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## How Race is Made in Everyday Life: Food, Eating, and Dietary Acculturation among Black and White Migrants in Florida, U.S.

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How Race is Made in Everyday Life: Food, Eating, and Dietary Acculturation among Black and  
White Migrants in Florida, U.S.

by

Laura Kihlström

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Keywords: foodways, dietary acculturation, immigration, racism, Whiteness, anti-Blackness

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## **DEDICATION**

To A, who has taught me more than anyone or anything else. I love you forever, kuuhun ja tähtiin.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores how race impacts everyday food decisions and experiences among Black and White migrants in Florida, United States. The study is rooted in scholarship on food and immigration, which asserts that dietary acculturation or the “Americanization” of diets adversely affects the overall health status of migrant populations in the U.S. To date, the majority of this literature has focused on the experiences of Latinx migrants and has not centered race in its analysis. Building on participant observation and semi-structured interviews (n=49) completed over a period of 13 months in the Tampa and Miami Metropolitan areas among Ethiopian and Finnish communities, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that food is a prominent site of race-making, affecting dietary decisions in and outside of the migrant’s household. Food shaming, food stereotyping, and fetishizing of “exotic” foods affected dietary decisions among Black migrants, while White migrants described their eating habits going largely unnoticed in everyday life. Among both groups, women were largely held responsible for both healthy eating practices as well as cultural continuity through maintenance of food traditions. Both groups described changes towards less healthy eating patterns in the U.S., however, only White migrants positioned themselves as having superior knowledge over healthy eating compared to other migrant groups. Among both groups, food was central to community-building and self-preservation. The findings from this dissertation demonstrate that race is a frequently unexamined social factor affecting dietary practices and changes among migrants in the U.S. Furthermore, the findings shed light on the social, affective, and gendered dimensions of foodways which calls for further research on understanding how migrants’ decision-making regarding food is impacted by such dynamics.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

In October 2020, well into the election season of an intense and polarized year in the United States (U.S.), a candidate to represent Delaware in the U.S. Senate tweeted<sup>1</sup>: “Most third-world migrants cannot assimilate into civil societies. Prove me wrong.” As an anthropologist of food, I was intrigued by how promptly food became a symbol for so called assimilation in the replies to this tweet. In true Twitter style, what followed was a storm of responses, including those that highlighted achievements: “Among the immigrants in my family are a professor, five medical doctors, an engineer, and two lawyers,” resembling undergirding notions of how conversations involving “third world migrants” often revolve around the concept of deservingness (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). The same person added: “My family watches football/basketball, eats hamburgers/pizza and enjoys good beers.” This response seemed to suggest that for this “third world migrant,” assimilation had been successful because their family partook in common cultural activities, including eating what are considered quintessential American foods, hamburgers and pizzas (which, coincidentally, are originally migrant foods). Yet another response read: “I haven’t assimilated to fast food, GOP level misogyny and racism yet, but there’s still time. LMK (let me know) if you want fresh falafel.” Contrary to the previous response, this one seems to acknowledge that assimilation is about politics

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<sup>1</sup> A full summary of the original tweet and the responses that followed can be found on this site: <https://meettheinternet.com/politics-meets-the-internet/lauren-witzke-immigrant-tweet/>

and pressure, a notion rooted in the experiences of European migrants, rather than being a blueprint which “third world migrants” could follow. But the tweet also asserted that assimilation was something migrants could purposefully resist while bringing to the table other culinary options, thus claiming the country as theirs also. This statement echoes that for all the xenophobia that often exists alongside discourses of immigration, diversity in food is frequently considered one of the more acceptable and universally benevolent aspects of multicultural societies (Heldke, 2003). But how does this example from one Twitter conversation inform broader conversations of race, a central theme of this dissertation?

I argue in this dissertation that through studying migrant experiences around food, and through deciphering meanings attached to foods in migrant communities, we can better understand how people – migrants themselves included – both make sense of race *and* resist racialized notions of who is considered an American. Food, then, becomes one of the ways through which race is communicated even when it is not explicitly stated: in the tweets prior, foods served as examples to what was considered “third-world,” “assimilation,” or “civil.” As this study will show, such shared meanings among migrants are commonplace in everyday life, not limited to social media or isolated Twitter conversations, and reveal a great deal about how intimately connected food and belonging are. That food becomes the object of scholarly inquiry is in itself not new: numerous social scientists have explored food to understand social difference and distinction as well as national identity in “a country of immigrants” (Gabaccia, 1998). Indeed, food is a proxy for difference, and “people who eat strikingly different foods or similar foods in different ways are thought to be strikingly different, sometimes even less human (Mintz, 1986: p.5).” Even the human language has a number of metaphors for conceptualizing separations between us and them using food, for controlling what one does not eat is a way to physically keep oneself intact from something we do not want to identify with (Garcia et al., 2017). The national narrative of the U.S. as a melting pot of cultures, too,

implies a culinary connotation. If food is key to social difference, then studying it in racial terms can reveal how the everyday and the mundane reflects broader, racialized issues of power.

In the scholarship of food and migration, two main strands of inquiry can be identified: the macro approaches which focus on the structural marginalization and experiences of food insecurity among particularly migrants from Latin American countries (Gálvez, 2018; Carney, 2017; Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Mares, 2013; Holmes, 2013) and the micro approaches which emphasize the connections between migrant food, memory, and cultural identity (Holtzman, 2006; Parasecoli, 2014; Vallianatos & Raine, 2015; Weller & Turkon, 2014). Finally, an additional strand of food studies has examined how migration impacts health due to dietary changes through a process coined dietary acculturation (Satia, 2010; Himmelgreen et al., 2007; Satia-Abouta et al., 2002). Studies focusing on dietary acculturation indicate that “Americanization” among migrants has been associated with increased consumption of foods high in sugar and fat as well as decreased consumption of fruits and vegetables, which alongside lower physical activity may be associated with chronic diseases, including hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, metabolic syndrome, cancer, and obesity (Popovic-Lipovac & Strasser, 2015). To date, however, race has remained a relatively unaddressed theme in the study of dietary acculturation, although racism today is considered a social determinant of health and race is integral to notions of who is allowed to enter the country as a migrant, and/or who is considered to be a “legitimate” American (Benjamin, 2020; Sáenz & Douglas, 2015).

In the U.S. context, work on race and food has been advanced particularly by Black anthropologists and social scientists who have demonstrated how segregation has affected the contemporary food environment, how food insecurity disproportionately affects communities of color, how processed foods and fast foods are marketed specifically towards communities of color, how stereotypical notions of foods such as fried chicken in the U.S. are tied to anti-Blackness, and

also how marginalized communities assert their agency and resistance through food and foodways (Kwate, 2008; Reese, 2019; Odoms-Young, 2018; Williams-Forsen, 2006). Such studies have answered questions which can be summarized as: “What does food become when we consider race and, conversely, how might we view race differently through food practices? (Slocum, 2011)” Similarly, in public health, scholars such as Viruell-Fuentes (2012) have argued for the need to study reasons behind the immigrant health decline as beyond cultural, including broader analyses which take into account race, gender, class, and nativity. In this dissertation, I bring this literature of food and race in conversation with existing scholarship on migration, food, dietary changes, and health.

Building on 49 interviews and participant observation completed in Florida over a period of 13 months of multi-sited fieldwork among Black (Ethiopian) and White (Finnish) migrants, this dissertation conceptualizes race as a “master category” in the U.S. society, asserting that neither migration nor food are race-neutral topics (Omi & Winant, 2015). Against this background, the dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

- In what ways do race and gender shape everyday encounters with food, and how are those encounters different among Black vs. White migrants?
- What kind of changes do Black and White migrants report about dietary habits in the U.S.?
- How does food matter for community-building and resistance against assimilation pressures among Black and White migrant communities?

By centering race in its analysis, this research makes several contributions to the scholarship on food and migration. By broadening the lens of migrant foodways from being depicted as largely cultural practices of distinct ethnic groups, this dissertation highlights the complexities and differences that exist within migrant communities, as well as the social factors which impact everyday experiences beyond culture, namely race, class, and gender (Wilcox & Kong, 2014; Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012; Narayan, 1995). Second, this approach contributes to critical race scholarship by

demonstrating how food matters for creating shared meanings and understandings of race at the everyday level, highlighting how race operates not merely at the policy and legal level but as “an everyday cultural performance (Smith, 2008).” Third, the work contributes to the field of public health where studies have demonstrated that upon moving to the U.S., the health status of migrants often declines, a process which has been strongly associated with dietary changes (Popovic-Lipovac & Strasser, 2015). How, I ask in this dissertation, might our understanding of those dietary changes be broadened if we sought to understand the impact of race in the lives of migrants in the U.S.? Later in the dissertation, I outline several implications of the study findings for the field of public health, particularly public health nutrition.

### **Rationale for Comparative Populations**

The groundwork for this dissertation began in November 2013 when I moved to Bahir Dar, Ethiopia from my hometown Helsinki, Finland to work a two-year contract in an international development aid project. The idea for this research study emerged during that two-year period. While working in a project which aimed at improving the farming efficiency and market access of Ethiopian farmers, I found myself asking questions which there rarely seemed to be time for: What did people themselves think of the foods that were being marketed as “better” crops? What about women’s opinions about food when they were the ones primarily responsible for cooking in the household? Not knowing this at the time, having received my training in the natural sciences, I was asking questions that were well suited for the major in which I would begin my doctoral studies a few years later, anthropology. In Bahir Dar, I learned to rely upon informal conversations through which I found out that one crop proposed by the project was considered “poor man’s food,” something that would not be widely consumed because of its reputation. Through spending time in the city’s restaurants, I found out how some of the restaurants held more prestige because they were



considered “Western.” I learned through my own yearnings and lack of access to certain familiar foods how much food mattered for self-definition in a foreign country. In other words, I was drawn to understanding the social life of food, the affective dimensions surrounding it, the subjective notions of what was considered “adequate” food (Garth, 2020). And every now and then, I would hear the sound of a party in our Bahir Dar neighborhood. During one of these occasions, I asked our local friend what the party was for. He responded it was someone who had won the diversity visa lottery and was getting ready to move to the United States. We stood there in the dark night, mosquitoes swarming near the lamp posts. I asked my friend whether he thought the person leaving would be changed after moving to the U.S. He kept looking forward and responded: “Look, America is America. But they’ll never stop eating injera.”

Entering graduate school, I set out to investigate whether or not the “they’ll never stop eating injera” statement – or more broadly the statement that migrants from various backgrounds were stubborn about their food habits and refused to let them go in their adopted home country - turned out to be true. While my main concern was to expand knowledge on understanding the process of dietary acculturation by studying it among two different migrant groups, early in graduate school it became clearer to me that the work’s primary theoretical contribution related to how it could tackle the issue of race. For while the foods of both migrant groups which I set to study – Ethiopian and Finnish – represented their respective cultures, they also were foods which in the U.S. were consumed in a society in which nearly all facets of life were impacted by race, from immigration, housing, schooling, earnings, and healthcare to education (Omi & Winant, 2015).

So far, the majority of studies focusing on migrants and changes in their food habits have been completed among Latinx immigrants. This is not surprising, given that immigrants from Latin American countries form 51 % of all the immigrants who have arrived in the U.S. since 1965 (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, this focus leaves out the Black immigrants who have nearly

tripled their share in the U.S. since 1980, and also leaves unexamined the role that race and anti-Blackness in particular may play in their experiences in this country (McInnis, 2017; Williams-Forsen, 2014). Similarly, the literature on food and migration rarely accounts for the everyday experiences of White immigrants, suggesting that their experiences are either monolithic or not related to issues of race at all. This lack of attention is similar to what Cuban American writer and artist Coco Fusco (hooks, 2014) has stated in the following way:

Racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and so on; they are also White. To ignore White ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without specifically addressing White ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other (p.171).

Building on this notion, the comparative approach in this dissertation allows to center race in a way which helps to understand how it affects both Black and White migrant groups. As Sabrina Strings (2019) points out in *Fearing the Black Body: The Origins of Fat Phobia*, race operates as a “double agent.” In uncovering the racial and historical origins of the “obesity crisis,” she demonstrates how race has affected experiences around food and eating among not just Black people whose bodies and eating habits are surveilled and scrutinized, but also White people, who learn how to discipline their own eating habits to uphold their supposed supremacy and fitness. Disproportionately, these racialized notions around food affect women, who due to their gender are often considered responsible for “proper” eating habits in the household. With its focus on Black and White migrant women, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate how the dynamic of race as a “double agent” plays out in the everyday with consequences on dietary decisions. This focus can ultimately help us uncover

questions about what it means to become an American, who we think of as an American, and how notions of who gets to be American change over time.

### **The Setting and Community Sites**

I completed the field research for this dissertation in two locations in Florida, U.S. As the country's third most populous state, Florida is a microcosm of major demographic and social trends in the U.S. Demographic transitions in the country are expected to lead the country to be a minority-majority nation by 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2019). In Florida, this demographic transition is connected particularly to changes in immigration: Florida's major population growth compared to the rest of the country has been fueled by immigration from countries such as Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Colombia, and Jamaica, with more than half of the state's foreign-born population identifying as having Latinx origin (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.) Both in Florida and nationally, the growing diversity of the nation have brought forward racial anxieties of White Americans (Craig et al., 2018; Hughey, 2014). Finally, Florida and particularly the Miami area is often heralded for its diversity, yet such narratives less often factor in the legacy and continuing impact of anti-Blackness in the state, particularly through segregation (McInnis, 2017; Wilkerson, 2010).

As a multi-sited study, I completed field research in Tampa Bay and the Miami Metropolitan area. In Tampa Bay, I completed research with members of the local Ethiopian community, the majority of who identified as Oromo (Ethiopia's largest ethnic group). In the Miami tri-county metropolitan area, I completed the bulk of my research with the local Finnish community residing in two adjacent small towns in Palm Beach county, which together are home to one of the largest Finnish American populations not only in Florida but in the country (Cunningham, 1981). In addition, I occasionally completed interviews and spent time with members of Finnish communities outside of these two locations in the broader metropolitan area. Both Finnish and Ethiopian

communities have larger diaspora concentrations elsewhere in the country. Washington D.C., for example, hosts over a million Ethiopians, earning the name “Little Ethiopia” for some of its neighborhoods. Hundreds of thousands of Finns and their descendants, in turn, have settled in Minnesota and Missouri. While research in such diaspora hotspots may yield interesting outcomes for immigration studies, it may also obscure some of the nuances and complexities of such populations, including the at times haphazard nature of how migrant communities are born outside of such hot spots, including decisions out of the control of some individuals (refugees) as well as migratory decisions based on word of mouth.

As a multi-sited research study completed in the same state in which I have lived in for the past four and a half years, this dissertation has been written in the tradition of North American anthropology, which legitimizes fieldwork completed “at home” as a viable alternative to prolonged fieldwork conducted in a foreign location (Masley, 2008; Nordquest, 2008). In my case, the notions of what was “home” and what was “field” were oftentimes blurred due to my status as an international student, often leaving me wondering if I ever left the field. The challenges I encountered during this fieldwork are similar to what those who have written about fieldwork conducted “at home” argue: namely that field sites at home are rarely delineated by strict geographic boundaries and that reaching people can be difficult due to busy work schedules and due to transient aspects of people’s everyday lives (Hannerz, 2003). Throughout the course of this research, I often came to think about participant observation as a mode of being even when not spending time directly with research participants: given that I lived in the same state and in the case of Ethiopian migrants, in the same city, as the research participants, observing also meant knowing what news people were exposed to, what the surrounding environment was like, and what sort of events participants were exposed to during the studied time period.

## **Data and Methods**

The bulk of data collection for this dissertation took place between February 2019 and March 2020, a period of 13 months which I split between the two sites. Due to COVID-19, I only completed scattered observations and a few interviews after March 2020. In order to build rapport with both communities, I had gotten to know them since fall 2016 (Ethiopians) and spring 2017 (Finns). The time I spent in the two communities during this period, however, has not been part of official data collection per Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol. This rapport-building nevertheless allowed me to begin my research swiftly as both communities were able to provide me with a support letter needed for IRB approval.

My methods consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. As part of the study, I also created an online survey, however, the results from the survey are not included in this dissertation due to difficulties in data collection since the pandemic started. Using convenience and snowball sampling, I completed a total of 49 interviews (18 with the Ethiopian community, 31 with the Finnish community), the majority of which took place in participants' homes, but also in coffee shops and on the phone based on participants preferences, their length ranging from 25 minutes to 2.5 hours. All but one participant in the Ethiopian community and all but two participants in the Finnish community were women. Among the Ethiopian community, 9 participants had arrived in the country as refugees, while the rest had arrived through family reunification visas, spousal connections, or diversity visa lottery. All interviewees in the Finnish community had arrived in the country voluntarily, the most cited reasons being work opportunities and marriage. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to roughly 70 years old, with the majority of participants being in the 30-50 years age range.

For conducting the interviews, I followed a set of pre-determined interview themes to guide my research (Appendix A). Early on in the research, I followed the list of themes in a rigid manner, but

as the research went on, I learned how to be more flexible by realizing that the order of questions mattered a lot for the quality of the interview. For example, allowing participants to take the lead in the beginning of the interview by asking a grand question such as “Tell me about how you ended up in the United States” usually led to a more insightful interview because I did not start with food questions which were more specific. Leading with food also often led participants to think that I was making judgment calls about what was “proper” nutrition, with particularly the Finnish participants stating that “they were not nutritionists” and thus “had nothing to say.”

I started data analysis while in the field and was constantly comparing and contrasting the findings between the two populations and linked those to the research questions. Beginning data analysis while in the field also allowed me to ask participants more focused questions on some of the emerging themes later on. Each participant with whom I completed an interview received a \$10 gift card to a local grocery store. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempted this study from written consent, and instead participants were read a verbal consent script (Appendix B). The study was approved by the IRB before beginning data collection for this dissertation, and the IRB approval was renewed once during the data collection and data analysis process (Appendix C). To protect the anonymity of participants, all the names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

I completed participant observation in various locations: in Tampa those locations included monthly women’s meetings (these were always held in a different home based on the rotating schedule of the women’s group) community meetings, birthday celebrations, and cultural celebrations. In the Miami Metropolitan area, I was a participant observer in cultural halls, churches, coffee shops, breakfast clubs, and community events. I had initially planned to spend a 6-month period in the Miami metropolitan area for my fieldwork portion with the Finnish community, but this proved impossible due to logistical and financial constraints. Thus, instead, I engaged in “the art of the possible” in my ethnographic approach (Hannerz, 2003) and completed more than 10 shorter

field visits which ranged from 2 days to 7 days in length between February 2019 and February 2020. From January 2020 to February 2020, I rented a room locally from a person who worked at a Scandinavian bakery and was able to stay for the longest consecutive period of time.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this dissertation follows a social constructivist paradigm, which is often associated with qualitative research methods (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014). Social constructivist approaches assert that “reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019: p.45). Research taking a social constructivist approach focuses on understanding individuals’ perspectives and realities, which is generally not possible using positivist methods such as surveys. Rather, social constructivists embed them in the everyday lives of participants in order to understand that “specific contexts in which people live and work to understand particular cultures and historical settings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019: p.45). By being a “passionate participant” in the lives of participants, the researcher’s role is to be the “facilitator of multivoice reconstruction” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Social constructivism has been critiqued for not adequately addressing or advocating for change regarding the inequalities and injustices that researchers often point out from their findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As a result, critical methodologies such as the transformative-emancipatory paradigm has been proposed as a way of emphasizing collaboration with marginalized groups or groups whose voice is not typically heard. The transformative-emancipatory paradigm focuses on historical power formations which have led to the exclusion of knowledge from marginalized groups. It challenges social science by asking questions such as whose reality is privileged, thus building upon critical approaches from feminist studies and critical race theories (Mertens, 2007). The approach in this dissertation has been influenced by these critical

theories which have called for the “decolonization” of one’s imagination in doing research (Hordge-Freeman et al., 2011; Shannon-Baker, 2016).

In analyzing the research findings, I relied upon a grounded theory approach to understand what was happening among the two migrant groups and how. Findings derived from a grounded theory-based data analysis do not seek to generalize to a level of a population but rather understand processes at a particular location and among a particular population (Charmaz, 2008). Given that social constructivists understand and acknowledge that research can never be value free, and that the “research process itself is never neutral or without context,” considerations of reflexivity and the researcher’s role, values, and worldview are necessary throughout the data collection and data analysis phases (Charmaz, 2008). To keep myself accountable, I implemented several measures to reflect on my research process during the course of my study and my fieldwork.

First, since starting my doctoral studies, I have kept a research diary in which I write down pertinent ideas about my dissertation and societal events that connected to it either in relevance or in contrast. This research diary has given me a longitudinal view of my thought process and has been a powerful reminder in that research contexts also change throughout time. For example, looking back at my research diary, I now see that the direction of my work was changed after attending a Race and Ethnicity seminar in graduate school. Before that, my attempt was to compare and contrast the process of dietary acculturation among Ethiopians and Finns, and the theoretical underpinnings for studying that phenomenon would have relied upon acculturation-based theories and models. After the class, the theoretical foundation of the project shifted. That shift in turn allowed me to read food studies scholarship more widely, as well as be more open to things I heard during fieldwork. Had I not been more receptive to the idea of centering race in my study, it would have been easy for me to dismiss the countless referrals to race and racial thinking I encountered



early on in my fieldwork – in fact, referrals to race among participants were so commonplace that it would have taken a deliberate act of not listening to keep those themes out of the research.

As I began collecting data, I kept several different logs of my observations as well as interviews. After spending a day or moments with participants in different settings, I would sit down and write my field notes knowing that a lot of the informal conversations, remarks, and observations would otherwise be forgotten. Initially, these field notes were free flowing and attempted to capture everything I had seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and observed. As I progressed, my field notes were then transformed into more structured memos. For writing each memo, I would focus on the same three things: (1) Where was I and with who? (2) What happened? (3) How does what I see relate to my research questions and theoretical framework? Is there something contradicting or something illuminating? (Calarco, 2018). Writing field notes in a more structured way helped me to make connections between the observations I made and the theoretical framework guiding the research.

The memos were important particularly in the initial stage as I had completed my first interviews. They helped me to think about how to refine the research questions and how to follow the principles of theoretical sampling so that I could talk to people that could potentially provide very contrasting views to the same questions asked. For example, with the Ethiopian community, I would talk to Oromo women who regularly took part in their community meetings, but also to women who were not members of the women's group and who represented different ethnicities or socioeconomic positions. Similarly, in the Finnish community, although I spent the majority of my time observing activities in the cultural hall, I would also meet people further away from these this location to engage with individuals who would actively turn away from the community. In the end, I had 90 memos ranging from 0.5 pages to 1.5 pages in length, in which I attempted to tie what I had seen, heard, and observed to theoretical constructs undergirding the research. After each semi-structured interview, I sat down to write a summary of that interview and the setting. I completed

interviews in English and in Finnish. I transcribed each interview verbatim and the interviews completed to English were then translated to English in the process of writing up the results. Taken together, these practices formed a sort of “audit trail” which is considered a key cornerstone in grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2015).

I followed a systematic approach to identify the themes brought forward in the findings. This process is captured in Figure 1, beginning from open coding and coding data in more detail. As I began systematically analyzing data, I used a coding process that started with capturing the “big ideas” of the data. This process is congruous with grounded theory methods in that in this initial stage the researcher is not attempting to impose their preconceptions on the data but rather pay attention to what is going on in the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In practice, this meant line-by-line coding and writing down topics and themes that came up from the data. This process resulted in an initial list of topics that were emerging from the data. After this step, I revisited the data for seeing how different themes and ideas interacted together. This process led me to identifying subthemes which could be used to recode the data. I did not use a qualitative data analysis software for coding but rather coded in color and comments on paper, in Microsoft Word, and in Microsoft Excel.

### **My Positionality in the Field**

Given that my time doing fieldwork was split between two communities, I also juggled multiple different contexts in terms of building rapport and negotiating my positionality. Negotiating access to the Finnish community was expectedly easier in some ways (shared country of origin, common language) but challenging in unexpected ways. I found out early on that there was a lot of tension in the Finnish community in the two adjacent small towns, where individuals would align with one of the cultural halls versus the other due to political reasons. I had initially planned to regularly visit

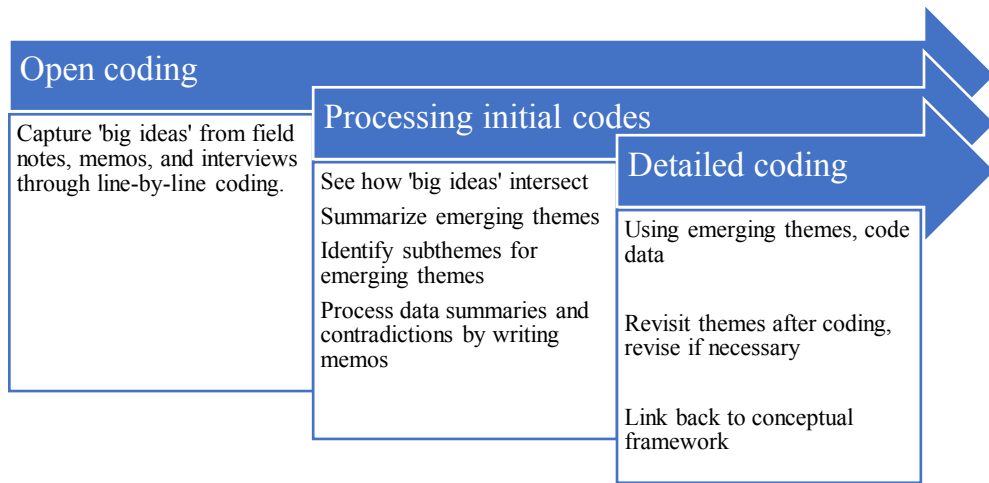


Figure 1. Process of data analysis, adopted from Bloomberg & Volpe (2019).

both halls, but my initial visits to one of the houses was not met with enthusiasm, and the suspicion I felt from “fellow countrymen” felt surprisingly hurtful although it can also be considered a very typical experience of awkwardness in anthropological fieldwork. For example, at one point in time, I had agreed to volunteer in the kitchen for an event that was being organized at one of the cultural halls, being invited there by one of the organizers who was enthusiastic about my research. There must have been miscommunication (or lack of communication) between the person who had invited me and the persons who were in charge of preparing the foods. As I entered the kitchen, introducing myself enthusiastically, they looked at me quietly and one of the members said: “We don’t want any help here.” After that, just silence as I walked out. I ended up spending a lot of time at the other cultural hall, where I was more openly invited and welcomed.

Additionally, throughout my field research among Finns, I wrote several notes and memos in which I expressed discomfort and worry about not feeling comfortable about some of the things I heard and eventually would write about. In many of these conversations, it seems as if my shared

ethnicity with the participants led to assumptions of shared notions of race: countless conversations in informal settings began with the sentence “This probably sounds super racist but...” or “I am not a racist, but”. I tried to refrain from the idea of positioning myself as the noble, ivory tower nonracist who was there to catch others from saying the wrong things. However, that these sentiments around race were so commonplace and regular (although not echoed by all) did tell me *something*. I often wondered how those conversations would have sounded had I not been another White/Finnish person in the room. Because of my positionality, I was considered “one of them” and trusted to state these things around. What did that say about shared understandings of the culture of my country of origin? At times, it was very difficult for me to balance between not involving myself in conversations and situations in which I encountered different forms of racism. For example, during one of my initial visits to the community I met with a highly influential person in the community who also assumed that our shared cultural identity allowed the racist sentiments such as “well we have some good Black people here, but they are mostly just too lazy to work” or “in Finnish we call Puerto Ricans portorikollinen” (a Finnish derogatory term meaning port criminals). After such encounters, I would often write field notes about how I felt guilty for not confronting participants. I saw it not as my place as the researcher to intervene in the moment, but my experiences in the field eventually resulted in applied research contributions such as writing columns to Finnish American media about race, starting a podcast which regularly addressed these topics, and launching an anti-racist book club for Finnish American women. Similar notions of race were not non-existent in the Ethiopian community either. Particularly male members of the community at communal events could occasionally say things like “Black people have so many minority grants, what are they still complaining about?” reflecting how communities of color may also reproduce ideas about race (Omi & Winant, 2015).

In my other field site, my positionality was wholly different. My entrance into the Ethiopian community in Tampa Bay was facilitated, I believe, by three main factors: that I had previous experience working in Ethiopia, that I was lucky enough to meet a gatekeeper who introduced me to women in the community, and that I was a migrant myself. The gatekeeper was an Oromo migrant and activist who helped establish my initial contact with the community. I remember first meeting him at a Panera close to the university after emailing him about my research project. We instantly had lots to talk about. I talked to him about my experiences in Ethiopia, and he told me about his childhood teachers in Ethiopia who – coincidentally – had been Finnish. After we had met, he started inviting me to community meetings, which in turn led me to meeting his wife, who also was an Oromo activist and one of the founders of the women’s association with whom I came to spend a lot of time during my fieldwork. Being a migrant myself definitely helped me in building rapport, as we would sometimes joke about mundane everyday stuff we found to be silly about the U.S.

The initial awkwardness I felt in fieldwork situations with the Ethiopian community was similar to the instances I described regarding my positionality with the Finnish community and are probably relatable to many anthropologists. However, with the Ethiopian community, I was not only the “awkward anthropologist” building rapport but a White woman entering a space for Black women which they had created in order to have a safe and supportive place from themselves. I had been invited to this space, but I was also aware of the dynamic and the history of White researchers entering Black communities and misusing their trust. Early on, I was often tested by the women, highlighting that power dynamics in field research can and will frequently shift. As an example, at one of the meetings, I had left a paper on a table so that the women who wanted could write their name and phone number on it if they wanted to participate in an interview. Early on in the research, Leensa, one of the women, encouraged her friends to sign up as I sat on one of the chairs at the back of the living room. From the other side of the room, in front of everybody, one of the older

women pointed at me and said: “Laura, what’s my name,” testing if I had been interested enough in the community to learn everyone’s names. She then pointed her finger at herself and repeated: “What’s my name?” The 15 or so women around the room stopped talking and looked at me, and it became very quiet. I could feel the tension growing. I replied by throwing both of my hands in the air and said: “Enku!” Enku the older woman, burst out in laughter, picked up the paper, and wrote down her name and number. She then pushed the paper forward to other women who signed up as well. I sometimes brought my son to these meetings too.

Fieldwork in these spaces demonstrated to me how accustomed I am to centering Whiteness in my everyday life. Being the only White person in the room, in which the languages would shift from English to Amharic to Afaan Oromo, I would often feel scrutinized, hypervisible, intrusive, and yes, unimportant. But the meetings went on and I kept going because I kept on being invited. Perhaps most importantly, completing a multi-sited research study as a White researcher in both a White and Black community taught me how I had been taught to see “research findings” much more clearly in the Black community compared to the White community. By the time I started conducting fieldwork, I had been trained in anthropology for three years. Being a researcher in the White community, I would often write field notes such as “I do not feel anthropological enough doing this work” – yet those field notes about “not being anthropological enough” would never appear after my experiences in a Black migrant community. This was a learning point in that as much as anthropologists – or social scientists in general – seek to methodologically learn how to “make the familiar strange,” our discipline still has a long way to go to not default to seeing a lot of interesting things in communities that are “exotic” and “foreign” to us and finding difficulties in describing how such interesting themes also emerge from communities that are White (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2019). This phenomenon has been described by Charles W. Mills as epistemological ethnocentrism (Mills, 1997).

Finally, in both communities, my positionality was impacted by various other factors in addition to race, including gender, motherhood, and socioeconomic status. To both locations, I sometimes brought my son with me, or if I did not physically have him with me, talking about motherhood was a way to break the ice or start a conversation. Being a student, I assume that my appearance and socioeconomic status could be considered “unthreatening” which probably also helped me gain access. Finally, completing this research with participants who in most cases were women was also possible because of my own gender, knowing that for example the women’s group did not allow male participants. However, completing fieldwork as a woman also reminded me of how gender affects notions of professionalism. For example, particularly in the Finnish community, I was often referred to as the “girl” when being introduced to new people, a word which at least in the Finnish language often carries a paternalistic tone.

Finally, it must also be noted that while having written this dissertation, I have also been a migrant myself, living in a country which is not my home country. In a way, I have been immersed in my field site 24/7 for the past four and a half years. Thus, everyday encounters around food and race are not just trivial, academic topics to me but themes which have been something which I to some extent lived through since coming to the U.S. One of the earliest experiences which demonstrated to me the impact of race on migrants’ lives in the U.S. occurred at University Mall in Tampa in September 2016, just a few months after we had moved to the country. I was holding my then 10-month-old son in my lap while we looked at the playground activities in the historically Black mall. Just then, a White couple, the age of my parents, stopped by us and said: “Oh my goodness. What a cutie. What’s his name?”. I thanked and pronounced my son’s name in the Finnish way, which of course provoked the next question: “I think I hear an accent there. Where are you from?” Finland, I replied. “Wow, Finland. Look at that blond hair and those blue eyes. Your son, what a Viking. A real Viking.” The man went on to say: “You know, with everything that’s

going around the world, it's so important that we protect children like your son. We have to make sure *he* has a future in this country. We need to protect our borders so *he* can have a future.” With a smile, they walked away. This instance, along with many others, is just one example of the innocence which my son – and people who look like him – are granted as migrants in the country. While we have not been completely insulated from the stress sometimes caused by immigration hassles, we have nevertheless always been protected. This has everything to do with race, and it is my hope that this dissertation can contribute to those ongoing conversations about race by demonstrating how it plays out in the everyday, even in the most seemingly mundane spheres of life, including food and eating.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized in the following ways. First, I will summarize relevant literature related to food as an object of anthropological inquiry, approaches to the study of migrant foodways, and race in the study of food. I will follow this summary by presenting the conceptual and theoretical framework used to guide this dissertation study. The findings from this study are divided into three chapters. In each of the chapters, I present findings from both Finnish and Ethiopian communities, allowing for the reader to make comparisons. In Chapter Three, “Food as Otherness: The Construction of Difference in Everyday Life”, I weave together the broad themes of food, race, and historical racial formations. I write about the differences in how Black migrants experience food shaming, food stereotyping, and fetishizing of “exotic” foods in their everyday lives versus White immigrants for whom such scrutiny is nearly non-existent. Additionally, in this chapter I write about how both groups learn the rules of anti-Blackness by disassociating themselves from African Americans either by avoiding certain grocery stores and neighborhoods (Finns) or by asserting their cultural practices (Ethiopians). In Chapter Four, “Good Migrants, Bad Migrants: Moral Food



Choices and Resistance against Undesirable Americanization” I explore the themes of femininity and race in the context of food and health. I demonstrate that both groups perceive a certain “Americanization” (interpreted by the participants as eating more “junk” food and living a less healthy life as opposed to the “organic” foods from their home country) as a threat. For both groups, the ideals of healthy eating are imposed particularly on female members of the household, highlighting the gendered aspects of foodways. However, White women dominantly view others’ “wrong” food choices as a result of lack of nutrition knowledge, and single out immigrants of color and Black people for their eating habits. Black women view reasons for dietary changes towards less healthy eating as more structural, resulting from lack of time or lack of money. In Chapter Five, “Food as Nostalgia and Loss, Food as Community and Resistance,” I focus on the role that food has in creating community and solidarities among migrants. For both communities, food becomes a centerpiece for bringing people together. However, among the Finnish community, many actively seek to turn away from their food roots and community, leading to a sense of loss, nostalgia, and racial anxieties. Among the Ethiopian community, particularly the Oromo women, food becomes the centerpiece of creating a space in which women assert their agency and self-determination and strive for transnational racial solidarity. The three results chapters are followed by a discussion chapter in which I tie the findings to the theoretical framework. A section of the discussion is also devoted to discussing the implications of the study findings on public health. The discussion section is followed by an overall conclusion, followed by the appendices which include the broad themes of the in-depth interviews, the verbal consent script used in this study, as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval letter (PRO000035150) for conducting this research study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Food as an Object of Anthropological Inquiry**

In studying food and foodways, I am following the tradition of scholarship which has long roots in the field of anthropology and increasingly in the interdisciplinary field of food studies, now encompassing disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, history, American studies, and English studies (Boisvert & Heldke, 2016; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Gabaccia, 1998; Ray, 2016; Rozin, 1996; Tompkins, 2012; Williams-Forson, 2006). In all these disciplines, central to the study of food is its acknowledgment as a substance that links the personal and the political as well as the material and the symbolic, thus becoming a potential field of study where traditional binary oppositions are contested (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). The rise of interest towards food as an object of scholarly inquiry has been coupled with the contribution of feminist and women's studies, transforming something that was once considered the product of peripheral and bodily women's work subservient to the larger questions of mind and structure, into a "matter that matters" (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Boisvert & Heldke, 2016).

Seminal works in the field of anthropology of food and nutrition have emphasized the ways in which foodways possess semiotic power in that they often carry messages regarding norms, social forces, and political histories, or the ways in which the embodiment of taste through acquisition of economic and cultural capital makes food and eating practices of distinction (Barthes, 1961; Bourdieu, 1979; Douglas, 1966). Through food, humans create distinct cultural worlds and implicit

or explicit rules regarding group membership and exclusion (Mintz, 1985). The scholarship regarding the materiality of food has been further extended by feminist and critical scholars who argue that notions of digestion and indigestion serve as metaphors for broader questions of belonging and bordering because food is literally a substance that becomes us, and controlling what one does not eat is also a way to keep oneself intact from external influences and values (Garcia et al., 2017; Slocum, 2011).

### *Approaches to Studying Food and Immigration*

For all people, familiar food provides a sense of home and memory, as customs, traditions, tastes, and smells related to food are often essential components of our socialization (Holtzman, 2006; Rozin, 1996). For migrants, having a sense of ownership regarding decisions related to food and eating is also a way to maintain a sense of control in an otherwise challenging new environment (Parasecoli, 2014). Diasporic food memories are maintained at home and during festive occasions, and selling one's own food by establishing a restaurant is often both a way to maintain a sense of community as well as a somewhat lucrative livelihood (Ray, 2016). Despite the importance of food for one's identity and belonging, as a result of migration, diets often change (Himmelgreen et al., 2007; Satia, 2010). At the dietary level, these changes commonly include an increase in the consumption of fat, salt, meat, dairy, and sugar at the expense of complex carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, and minerals (Colby et al., 2009). At the level of foodways, changes may include shifting patterns in commensality and other social aspects of eating (Gerchow et al. 2014). Several models and frameworks have been brought forward to explain these changes.

Dietary acculturation refers to “the process that occurs when members of a minority group adopt the eating patterns of food choices of the host country (Satia-Abouta et al., 2002: p.1106).”

Dietary acculturation builds upon earlier theories of acculturation formulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup>

century which focus on the relationships that the native, White majority encountered with migrants and minorities (Redfield et al., 1936). Acculturation, a concept similar to, and sometimes used interchangeably with assimilation, is explained as a unilineal “osmotic process” during which immigrants gradually absorb cultural forms of the majority (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Under this assumption, these cultural forms include eating habits, and most commonly dietary acculturation has referred to the “Americanization” of eating practices, often happening within the first two years of one’s stay in the U.S. (Himmelgreen et al., 2005). Dietary changes are known to be affected by generational status. First- and second-generation migrants according to the literature are known to prefer American foods whilst older migrants tend to more conservative about their foodways (Wang et al., 2016). Dietary acculturation may speed up among subsequent generations because children tend to be sensitive to peer pressure, and the willingness to not stand out may result in rejecting one’s traditional dishes and favoring an “Americanized diet” (Colby et al. 2009; Van Hook et al., 2016). Children are also impacted by advertising on television, or their parents may be inclined to treat them with food items that are considered luxurious (Blanchet et al., 2018). The unwillingness of children to consume foods typical to a migrant family’s food culture may be the source of intergenerational conflict, as different food preferences within the family may reflect broader issues of power related to one’s food choices (Hadley et al., 2010; Himmelgreen et al., 2007).

As children of migrant parents enter school in the U.S., they typically start using the English language. On the one hand, parents may wish for their children to maintain distinct foodways so as to maintain some sort of connection with their homeland. On the other hand, having a say in the dietary decisions in a household can be considered a form of children’s agency through which children teach their parents or caregivers about aspects of a new culture (Blanchet et al., 2018). However, even generational status seems not to dictate eating habits in a uniform way, as dietary changes are not always uniformly cut across generations (Chapman & Beagan, 2013). For instance,

children's eating preferences were found to be less "Americanized" in households in which parents had a high level of education (Van Hook et al., 2016).

Migratory background also affects day-to-day realities in the U.S. Migrants with refugee background are known to be more prone for situations of food insecurity due to economic and social hardship, and food insecurity in refugee households has been associated with depression (Hadley et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2016). Food insecure refugee households have been found to consume disproportionate amounts of snacks and sugar-sweetened beverages compared to the amount of fruit and vegetables (Dharod et al., 2011). This is not surprising since dealing with food insecurity means having less power over one's food choices. Diets may be further affected and changed if refugee households rely on charity-based measures, such as food pantries, for their daily food (Blanchet et al., 2018). However, households with food insecurity may also be less likely to change their diets because a lower income may encourage consumption of those foods typical to one's culture which one knows how to cook well and at low cost (Anderson et al., 2014). Thus, the findings between associations of food insecurity and dietary changes are mixed. Furthermore, findings regarding dietary changes among refugees vary widely between different groups (Wang et al., 2016).

Economic constraints are often widely cited as one of the main factors speeding up dietary changes among migrants (Blanchet et al., 2018; Satia, 2010). For instance, fresh produce in the U.S. is expensive compared to many other countries while meat is relatively cheap and abundantly available (Lopez-Cepero et al., 2017). Meat may also be considered to have superior return value over fruits and vegetables, particularly if it has been a scarce food item in the past (Dharod, 2015). As a result, in migrant diets, meat may transform from being a rare, luxury item to a food product consumed during several meals a day in the U.S. (Blanchet et al., 2018; Guarnaccia et al., 2012). Finally, "American" food items may also be considered to have higher status than "traditional"

foods (Himmelgreen et al., 2007; Ramírez et al., 2018). For instance, depending on the socioeconomic status of the individual prior to migration as well as the political-economic developments in the country, American “junk foods” may also be perceived as luxurious (Himmelgreen et al., 2017).

Moving to the U.S. also means dramatic changes in lifestyle which often have implications for not just diets but entire food cultures. Living a life “always on the run” means less time for purchasing, preparing, and consuming food, and thus processed, canned, and frozen foods becoming viable and convenient options (Greder et al., 2012; Lopez-Cepero et al., 2017). When “all you do is sleep and work,” mealtimes traditionally shared with family members are more difficult to organize. Feelings of exhaustion and the loss of this social interaction around food, in turn, may increase feelings of alienation and isolation (Himmelgreen et al., 2007; Satia, 2010). Other disruptions in daily food routines include skipping of meals because of time constraints (Weisberg-Shapiro & Devine, 2015).

Migrant women also face challenges of being full-time workers or students whilst still being expected to be responsible for most household tasks related to food and eating (Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). The stress caused by the change in lifestyle can be particularly strong among migrant women who prior to migration have had domestic help in cooking, grocery shopping, and cleaning (Blanchet et al. 2018). Furthermore, because of a gendered division of labor, women also feel pressures for being considered the ones responsible for children’s healthy meals (Greder et al., 2012).

Despite common patterns detected in the dietary acculturation literature, the model proposed by Satia-Abouta and colleagues (2002) does not wholly capture how and why acculturation operates differently among various migrant groups, or the variation that exists between migrant groups (Ayala et al., 2008; Himmelgreen et al., 2014). One of the most persisting critiques towards

the acculturation model is that it assumes that dietary changes only begin when an individual moves to another country (Parasecoli, 2014). This, however, is not the case, as changes in diets are known to begin prior to migration. In many cases, changes in diet prior to migration reflect broader political-economic changes in the migrant's home country (Cantor et al., 2013; Himmelgreen et al. 2014). Furthermore, the dietary acculturation model, viewing migrants' diets as "traditional" and monolithic may obscure the historical reality of foods being subject to global exchange and trade for centuries, as well as the rapid developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century during which increasing corporate power and conglomeration of agri-businesses in the food industry has facilitated the spread of certain food products, particularly highly processed foods reliant on corn, wheat, sugar, and oil, across continents (Anderson et al., 2014; Crowther, 2013; Phillips, 2006).

The incorporation of these processes is captured in what can broadly be called transnational approaches to food and migration. Transnational approaches to dietary change have typically drawn upon the concept of the nutrition transition, a process characterized by notable changes in the structure of diets across the globe in the decades preceding the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This transition has taken place in the majority of countries in Asia, Latin, Northern Africa, the Middle East, as well as in the urban areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Popkin, 2001). The nutrition transition is happening in conjunction with a "delocalization" of diets which is marked by a state in food systems in which production and consumption take place in different geographical locations (Pelto et al., 2012) and seems to suggest an "Americanizing" of the global diet, accompanied with a decline in physical activity (Satia, 2010).

Global shifts in diet through the processes of nutrition transition and dietary delocalization have also been linked to a change in disease patterns, with the bulk of the global disease burden shifting from communicable diseases to non-communicable ones, such as cardiovascular disease and obesity, but also mental health issues (Popkin et al., 2012; Ronto et al., 2018). The increasing reliance

on processed and imported foods or the “Coca-Colonization” of diets – often named as the culprit for epidemiological changes particularly in poor and middle-income countries -cannot be decoupled from neoliberal developments of the global economy (Leatherman & Goodman, 2005). Many U.S. led companies have increasingly turned their marketing efforts to low-income countries, often aided by transnational trade deals (Hawkes, 2006).

In the Global South, the nutrition transition has occurred more rapidly among people living in urban areas compared to those living in rural areas, as shifting economic structures have attracted more people to move to cities for jobs in construction and service in tourism centers (Leatherman & Goodman, 2005). Thus, the changing of livelihood structures may provide much needed jobs but at the same time increases the reliance of local people on imported and processed foods. In some countries, households are facing a double burden of over-nutrition and undernutrition, as calories during a transitory period may be ample, but nutritional value is not (Himmelgreen et al., 2006).

What does this all mean for migrants in the U.S.? Including a transnational component in the study of dietary changes among migrants points to three main things. First, while the U.S. food system has its own unique characters, transnational approaches stress that it is critical to take into account pre-immigration factors such as socioeconomic status, area of residence (urban/rural), and reported changes in diets before moving, as these may impact post-migration dietary patterns. This is particularly true for current dietary acculturation studies which tend to focus on Latinx migrants who have arrived in the U.S. after the 1960s. Political economic changes in Central and Latin American countries may have included elements of the nutrition transition. Dietary practices that may be considered unhealthy, such as the increased consumption of processed foods, have often been already practiced in the home country prior to migration (Martínez, 2013).

Second, the incorporation of transnational perspectives may better recognize the agency of migrants and the ways in which creating a new home culture in the U.S. is possible despite its



challenges (Pilcher, 2014). Migrants in the U.S. are likely to have bicultural diets and foodways which are influenced by new knowledge and traditions but build upon memories and experiences from the past. Viewed in this sense, dietary changes are a complicated process of give and take (Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). Transnational perspectives may also better reflect the realities of migration today, as many continue to have tight bonds with their families and travel back to their home countries whenever they can. For instance, Puerto Ricans commonly travel between U.S. mainland and the island, highlighting the ways in which foodways can and are shaped by multiple cultural environments (Himmelgreen et al., 2014).

Finally, recognizing that foodways are influenced by various factors challenges the notion of migrant diets as static entities that do not change. Rather, individuals may feel connected to several nations and create “hybrid” identities (Chapman & Beagan, 2013). This notion builds upon Appadurai’s (1998) thesis on modernity which poses that cultural traditions during a globalized era must be conceptualized through the ways in which the opening of borders, through travel and exposure to mass media, now allow individuals to re-create their cultural identities, including foodways.

However, the impact of globalization and the global nutrition transition on dietary changes are not linear or direct. The nutrition transition model has been criticized as a “one-size-fits-all” solution which does not capture the complexities and variations in regards to dietary changes and eating practices (Himmelgreen et al., 2014). In countries undergoing nutrition transition, changes in diet do not always lead to adverse health outcomes, such as declines in nutritional status (Piperata et al., 2011). Rather than having a homogenizing effect, the “Americanization” and transcending of diets across national and regional spaces may in fact strengthen “diasporic public spaces” in which new forms of resistance take place. Indeed, resisting dietary acculturation may be one form of distinction during a globalized era (Parasecoli, 2014).

Finally, although less explored, migrant diets may also shift because of pressures of “fitting in” the American society. Identity-centered studies in psychology suggest that particularly migrants of minority background may attempt to distance themselves from behaviors or practices that increase their categorization as “ethnic” to increase their chances of fitting in (Guendelman et al., 2011). The “Americanization” of foodways may, then, be a way for migrants who are visibly different, to claim a widely acceptable American identity (Guendelman et al., 2011). One’s status in the U.S. society may also affect the approachability of practices promoted as crucial for leading a healthy life in the U.S. For instance, minority migrants may feel that physical activities, such as children’s sports practice, are non-welcoming spaces for their children who are not white (Gilbert et al., 2008).

To conclude, studies focusing on everyday life around food among immigrants have often focused on dietary changes. The majority of this literature has been completed on migrants which represent the ‘Fourth Wave’ of migration, a result of the 1965 Immigration Act which largely for the first time opened the borders for migrants of non-European descent. The results from these studies are mixed. Certain patterns can be detected, such that changes in diet are exacerbated by high prices of healthy food, unavailability of certain types of ingredients, children’s preferences, convenience and affordability of fast-food restaurants, busier lifestyles and schedules, as well as pressures of fitting in. In many cases, changes in diet have begun prior to migration, reflecting the globalization of diets which shifts dietary patterns to an increased consumption of processed foods and foods high in sugar, fat, and meat. Yet, regardless of where dietary changes begin, migration to the U.S. often exacerbates these changes, which is associated with the declining of health status among migrants with minority background. Neither dietary acculturation nor globalization has linear, direct, or similar effects on diets across various migrant groups.

## **Bringing Race to the Study of Food and Immigration**

In this dissertation project, I re-conceptualize approaches to migrant foodways and so-called dietary acculturation as few anthropological works have focused on the ways in which the social construction of race, through racialization and institutionalized forms of racism, influences everyday practices around eating among “new Americans.” Amidst notions of the U.S. as ostensibly a post-racial society, disparities persist between minority and majority populations in health, wealth, education, job opportunities, and access to resources such as food. However, to date, the majority of the dietary acculturation studies have utilized either assimilation-based or transnational approaches in understanding the process through which diets change, highlighting the role of ethnicity and/or globalization in their conceptual framework. Several scholars have criticized these approaches for not being able to explain the variation reported in the dietary acculturation literature, and for leaving the constructs of race and Whiteness unexamined (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Biltekoff, 2013; Himmelgreen et al., 2014; Pilcher, 2014; Ray, 2016; Slocum, 2011; Sutton, 2010; Wilcox & Kong, 2014; Williams-Forsen, 2006). My dissertation project is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature regarding migrant foodways. By being in conversation with both critical food scholars and critical race scholars, the project examines the ways in which food and eating practices among migrants in the U.S. may in fact reflect broader racial inequalities.

There are several examples of food scholarship in the U.S. context which demonstrate the importance of centering race in critical analyses of food systems as well as foodways. During the nation’s early history, White settlers appropriated Native American lands and used forced assimilation techniques to undermine the food sovereignty and food cultures of Native American groups (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Deprived of their lands and foodways, Native Americans today have some of the highest rates of food insecurity (Jernigan et al., 2012). Compared to whites, Native Americans are twice as likely to be food insecure and to have difficulties accessing healthy foods

(Jernigan et al., 2012). Similarly, the built environment in the U.S. today is shaped by urban planning and mortgage lending policies which impact the proximal food environment of neighborhoods (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Although legally sanctioned, these practices and policies are a continuum of a long history of residential segregation (Gordon et al., 2011). So called food apartheid areas “where it is easier to get fried chicken than a fresh apple” often correspond to areas with the highest proportion of Black residents (Kwate, 2008: p.34). Overall, areas that are either dominantly White with populations living under the poverty line, or majority Black areas (regardless of income), are areas in the U.S. which will have poorer access to foods that allows individuals to make healthy choices (Baker et al., 2006).

Furthermore, low-income areas and minority neighborhoods often are disproportionately targeted by advertisements for unhealthy foods (Walker et al., 2010). Fast-food companies actively seek out areas with large populations of minorities, which in the U.S. are easy to find due to residential segregation. Segregation also concentrates poverty and joblessness in distinct areas, giving fast food companies a surplus of labor not available in most White neighborhoods. Areas with most wealth also have the most political power to affect zoning policies which can block the introduction of fast-food restaurants to their neighborhoods. Finally, consumer profiles of neighborhoods often describe areas with high concentrations of Black people as “distressed neighborhood” in which single parents regularly consume products from drive-in restaurants, as opposed to white neighborhoods the residents of which are characterized as “successful suburbanites” that enjoy home ownership. These profiles affect the decisions of businesses, impacting the whole retail profile of a neighborhood, and ultimately, its food environment (Kwate, 2008).

Thus, interventions to increase access to healthy food may not be efficient if not rooted in tackling the root causes of inequalities in the food system. Some grocery chains, such as Whole Foods Market, have opened businesses in so called “food desert” areas as part of a healthy food

movement. However, these initiatives may create feelings of displacement if coupled with gentrification or the disappearance of minority supermarkets which often provide racialized minority women a less judgmental place for grocery shopping (Anguelovski, 2015; Slocum, 2011). Thus, to understand structural constraints to healthy eating, food access must be conceptualized more broadly than in terms of physical proximity to a grocery store, and rather as the result of a racial project which systematically shapes the built environment and access to employment opportunities.

As a further example of how race has been centered in the study of food, racialized notions of civility and respectability have been found to be coupled with eating habits (Appadurai, 1998; Williams-Forson, 2006). It is not surprising, then, that foodways have been used as markers for racial identity throughout colonial and American history, and they continue to be significant for the processes of racialization in contemporary U.S. The connections between racialization and foodways can be dated back to plantation-style agriculture that emerged during the “discovery” of the New World. The purpose of this project was to build a highly profitable sugar industry ready to meet the needs of a sugar-craving Western population, and it was justified through a racial hierarchy that that deemed Blackness as inferior and subservient to Whiteness (Mintz, 1985). The associating of Blackness with inferiority and a natural character for service continued throughout slavery as enslaved people were considered “natural-born cooks,” serving elaborate meals to White slave-owners while being fed highly rationed, meager meals (Williams-Forson, 2006). During the Jim Crow era, minstrel shows reproduced racist imagery of Black people as sub-human, constantly stealing food items such as chicken and watermelon (Purdick, 2014; Wazana Tompkins, 2014).

Similarly, food was used as a way to racialize and other non-white populations during the events leading to the annexation of New Mexico to the U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Foodstuffs and consumption practices played a key role in how white Anglo settlers determined racial difference. The chile used in Mexican cooking was coupled with “heat” and used to create stereotypes of

“unstable” Hispanic people who were “crooks and deviants” (Garcia et al., 2017). White settlers would often complain about the overuse of chile in Mexican foods, worrying that the stuff they put in their bodies would affect their morals and the health of a nation. “Chile queens” in the plazas of San Antonio were depicted as “sharp-witted women who threatened Anglo men with their rapacious sexuality” (Pilcher, 2014: p.448). In travel books and cookbooks written about Mexican cuisine, Hispanic foodways were appropriated for a White Anglo audience that should “improve” it with aspects of cleanliness (Massoth, 2017). Starting from the 1950s and 1960s, along with the influx of Mexican migrant laborers to the country, Mexican cuisine became a tool through which to distinguish Mexicans from the white American identity by being described as being of lower culinary status (Burdick, 2014)

During the Great European Migrations, the culinary traditions of New Americans caused a great deal of concern among the dominant White majority. Migrants from Europe were to be educated in personal characteristics such as self-control, and taught how to adopt a “modern” and “patriotic” diet influenced by dishes from New England, including cod, bread, and baked beans (Gabaccia, 1998). Dieticians focused their efforts on assimilating migrants into an American diet, making claims such as that sour and pickled flavors among Eastern European Jews rendered them unassimilable, and discouraged Hungarian and Polish children from eating dill pickles because that ostensibly had a negative impact on their health (Gabaccia, 1998). Although these actions were likely defended through health claims, they were tied to fears of “Uncle Sam being swallowed by foreigners” (Gabaccia, 1998: p.125).

Thus, throughout U.S. history, food has been a site of race-making and various racial projects have been employed to create difference between “native” Whites and those racialized as others. During these racial projects, some foods, such as pizza and bagels, have become naturalized and accepted as mainstream American foods, while others have remained “ethnic”. This othering of

food, argued by several critical food scholars, reflects the way in which some foods are still exoticized in order to exclude them from American normative cultural identity, despite claims of cultural pluralism and acceptance (Anderson & Benbow, 2015; Burdick, 2014; Ray, 2016; Wazana Tompkins, 2012). Finally, during a so called post-racial era, racialized meanings attached to food may take different forms, such as through an over-reliance on individual and behavioral factors in regards to healthy eating among minorities (Wilcox & Kong, 2014). Food remains a salient site of race-making and an avenue through which particularly White Americans map distinctions and establish their position in the U.S. society (Burdick, 2014).

### *Food, Race, and Gender*

In most societies today, women bear the responsibility for the “mental and manual work of food provision,” one of the most basic and important forms of care (Allen & Sachs, 2007: p.1). Gendered expectations assume that women are naturally more inclined towards nurturing and caring. Much like racialization, the feminizing of women’s bodies assign socially constructed roles described as “natural” for women (Igenoza, 2017). Consequently, the promotion of healthy eating habits, particularly in households with children, is often considered the woman’s task. And although being the gatekeepers of eating habits in the household, this gatekeeping does not necessarily transform into power over overall decision-making (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). That food and cooking are so strongly associated with women affects women’s lives in complex and sometimes contradicting ways. On the one hand, the “kitchenspace” may act as a space of female subordination. On the other hand, by claiming control over food, women also exert their agency (Page-Reeves, 2014).

Intersectional approaches in food studies stress that the extent to which such agency and self-definition can be practiced by women is impacted by various social identities and positions that

women embody (Williams-Forsen & Wilkerson, 2011). Racialization processes have historically been tied to gendered processes, as is reflected in the Jim Crow era minstrel character “Old Aunt Jemima.” Reportedly, the caricature was introduced in a minstrel show by a White person in Blackface, depicting “Aunt Jemima” as an asexual, submissive “mammy” figure, happy to serve the children of her White master and mistress and to remain in the kitchen (Witt, 1999). In contemporary times, Black women have been associated with derogatory names such as “welfare queen,” attaching social stigma to services that were designed to assist low-income families in access to necessities, such as food (Littlefield, 2008).

Today, migrant women of minority background are more likely to face barriers to healthy eating due to their higher risk of food insecurity. Bearing the bulk of labor in obtaining foods for the family while often being full-time laborers themselves, minority migrant women experience stress not only from uncertainty and food insecurity but the social expectations laid upon them. Many report feeling “lectured to” about the importance of healthy eating, and being under strict social scrutiny for their eating habits which are equated with their competence of motherhood and womanhood. Treating their children with “junk food” is met with judgment in White spaces and essentialized as a cultural trait and/or personal failure to keep their children healthy (Greenhalgh & Carney, 2014).

Furthermore, during the Great European Migrations, it was the role of White women to educate lower class newcomers of “racially different material” on how to eat a proper American diet. White women were quick to tell racialized others about the wrongs in their foodways and child rearing practices, such as that Jewish mothers were too indulging with their children (Gabaccia, 1998). This speaks to three things: the gendered aspects of food and eating practices, the relative power that White women have historically had over Black women and other women of color, and



the racial formations that have subsequently allowed for some women to elevate into the White category.

Because a lot of the current food research has been conducted by White scholars, intersectional approaches to the study of food are only beginning to take their shape (Wilcox & Kong, 2014). Acknowledging and calling out the assumptions in the literature, however, may open up new avenues for scholarly inquiry. For instance, despite anthropology's insistence on cross-cultural diversity and multiple ways of knowing, minority scholars have called out the Eurocentric assumptions underlying current food studies. Western understandings of what feminism or female independence means often fail to take into account the multiple ways in which women practice their agency. Rather than juxtaposing "modern" and "traditional" women's roles, such as by depicting racialized others as being in a subservient role because of their heavy involvement in feeding the family, approaches should be led by women's own definitions of themselves. Similarly, studies on dietary changes among migrants and/or minority groups often use a monolithic idea on what constitutes a healthy diet, and rarely has there been space to define health from the viewpoint of the people studied (Wilcox & Kong, 2014).

Gendered and racialized aspects of foodways also affect the language and discourse surrounding food. In a comparative study of discourses around healthy eating among white and Black women, Igenoza (2017) found that White women had been socialized into the idea of dieting. For them, the right way to perform femininity was to aim towards a slender ideal, which led to a strict regulation of food intake. For the Black respondents, the relationship towards food was more about commensality and socializing, with thinness not being their main pursuit. This does not mean that either group cares more about their health than the other. It does, however, speak to the ways in which racial difference may be performed by various everyday practices such as eating. By controlling and disciplining the body with a substance as intimate as food, ideas about race become

embodied (Igenozza, 2017). Food, as one of the most material substances in our lives, then, is a fruitful place to study this phenomenon (Garcia et al., 2017; Slocum, 2011; Parasecoli, 2014). Finally, the idea of disciplining the body with the right types of foods may be a very narrow and Western approach for conceptualizing health and practices around eating. This approach reproduces the idea of the contained self which promotes individual responsibility for health and well-being.

### *Food as a Symbol of Resistance*

Throughout history, groups of people marginalized as racial others have both resisted systems of stratification and exercised power through food. For instance, slaves in the United States were often allowed to maintain small garden plots in which they were able to grow foods typical to West Africa. Through such a connection of plate and land, a diasporic identity could be maintained even among the brutal violence of plantations (Burdick, 2012). Several of the foods considered today as “Southern,” such as greens, gumbo, jambalaya, and fried chicken, or barbeque as a cooking style, are all the results of food cultures brought to the U.S. by enslaved Africans. African American women asserted their agency, tackled stereotypes, and cultivated resistance through the stealing of food from slave masters and maintained a small livelihood by selling food products along railroad lines in the U.S. south (Williams-Forson, 2006).

Dozens of culinary traditions brought to U.S. by migrants have shaped its foodways. Migrants have resisted dietary recommendations and pressures from the White majority by insisting on the preparation, consumption, and selling of their food products (Burdick, 2012; Ray, 2016). The process of dietary acculturation has never been a unilineal and unidirectional one in which the newcomers simply adopt the traditions of the host majority (Parasecoli, 2014). In fact, dominant, homogenizing practices often provoke waves of resistance, distinction, and quests for authenticity (Appadurai, 1996). However, given that the racial hierarchy in the U.S. places Whiteness at the top,

the extent to which migrants of minority background publicly remain distinct identities through cooking and eating practices may be affected by a wish to resist being racialized as Black (Habecker, 2010).

Thus, acts of resistance around food do not necessarily profoundly challenge institutionalized forms of racism or the salience of race. It would be easy to claim that once everyone eats together, or eat one another's foods, they also get along. Such notions can be found or in the current foodie culture which emphasizes multicultural values through the consumption of other cultures' foods. Heldke (2003) warns about "food colonialism" which grants (often White consumers) expertise over an "ethnic" culture after being exposed to their foods. She reflects on her own positionality as a "foodie" and her wish to make herself more interesting by experiencing as many "exotic" foods as possible, yet rarely taking the time or effort to understand the complexities of that culture. This reflection, she claims, is not an attempt to "take the fun out of food," but one way to understand the power differentials between racialized bodies and the ways in which certain bodies are assumed as experts of cultures while "ethnic" others are often considered only the experts of their own culture. Finally, Julie Guthman (2011) uses as her case study the current alternative food movement which promotes consumption of local, organic foods, born as a critique towards the consolidation of power in the food industry into the hand of a few companies, as well as the challenges regarding environmental sustainability in the current food system. While this act in itself can be considered a form of resistance, Guthman (2011) argues that the movement often uses colorblind statements and narrow definitions of "good food" which fail to take into account the constraints and preferences of communities of color.

To summarize, this literature review captured current trends in the study of dietary changes among migrants in the U.S., followed by findings and research approaches in the food scholarship

which centers race in its analysis. Bringing these two strands of literature together, I next turn to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks undergirding this dissertation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In bringing together the topics of race and food in the context of immigrant foodways, this dissertation is conceptually grounded in the immigrant-food nexus as proposed by Agyeman and Giacalone (2020). This framework is proposed as an alternative to the somewhat rigid separations currently existing in the studies of food and immigration, which tend to focus on either the macro (immigration policy) or micro (daily lived experiences, cultural practices, identity). Instead, Agyeman & Giacalone (2020) argue that such separations between the two approaches fail to take into account that what is defined as “macro” has real-life, material consequences at the everyday level, and what is defined as “micro” also reflects pertinent, large-scale meanings. The nexus, meaning connection, then extends “from the macro scale of national policy to the micro scale of the intimate daily performances of culture, community, and individual bodies through food.” (Agyeman & Giacalone, 2020: p.8). Within this conceptual framework, neither the macro nor the micro level issues are given primacy, rather they are seen as mutually affecting each other (Figure 2).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the analysis of the findings, I rely upon two theories: the theory of racial formation and intersectionality. The reasons for turning to critical race scholarship rather than anthropological theories in this dissertation are outlined below. As a discipline, anthropology has historically had a troublesome relationship with the concept of race, given that the field was instrumental in coming

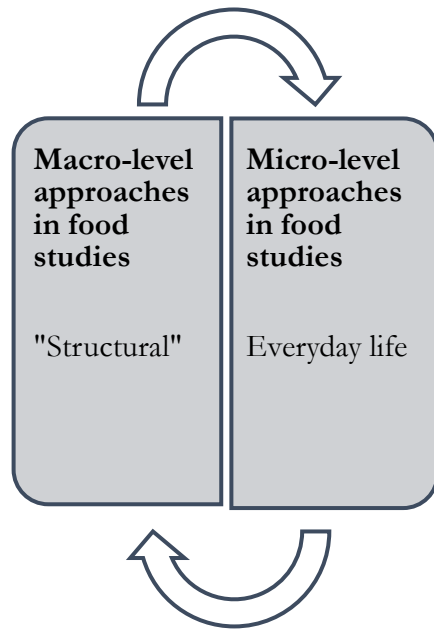


Figure 2. Visualization of the food-immigration nexus.

up with and reinforcing pseudoscientific notions of biological and/or genetic races, which meant juxtaposing “savage” populations with civilized European, White populations. The “scientific” basis for such notions was challenged starting from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by anthropologists such as Ashley Montague, Franz Boas, and Ruth Benedict (Mullings, 2005).

However, the discipline’s problematic history with the concept of race still led many anthropologists to taking on an anti-race stance in their approaches and favoring the concept of “ethnicity,” while many Black anthropologists continued to pursue anti-racist work (Harrison, 1995; Mullings, 2005).

However, overall, “compared to its sister disciplines of sociology of history, anthropology’s contribution to the study of racism in the last several decades has been modest.” (Mullings, 2005: p.669)

In more recent decades, anthropologists have shed light on the ways in which racism continues to operate and how the social construct of race continues to have real-life, embodied consequences in everyday life. Biocultural approaches in anthropology have noted how racial health

disparities are examples of such inequalities (Dressler et al., 2005; Gravlee, 2009). More recently, calls for decolonization and anticolonization in anthropology have highlighted the discipline's still prevailing legacy of Eurocentrism, the lack of incorporation of scholars of color in its canon, as well as the lack of engagement with race and racialization in studies of globalization and power (Allen & Jobson, 2016; Rosa & Bonilla, 2017; Thomas & Clarke, 2013). Moreover, Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre (2019) have called for an "anthropology of White supremacy," arguing that even when there is recognition of the significance of race and racialization, "the analysis of white supremacy is often missing (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2019: p.65)." Indeed, interrogation of Whiteness and White supremacy in anthropology remains scant. There are exceptions, including in food studies, such as Kolavalli's (2019) work on how food pantries operate as "white public spaces" and in other topics, such as the connections between White nationalism, religion, and patriarchy, the overrepresentation of Whiteness in studies of human variation, as well as racialized practices and inequalities in forensic anthropology (Bjork-James, 2020; Clancy & Davis, 2019; Bethard & DiGangi, 2020). The anthropology of White supremacy, however, remains a rather scattered line of scholarly inquiry, and Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre (2019) call for its expansion through interdisciplinary engagement "rather than police the boundaries of our discipline and ethnography from the perceived encroachment from cultural and media studies, women's, gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory, or ethnic studies (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2019: p.71)." Recognizing the work of these anthropological scholars, I turn to sociology in which critical race scholarship has been developed with more force and allows for the centering of race in the analysis of the topics brought forward in the dissertation.

First published in 1984, *Racial Formation in the United States* by Michael Omi and Howard Winant has since become one of the most cited works on race in the social sciences (Omi & Winant, 2015). The racial formation theory was formulated as a reaction towards dominant ethnicity-based, class-based, or nation-based theories in the study of race. Racial formation, then, "is the

sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed (Omi & Winant, 2015: p. 109),” acknowledging race as a “master category, a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States (Omi & Winant, 2015: p.106).” Influenced by symbolic interactionism, racial formation theory emphasizes individual and collective agency and recognizes that the salience of race is both maintained and transformed through a sort of dialectical interplay between social structures at the macro-level and actions at the micro-level (Omi & Winant, 2015).

Given the vastness of the theoretical concepts included in the racial formation theory, the one most central to my project is that of *racial projects*. Omi and Winant (2015) describe these as the “building blocks” of racial formation:

A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning. (p.125)

Racial projects can take place at the macro-level or micro-level, yet every racial project “attempts to reproduce, extend, subvert, or directly challenge the system of race (Omi & Winant, 2015: p.125).” For instance, the “War on Drugs” and the resulting criminalization of Black and Latino is a racial project, signifying the meaning of race through a common sense of law and order, and structuring race by leading into high rates of incarceration of minorities (Alexander, 2012). Racial projects can also highlight the significance of race through advocating for anti-racist racial projects, such as the through efforts to desegregate education (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004). Racial projects are regularly

present in today's news: the separation of migrant children from their parents, the calls for building a wall, the wish to receive more migrants from Scandinavian countries, plans for abolishing affirmative action for the sake of meritocracy, Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter - all are projects through which the salience of race manifests itself today.

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) who used the term to describe the exclusion of Black women from the discourse of feminism (equated with White women) and anti-racism (equated with Black men). Crenshaw's work builds upon earlier notions made by Black women, including freed slave Sojourneu Truth and the Combahee River Collective, about how understanding and overcoming oppression would remain insufficient if the work did not recognize the influence of multiple, overlapping social identities (hooks, 2000; Lorde, 2017; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). Intersectionality was a call for the acknowledgment of Black women's realities, such as forced sterilizations, sexual assaults, and low-wage labor, during movements that ostensibly advocated for the liberation of all women and all Black people. Intersectionality, then, is a theoretical and analytical perspective "which gives people better access to the complexity of the world and themselves (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016: p.2)." Besides women and gender studies, it is now used as an analytic tool in several disciplines, including public health and psychology (Bowleg, 2012; Rosenthal, 2016).

Although it may seem deceptively intuitive that all human beings have multiple identities, this notion should not be used as an analytical shortcut to understand intersectionality. The focal point of intersectionality is historically oppressed and marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, LGBT people, low-income people, and people with disabilities. This consideration can yield new insights in several disciplines. For example, a commonly reported positive linear association in public health is that of higher SES and better health outcomes. However, viewed from an intersectional perspective, this association turns out not to be true. Among Black women, infant mortality, a



commonly used indicator for population health assessment, is three times higher than among the White majority population, despite similar levels of education. Similarly, the homicide rate of Black males who have the highest level of education is higher than the homicide rate among White males with the lowest level of education (Bowleg, 2012). Thus, intersectionality emphasizes that current social problems cannot be fully understood without the consideration of multiple identities, and without understanding the histories of oppression of marginalized groups.

### **Key Concepts**

Throughout the dissertation, I repeat certain key words which are explained here in detail.

Immigration is a “process by which non-nationals move into a country for the purpose of settlement.” (International Organization for Migration, 2011) People may be forced to move across borders or to do this voluntarily due to various political, social, economic, or environmental reasons, and migration can take several forms, such as being seasonal, circular, or chain migration (Himmelgreen et al., 2012). I use the term *migrant* which according to international conventions is any person who is moving or has moved across an international border, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is (IOM, 2011). In regard to food, I use several key concepts commonly utilized in the anthropology of food and nutrition, food studies, and nutritional anthropology. *Diets* refer to specific foods and drinks regularly consumed, and thus dietary changes among migrants refer to reported increases or decreases in the consumption of specific food groups, commonly measured by methods typical to nutritional assessment (Gibson, 2005). *Foodways*, defined as “the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period” is a broader term which encompasses the larger and complex ideological meanings of food, as well as the social aspects of eating (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Thus, this term compared to diets

more holistically captures the ways in which food, not only nutritionally but socially, economically, politically, and mentally, shapes human life (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). The term *food system* refers to the “totality of activities, social institutions, material inputs and outputs, and cultural beliefs within a social group that are involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (Pelto et al., 2012: p.3). Finally, *food culture* is understood to encompass both concepts of foodways and food system, including “the fundamental understandings a group has about food, historical and current conditions shaping that group’s relationship to food, and the ways in which the group uses food to express identity”, including ideas about what is considered food, tasty food, healthy food, or socially appropriate food, and the groups and individuals with whom food can be shared, and when (Lexicon of Food, 2018).

Furthermore, throughout this dissertation, I conceptualize *race* not as something rooted in human biology, but instead as a sociocultural construct, as explained by Dorothy Roberts: “Race applied to human beings is a political division: it is a system of governing people that classifies them into a social hierarchy based on invented biological demarcations. (Roberts, 2011: p.2).” I use the term *racialization* to mean “the complex set of historical and sociopolitical processes of attributing superior or inferior status based on the presumption of biological difference (Pierre, 2020: p.1).” In defining *Whiteness*, I emphasize it as a recent project in human history, which has both material and ideological underpinnings (Roediger, 2007). As sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) has put it, central to Whiteness particularly in the context of immigration has been its changing nature, yet what remains constant is its connection to *anti-Blackness*:

Whiteness, the idea, the identity tethered to no nation of origin, no place, no gods, exists only if it can expand enough to defend its position over every group that challenges the throne. White is being European until it needs to also be Irish because of the Polish who can

eventually be white if it means the Koreans cannot. For that situational dominance to reproduce itself, there must be a steady pole. That pole is blackness. (p.112)

While writing in the context of the United States, I echo Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre (2019) in that anthropological scholarship on race, racialization, and racism must also be placed in the context of how Whiteness operates transnationally and not just in the U.S. In this dissertation, I try to bring forward some of the aspects of how racialization has impacted both Ethiopian and Finnish migrants prior to coming to the United States. For example, writing about Ethiopians of Oromo ethnicity in the United States is incomplete without mentioning how their historical marginalization has also been connected to White supremacy and European colonialist thinking, which elevated fair-skinned Ethiopians to represent “civility” over “savage”, dark-skinned Oromos (Dugassa, 2005). While this dissertation does not explicitly focus on this dynamic, it is important to bring it forward to better understand the transnational nature of race and particularly Whiteness, framing them not only as U.S. based phenomena. Similarly, for Finnish immigrants, arrival to the U.S. was not their first introduction to the effects of race and racialization. Keskinen (2019) has documented how Finns have been racialized as an “inferior race” in European racial taxonomies from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under this racialization scheme, Finns were excluded from the “superior” Nordic race, which included Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes, instead they were considered to be of “Mongolian” descent and unfit for the White category. Anecdotal stories from my fieldwork for this dissertation indicates that some bilingual Finns in the U.S. may have chosen to align themselves with Swedish Americans due to the elevated status they enjoyed in the racial hierarchy both in Europe and in the United States.

On a final note, I have chosen to capitalize both Black and White in this dissertation. Capitalizing *Black* is aligned with the notion that it conveys “an essential and shared sense of history,

identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa.” (Associated Press, 2020) Capitalizing *White*, however, is subject to more debate as Whiteness does not refer to any specific culture or ancestry but rather represents a historical and social process of granting socioeconomic and material privileges to certain segments of the population. I have chosen to capitalize *White* as an attempt to name it and normalize the use of the word in both scholarly and public conversations. By ignoring the social and material benefits of White as a social category “we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility” (Ewing, 2020).

### **Immigration History and Foodways among the Two Populations**

The dissertation title suggests that although this work has been completed with two distinct immigrant populations, I have chosen to write in the title Black rather than Ethiopian and White rather than Finnish. This is not to diminish the cultural background of the migrant groups, the features of which will be the focus in all chapters of this dissertation. However, the title is a conscious choice to indicate that if we only group migrants together based on their ethnic origin, we may lose the nuances and complexities which exist both among migrant communities and which impact their everyday life in the U.S. However, certain background characteristics regarding the migration history and foodways of both groups must be listed here before presenting the findings.

The earliest record of Finnish migration to the U.S. can be traced to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A part of the Kingdom of Sweden at the time, small groups of Finns moved from Värmland (Sweden) to Virginia where a Swedish trade company, actively involved in the Middle Passage, had its North American base with the Dutch. The earliest Finnish Americans, such as one of the less known “founding fathers” John Morton, are therefore descendants of this group (Kero, 1982).

However, the largest influx of Finns to U.S. happened during a few decades spanning from the latter

half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a phase which in Finland was coined “America Fever.” During this period, the U.S. was depicted in Finnish newspapers as the “land of freedom, equality, and democracy” as opposed to the “failing” European society. Migration to the U.S. was a combination of economic and adventurous reasons, although some also fled the country because of perceived oppression from Russians (Kero, 1982). Migration of Finns to the U.S. followed certain patterns. The first ones to leave were wealthier men from western Finland, and gradually those with lower incomes migrated as pre-paid tickets became available for Transatlantic travel. By 1930, almost 400 000 Finns, at the time one tenth of the population, had left the country. Migration to the U.S., however, had already slowed down by the 1920s as the U.S. had imposed immigration restrictions lobbied by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP), meaning that only a couple of hundred Finns could move to the U.S. every year (Kero, 1982).

Today, the numbers of migration are substantially smaller. Between 1945 and 2016, 30,000 Finnish citizens have moved to the U.S. Approximately 670,000 individuals in the U.S. identify as Finnish or as having Finnish ancestry, and of these 20,000 were born in Finland, and 80,000 are first generation migrants (Korkiasaari, 2018). Finnish Americans are usually categorized into seven different groups based on their migratory background. These terms include: 1) fully Americanized generations 2) generations aware of their ancestral roots 3) early birds or “post-war Finns” who moved to the U.S. after the wars in the 1940s 4) snowbirds or Florida residents who moved to the U.S. between 1960s and 1980s 5) odd birds, including individuals from various educational backgrounds who have moved to the U.S. between 1980s and 2000s 6) love birds, meaning those who have married American, and finally 7) migratory birds, those who reside in U.S. temporarily (Korkiasaari, 2018).

Finnish foodways are said to belong to the Nordic diet, being influenced by culinary traditions from both east and west, and characterized by the consumption of certain staple foods,

such as whole meal products, potatoes, fish, low-fat dairy, and seasonal foods such as berries and mushrooms. Finland was a relatively poor country until the Second World War, which has impacted its foodways. For a long time, foodways have been shaped by what has been locally available. Because of a short growing season, people stored food for the winter, which is why root vegetables and tubers are so prominent in Finnish foodways. Diets were and are complemented by berries and mushrooms picked from the forest. Breakfast is often one of the most important meals of the day, and substantially heavier than the typical American cereal breakfast. Yet, rather than being described as a unified, distinct Finnish cuisine, there are several regional dishes and certain festive meals which appear on almost everyone's table, including Christmas dishes such as ham, carrot casserole, and rutabaga casserole. Typical easter foods are influenced by Russian traditions, and most families consume lamb and pasha (a dessert) during this holiday (Ponkilainen, 2016). There are hardly any Finnish restaurants in the U.S., nor are Finnish foodways particularly known in the country. The diaspora regularly organizes events and festivals which serve Finnish foods, although these tend to be mostly participated by other Finns.

Overall, there is a dearth of literature of Finns and their foodways in the U.S. A comparative study between Finnish Americans and Chinese Americans in California suggests that Finns find it much less important to maintain a traditional diet abroad compared to Chinese (Anderson, 2014). For Finns, food traditions are thus not necessarily maintained through everyday eating but through the preparation of specific holiday dishes (Stoller, 1996). However, there is a lack of studies corroborating these findings. Reports of Finns and food in the U.S. also include notions of Finnish Americans "educating" newer immigrants on proper nutrition and on how to eat well during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gabaccia, 1998).

Ethiopian migration to U.S. has been tied to both domestic politics and events as well as U.S. immigration legislation. Historically, the U.S. has had a strategic interest in Ethiopia due to

its geopolitical importance as a partly Christian country in the Horn of Africa, and to this date the U.S. provides a lion's share of its foreign aid in Africa to Ethiopia (Reimers, 2005). Even during national quota systems during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, light-skinned Ethiopians received a somewhat preferential treatment compared to other non-European countries and had a quota for 100 migrants due to its independence. However, only after the 1965 Immigration Act did migrants from Ethiopia, other African countries, as well as the Caribbean move to the U.S. in larger flows, forming the "new Black diaspora" or "the new Black immigrants" which today exceeds the African American diaspora in numbers (Reimers, 2005).

Ethiopians have arrived in the U.S. in distinct waves. The first wave included the "I-20" diaspora. This diaspora consisted most often of male children of elite Ethiopians with Amhara and Tigrinya background, arriving in the U.S. to attend graduate programs in historically Black colleges such as Howard University, or to represent their government (Idris, 2015). The second wave took place from roughly 1974 to 1991 as a result of the 1974 coup in Ethiopia during which a military government known as Derg, backed by the Soviet Union, took over the country. The third wave consists of Ethiopians who have arrived in the country since 1991 to present. 1991 marked the overthrow of the Derg government in Ethiopia, and migrants moving after this period have arrived in the U.S. as political asylum seekers or as diversity visa lottery winners, through family reunification processes, for graduate studies, or with an H-1B work visa (Idris, 2015). Given that the number of Ethiopians in the U.S. was roughly 10,000 in the 1980s, and about 250,000 in 2014, the diaspora has essentially been formed only in the past three decades. The largest diaspora groups can be found in five states: in California, Texas, Virginia, Maryland, and Minnesota (Getahun, 2006; Terrazas, 2007).

Ethiopian foodways are easily discernible: they are built around injera which acts as a foundation for all dishes and is consumed at most meals. Injera is a pancake-like dish made of the

endogenous crop teff. Stews, curries, and vegetables are placed on top of the injera and often seasoned with berbere, a mix of spices such as chili powder, fenugreek, ginger, garlic, and cardamom. Injera also acts as utensils as Ethiopian food is eaten by hand, preferably the right hand, with pieces of injera used to scoop stews and curries. Etiquette requires careful washing of hands and mouth prior to consumption of food. Injera and sauces are served on a communal platter which makes eating a highly social act. Those in Ethiopia who follow Orthodox traditions follow fasting rules on each Wednesday and Friday, as well as during longer periods throughout the year, and thus vegan food is common in Ethiopia, with meat being saved for special occasions and festivals (Seleshe et al., 2014).

Depending on the ingredients, different Ethiopian meals can be considered or perceived as rich or poor. For instance, shiro, a staple stew made of chickpeas and broad beans, has higher value if it is prepared with butter instead of vegetable oil. Injera cooked with teff is considered the most valuable injera, while poorer Ethiopians and those residing in the rural areas may prepare it using barley, giving it a distinctively darker color over the preferred white injera. Because of injera's high carbohydrate content, poorer households may consume more injera over quality and quantity of stews (Kifleyesus, n.d.). Other discernible features of Ethiopian foodways include the coffee ceremony, which includes serving three cups of black coffee in small cups, often accompanied with popcorn and the burning of incense.

Ethiopian food is quite well known by Americans. In cities such as Washington, D.C., the city inhabiting the largest Ethiopian diaspora, dozens of Ethiopian restaurants mark the city's culinary map. Ethiopian cuisine has gained a level of prestige and has generally avoided being grouped into a derogatory "cheap, ethnic food" category, at least in the world of culinary critics, being one of the most well-known culinary traditions from Africa (Mtshali, 2017). Ethiopian restaurants typically have presented themselves as exclusively Ethiopian, resisting "modernizing" or



“Americanizing” of their kitchens. Some argue that this is due to Ethiopian pride and the will to maintain its reputation as “the only African country that wasn’t colonized” by a European power (Kifleyesus, n.d.; Kliman, 2015). Typically, restaurants have a strong presence of women cooks, highlighting the role women play in Ethiopian households, with recipes being passed down from mothers to daughters. For the diaspora itself, Ethiopian restaurants act not just as a source of livelihood but as familiar places that help migrants to reconnect with experiences similar to those at home (Idris, 2015).

Food traditions are generally carefully preserved among diaspora, though some changes are evident. In the U.S., teff is not as readily available, and injera has a different texture in the country compared to back in Ethiopia. Berbere is commonly bought in powdered form from import or specialty stores rather than being prepared from scratch (Kliman, 2015). Injera remains a staple food among Ethiopian families in the U.S., although very few if any academic papers have addressed the issue of dietary acculturation, dietary changes, or culinary identity among the Ethiopian diaspora, rather experiences are reported in brief newspaper articles (Dukmasova, 2017). To date, I only found one study of dietary acculturation among African migrants including some Ethiopians, with the conclusion that greater dietary acculturation was associated with declines in self-reported health (Okafor et al., 2014). While studies exist on the racial identity and racial formations of both Finnish and Ethiopian migrants in the U.S., to my knowledge virtually no or very few studies have looked at the intersections of food, race, and health among these populations.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### FOOD AS OTHERNESS: CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

*The very idea of the melting pot serves to celebrate assimilation while continually remarking difference. It is startling how often in ethnic and immigrant narratives we find overridealization and euphoria in place of injury.*

Anne Anlin Cheng, *the Melancholy of Race* (1997)

#### Ethiopian Participants

##### *Introduction*

On a balmy Saturday afternoon in March 2019, I was sitting on the porch chairs of Enku's house, waiting for the rest of the women to arrive in order for the community meeting to begin. Enku's house is located in a gentrifying neighborhood in Tampa, Florida, just a few blocks away from the hottest new foodie hall in town. The yellow-colored three-bedroom house she had been able to buy with her husband over 10 years ago after first arriving to the city in the early 1990s as refugees from Ethiopia, now sat among giant, new developments. Back then, the money she and her husband made and saved from working six or seven days a week - Enku in a sewing company with other migrants - and later at the airport - was enough to make a home purchase such as this. The neighborhood itself represented a rather typical story of gentrification: a formerly redlined, segregated area was now the "hip part of town," and when the local newspaper published reports of best neighborhoods for "house flips" in the Tampa Bay area, Enku's neighborhood always made it to the top of the list, but the bottom of the list in what got referred to as a "good schools," reflecting the historical disinvestment in communities of color (Alkon et al., 2020).

Enku's grandchildren were playing outside, while their aunt Aida was standing on the porch behind me. We were chatting about her upcoming wedding while she kept a close eye on the

children. I was sipping on the cold Coke from the can Aida had brought me. The children were throwing around leaves which Aida told them not to. “Your mom will get mad,” she told them. From inside the house, I could hear the sounds of cooking. I knew that Enku had been preparing the foods for this meeting for at least 24 hours, if not longer. On this occasion, it was her responsibility to host the monthly women’s meeting – a rotating responsibility of all members in the women’s group, an act involving a lot of fermenting, baking, peeling, dicing, slicing, frying, simmering, and stewing. The high point of the women’s meeting was always the dinner served: a table full of *injera* or *bidden* (depending on if one is speaking in Amharic or in the Afaan Oromo language) the centerpiece of Ethiopian meals, a fermented sourdough round bread, or as some say, pancake, accompanied by a variety of stews, usually made with lentils, chicken, beef, cabbage, and various other vegetables. This food took hours to prepare, and that work, as most food work, typically fell on the shoulders of women.

During the course of my fieldwork, over a period of 13 months, I attended these women’s meetings in order to get to know the community and to learn about the stories of Ethiopian women, some of whom had arrived in the U.S. with their families as early as 1990, some as late as 2016. Many were refugees, while others had arrived in the country through family reunification visas or diversity visa lottery. Most women (70-90 % depending on the meeting) in the group were Ethiopians of Oromo background, representing the country’s largest ethnic group. The community group also specifically identified as an Oromo Women’s Group, although the group did not exclude women from other ethnic backgrounds, including those with Amharic or Tigrinya background. Ethiopians in the U.S. are far from a homogenous group. In addition to ethnic background, differences exist based on gender, socioeconomic status, religion, as well as immigration status and background, among others. Highlighting such heterogeneity is important, as essentializing may lead to immigrant groups being described as homogenous when they almost never are (Wilcox & Kong,

2014). The women's group provided a sort of microcosm for observing some of these differences. The women were a varied group: there were multigenerational families involved, there were single women, older women, younger women, women with and without children. They lived in different parts of town, all around Tampa. Some were married to Ethiopians, some were married to Americans, some were single. Typically, the meetings drew between 15 to 20 women, sometimes less, depending on individual schedules.

Some moments later, more cars had parked outside, and we all proceeded indoors to Enku's house. There, everyone greeted each other by hugging and by kissing each other on the cheeks. If children were present, the women would gently grab the children's hands and kiss them. What preceded dinner was a lively chatter of catching up and sharing stories of the month that had passed. Then, after saying a prayer, the table was ready for everyone to begin eating. Following the customs from previous meetings, I walked to the bathroom, lining up to wash my hands with soap and water, drying them with a paper towel, and lining up to grab a plate from the end of the table. On the plate, I first laid an *injera*. On top of the *injera*, I proceeded to add different stews. With a plate full of food, I sat down and started eating with my right hand, shredding pieces of *injera* with which I then scooped the stews onto my mouth, recognizing the familiar taste and smell of berbere spice on the *tibs* (fried meat) and the *messer wot* (spicy lentil stew).

This typical scene from my fieldwork with Ethiopian women followed an almost ritualistic pattern in each and every one of the monthly women's meetings that I attended over the course of my fieldwork. Described in this way, the scene captures what many other scholars have highlighted in their work on food, culture, and immigration. Foods are an essential part of human enculturation and socialization, and food memories in migrant communities are known to be particularly salient (Holtzman, 2006; Rozin, 1996). For most migrants, familiar food is a source of pleasure, pride, and comfort, through which one is able to create home and to maintain connections (Gabaccia, 1998;

Williams-Forson, 2014; Mares, 2012). The women's meeting provided such a space where food was essential to remembering, and for connecting with one another.

Yet this scene from my fieldwork is also vastly incomplete. The familiar sensory pleasures and aesthetics of food in the communal space shared among the women were contradicted by the accounts of the same women in interviews and everyday instances, where most of them described having had experienced feelings of shame regarding their food, which in turn had resulted in them



Figure 3. A table set at one of the Oromo women's meetings. The selection varies based on who is hosting the meeting, but there is always *injera* (on the left).

mostly refraining from eating Ethiopian food in certain social spaces. While I am certainly not the first one to notice a pattern of change in migrant foodways, often described as dietary acculturation in the field of public health and nutrition, this literature rarely factors in a critical analysis of *why* it is that certain spaces feel particularly unwelcoming to different migrant groups in regard to exercising a basic tenet of food sovereignty, which simply means having access to and eating the types of foods one may prefer. This social life of food, its affective dimensions, can reveal a great deal about what and who we consider American and who is coded as not belonging. In this first section of the dissertation, I bring forward the stories of Ethiopian migrant women in the Tampa area to bring nuance to the conversations on migrant foodways and dietary acculturation. These stories are then followed by and contrasted with the everyday experiences of Finnish migrants living in the same state. Together, these stories highlight how foodways and dietary changes relate to broader issues of race, assimilation, and belonging in the context of the United States.

*“The Go-To Story of America, I Don’t Think It’s My Story”*

“African immigrants are often completely erased in America,” 31-year-old old Aida, daughter of Enku, said to me. Aida’s parents, Enku and her husband Abdii, had first fled Ethiopia in the late 1980s due to Abdii’s father’s involvement in the communist government. When the communist government was overthrown in 1991, Aida’s parents left in fear of persecution, leaving their two daughters, Aida’s older sisters, with family in Ethiopia. They stayed in Somalia where Aida was born. When a war broke out in Somalia, the family was eventually allowed to enter the U.S. as refugees in 1999. A few years later, Aida’s older sisters were reunited with their family. Aida’s parents now have four grandchildren. I had gotten to know their multigenerational family over a period of four years in Tampa, spending time with family members individually and at community meetings. Aida continued:

It's always about Hispanics. And it's almost like, you know, we don't exist. Y'all don't exist. All they talk about immigration are about, you know, Hispanic immigrants. And of course, they're a pretty significant population. But what they need and what they want is going to be different than African. It's very hard to come to America as an African.

Aida said this towards the end of our interview sounding somewhat frustrated. She felt that her experiences as an Ethiopian migrant in the United States were not included in the American story of immigration.

All types of people come to America. It's just not really discussed. It's under that Hispanic...but our needs are different. I think it's different to fly back home, 16 hours one way for us. It's completely different. And being in a community where, I don't know where you can go in America and you can't find another Hispanic person. Everywhere, Midwest, everywhere...they're going to...you're going to have, and they're generally a close community, they help each other a lot. Which is great. But we get kind of erased from the conversation. I think as an African immigrant, I think in general, they think you're just here to take advantage of the system and get food stamps and this and that.

It was true that Tampa at least did not have a large African, let alone, Ethiopian migrant community. Migrants grouped under the broad term "Hispanic" comprised of a much larger number of people at least in Florida: out of the foreign-born population in the state, only 1.6 % were born in Africa while 75.6 % were born in Latin America (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Had Aida's family moved to Washington D.C., Minnesota, Seattle, or Denver, they would have been part of a much larger Ethiopian community, and they would have found the "Little Ethiopia"

neighborhoods, as well as a wide selection of shops that sold Ethiopian foods, coffee, clothing, and other cultural artifacts, alongside numerous Ethiopian restaurants. In Tampa Bay, there are no Little Ethiopias. The first Ethiopian restaurant opened in 2008. There is no “ethnic voting block” of tens of thousands of members of the Ethiopian diaspora (Foner, 2016). Here, the community had formed haphazardly: by word of mouth, and as a result of having no other choice, the latter of which was often the case for refugees. Many told me they had stayed – or returned after trying out a more northern city – because the weather was amenable.

Aida mentioned to me being erased from the conversation around immigration. Nationally, the Black African-born population has more than doubled between 2000 and 2013 (Foner, 2016). And although on average this population, among all migrants, is the most educated, Black African migrants are subject to the anti-Blackness of the racialized social hierarchy, as is exemplified through negative encounters with the police, higher deportation risk, and everyday discrimination (Foner 2016). Such anti-Blackness also manifested itself in the type of perceptions that Aida mentioned, such as being perceived as someone who would “take advantage of the system.” The omission of literature on Black migrants from Africa and particularly how they experience and negotiate everyday life in a racialized society has also been noted by anthropologist Jemima Pierre who has written about the complexities related to how race and racialization processes affect the experiences of Black African migrants in the U.S. (Pierre, 2004).

Additionally, Fumilayo Showers (2014) has pointed out that much of the literature on the experiences of Black migrants in the U.S. has focused on the experiences of Caribbean migrants, while “comparatively little effort has been expended in understanding how recent black immigrants from Africa fit within paradigms of immigrant incorporation in the USA, and how they navigate race relations” (Showers, 2014). The same can be said for the study of migrant foodways, particularly for the literature focusing on changes and resilience in dietary habits among migrants. The majority of



such studies focus on migrants of Latinx background, and much remains to be known about the particularities of everyday life among Black migrants from Africa (Williams-Forsen, 2014). Aida continued:

I think I learned...I knew young that okay, we are just different, our life is not like, how would I say, like, just not a typical American I guess. You know you hear that America is a melting pot, everybody's here, you know the go-to story of America...I don't think it's my story. I don't think they want it to be my story.

Aida did not feel part of the “go-to story of America,” where migrants of all backgrounds would ostensibly be woven into the social fabric of a diverse country. But she also was not part of the Ethiopian “I-20” diaspora.” This categorization referred to Ethiopian migrants of the 1960s and 1970s, largely male children of elite Ethiopians with Amhara and Tigrinya background, aided by visa reforms of the 1964 Immigration Act, passed as a result of the civil rights movement, and who arrived to the U.S. to attend graduate programs in historically Black colleges, such as Howard University (Idris, 2015). The 1980 Refugee Act and the 1990 Immigration Act (which initiated the diversity visa lottery) changed this. Now, Ethiopians such as Aida and her family with very different backgrounds arrived in the U.S. They left for different reasons than the I-20 diaspora. They often had no say in where they ended up in the U.S. Many were of Oromo background, representing an indigenous population to east Africa and Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group, yet historically marginalized and oppressed, to the extent that many in the diaspora in the U.S., as the women often told me, did not actively want to identify as such due to the stigma it brought.

All of this was part of the complexity Aida was referring to when she said it was tough to be an African immigrant in the U.S. And it is against this diverse background that the study of food must also be viewed from. In the next sections, the stories of Ethiopian women demonstrate how

food is very much tied to encounters with a racialized system, as well as to how the broader Western imagination views Africa and particularly Blackness. The stories point to how fictions of race become embodied in everyday life. Based on my fieldwork consisting of participant observation and interviews, I outline everyday situations around eating through which difference and “Otherness” are constructed and resisted in everyday life among Ethiopian migrant women. These include food shaming, food stereotyping, and food as distinction.

*“Ew, What is That!”: Food Shaming*

I was seated on the sofa in Edna’s living room on a Tuesday morning in February 2019. This weekday morning worked best for her work schedule in the manufacturing company she was employed in. Edna had gotten this job through a referral by Bifani, one of the leaders in the women’s community, and although she had to work six days a week, she told me it paid much better than the cigar company where she had rolled cigars seven days a week with other migrants in her earlier years of living in the U.S. Back in Ethiopia, Edna had been a teacher, and she had arrived in the U.S. through a family reunification visa in 2006, her husband having arrived sooner. The new job had allowed her to save enough money so that together with her husband, she had recently been able to buy a townhome apartment in West Tampa. Edna had asked me to park my car in the small parking space adjacent to her home. Once I approached her doorway, she was waiting for me outside, dressed in a white Oromo dress and headscarf, tending to the oregano growing in a small pot in front of her apartment, something she told me she grows for *shiro* (Ethiopian chickpea stew). Edna handed me a parking pass and advised me to put it in the window of my car. It was quiet outside with no neighbors in sight, but Edna explained to me: “The neighbors are so strict about parking,” adding that they were “mostly older White people” who she felt were controlling. She added how much she appreciated the opportunity to be able to purchase a home, but that she

missed her old neighborhood and her old neighbors who all knew her. She told me she disliked the way she was being watched in her new home and neighborhood.

Edna's living room reminded me of the Ethiopian homes I visited when living in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia prior to beginning my graduate studies in the U.S. The black leather couches were turned towards a TV in which an Ethiopian news channel was turned on. I saw prime minister Abiy Ahmed speaking on TV. On the walls, I saw family portraits and the diploma on Edna's daughter from a local university. I was there for an interview, but Edna had prepared Ethiopian food: we ate *injera* with meat stew and vegetables, drank *tella* (a fermented alcoholic drink which Edna assured "was not strong at all this time"), and finished with *buna* (coffee) and *dabbo* (a homemade bread seasoned with cardamom, which Edna told me she buys from the Indian store, as she did for all her spices). After we had finished eating, Edna showed me the *injera* pan which she kept in a storage room adjacent to the kitchen. It was an essential item in the household for anyone who did not want to rely upon purchasing their *injera* from the local Ethiopian restaurants, stores, or the few women that sold it as a side hustle. As Edna and I were sitting there, in what could perhaps be described a very Ethiopian scene, in terms of the food, smells, TV program, and the occasional Amharic words between our English sentences, Edna's stories about her food habits outside of her home contradicted this scene. While she told me that cooking dominantly Ethiopian food at her home was the norm – because it was both preferred by her and her husband and it was economical – what happened outside the home looked different:

I don't (bring Ethiopian food to work) because the smell maybe interrupts somebody. I never take my food outside the house. I don't feel comfortable. Even for my husband, I pack for him only macaroni, pasta, rice. No injera. Actually, I never tried. But when I was working in one place seven years ago, I saw my Vietnamese co-workers...they love fish.

When they put in microwave...So that's why, I compare. I know my food is spicy. If you put in the microwave, everyone will notice. So, I never, never take. If you heat up pizza, everybody loves the smell. But when you put your food in, no. Put chicken, nobody say nothing.

This passage demonstrates how Edna learned ways to avoid being too visible at her workplace by managing what she would eat in the office. In Edna's case, no one had explicitly told her about the politics of eating in the workplace for migrants, yet she picked up on this information by observing the experiences of another migrant group. Without explicitly being told to avoid bringing her own spicy food to work, Edna paid attention to the tacit codes in the workplace which had likely resulted in the disdain for the fish the Vietnamese co-workers were eating. Through describing the visibility and smell of certain foods alongside the acceptance of other foods in the workplace, Edna articulates what scholars have described as the "naturalization" of certain migrant foods, such as pizza, originally brought to the U.S. by Italian immigrants, while at the same time some migrant foodways have persistently remained "ethnic" (Ray, 2006). Here Edna's story demonstrates that her food remaining "ethnic" had to do with its sensory properties, namely smell.

Later on, after meeting with Edna, I talked to her daughter Emebe as well. In our interview, she would describe similar things. In her experience, the school environment was a place in which Ethiopian food became something that marked one's Otherness through sensory means:

I told my mom, when I started high school, I wasn't gonna take food to school...because it has a strong aroma. I didn't want to eat injera with my hands at school. Plus, you don't really get to wash your hands, unless there's like a bathroom. It's different. The only place where I eat Ethiopian food is at the house or at the Ethiopian restaurant...I think that in general my

high school life was different. I only had a few friends. I didn't want to bring that attention to me. I didn't want them to say that oh, she's weird. And you know you see on the news that kids get bullied and stuff like that. I definitely didn't want any of that. I just wanted to be...I wanted no attention.

Similarly to Edna, Emebet also consumed Ethiopian food strictly in her home or in an Ethiopian restaurant, and not in spaces where she would be asked questions about her food. She wanted to be as invisible as she could, bringing no extra attention to herself. Here, she associates the olfactory and haptic properties of food with possible being labeled "weird" and being bullied. She also highlights how the school lunch area environment is not culturally sensitive due to a lack of place of washing one's hands somewhere close to the lunching area. And so, food played a big role in gaining acceptance, and diverting attention away from one's food culture was a viable strategy for fitting in:

People want to assimilate. You know, they want to be accepted. So, they want to try these different foods. Drink soda and eat pizza. And Americans are very big about their food just like we are. Pork, you gotta try it. With food, you make connections. If you eat the same food, you're more likely to feel you're being accepted. You know, you can go to the same restaurants and eat the same foods.

This quote demonstrates both the pressures and agency that migrants like Edna and Emebet experienced as they navigated the U.S. social hierarchies as migrants. Food was a way to make connections and eating the same food as Americans was a way to build and maintain a sense of belonging.

However, even as the women explained to me that they would avoid bringing food to school or ate the same as everyone else, the sensory properties of their food would follow them to school as explained here by 30-year-old Alemtsehay:

I mean they (other kids) commented and we cooked with a lot of onions, as you know. So, this is the struggle of all Ethiopian kids. You go out of the house smelling like onions and it's the most embarrassing thing that could ever happen to you. It's traumatizing. Cause you smell like someone put onion deodorant on you. It stinks. Oh my god. It's disgusting. And with the heat it smelled worse, and I'm like...I would get so mad. But, um, that's the only struggle, the only thing I was embarrassed about.

Alemtsehay describes here how smelling like onions in school was “the only thing I was embarrassed about” as migrant. By stressing that this is the “struggle of all Ethiopian kids,” she refers to the specific generational experiences of Ethiopian migrants who went through the American school system. This experience, which their migrant parents were lacking, made it impossible for their parents to fully understand their children’s experiences. Thus, while Alemtsehay and others described their parents as wanting to instill in their children a sense of pride and memory of where they came from, such as by cooking familiar Ethiopian food, the children had to bear the consequences of those actions in spaces they shared with Americans during childhood and adolescence. Their preference was to “not smell like onions” at school because it marked them as different.

Neela described an instance where her mother had invited Neela’s friends over for lunch. While Neela had been looking forward to this, what happened at lunch became a deeply embarrassing moment for her as she found out what her mother had cooked:

They come over. It was injera. And I was so upset. I still remember...I must have been like seven or so. And it still feels like...in the moment it felt like it was this very silent lunch. Nobody spoke or anything like that. And then later on they were telling their grandmother like “she served us this white sponge with a sauce.” And I was so embarrassed. Like I was really mad at my mom. I was like why would you do this to me. And yeah they were like why would you feed us this spongy thing, and with that sauce. I never ate it in front my friends either. It was like, if you’ve seen, the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding...she takes moussaka to lunch one day and her friends are like ew, what is that! And she felt like, she likes her food, and I like my food, I like injera, but it was embarrassing to eat it like, in front of Americans ‘cause they were just like, that can’t be good.

Here, Neela describes how her friends’ reactions towards the food her mother was serving – *injera* and sauce – was telling: the food was met with silence, and later described to others as something inedible (a sponge), all the while asking Neela “why would you feed us this?” Instead of confronting the other children’s hurtful comments at the young age of seven, Neela directed her shame and embarrassment toward her mother, who she questioned for the lunch choice. Seeing her friends react with aversion towards her food, she concluded that her food was something to feel deeply ashamed of.

Neela described another instance from her childhood where she remembered her food being commented on by a family acquaintance – a grown-up - who had been invited over for a holiday meal:

It must have been like Christmastime. She (mother) got lamb and she was making wot. And I was `like okay, we’re not gonna eat it. And I remember...the same lady, she was like ew, I

don't eat that stuff, I don't eat lamb, I don't eat goat, it tastes so...um...I forget the word she used. And then I put that in my mind. I thought these are not okay. And I stopped eating it at that point. I did not eat it for all of my childhood. It wasn't until high school when they made tibs, and I ate it, and I was like this is good, what am I doing. The fact that she was like...it was an exotic meat other than your usual chicken and beef, that I was like, I don't want to eat that, that's gross. It smells like an animal. I would say things like that to my mom. She was like don't eat it then. It can influence you. Wanting not to be the weird, the weird kid from Africa eating, you know, just any sort of meat they can find. Because you know, we're poor Africans, so we eat weird stuff all the time.

In her passage, Neela described how her whole perception about her family's foodways would change due to this woman's aversion and disgust towards the type of meat used in Ethiopian cooking. She would internalize the messages brought forward by an adult who had been invited over for a holiday meal. In order to not be depicted as the "weird African" or the "poor African" eating "weird" foods, she would opt out of goat and lamb meat and choose the less exotic options of chicken and beef. While Neela's mother attempted to carry on cooking culturally preferred foods, the comments over a holiday meal made Neela decide that she would stop eating those foods as they rendered her unacceptable and unassimilable to the people that she sought acceptance from.

Faizah, who had arrived in the U.S. in 2018 through the diversity visa lottery had not gone through the school system in the U.S. but she had decided to not bring Ethiopian food to work because she was too tired of answering questions:

I have never even tried to bring Ethiopian food to my workplace. Because I know it's a little bit different and it's gonna cause some questions. And I'm not necessarily concerned about



them commenting things on it, but I know it's different, and it makes me uncomfortable to not just enjoy my meal and explain something at that point.

Breeze Harper (2011) writes about in regard to Black bodies always being scrutinized, including the foods Black bodies represent:

....always being put on display for, and being judged (tasted) by a white gaze that appears to be ignorant of the entire colonial history of what it means to place a nonwhite person, food, culture, and so forth, into the categories of 'exotic' and 'foreign' (Harper, 2011: p.229).

The examples brought forward by Ethiopian women, whether related to cues picked up from other migrants on proper politics of eating in the workplace, or after hearing comments which shamed their foods, or seeking to better fit in as a result of the above interactions, these all demonstrate Harper's notion of being "on display" or "being judged (tasted) by a white gaze" under the category of "exotic." This colonial gaze that Harper writes about in relation to food and foodways is perpetuated through various means in popular media, including reality, travel, and cooking shows where contestants are often dared to eat – or demonstrate their cultural capital – over knowledge and bravery over "exotic" foods (Heldke, 2003). The experiences of Ethiopian women around food shaming demonstrates that "exotic" foods are viewed as something to be conquered, experienced, commented on, and scrutinized, rather than respecting the fact that they represent an important part of the identity for the person whose culture those foods represent.

Finally, scholars of race have written about how daily, reoccurring questions, such as "where are you from?" can serve as microaggressions and daily reminders of one's difference and status of belonging in a country which is dominantly White (Sue et al., 2008). Experiences of food shaming can be added to a long list of experiences and reminders of not belonging, brought forward by the

Ethiopian women in the interviews, including being followed in stores, having people comment on their hair, having people make assumptions about their background (Hispanic? Indian? Saudi? African?), having teachers assume they did not have it in them to succeed, having people associate their home country with poverty and hunger, having a noticeable accent which in everyday life equated their personhood with stupidity, and fearing for the safety of one's children, particularly that of Black boys. Thus, a seemingly simple question about food was another reminder of difference and one's visibility, and food shaming served as a reminder of power. The next section shows how perceptions about "poor Africa" followed the Ethiopian women everywhere they went, being reproduced in food stereotyping in everyday life.

*"There Are Starving Kids in Africa": Food Stereotyping*

Most people back in the day only knew Ethiopia from the famine. So, it's just, you know, weird having conversations...you can talk to people about Ethiopian food and they're like so you guys have food? And I'm like a whole country that has been around for centuries, doesn't have food to eat? They don't have no cultural food?

Growing up in Tampa in the early 2000s, Aida quickly realized that people knew very little about Ethiopia. Much of the knowledge that people had about the country related to its food, or more specifically a perception of lack of food, which Aida also came to represent. It offended Aida that her country's history would be reduced to something as simple as poverty and hunger. Rather than asking her about what her country's food culture was like, people assumed it had no food at all, let alone food culture. The existence of a refined food culture has historically always been associated with origin myths and building of nation-states (Gabaccia, 1998). In *Every Nation Has Its Dish*, Jennifer Jensen Wallach (2019) writes about how the existence of a well-known national food culture

has been key to defining notions of civility and prosperity. Similarly, Ray (2016) has written about the Eurocentrism in what gets to be defined as “high cuisine” or worthy of Michelin stars. In this context, cuisines from African countries have less commonly been considered “refined” if not only recently. And while Ethiopian cuisine has in the past years and few decades been mainstreamed as one of the better-known African cuisines, this trend did not affect the experiences of many Ethiopian migrant women in this study, who still were identified as “poor Africans” with no culture.

The lack of food culture and the lack of food have been central to how Ethiopia has been brought into the broader American – and Western – consciousness through popular media and culture. In telling the story of food stereotyping brought forward by Ethiopian women, it is impossible not to highlight the role of two specific examples linked to the Ethiopian famine in 1984. In November 1984, a British singer-songwriter named Bob Geldof gathered a supergroup to sing *Do They Know It's Christmas*, a song that would put Ethiopia on the world map in the Western world. The song was a reaction in the West to what was defined as a “biblical famine” in journalist Michael Buerk’s October 1984 report from Ethiopia, showing footage of Ethiopians struck by and dying of hunger. What would become a pivotal moment in modern TV journalism was broadcast to hundreds of television stations worldwide (Franks, 2014a). *Do They Know It's Christmas* became an instant best seller, raising millions of dollars for relief efforts tackling the 1983-1985 famine in Ethiopia. The lyrics painted a picture of a barren country:

And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmas time/  
The greatest gift they'll get this year  
is life/  
Where nothing ever grows/  
No rain or rivers flow/  
Do they know it's Christmas  
time at all?”

Following the United Kingdom (UK), the U.S. put together its own supergroup, *USA for Africa*, to lead famine relief efforts. Seven weeks after the release of a massive charity hit in the UK,

*We Are The World* hit the airwaves and raised nearly 60 million dollars to provide food aid for the regions hit worst by the famine in Ethiopia, and is today the eight best-selling physical single of all time. Franks (2014b) has written about the failures of famine-reporting, which gave spark to a new type of philanthropy in the West but sparked no major conversations about social and economic marginalization as root causes of the Ethiopian famine. Similarly, Fair (2012) has written that “the lens through which American news consumers view famine in Africa obfuscates the contexts of colonial legacies, patriarchy, and economic imbalances by focusing coverage on dramatic, often horrifying events of wars and natural disasters (Fair, 2012: p.1).” Such coverage is part of a continuum where the Western world has been introduced to an Africa which is poor, damaged, disease-ridden, and far from civilized. This is the background context of what was known of Ethiopia in the U.S., serving as the backdrop to the women’s stories.

Aida’s 37-year-old sister Zahra, who had first stayed back in Ethiopia with her family, was able to arrive in Tampa through family reunification when she was nine years old, on Thanksgiving Day in November 1992. This was eight years after both songs – *Do They Know It’s Christmas* and *We Are the World* had first started playing in the radio, and four years after *Coming to America* had been first released in the movie theaters – depicting Eddie Murphy as the rich African heir from a stock-photo like African county, demonstrating the stereotype of his innocent stupidity through an incessant smile and a noticeable accent. Zahra told me how the images of Africa in Western-dominated popular culture affected all of her everyday interactions as a new migrant to the country.

I’d make up like a European country for my other parent because Africa was, you know, equivalent to negativity. Everything was bad about Africa. Poor and sick people and this and that. So, you didn’t want to be associated with that. There’s no, like there was no sense of pride at that age...now I’m like I’m gonna tell you where I’m from, because there’s that sense

of pride and value and appreciation for who I am and where I'm from. But as a child you don't understand that. Kids don't know that. Kids only know what they might see on TV. So, you want to hide your identity.

Zahra told me how she hid her identity by fabricating a story of having a mixed background, so that she could avoid saying that both of her parents came from an African country. For her, going through the school system had been a profoundly unsettling experience filled with issues related to race, belonging, and identity. She told me that the hiding and feeling ashamed of one's identity would only change in the college years or later in life:

I remember in elementary school for multicultural week... or day or whatever, where we dressed like our culture, and then also brought in artifacts, and then also food. I think there are people who like it and people who don't. And I think as a child you're just sad, you're upset, you kind of feel like wow, they won't...what's wrong with our culture, what's wrong with our food. Like, you take it personal. But as an adult I'm like, you know, you get to the point where you couldn't care less. Because you value it. You want it. And you also understand people's perspectives... it got to the point where at school it would be like you don't want to talk about your culture, you don't want to bring your food.

The perception of one's culture being unaccepted led to the abandonment of some of the everyday practices that represented that culture, including food. Leensa, who had lived in Tampa since the age of 11, agreed:

So before, I remember, kids used to even make fun of me at school. Cause like, "did you use to live in a hut, did you live in a jungle?"...the Americans here...maybe it's because they're

young. Like the people I went to school with. They didn't perceive Africa..they'd always see it as just a poor country that doesn't have anything at all. The older generation are a little bit more knowledgeable. You know, they know about the food, they ask me about it. They know a little bit about the culture. But as far as kids, I think they just look at what they see on TV. Then they perceive the whole of Africa like that.

Both Zahra and Leensa mention that kids could not know better since the only source of information they had about Africa was through TV where they would be exposed to certain types of ideas about the continent. And they were right: even after the 1980s fundraising hits and *Coming to America*, the stereotypical imagery of Africa continued to be reproduced through popular media. In 1997, the popular TV show South Park depicted a caricature of an Ethiopian child named "Starvin' Marvin." While the episode in which Starvin' Marvin was introduced also criticized the global food charity industry, the most memorable feature of the episode for many of the show's child viewers was the Black character from Ethiopia whose name was literally associated with hunger. And finally, countless people from Western countries remember, as brought forward by a Finnish comedian, being told at dinner tables to finish their meals because "there are people starving in Ethiopia," leading a Nigerian football player to pose the question: how many Western children were brought up with these stories (Teller Report, 2020)? In the Ethiopian women's lives, all of these representations in popular media led to feelings of alienation and lack of belonging and sometimes even farcical situations. One of the women told me how in high school another student had walked over to her and said: "Hey, do you want my milk, there are starving kids in Africa."

While many of the instances highlighted above relate to the coming-of-age experiences of Ethiopian women, the stereotypes were reinforced in not just the school system by "ignorant kids" but by grown-ups in workplaces. Bifani, one of the leading figures in the local Oromo community, had lived in Tampa for nearly 20 years, and was now in a managerial position at a local company,

being one of the driving forces behind starting the women's group. When Bifani and I talked about whether she had experienced racism in the U.S., her specific example led to food.

I feel it. You know, the way people think that Ethiopians don't have something. Even if we are poor, it is not the way they say we are. Sometimes they say: you are, you are safe. Maybe you don't have options to do everything you like, but you can eat. It's not like no food or something. I don't like the way they think. Maybe a long time ago somebody put on the camera, they have on the record, every time they think you are hungry. You don't have food. Somebody put on the thing that Ethiopian kids are hungry. They have that mentality in their mind. When you tell them you are from Ethiopia, they say you are safe in here. I don't like the way it is.

Here, Bifani specifically mentions what is likely the BBC footage of the famine in Ethiopia. She talks about the long-lasting impact that footage has had in regard to how they perceive Ethiopia. It was the first thing Americans thought of when they heard from Bifani that she was from Ethiopia. And because of that, she would often hear condescending comments such as "you are safe," as if she would no longer face any constraints after having escaped a famine-struck country. Similarly, Faizah described how a work gathering had led to an awkward exchange:

I remember at work we had this food pairing coming up for our clients. I was asking my coworkers if they need to keep the food because...and I'm like I hate to waste food. And this dude was like oh is that because you're Ethiopian. And I was shocked then. Like, wow.

And so Faizah's Ethiopianness was associated with her act of not wanting to waste food. Emebet also recognized the persistence of the imagery she was up against:

I made my colleagues try Ethiopian food for the first time. And you know they loved it. But it's about bringing...to me it's important to show them because before they met me, all they knew about Ethiopia was that it's poor, and that's pretty much it. Or that we're always starving. We want to change that. We don't want that to be the first thing that comes out of Ethiopia.

Emebet's quote also demonstrates how the Ethiopian women in this study felt like they were constantly put in a position where they were associated with poverty and lack, but where they also had to prove their worth and advertise their country's better and less commonly known parts to the general public.

*“We Are Not African American”: Food as Distinction*

The previous examples have demonstrated how Ethiopian migrant women experience being constantly perceived from the outside in, with racialized notions about their everyday food habits leading to food shaming and food stereotyping, which in turn led many of them stating that they would choose to eat their foods only in their homes or at Ethiopian restaurants, and changing their diets in other spaces in order to better fit in. However, it also became clear that some of the women were so aware of the racialized hierarchy in the U.S. that they would sometimes actively seek to distance themselves from Black Americans. For example, during my interview with Edna, we had the following exchange:

Laura: Do you think there are benefits to being a white migrant in the U.S. and what would those benefits be like?



Edna: I think there is a benefit. Even now, if you go to Asian people. Nobody say nothing for them. They are immigrants, and their color is similar. So, they think they are smart, they say like that.

Laura: What would you say are the benefits of being a black migrant?

Edna: I think they are like benefits, you know, maybe, I mean the ones who come from Africa. But the ones who live here... I don't think there is none.

Here, Edna explains to me how she perceives Asian migrants to having similar benefits as White migrants due their similar skin color, and also immigrants from Africa having benefits over those who were African American. And while anti-Blackness was at the heart of these hierarchies – demonstrated by the stereotypical and shaming notions laid out by the women earlier in this chapter – they could still seek to adapt to that system by asserting certain cultural features which set them apart from “Black Black” people (McMillan Cottom, 2019).

Birhan was even more explicit about how being Ethiopian in the U.S. brought her benefits that were not granted to Black Americans. Birhan's story is different from the stories of the majority of the other women I met because she had arrived in the U.S. not as a refugee or as a result of involuntary migration, instead she had arrived as the spouse of someone who came to the U.S. to work. Birhan listed to me her privileges which she was aware of: she had a White husband and lived in predominantly White area. She had lived and worked internationally, gotten her Master's in Europe, with all of these experiences allowing her to constantly “switch hats,” alternate between identities. Additionally, I knew Birhan was Amharic and so her experiences back in Ethiopia had

been very different to the Oromo women mentioned earlier in this chapter. Early on, Birhan talked to me about how over-asserting Ethiopian culture in the U.S. would bring benefits:

I'm gonna get in trouble for this one. But Ethiopians, we intentionally and consciously make a point that we are not African American. Because we understand the stereotype. We understand the reality. And we understand how racism affects the African Americans. The blacks, you know, who originally came from Africa. And we also make a conscious differentiation, like, oh we are not like them. So, it is extremely complicated for us. It is extremely complicated. There are people even within my own circle, there are people who completely go the African American way. So, they are kind of rejecting the Ethiopianness. So, it feels as if you have rejected your Ethiopianness and we look at them and...as open as I think I am...when I see Ethiopians acting, you know, like rapping, it does not add up in my head.

Here, she openly talks about how understanding the racialized social system in the U.S. meant that Ethiopians should over-assert their ethnicity in order to avoid being grouped together with African Americans, which would bring a disadvantage. Because of this disadvantage, Birhan also expressed her confusion at why anyone would decide to “go completely the African American way” as opposed to embracing “Ethiopianness,” with “rapping” used as an example of a type of Blackness Ethiopians should disassociate with. Birhan continued:

Most of the time, police brutality is towards African American males. Um, but there is a variety among the women as well. I have zero. None of it. My first go-to people are police officers. I got stopped and the minute they hear my accent I have a free ride. Even when I was coming against traffic, and I am like oh my goodness, and I play up my accent of course.

And they said, oh no, I don't need to see your license and registration, let me get in my car and I'll help you. So, there is automatically something that disarms, oh, she is not one of those, whatever one of those are. I have that advantage. And so I'm glad that I came to this country when I was in my early thirties, you know, when I don't have to change my accent or anything. Because it serves me well to differentiate myself. You know, whatever it takes to survive.

Here, Birhan talks about the strategic ways in which she could benefit from her accent in everyday encounters, such as those with law enforcement. She also recognizes that this behavior is motivated by the desire to "survive," and that her positionality is different from those who have to live in the country from a younger age on. However, despite her wish to over-assert Ethiopianness in order to survive by disassociating herself from "those people," Birhan's story demonstrated how she was not free from the anti-Blackness in her surroundings. During our interview, she told me about her skin color had been associated with certain type of eating habits when visiting the doctor:

You look like me, and you go to the doctor, and they say, there is no way you can have food allergies. Your people don't have food allergies. They said that to me, to my face. If you have hypertension or you are pre-diabetic, they tell you, don't eat fried chicken. So, I had a freakin' fight with a Puerto Rican doctor. Yeah. So food is associated with race and everything here in the U.S. And you're like, yes, I am black, but I don't eat that food. I hate fried chicken. I hate it. So I know...I have a Puerto Rican friend. She and I are so close. We are like sisters. And she talks about Black people in her country, those people eat like plátanos, so I said to my doctor, it's like me saying to you you eat like a plátano. Oh, she doesn't like that. She's like stop eating fried chicken. I don't. I said woman, I'm from Ethiopia. We don't eat that. Even if I do, don't assume. Just make me do a diet diary and

analyze it from there. Act like a scientist, for Christ's sake. So I said, it's like me calling you a plátano.

Birhan explains how race is connected to notions of people's eating habits and how her Puerto Rican doctor had assumed that she ate fried chicken because of her skin color, a stereotype which angered her because she had been fighting hard to refrain herself from being grouped into "that" category. This racialized food stereotype has its roots in history, where depictions of Black people or "savages" eating fried chicken have been perpetuated, the story well documented in the work of Psyche Williams-Forsson (2006). Because of her relative privilege with a higher socioeconomic status and language skills, Birhan had been able to confront the doctor. However, her story reminded me of other instances where Ethiopian with less socioeconomic privilege had had less than desirable encounters with the medical system, including before, during, and after childbirth.

Regardless of these experiences, many of the women explained to me how they perceived White people treating them differently because Ethiopians were not considered "that kind of Black." Zahra told me how upon moving to the U.S. she "obviously did not fit in with Black people" because she came straight from Africa, looked different, spoke differently, and had a different language. She told me about seeking a group that would accept her, needing to "just get accepted by whoever's gonna accept you." In elementary school, she ended up identifying with the other children she met in obligatory ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. She told me how White kids approached her differently because she was "not Black," however, these encounters made her feel like she could never be herself, "except around your own group of people." Many women mentioned how they had noticed that recently their cuisine had become the subject of interest. Leensa said that "White people are actually very interested in the food and they want to try it."

Neela, who had vivid memories from her childhood about her food and culture being shamed, told me how things shifted after the elementary, middle, and high school years:

Once you get through college, you become...you're not the weird African girl anymore... you're the interesting exotic girl who nobody really knows about. I have friends who work with me and they're like yeah, we drive to Orlando all the time because we love Ethiopian food. And I'm like, I remember being afraid to show people what injera was. And now people are like it's great, it's different, it's exotic. And I'm like yeah, it's a luxury for me, because I don't get it that often. Yeah, it's like a new culture to them. It's an experience. Everybody eats together. It becomes this great experiences. Whereas before I was like mom, I can't believe you gave my friends the shiro and the injera, I am embarrassed right now. And I'll never recover from this. And now I'm like you wanna come to my mom's house, she is making injera.

Here, Neela describes how her culture and food shifted from being an embarrassment to a form of cultural capital, with Ethiopian food becoming a sought-after experience, and Neela's identity being transformed from a "weird African girl" into an "exotic girl." I also remember meetings where Leensa and Bifani would laugh and talk about Ethiopian restaurants which they went to, in which everyone was White and they were the only Black customers, feeling self-conscious, and often refusing to sit down and stay. This reflected a broader change in the American food system and particularly the eating habits of particularly upper-middle class White people whose love for "ethnic foods" had resulted in knowledge of "exotic" foods counted as cultural capital (Heldke, 2003). The absurdity of these conversations around food was not lost by Neela who describes how she still remembers being ashamed of her cultural food while now witnessing her colleagues driving great distances only to be able to "experience" Ethiopian cuisine. In the next section of this chapter, I

contrast Ethiopian women's experiences with those of a European migrant group, namely Finnish migrants. As the section will show, White migrants such as Finns in the U.S., have not been completely immune to experiences such as food shaming, however, their story reveals the tangible benefits available to those who get to be White: being invisible in the everyday while being hyper-visible in aspects of power and decision-making.

## **Finnish Participants**

### *Introduction*

On a Sunday in early January 2020, I was attending an event in a cultural hall for Finnish Americans in a small town in Palm Beach county. While I met and spent time with the Ethiopian community in the Tampa Bay area, known for its coastline along the Gulf of Mexico, my other field site was located on the other side of the state, near the Atlantic coast. This Sunday, the cultural hall was hosting the weekly meetup of a club for Nordic migrants, consisting of individuals who either identified as Finnish Americans or Americans of other Nordic heritage, such as Swedish, Norwegian, or Danish. Most of the people there were 65 years or older, who either resided permanently in Florida or spent a large portion of their year there, claiming the word "snowbirds" from locals. The cultural hall in which I found myself was one of the two halls of Finnish migrants in the area and had been built in 1948 on a large plot in the northern part of town. From here, it took less than 10 minutes to drive to the beaches offering gorgeous views of the Atlantic Ocean.

Most people I have talked to throughout my years in Florida do not know that there is a sizable Finnish population in Florida. But then again, this seemed to be true for many European migrants: most of the time, they could live their lives alone, unbothered, and were often not even grouped under the term migrant, rather being affiliated with their ethnic background.

Neighborhoods where dozens of Finnish families lived in Florida were never called "ethnic

enclaves.” Yet in the town I was completing my fieldwork in, I was surrounded by one of the largest concentrations of Finnish people outside the borders of Finland. The omission of Europeans under the concept of “migrants” has everything to do with their racial status, which was debated originally but eventually allowed them – including Finns – to be grouped under “White,” often through aggressive campaigning and legal efforts by Finnish migrants themselves (Roediger, 2007; Kivisto & Leinonen, 2011). The omission of European migrants from recent scholarship on migration has, unsurprisingly, led to omissions in food studies as well: the majority of dietary acculturation studies do not cover the food habits of European migrants, rather their foodways are often studied as “heritage” in the field of food history (Strings, 2020). But given that there has still been a steady influx of European migrants to the U.S. in the past decades, I became curious to learn more about how the everyday politics of food played out among a group that is considered to have so successfully assimilated.

The town in which my field site was located in Palm Beach County is a four-hour drive away from Tampa. This regular trip I took during the course of my fieldwork meant getting on Interstate 4 and exiting the interstate around Lakeland, well before the Disney Theme park exits surrounding Orlando. I would drive through Lakeland, an old mining and industrial area, then get on State Road 60 which passes vast fields, lakes, orange groves of central Florida, and the occasional Confederate flags and signs for “Dude Ranches.” Having crossed the state from West to East on State Road 60, I would then get on I-95, the highway connecting Maine and Florida, a massive infrastructure dating back to 1956. It runs parallel to the Atlantic Ocean and passes several small towns and larger cities on the east coast of Florida. Somewhere along I-95, the air always started to feel hotter, which is when I turned up the AC, until I finally reached the exit which took me to my field site.

The drives between the sites became an important moment and space for reflection. As the landscape of Florida kept changing around me, I often processed the findings and thought about the

different realities that Ethiopians and Finns lived in in the same state. I often thought about how race was part of the story – yet rarely touched upon – and how Palm Beach county, where Finns started arriving in large numbers starting from the 1940s following the investment boom that was to define Florida as America’s favorite holiday destination, had also at the time been heavily segregated. When Finns arrived in the area, Palm Beach county had one of Florida’s strictest segregation laws, and “colored people had to be off the streets and out of the city limits by 8 pm.” (Wilkerson, 2010: p.44) There was even a “wall of segregation” that ran through the city of Lake Worth, effectively keeping Black people out of sight and allowing White people to occupy the more lucrative land closer to the ocean.

One of the cultural halls for Finnish Americans in this area was a central field site in which I made observations, met people, asked questions, and attended activities. The hall was not wholly representative of the Finnish population in Florida; as the remaining chapters in this dissertation will show, there are rifts and differences among the Finnish population, not just between generations, but regarding politics, racial justice, socioeconomic status, and gender, to name a few. Yet it would have been a mistake not to spend time at the hall given its importance in the local Finnish community. It was one of the few remaining physical localities where “Finnishness” was actively maintained and practiced in a way that brought people together. Cultural halls had been integral to many European communities; they allowed to continue traditions and to bring people together in a safe space. Today, although the hall was no longer attracting the crowds it used to, it was still a place for gatherings, dances, guest speakers, movie nights, and above all – Finnish food. During my frequent visits to the club, the setting and the faces would often remain the same, but the Finnish foods on the menu would change from salmon soup to macaroni casserole, from beef stew and potatoes to cinnamon buns and coffee, prepared by the volunteers in the Club’s kitchen area.



At this particular meetup, I was seated around a round table next to Katri, Suvi, Nea, Roger, and other Finnish Americans whom I had become familiar with over the course of my research study. We were all gathered in the large event hall at the back of the building around a white, round table which had been decorated with fake orange flowers in grey baskets. Lining the main room of the hall where we were located were long benches attached to the walls, which Roger had told me, were “designed to be egalitarian:” when the hall was first built in 1948, Finns wanted a hall without a rigid seating order— anyone could sit anywhere to reduce social hierarchies. This was in line with the Club's political affiliation: unlike the other Finnish Hall in town, the one I was in was historically known as being more left leaning, although this reputation was something current members wanted to get rid of, so much so that in one board meeting they had decided to cancel the decision to have red Finnish designer curtains in the Hall out of the fear of how that might be perceived as communist.

The program for the meetup of the day included a silent auction and a guest speaker who introduced himself as Max. Max was of Nordic heritage and told us he was a world champion in karate. Max stood in front of all of us, our gazes directed towards him, a man dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt and who seemed to have been invited to the meetup to give the audience tips on how to stay healthy at an older age. The majority of his speech so far, however, had focused on highlighting his life achievements. He talked about his experiences as Elvis Presley's former bodyguard and about being a film actor. He asked the crowd to stand up, which we did. I mimicked the boxing moves he guides us all through. Then he told us: “Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, should be able to touch their toes,” he said as he went on to touch his toes. Then he stood back up again: “So keep that muscle memory.”

The stretching came to a halt when Max went back to sharing stories about his experiences of filming a movie in China. “One time, during a break, I saw this Chinese guy cooking, sitting by a

big pot. Is that lunch, I asked.” Max went on to imitate the Chinese man’s answer with a mock Chinese accent. Laughs erupted in the crowd. “I saw chicken heads, I saw chicken feet, I said to him: I ain’t gonna eat that! Get me to the closest McDonalds. Get me a coke, burger, and fries, you know what I mean? I love me some burgers.” Hearing fewer laughs now, and as if remembering his crowd, Max then added: “I mean, when I traveled to countries like Sweden, Norway, Finland, those places, I’d get used to all *those* foods. But I do love those burgers. You know who really messes up burgers? Mexicans. They put mustard in them.” He then went on to demonstrate a few more stretches, our hands now reaching towards the ceiling, stretching from side to side.

After a while, Max was done with his presentation and the crowd gave him a round of applause. The guest talk was followed by a coffee break. In the adjacent dining room next to the big room in which we were seated, several tables had been filled with Nordic foods that could be enjoyed with coffee, the Finnish food table including open face sandwiches and cardamom bun (Figure 3). After the coffee break, we briefly reconvened in the main event hall so that the winners of a silent auction could be announced. One of the winners was an older woman sitting in the other side of the room. She got a basket of all sorts of kitchenware. One of those items was a kitchen cloth which she waved enthusiastically to show it to the crowd. The embroidery on the tablecloth read: *I have a disease – I am sick of cooking*. I laughed and applauded with everyone else.

Much like in my description of the gathering of Ethiopian women prior in this chapter, this particular scene from my fieldwork with Finnish migrants in Florida demonstrates how food is central to staying connected to one’s cultural roots, the memory of food often being one of the remaining contacts to one’s ancestors, even if one’s language had changed. Roger, Suvi, Katri, all of the people I had gotten to know through spending time at the Club, would go to great lengths and volunteer hours of their time to maintain the sort of activities as the one highlighted above. It was challenging to do this. People were busy. Roger had once told me about his desperation in keeping

the Finnish community going, with an ongoing fear that the younger generation was just not as interested anymore. “But people still come for the food”, he had told me. Food memories brought people together, just like they did for the Ethiopian women. In some cases, the participants of events at the hall were second or third generation Finns, who remained their connection to their roots through learning recipes of the foods served there.

But I have also highlighted this particular scene from my fieldwork because food also exemplifies the type of distinctions people make in comparison to other people. In food studies, the “tell me what you eat and I shall tell you who you are” line from the French lawyer, politician, and gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin has become a well-known sentence for understanding how important food is in the crafting of identities and social positions (Brillat-Savarin, 1988). In this short moment of observation, I could see several things that food represented: culture, ethnicity, proper womanhood, and race. It highlights how food is central to feeling connected, but also in creating shared understandings of which foods stand out as being too different. In comments made by Max for an audience for people of Nordic origin, a shared understanding was created on what was considered weird, unconventional, disgusting food (Chinese) and who made their food inferior (Mexicans). Under this common understanding, Finnish food was not considered to be weird, unconventional, or “ethnic.” It simply was. As the data following this introduction will show, these notions are neither accidental nor race-neutral. I argue that the food from a certain (migrant) group is an easy target of ridicule and disgust as long as the social position of that (migrant) group of people is still being debated in the broader society, or if that group of people are seen as a threat to a racialized social order. As the results will show, food becomes less threatening, less disgusting, or even less interesting, when a group of migrants has assimilated, which in this case meant that they have become unambiguously White.



Figure 4. Popular foods served at Finnish meetups.

*Finnish Spaghetti: Food Shaming among White Immigrants*

Once upon a time, Finns in the U.S. were not in a position of power where they could group themselves together with those of Nordic origins, which meant being migrants from a preferred background. Finns were legally recognized as White in a state court ruling in Minnesota in 1908, but the ambiguity around the “pure” Whiteness of Finns remained debatable well beyond that year. Back in Europe, Finns had had their share of pseudoscientific racial classifications which meant that under the rule of Sweden, Finns were considered to be an “inferior race” (Keskinen, 2019). Racial

notions followed them to the U.S., where they could be picked up to further ostracize Finns who were condemned for their unionizing and labor activism, considered to belong to the “Mongolian” race and to be “jackpine savages” who shared with Native Americans a propensity for alcohol consumption, preference to live in the wilderness, and practices of magic and shamanism (Huhta, 2014). Although socialist Finns condemned statements of “Mongolianness” as racialization without any scientific basis, they were also careful to distance themselves from other racialized groups such as Asian Americans, presenting themselves as “proper American workers.” Class-based arguments in Finnish American socialist newspapers color-blindly called for workers’ unity (Huhta, 2014).

Anna was a third generation Finn whose grandparents on both sides immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s. Anna’s parents met in Idaho where they married. From there, they moved to Salt Lake City, and Anna was raised in Utah. She was one of the few people I talked to who lived outside of Florida, and her story connected the story of Finns to historical racial formations in the country. Anna had connected with me through an advertisement of my research that she had seen in the Finnish American Reporter, a magazine published in the U.S. by Finnish Americans. She told me about the food memories from growing up, the recipes she had learned, and which she had passed on to her children as well as a way to stay connected to their cultural roots. However, she was not as interested in talking about food memories (although she returned to those later in the interview) as she was about talking about how Finns were perceived as inferior “back in the day”, and how that experience still affected her, growing up in the country in the 1950s:

There was a Finnish community in Idaho. They were very looked down upon. In fact, what I find interesting is, and my parents were quite successful, my mother was a nurse and my father worked for the federal government. I don’t think it was until I was in sixth grade, I seriously thought there was something wrong with me. And my cousin who is...she’s a few

years younger..and she is Finnish, completely, and, um, we one day started talking about.

Hey, we're....and now it sounds racist, I guess..we're like, we're blond, we have blue eyes, we are cute, why are we feeling inferior? I know, it's crazy right? Cause you're white, you know, you do have privilege, and we had it. And yet you feel like you have to keep your heritage a secret. Bizarre.

Because of this experience, Anna told me that her parents advised her to keep her heritage a secret.

When describing this, she also mentioned an instance experienced by her daughter, an example which led to food.

Anybody at school had no idea of my Finnish background. I would never talk about it per se. You know, it was like I was embarrassed about it. I didn't really, I didn't feel any, being ostracized. But my parents did. My mother told me they would call them the dirty Finns. And then my daughter, when she was in college, she dated a kid from Michigan, and his parents came to town. She dated him quite a while. They went to dinner or something. They went to a restaurant. And the woman said, 'cause it was spaghetti, and it wasn't really good, she said, oh this is Finnish spaghetti. And my daughter got all excited, like this is? She didn't realize, the woman was being derogatory.

Anna reflects here on the knowledge that was passed on to her by her parents which was that of concealing one's roots. Anna's mother wanted her daughter to be free of being associated with the "dirty Finns." The stereotypes, however, lived on as is told in Anna's story about the moment in her daughter's dinner where poor-quality food was associated with "Finnish" food. This scene she describes from her daughter's life is very similar to the type of food shaming and food stereotyping

that Bill engaged in the beginning of this chapter, or the experiences that Ethiopian women describe around food.

Anna's experiences also demonstrate how as a child, she had enough knowledge about the U.S. racial hierarchy that she felt confused about her sense of inferiority, because she checked all the phenotypical boxes of being White (blue eyes, blond hair). If Whiteness was about certain physical characteristics, why would she still be feeling like she was not getting the privileges that was granted to her, and her family? Why would she have to hide her heritage? Finnish historians have examined to a great length how Finns in the U.S. would make campaigns about their Whiteness, as to prove their worthiness to the American society (Huhta, 2014). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finnish Americans carefully managed their racial visibility in the U.S.: in a book published by a Finnish church in 1957, Finnishness was described in the following way: "Finland and her people are as Caucasian as any can be – anthropologically, geographically, historically, politically, and from the religious viewpoint" (Kivisto & Leinonen, 2011: p.13). This statement came out only a couple of years after a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statement, spearheaded by anthropologists, which declared that there was no scientific basis for racial bias (Kivisto & Leinonen, 2011).

When I had asked Roger, one of the members in the Florida community, about this history, he replied: "I don't know if they were against Finns or their politics." Another participant had told me about an instance where "the Klan had burned a cross" outside one of the Finnish cultural halls in the Midwest. This person laughed about the memory, but clearly the intimidation tactics had also worked – vocal outreach for unions and labor movements are nonexistent in the Finnish American community today. Thus, this passage and history demonstrate how the construction of race has always been a political project, maintained to sustain differential access to resources by arbitrarily dividing people into groups based on their phenotypical features (Roberts, 2011). In order to

maintain such divisions, everyday practices, such as food, were easily available to further caricature a population that could be deemed inferior and/or threatening.

*“Some People, It’s as If They Refuse to Assimilate”:*

I was lucky I had caught Anna’s story. Because fast forward about 50 to 60 years, and here I was, meeting the Finns living in Florida, where stories of inferiority seemed to be non-existent or ancient history. Here, as I was told by a prominent member of the community, Finns had “always been respected in the community” particularly because of their “hard work ethic” and because they were “punctual and trustworthy.” At the cultural hall, no one seemed to be hiding their heritage. Foods were openly on display. In fact, it was the food that seemed to get people to attend these events in the first place. The pancake breakfasts, the split pea soup, the meat balls and mashed potatoes, the coffee and pastries – these were the comfort foods that attracted the crowds. Yet it was also a space completely separate from what went on in the outside world, and I could not help but think that it was safe to embrace one’s heritage when no one was looking, when there were walls around the practice, much like among the Ethiopian community.

Outside the walls of the cultural hall, acceptance was still important. Early on in my research, I had met with one of the leaders in the Florida Finns’ community. He had emphasized to me how appreciated Finns were in the area, how even one of the major streets had been named Finlandia Boulevard. He told me about the blocks of streets where most of the houses had been built by Finnish carpenters and builders decades ago. He mentioned that “in general, Finns have been very liked in Florida.” After this, he looked at me and emphasized: “It is *highly* important to be respected by and accepted by Americans.” He continued:



I don't get it...some people, it's as if they refuse to assimilate. They come here and they stick to their old ways, requiring the same foods, refusing to let go of their potatoes and sausage. Like they can't let it go.

He frowned when he talked about “them,” shaking his head. Again, food served as an example of a migrant being stubbornly stuck to their own ways, a marker of one's inability to assimilate, of not being disciplined, and thus causing harm to all Finns who tried to follow the rules of assimilation.

If assimilation and acceptance – which meant letting go of many or some of one's customs, including certain food traditions – was the goal, not everyone in the Finnish community saw this assimilation as a positive development. It led to feelings of loss. I met Lotta in a Lutheran church that used to be solely for Finnish churchgoers. Lotta was a second-generation migrant, born to Finnish parents who had a story similar to that of many other Finnish Americans. Lotta's father had first immigrated to Maine, to the northern parts of the country where a lot of other Finnish men worked as carpenters too. He had originally ended up there because there had been targeted recruitment advertisements in Finnish magazines for artisan interns. Lotta told me that starting from the 1940s and 1950s, people started moving from New York, Minnesota, Michigan, and Maine to Florida – a time which coincides with the Great Migrations of Black people fleeing a violent life in the South to seek a better life in the North for more opportunities – Lotta's father did the same thing, followed his friends, found a Finnish girlfriend, and got married.

It was a good time to be a Finn. In Florida, Finns were wanted and actively recruited. Finns in Florida were also growing a reputation in Finland, and the motels of Federal Highway in Lake Worth and Lantana would accommodate the bus loads of Finnish tourists arriving to see what was considered an almost mythical holiday destination. During this time, Finland was still far from having the same sort of wealth and economic status that was depicted in postcards, letters, and pictures from across the Atlantic. In displaying this prosperity and abundance, food played an

important role. Older members of the community told me in interviews that during those early times – 60s, 70s, even 80s, everything was more plentiful. Fried chicken, pizza, and fast foods were things that Finnish people back home could only dream of. Burger King was legendary. During that time, there was no talk about fast food being the menace of the American food system; rather it was the envy of the world, I was told (I write more about this in Chapter four). Fruits were plentiful, and Florida was known for its oranges. In Finland, fruits such as oranges were still rare sights in everyday consumption. America equaled abundance in everything for these early migrants, and particularly so in food.

In describing her own growing up in Florida, Lotta told me that her parents' generation still had a strong connection to their culture, and as a result of that her childhood in Florida was quite Finnish. She told me that the Finns in Florida were a strong community:

We were tight knit, removed, very removed. And we were very big. We were a big group, you know, you didn't have to go anywhere and speak English. Even at the grocery store we helped older Finns who didn't speak English. There were Finnish businesses that would be support because they were Finnish, and everyone would make sure that they knew their roots. However, this would change, with the younger ones no longer being interested in their roots. It's not organized like that anymore.

With "removed," Lotta meant that the Finnish community did not interact much with the broader population, rather the community was supportive of each other and allowed many Finns to migrate to the area without necessarily ever having to learn English. Lotta was worried about the younger ones no longer being interested in their roots, as she said that one's cultural roots would inevitably lead to losing touch with the factors that affected one's life. For Finns who were particularly prone

for alcoholism, Lotta told me, knowing their roots was very important so that these problems could be avoided.

Yet there was a pressure to assimilate: Lotta told me that Florida Finns had “avoided being political” because “when you live in a society, you are expected to speak about certain things in a certain way.” She told me she understood why traditions were fading, because being in America meant “you gotta be American first” and that it was important for Finns to “be good citizens and to work hard.” Lotta would reminisce to me about the “golden era” when there was still an active community. Every weekend, she would visit a local Finnish bakery with her brother and parents, where they got Finnish desserts. There were the cultural halls they could go to when they wanted to go out, and they even had a Finnish restaurant where one could go to spend an evening. It was a tight-knit community with everything available for Finns. Lotta’s remarks demonstrate that food was part of precious memories, but it also was a painful reminder of what had been lost as part of assimilation.

Later that week, after meeting Lotta, I spent three hours at the cultural hall talking to three active members in the community. They told me about the labor that went into organizing the activities at the hall. They all seemed to be in agreement in their worry that the culture of Finnish communities was disappearing and that no one was interested in maintaining traditions anymore. They told me that in the past, all activities happened with volunteer labor, and no one questioned the labor that had to be put into it because everyone needed each other and the community. Niklas said that things started changing in the 1970s and 1980s in Florida. Suddenly Finns no longer needed translators, spoke English, and could blend in. Yet they all agreed as they were speaking to me that something was lost when one loses one’s roots and “becomes too American.”

The feelings of loss and alienation, they told me, were not only caused by a lack of connection to one’s own cultural roots but because of demographic changes. All three spoke to me

how there was a lot of racism among Finns, how “back in the day” Finns did not have to interact with non-White people (as a reminder, there was literally a wall segregating Black people from White people), however, in recent years Finns had been exposed to “otherness” when immigrants from Latin American countries and Haiti had started arriving in Florida. For example, they told me, the formerly all-Finnish church was in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly Hispanic, which had caused a lot of anxiety in the churchgoers, with bitter fights ensuing over whether everyone should be able to attend church (the view of some in the community) and whether “no colored people should ever be allowed to enter” (the view of others). This racism, they told me, remains, and had been unresolved, a theme which I will return to in Chapter five.

*We Are Honest and Hard-Working: Reputation, not Food*

By the time I was conducting my fieldwork, the “golden era” of Finnish motels of the 1970s had disappeared, but in a central part of town, I could still buy Finnish pastries and coffee from a local Finnish bakery. Driving on the roads, I would pass Finnish landmarks, such as a street named after Finland, and statues erected by Finns in the area. The physical landmarks of a Finnish presence were there. But everyday experiences around food were vastly different from those mentioned by Ethiopians earlier in this chapter. In complete contrast of their foodways being under intense scrutiny – either by shaming, stereotyping, or exotification – the Finns I met told me that Americans knew nothing about Finnish food culture, nor did they care. And there was rarely any reason to explain, except if someone asked specifically. Most associated Finns with “Ikea” food, grouping them together with other Nordic migrants. But rarely did anyone ask questions from them or pay attention in their foods, whatever they were.

Indeed, food seemed somewhat irrelevant: the reputation as being a hardworking and trustworthy person was the main story line. This opportunity to be invisible, to not be asked

questions, made life easier. It is what Sara Ahmed has called the “energy-saving” aspect of privilege (Ahmed, 2017). One of the Finnish women, Leena, expressed this clearly:

I don't think anyone has any idea where I'm from. Of course, I don't live in an area where there are more of those...you know, ethnics. But I have to say that as long as you are white in this country, no one asks you where you come from and what you do or why you are here. You are welcome as long as you are European.

Here, Leena is clear about how Whiteness brought her benefits that included never being asked where she came from. Finns were not considered “ethnics,” and thus their food was not “ethnic” either, resembling the shared understanding from the introduction of this chapter. Finns could maintain their traditions in safe spaces, such as their homes and the cultural halls, and be left alone outside those spaces. I would notice this when I spoke to Finnish people in Florida and asked them about their migrant experience. Some shuddered at the word, as if listening to it as a foreign concept, not referring to them.

*“The Dirtier Walmart:” Learning the Rules of Anti-Blackness*

Earlier in this chapter, I wrote about how some Ethiopians used food and other cultural features, such as accents, as a way to distinguish themselves from African Americans, an everyday practice which demonstrates the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness. Finns, who had claimed their Whiteness, had other means to distance themselves from Blackness, as the food-environment related example below shows. Aliisa, who was in her early thirties and now an American citizen, had the following interaction with me:

Laura: Where do you go grocery shopping here?

Aliisa: Mostly Publix, the quality is better there. And my parents-in-law (American) told me to avoid Aldi's. They are a bit high class, and I think they think that store is lower quality.

Laura: Okay.

Aliisa: And one of the first things one learns here is that one should never go to that Walmart (refers to a specific location).

Laura: Why is that?

Aliisa: I don't know...I guess because there are so many dark-skinned people there.

Laura: How does that affect the shopping experience?

Aliisa: I don't know...it's just a dirtier Walmart.

This interaction shows how Finns learn how to code race in their everyday lives, including in the food environment. From the interaction, it becomes clear that perceptions of the quality of grocery stores is associated with both socioeconomic status and race. Publix is higher class than Aldi. Yet it is only “*that* Walmart,” the grocery store with “so many dark-skinned people” which is associated with the word “dirty,” a reason for why it should be avoided. The example given by Aliisa demonstrates how decades of segregation in the past are still reflected in the contemporary food environment, with the demographics of neighborhood grocery stores reflecting the racial composition of neighborhoods. In my field site in the Miami Metropolitan area, decades after such segregation was outlawed, the notions of a “dirtier” race still remained. In *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, Historian Mark M. Smith writes about this history of associating Blackness in the U.S. South with “dirty” in the post-civil rights era: “In American culture, ‘yellow, brown or black (skin) tends to be associated with ideas of dirtiness or destructiveness or unpleasant smell, while light colors, especially white and pink, tend to be associated with ideas of cleanliness, purity, innocence, and chastity.’” (Smith, 2008: p.80).

These notions of anti-Blackness were confirmed when I met Ester. I had been directed to meet her by several people because she was one of the elders in the community and had a lot of knowledge of the migration history of Finns. From Ester's apartment, I could see the ocean. It was not difficult to understand why people would want to retire here in Palm Beach county. Ester welcomed me to her living room, the walls of which were covered with paintings of Finnish landscapes. Having moved to the U.S. in the 1950s to follow her father who was already living here, Ester was informed about a job opening for working for a wealthy American family. Ester ended up working as an assistant to the chef at the mansion of this family, her being one of the 20 helpers. "It was like living in a movie," she told me. "All expenses were paid and health insurance was offered." She was able to start saving up money right away. This money allowed her to transition to a new job in New York, where she also finished high school, learned English, and met her Finnish husband, the two of them living in New York for decades and finally moving to Florida in the early 1980s.

Familiar food played an important role for Ester when she was new to the U.S. It provided comfort, and back in New York, groups of Finnish migrants would regularly get together for cookouts. A lot of that has faded, she told me, and a lot of her Finnish heritage was being preserved by her language these days. She did, however, regularly attend the events organized in the halls and the Lutheran church in the area. She told me that the younger generation was not interested in cultural activities anymore, and that her two children living in New York were "Americanized." It's easy being a Finn in Florida because they have a good reputation, Ester told me. For her, Finnishness had "never caused any shame", and she told me she has only become "more Finnish" the longer she had stayed here.

"Americans, they know we are honest and hard-working," Ester told me. I went on to ask her if she thinks being Finnish has helped her in succeeding as a migrant. She responded by saying: "No, I don't think so." After a while, she added: "Well, I mean, my employer did not want to hire

Black people, so I guess that helped me a bit.” She then continued to tell me about how Finns had interacted with Black people. She told me that Finnish migrants had cultural halls and activities (similar to those in Florida now) in Harlem, New York up until the 1950s. “But it became a dangerous neighborhood. Those people who lived there were fundamentally different from us.” “Those people” were Black people fleeing the Jim Crow era violence and lack of opportunities in Southern states, intimately weaving the migration story of Finns in the U.S. into the less explored Great Immigration story of Black people in the same country. A wave of White flight ensued, and so many Finns started to move to Florida, where they could find services in Finnish, along with Finnish communities.

Ester went on to add that Finnish people in Florida did not want to live close to Black people because “they bring the value of real estate down.” She added that “Crime also goes up. They live so differently, and Finnish people notice them immediately. But I guess they still have to be respected as people.” She told me that in Florida there are a lot of “difficult people” with “a different lifestyle” moving in from Haiti. In her apartment complex, she told me, they had one Black person, the wife of one of their residents. Finnish people, she told me, “never buy apartments or houses from “their” neighborhoods.” Then she leaned towards me and said: “But we are not supposed to say these things out loud.” After we finished our meeting, Ester walked to me the elevator, smiled and wished me a wonderful day.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I explored how racialized pressures to assimilate affect both Ethiopian and Finnish migrants. Finns have experienced food shaming in the earlier years of their migration history when their Whiteness was still ambiguous and their politics were considered threatening, however, today their foods go largely unnoticed and un-scrutinized, and they emphasize honesty and hard work as



the traits which have led to their successful assimilation into American society. This development, however, has also led to feelings of loss and alienation in the community, themes which I will return to in more detail in Chapter five. The opposite is true for Ethiopian women, who represent a migrant group which has been in the U.S. for almost three decades, yet they still frequently experience food shaming and food stereotyping in their everyday lives. While having these experiences of shaming and stereotyping around food, they also describe the “fetishizing” of their “exotic” foods which leads them to feeling surveilled and scrutinized in their everyday food habits. I also demonstrated how anti-Blackness is reproduced by both groups in different ways: some Ethiopian migrants use their foodways as a way of distinguishing themselves from African Americans, while Finnish migrants distinguish themselves from Blackness through physical distancing, including in their choice of grocery store environments and residential areas. Together, the findings from this chapter demonstrate that migrant foodways may both reflect and reproduce racialization processes and that they are part of broader historical, racial formations. In the next chapter, I turn to the issue of dietary change in the context of what is considered healthy and unhealthy eating in the U.S.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### GOOD IMMIGRANTS, BAD IMMIGRANTS: MORAL FOOD CHOICES AND RESISTANCE AGAINST UNDESIRABLE AMERICANIZATION

#### Finnish Participants

##### *Introduction*

American junk food culture is very heavy. I don't know what they put it in. It's mass production, it's whatever, whatever can be produced cheaply and in masses. Health has no value for them. And it's disgusting. All of these genetically modified things, corn and soybeans, you know I find it appalling. So that's why I have started buying organic.

Krista said this to me in a Starbucks where she had agreed to meet me after work. It was a weekday, and the shopping center in which the Starbucks was located was filled with what I assumed were tourists from Fort Lauderdale and Miami, carrying shopping bags and idly walking on the narrow streets of the mall, stopping to read the menus of restaurants. I was still in the Miami Metropolitan area but in an area distinctly different from the towns where the Finnish halls were located, and where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork. The town where I met Krista was a hub for many of the newer Finnish migrants, as well as many other migrants from Nordic countries. The landscape here consisted of shopping malls, cross fit gyms, neatly cut lawns, and neighborhoods with pretty-sounding names. This was a place where many of the newer migrants moved when they wanted peace and quiet and big houses yet somewhat more affordable housing compared to locations closer to Miami.

Krista and other Finnish women who lived in the area mostly had a widely different background than the Finns who lived closer to the cultural halls, which is why I also wanted to talk to them to gain a more representative sample of people living in Florida. Most had moved to the U.S. after 2001, the year after which entering became immensely more difficult, even for White migrants. Although Finns had been favored as visa and work permit recipients alongside other migrants from Northern European countries throughout the 20th century in the U.S., the events of September 11 restricted immigration in dramatic ways, making it more difficult even for Finns to get a visa or work permit. While it had been possible for Finns to migrate to Florida in the 1970s and 1980s just by flying in and getting employed by other Finnish people – and many openly admitting to me that some had overstayed their permits without repercussions (while critiquing undocumented migrants of today in the next sentence) – this was no longer an option in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now, getting in and becoming a migrant meant either starting in a degree program in an educational institution, having an exceptional talent, working as a professional in a multinational or Finnish corporation, or being married to an American. As a result of tougher visa restrictions, the Finns who had arrived in the country after 2001 were often more educated, knew English, and had left a Finland that was a lot more prosperous than the country that earlier migrants had left behind.

And so, the way Krista talked about American culture, particularly food, at the beginning of this chapter captures some of that change in Finnish immigration patterns as well. The older generation of Finns often express to me how the U.S. “back in the day” had represented everything Finland was not: “everyone drove a car,” “fruits and vegetables were ample,” “people had cherry trees in their backyard,” and fried chicken was something Finns back home had never even heard of, let alone all the burgers and French fries. These were the stories of the U.S. that were brought back home when Finnish Americans would visit, and they were consumed through popular media, until finally in 1984, the first McDonalds opened in Helsinki, Finland, paving way for changes in the local

food environment and starting the process in my home country which has been described to be similar elsewhere, namely that of the “globalizing of diets” and particularly “Americanization” of diets. When Krista and others arrived in the U.S. after 2001, they had not only left a country that looked a lot different than earlier Finnish migrants had left or remembered, but they were also well informed about the unattractive aspects about an industrial food system championed by American fast food. The latter can be associated with a broader shift taking place in public discourse about the food system towards the end of the 1990s and amplified throughout the early 2000s and beyond, with books such as *Fast Food Nation* and documentaries like *McDonalds and Me* and *Food Inc* criticizing the industrialized food system for all its public health, environmental, and moral risks and offering organic foods as the solution to those.

Krista described to me how she had started buying more organic foods as an opposition to the “junk food culture” that prevailed in the U.S. She expressed to me that “health has no value for them”. With *them*, she refers to “Americans,” although this distinction remains elusive, as Krista herself was also a citizen now. However, what becomes clear is that she herself does not want to be associated with *those* kinds of Americans, and that eating organic, healthy foods as opposed to “junk” was a way for her to resist being incorporated into the group of those for whom health had no value. However, she also expressed to me that she had not been successful in avoiding the dietary changes that led to an increase in the consumption of the foods that she regarded as “junk”:

I wish we didn't go out that often. Eat fast food. For example, Anton (her son) has a game to go to, my husband doesn't cook, so they go to McDonalds. I've tried to tell them, if you have to go somewhere, go to Chick-Fil-A. Don't go to McDonalds. Definitely not to Burger King. Or Wendy's. I told them Chick-Fil-A is okay. If you really have to go somewhere, then maybe

McDonalds. And we eat so much pizza. In Finland...people don't eat pizza that often. And in Finland soda is an occasional treat. Here we drink soda all the time. Soda all day every day.

Here, Krista told me that moving to the U.S. had led to her eating out more and eating more fast food. She lays out a plan that she seeks to follow: if one has to eat at a fast-food restaurant, some choices were better than others. And she also reflected on how food items such as pizza and soda were staples here, while she considered them occasional treats in Finland. This reflects a nostalgia towards a past that was – although perhaps not that grounded in reality – and an aversion to the present from which she had not been able to keep herself and her family intact. To Krista, this sort of “lapse” into eating too many fast foods in her new home country represented an individual failure, a failure of self.

In this first part of the chapter focusing on Finnish women, I advance two major arguments. First, through the examples and stories of Finnish women in Florida I demonstrate that so called dietary acculturation may be just as prevalent among White migrants although it has mostly focused on the experiences of Latinx migrants. The omission of White migrants from these studies means that we operate under the assumption that White populations in the U.S. have a shared meaning of American eating culture and that they already have “assimilated.” According to the results in this chapter, this is not the case, and a more nuanced analysis of such patterns will take into account the impact of race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Second, I argue that among particularly the newer Finnish migrants in the U.S., socialization into a healthy, organic, clean, and/or “conscious” eating is a central part of performing a proper style of White womanhood and femininity. Among the population that I studied, this nutrition socialization is particularly relevant for the newer migrants and is tied not only to messages of the global anti-industrial food movements but to racialized notions of who knows how to eat well and who does not. As a result, the everyday anxieties and rules around food presented in this chapter reflect White women’s gendered positions in their own

communities and racialized positions in the U.S. society overall, demonstrating how anti-Black, racialized notions around eating not only suppress Black women but also discipline White women. After advancing these arguments, I will compare and contrast the findings on similar issues among Ethiopian women in order to pursue an intersectional analysis.

### *Finnishness Means Health*

During the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that one aspect of shared Finnishness was the notion that being Finnish equaled knowledge on how to eat well. It was common for participants to contrast American food culture with what they remembered from back home. Ulla had lived in Florida since the early 2000s and perceived her home country as a place where food was healthier:

In Finland no one eats white bread anymore. Everything is wholesome. More organic. Here, you have to look for organic stuff. Only in the past years have they started having more organic things. But it hasn't been a lot.

Food memories from back home caused feelings of nostalgia, with Finland being described here as a place where food was “wholesome” and “more organic.” It is not true that no one in Finland would eat white bread, but here the notion of white bread seems to symbolize the overall unhealthiness of the food system of which Ulla was now a part of. Lotta, who had spent most of her life in the U.S. as the child of migrant parents, also spoke nostalgically about the food back in Finland and similarly referenced white bread:

Everything we bought, we bought from the market. Everything was fresh. We grew up in the countryside, we could just walk out of the house and get carrots, dill, berries. It was so utopian

for us. You know, you get your apples from the tree, it felt like there were possibilities. That at least some things still made sense. But once we came here, we had to have a better car, we had to have a cell phone, brand new clothes. It was so crazy. And the food that we ate was the same fake, fake, fake wonder bread. My mom and her friends, who were all nurses, wondered why all Americans feed their children with wonder bread. There is nothing in it, it is just starch, how do they get any energy from it.

The food memories which Lotta describes here demonstrate how a connection to the land and one's preferred foodways brought a feeling of belonging, how harvesting fresh produce made it seem that "things still made sense." This is contrasted by the environment in which Lotta found herself after moving to the U.S. as a child, where things revolved more around consumerism, and food was reduced to something that she perceived as "fake." And just like Ulla, Lotta also references white bread (specifically Wonder bread) as something that embodies the flaws in the local food system. White bread has a specific social history in the U.S. connected to immigration, race, and class. Originally heralded as the modern superfood and patriotic alternative to "dirty" immigrant bakeries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white bread has since become a symbol of unhealthy eating, reflecting the role that food plays in defining the decay or rise of a nation's social fabric (Bobrow-Strain, 2012). For Ulla, Lotta, and other Finnish migrants, white bread was the symbol of American decay which could only be resisted by eating more organic foods. It also reflects the strong role that bread has had in Finnish food culture across history.

Sonja, another of the women I spoke to, had lived in Florida for over 30 years but still visited Finland frequently. She described Finnish food in the following way:

It is basic food, made of nature's ingredients. Fish from the lakes, cows have lived in the shed, sheep live on farms, eggs are from the henhouse, mushrooms and berries come from the

forests. That's basic food. And all the Finnish grandmothers use no other spices than white pepper and salt.

The food system that Sonja describes from Finland may have been true at one point in time, but it is also one that is not based in reality, as the Finnish food system has changed radically over the course of the past decades, with family farms shutting down and those who stay in business have had to expand and industrialize their farm operations. Still, Sonja's food memories reflect the long agrarian history of Finns and the connection that almost every Finn has had to the countryside, as well as the connection that Finnish food culture has had to land, particularly foraging activities in the forest (Mäkelä & Rautavirta, 2018). This is what Sonja meant when she talked about Finnish food being made of "nature's ingredients", opposed with her new home country:

The general food traditions here are terrible. Terrible. People eat a lot of fast foods. Fast foods and wrong type of fats. They are so busy, driving their kids from place to place, eating processed food... it has no vitamins or anything like that.

This aversion to American "fast food culture" as opposed to a healthy, Finnish food culture was a recurring theme throughout the interviews and my fieldwork. While Finnish women that I interviewed would often say things like "we should act like Americans in America" and reiterated the success story of Finnish integration brought forward in Chapter three, it became clear through the interviews that the tension between Finnish migrants and their new home country was far from non-existent and seemed to be safe to vocalize in the area of food. I asked about this during one of my informal conversations with three Finns who had all lived in the area for decades. They would express to me how Finns were grateful about all the opportunities they had been granted in the country, yet they also expressed disdain against some "uncivilized" parts of the culture. It seemed as



if the topic of food in particular was one of the few areas in which Finnish migrants felt comfortable enough to criticize their adopted homeland, perhaps because it is so often considered a seemingly mundane topic with little meaning. Food was the topic through which Finnish migrants could openly express their occasional or recurring feelings of longing to Finland, while negotiating with the boundaries of belonging in the U.S. Susanna, a recent migrant to Florida in her forties, spoke about Finland as a country where people were more knowledgeable about health overall:

I have been raised with healthy food. Of course, we have some unhealthy aspects our food culture too, we use a lot of cream and butter. Gotta get those calories. But I mean that sort of food has had its purpose and place, so many people used to work in agriculture. But for myself, the food culture has been a lot of fish, a lot of potatoes. And imagine, we ate the potatoes with the peels on, because the peels contain all the nutrients. And ever since you are a little child, you are taught about nutrients and health. And as a result, you like healthier food more. I have always eaten healthy food.

Here, Susanna acknowledges that there are elements of Finnish food that can be unconsidered “unhealthy” (butter, cream), yet she relates this back to labor structure of a Finnish past, with people needing more calories to be able to work in physically demanding conditions. She mentions nutrition education as one of the cornerstones of Finns’ knowledge of health, an aspect she saw as lacking in the U.S. society:

People here just don’t understand. Maybe they think that something is wholesome. But they don’t understand what the food contains. They pour all kinds of stuff in their food. They keep on adding butter and sugar... Finns would add a lot less. People don’t think about the function

of food. Food is meant to keep us alive, not kill us. I think school health education plays a role in this too. I've always wondered why they don't teach nutrition here in schools.

Here, Susanna's reflection demonstrates a stark division between what is considered to be pleasurable and what is considered to be healthy. To be able to restrain oneself from too much sugar and butter is considered morally superior, while others "pour all kinds of stuff in their food", demonstrating their lack of self-discipline, a trait which Susanna associates with the lack of nutrition education in the U.S.

*"You Start Eating Like Everyone Else"*

Aliisa had been born in Finland but prior to living in Florida had lived in other locations in the U.S. with her mother. As an adult, she met someone and that someone became her American husband, and that is how she ended up staying in the U.S. She said that people rarely recognized her as a Finn because of her American name and her lack of accent. While her husband "did not appreciate the taste" of Finnish foods, she described to me the importance of Finnish comfort food. Eating Finnish food made her feel like "someone was hugging her from inside". Yet she only cooked that food to herself, as her husband did not appreciate the taste of Finnish food. But she also described other changes to her diet, mainly eating out more, and eating more processed foods.

I go to a lot more fast food restaurants. I eat a lot more unhealthy food. Here, it's so easy to go to McDonalds on your way home from work rather than go home and cook the meal yourself. In Finland, where I lived, there was no McDonalds on the way home. If you wanted McDonalds, you'd have to go to the city center. Here you have a McDonalds in every corner. I rarely eat at home these days.

Aliisa associated her eating out more and cooking less at home to the food environment and to the ubiquitousness of fast food restaurants. It was a lot easier to grab food to go than to go home after a workday and cook a meal from scratch. When I asked her why that was, she answered:

It's probably stress. People experience a lot of stress here. I've noticed that I eat a lot more here than I eat in Finland in a day. You know, when you feel stressed and everything starts to fall apart, you feel unwell, you start thinking about what you're going to eat next. It's the stress. You start eating more fast food and bring more of these ultraprocessed foods home. I don't know... I feel like your whole lifestyle changes when you move here from Finland... everything is so heavy from day to day. That's how I would describe it.

I asked her more about what she meant by a whole change in lifestyle. Aliisa responded she had been working non-stop for several years, and her life was “zombie like” repetition of work, going home, and sleeping. She compared this to her life in Finland where everyone took things a “little slower.” Others would echo that moving to the U.S. had resulted in a lot more eating out because it was convenient and restaurants were everywhere to be found. The change in lifestyle that Aliisa referred to was very much tied to the concept of time: lack of time led to short-cut solutions in eating to make the day easier. Marianne would also speak to similar issues:

I definitely put on more weight. It's a combination: the food, a lot of sugar, lot of soda. I ate all those things because I was so stressed, I was missing home so much. There is nothing else to do, my kids were in school, I was alone all day, I had nobody. What was I going to do? Everything was so uncertain. I didn't know when I would go back to Finland. I had so many weight issues back then. Still do.

Here, Marianne speaks to how her emotional state in the beginning years affected her eating habits and the stress that she felt from being homesick, not having a community, and not feeling like she belonged in Florida, would lead her to eating more sugary foods, bigger portions, and more soda. Asta told me how “every Finn” who moved to the U.S. gained weight during their first years in the country. She also mentioned that the changes include eating larger amounts of food:

I think it’s the story of every Finn that when they first move here, they put on weight. The portions here are just so much bigger than in Finland or Europe. And you know, as a Finn you’ve been taught to finish what’s on your plate. Here, I had to unlearn that. You know, you can pack the rest of the portion and take it home. Otherwise, things get out of hand here.

Thus, Asta viewed dietary changes and eating more than usual as something that would “get out of hand” if one was not careful, referring to weight gain. Some would also say that a sign of the “Americanization” of their food habits was the fact that they had started eating sandwiches for lunch, which was different from the Finnish style lunch that was a warm meal, just like dinner. Others would also mention that they were surprised by how expensive food, particularly fresh produce was, compared to processed foods. In grocery stores, the aisles were filled with processed foods. And finally, other changes include consuming more soda and sugary products overall, which were “rare treats” in Finland but everyday products in the U.S. Finally, it was not just the dietary changes but the change towards a more sedentary lifestyle. Tuire said the following:

I think part of it is dietary habits. You know, I think still to a large extent, um, my understanding of what is at U.S. is that we eat a lot more junk food. We eat a lot more processed foods. I think the other thing is that, you know, even based on what I remember of being in the U.S. in the beginning. I think people are a lot more active, there was a lot

more...even back then, you could be going some place a mile away but you would drive as opposed to walk or bike, or do some other thing. I mean those are the main two things I can think of.

Florida was described as being too hot most of the year to walk anywhere, and not all neighborhoods had proper sidewalks. Walking from place to place, which was common back in Finland, suddenly shifted towards a dominantly car-based culture. But the process of dietary changes or the “Americanization” of diets was not linear, and could be “reversed,” as Veera expresses here:

When I first moved here, it was so fun to eat out a lot and try all kinds of American foods and restaurants. But when I had my child, I wanted to start cooking more at home, prepare healthy, wholesome foods at home. And that’s when I also started reading in Finnish about baby foods that you could prepare at home. I didn’t read any American recipes or guidelines for baby food. And when it was time for my child to enter school, maybe I paid a little bit more attention to having wholesome foods compared to other parents.

Veera’s reflections demonstrate how pivotal life events, such as the birth of a child, may influence dietary habits among migrants, including returning to nutritional knowledge and food memories from one’s home country. There were also those who had seen a very different food environment. Liisa, who had lived in Florida for nearly 40 years, said that there were “not nearly as many obese people here than there were back when I first arrived”. It was Liisa and others who had moved to the U.S. earlier who described their diets as having changed for the better when they first arrived in Florida. That there was an ample selection of fruits and vegetables which would never have been available in Finland, and that it was much easier to consume salads here than it was in Finland, where they were rare treats. This speaks to how different generations of migrants have arrived in

different types of food environments, with the scarcity of Finland in particularly related to fresh produce up to the 1980s contrasted the food environment in the U.S. back then (Mäkelä & Rautavirta, 2018). And contrastingly, the Finns that arrived from a country which had moved from scarcity to abundance in a short period of time were shocked by the food environment which had changed in the U.S. to a processed environment. However, regardless of their views of the food environment, the central notion connecting all of these stories is how Finnish women were anxious about their dietary choices and expressed frustration or guilt over making the “wrong” food choices or for putting on weight.

#### *White Women’s Nutrition Socialization*

I met with Maria in April 2019. A mother of three, she sat across from me, telling me her story about how she had ended up in the U.S. We were sitting outside a coffee shop by a busy road, and it was hot and humid. Even afterwards when listening to the tape recording of our interview, I had trouble hearing some of things we said. Clearly it had not been the best place to conduct an interview. However, I tried to play along, looking like I was accustomed to the sometimes-oppressive Florida temperatures by then. Maria worked in the area and her family was new to Florida, but not to the U.S. Prior to this, they had lived in California. As we were talking about issues on food, culture, and identity, she said to me the following:

The local food culture is just so greasy here in Florida. In California, I could freely eat anything. Everything was organic and the culture there was overall something I wanted to associate myself with. Here the culture is like deep fried Oreos. It’s just too much. So now we are completely resisting it.

This passage demonstrates not only the fluidity of food habits but that for migrants like Maria who were in a comfortable socioeconomic position, food culture became almost like a pick and choose type of thing, where she and her family were able to choose whether or not they would adopt to the surrounding culture, including its food. The passage also demonstrates how the U.S. South and Florida included provide a particularly interesting case study of white migrants' racialized positionalities: it is in the U.S. South where Finnish Americans are often exposed to a much greater presence of non-White people as opposed to the more "European" California or Northern cities the women would often refer to as a more ideal place to live. Notions of a backward South and "Florida man" ran frequently among Florida Finns, especially among those who represented the newer generation of migrants. The stereotypes about Southern culture – including it being a "deep-fried" culture, a term often associated with food cultures of Black Americans, demonstrates how deeply engrained food metaphors are with the presence of racialized bodies (Smith 2008). In the South, it seemed that food became a particularly salient source of distinction for Finnish Americans, a way to express that *we* were not like *them*.

And so, Maria described to me how eating in a healthy way was a cornerstone of the food habits in the family. She wanted to teach her husband and kids the values of healthy eating. Mycek and colleagues (2019) have used the concept of nutrition socialization to conceptualize the "process whereby doctors, teachers, and nutritionists introduce immigrants and refugees to concepts that help them understand and adopt practices of optimal health and nutrition by U.S. understands," adding to conversations on how young children particularly are socialized into food norms. While Mycek and colleagues use this concept in the study of non-white migrants and refugees in the U.S. and how they are exposed to norms of healthy food and the right way of eating, I argue that this concept is equally relevant to how White and other migrants with an advantageous racialized and socioeconomic status socialize their children into the "right" ways of eating. This nutrition

socialization among White migrant women, then, must be viewed in the context of historical racial formations. In her comparative study on discourses around nutrition among Black and White women, Mary Igenoza (2017) found that White mothers emphasize the values of dieting and restrictions in regard to eating, while Black mothers emphasize the values of sociability. These values were communicated particularly to daughters, reflecting how among White women these rules reinforced both patriarchal and racialized norms. Similarly, Sabrina Strings has written about how feminine aesthetics and eating habits have been central to race-making projects in the U.S., with particularly upper-middle class Anglo-Saxon protestant White women being depicted as the “source of the nation’s moral and physical improvement” (Strings, 2019: p.137).

Maria explained to me how the “deep-fried” culture in Florida as opposed to the “organic” culture in California had made her even more careful about teaching the values of healthy food to her children:

My son has adapted to the local culture, he eats the food at school. But for my daughter, we pack lunch, and that lunch follows the nutritional guidelines of Finland. You know, a big bowl of salad, carrots, and tomatoes, and the other half is pasta and ground beef. She is pretty Finnish in that sense. I don’t pack the lunches...my husband does that. I guess the snacks they have at home are American. But I am grateful that she is such an apple carrot girl.

Here, Maria demonstrates that she is a different type of woman than perhaps the older generation of Finnish women who would be responsible for most of the cooking and food related chores in the household, emphasizing that her husband does the cooking. However, she still makes sure that the foods packed for her daughter follow nutritional guidelines, emphasizing the health value of vegetables and appreciating the fact that her daughter is an “apple carrot girl,” while her son has “adapted” (Americanized) and is fine with school lunch. And while Maria did not cook at home as



much as her husband, she would be responsible for making sure that they bought the right type of foods from the grocery store:

My husband does all the grocery shopping for us, so I have made sure that our family has good products in the store. I have chosen those products one by one. I think I have spent an hour in front of the yoghurt aisle, looking for the yoghurts which our family can buy. I take a picture of the yoghurt can, from the front, from the back, and upload those pictures on my husband's phone. And we have a shopping list app where I can upload them. So, when we update the grocery shopping list, he can click on the products and see which ones are the good options. I've tried to do the same scanning for cereals... but there are no good options. They add something to oats too. I mean you find some interesting stuff here. Oats that look just like oats, but it has added sugar. So, you have to be really careful. This process takes between two or three months whenever you move to a new state. And I do the work and find the good products, one by one. This is what it is like. Because we cannot change the lunches at school.

Here, Maria explains her process of staying healthy as a family. She emphasizes that although her husband does the grocery shopping, she was responsible for the months long process through which she selected food products one by one that would keep her family healthy. Her quote reflects that her definition of good food means carefully reading the food labels and studying what has been added to the products. Finally, she would emphasize that this work of keeping her family healthy through the right food choices was something that was a burden of individuals, with her having little power over decisions that happened at the structural level (school lunches, or advocacy related to school board decisions). As a result, she saw unhealthy eating habits as the result of lack of knowledge and education:

None of the schools here teach nutrition science. So that people would actually learn how to read the etiquettes in food products. People need to learn how to read. Everything they sell here as healthy is not... maybe if you eat it once, that is okay. But people really don't know how to think about meals as a monthly, weekly, daily entity. And, of course, their fat percentage increases. You get insulin resistance and all of that. I mean I guess they have some of this in Finland too. People need to learn how to read what's in those products. Total sodium content, total sugar content. I try to teach my two teens, the other one does not care at all, but he is so thin, so he doesn't have to care, I guess. But anyone can get insulin resistance or type 2 diabetes. I've asked the doctor to assess my kids' total cholesterol levels and blood glucose levels. I don't want this deep-fried culture to ruin their health. I have noticed that a lot of Finns struggle with this. They come here, they eat Finnish foods, and they add on weight, five or ten pounds.

According to Maria, not knowing how to make healthy eating choices was the result of not having been educated about the basics of nutrition. This is similar to what Mycek and colleagues (2019) write about in their article on nutrition socialization, and how most health interventions on dietary change revolve around increasing nutrition education, although research suggests that food choices are impacted by a variety of factors related to socioeconomic class, environment, culture, and immigrant status, to name a few. Speaking in the terms of labels and contents of food, Maria's quotes reflect what medical anthropologist Emily Yates-Doerr (2015) writes about when she refers to nutritionism and the way that particularly Western nutrition science reduces eating to its individual components. For Maria, in order to avoid assimilating into a "deep-fried" culture that would ruin her children's health, she needed to restrict the intake of individual products and substances, to keep her and her family's bodies intact from those harmful, "deep-fried" influences. Maria also equates thinness with health, which is a common feature of diet culture and White

feminine aesthetics (Strings, 2019). These restrictive habits in relation to food were re-iterated by several other Finnish women, such as Venla. Venla had a green card and had relocated to Florida when she retired in Finland and lived close to her Finnish daughter and granddaughters in the Miami Metropolitan area.

My daughter carefully reads all food labels. She says that Aldi's is pretty okay because they don't use certain poisons that they do otherwise here. And so, I've also become more careful in what I eat, like what is this syrup. You know, have they used hormones. These are the kind of things you pay more attention to when moving to the U.S. In Finland... I never gave second thought to which meat I would buy. But here, I do. You know, like the chicken here...they are filled with hormones here. We pay attention to all those things. I am so grateful that my daughter is as careful as she is. She has three growing children. You'd do anything to keep them healthy.

Venla stressed that making the right type of food choices was key to keeping children healthy. She would reference to me her own childhood in Finland where her family was not "all that rich" but wholesome, healthy food had always been the cornerstone of their eating habits. And so, she had tried to pass on that knowledge, that even if money was tight, they would spend less on something else, but they would not compromise the quality of food. In her quote, she expresses how grateful she is that her daughter has passed on that sort of nutrition socialization to her children, carefully reading all the labels in the U.S. food environment where children had to be protected from features of the industrial food system, including hormones. She said that as a result of this, her granddaughter was different from the rest:

We pack healthy foods to the granddaughter. You know, Finn crisp (a particular Finnish bread sold in Publix), turkey, or ham, cheese on top. And we always pack fruit. And of course, a bag of chips. And water bottles. My 12-year-old granddaughter...she is so thin, a cute, a very cute girl. You know, she eats a lot of salad, lot of tomatoes, cucumber, peppers, we have taught her to eat all of those. I know some of our friends' families who don't eat any of those foods. And they look like it too. You can tell it from the outside that they don't eat them.

Venla mentions her granddaughter whose "thinness" and "cuteness" she associates with the type of healthy foods that they as parents and grandparents have taught her to eat. In the *Origins of Fat Phobia*, Sabrina Strings (2019) writes about how notions of thinness and dietary restrictions started appearing already in 19<sup>th</sup> century magazines to appeal to particularly middle-class and upper-class White women. Watching what they would eat and eating as little as possible was seen as part proper womanhood for Anglo-Saxon Protestant women. This racialized notion was tied to ideas of rational self-control among White people as opposed to more "animalistic" Black people who loved food, loved sex, and would represent the type of frivolous, unruly bodies that were so different from White bodies. And in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, eugenism arose as a "benevolent" strand of eugenic pseudoscience which focused on the impact of diet on bodily fitness. According to the proponents and spokespeople of eugenism – who most often were White women – eating in a healthy manner was a way to assert moral superiority as opposed to how Black people ate (Veit, 2015). Thus, "diet culture" and food restrictions, too, had their racial origins. Krista had told me about how she tried to teach her son about the proper way of eating:

He is 12 years old. I can't forbid everything from him. But I try to teach him a lot. If we go to the grocery store together, I tell him, look at the back of the product. Look at the label, the ingredients. So, you understand it. I tell him I don't say this to you because I am crazy. But I want you to understand that if there is something there that you can't pronounce, it can't be healthy. Well, okay we do eat candy, I can't forbid everything from him. But I want him to grow up to be a person who understands things and looks at a Gatorade and sees that there are 34 grams of added sugar. I tell him he has to think about these things. I try to educate him. He is twelve years old after all. Now, little by little, when he goes to the grocery store, he puts the bad stuff away.

The contrast between “bad” and “good” food is clear: Krista wanted her son to understand that things like added sugar were inherently bad in food, and it was her role as a parent to make sure that his son had the best possible education into choosing the type of food products that made him a healthy adult. Lotta, who had lived in the U.S. most of her life and had arrived a lot earlier than most of the women mentioned in this chapter, described a similar pattern of nutrition socialization from her childhood in Florida in the 1980s:

We never had potato chips. Friends always asked me why I always had yoghurt (laughs). I said I am supposed to have yoghurt every day. And I had a sandwich. My friend's mom could make it really well. It had to have a looooooot of lettuce and vegetables and I showed it to my mom and said: isn't this good? Everything had to be whole wheat so that we would stay healthy. And often we'd stare a bit at our friends who had so much junk food on their table. Especially at that time, the 80s culture was known as the junk food decade. And we had a good friend who was really thin. But she ate chips, mustard and bologna sandwiches,

Ho Hos and Twinkies. Every day for lunch. I mean...I just always thought, my mom would never. You are not supposed to eat that stuff.

Thus, a common theme among Finnish women were notions of what they did *not* eat. It is common in food studies to refer to the idea of “we are what we eat,” but among Finnish women those distinctions of self and other were drawn by emphasizing the undesired, unacceptable things that one should not put in one’s body. These included Ho Hos, Twinkies, sandwiches, representing the “junk food” decade that Lotta referred to, and later on, the unhealthy foods overall.

Finally, distinctions about what one didn’t eat led to conclusions about the perceived harmfulness of the eating habits of others. Sonja gave me this example:

We went to a barbeque once and there was this Black girl, an American. She was making baked beans, she opened the can, and she added chunks of butter on it, she added brown sugar, and I was like oh my god...of course we ate it and it was good but goodness, there is already sugar in baked beans.

This casual comment about food reinforces stereotypes about Black bodies: by making the statement as a White person, Sonja’s sentence signifies the belief that Black people can in fact not cook healthy and that they cannot restrain themselves from the pleasures of eating (Strings, 2019). Sugar in the story, then, becomes a marker of eating something that is perhaps too sweet, an uncalled for pleasure at odds with proper eating. Thus, while White women are also impacted by patriarchal structures that require them to be the primary caretakers and coordinators in the family for food and healthy eating, they also weaponize their Whiteness to paint an image of non-white bodies as being unruly and unhealthy. Other participants would also make descriptions about how non-white migrants would start eating more unhealthy foods as they came to the U.S.:

There are these people who come from...let's say South America... 'cause there are a lot of people coming from there. I don't mean everyone, but there are also those from there who are, how do I put this, less educated people who work in the fields. And they do the hard work that Americans do not want to do. So, they can't afford to buy better foods, so they buy that hamburger.

Another participant said:

I think there are those people here who come from South America and suddenly they have access to all this fast food. It's cheaper than normal food. So they start eating it.

Both of these quotes demonstrate that it was common sense among Finnish immigrants that some level of dietary acculturation would take place among immigrants who arrived to the U.S. There was no doubt in their minds that this change in dietary habits would lead to eating more processed foods, and that people with less education would be unable to avoid such changes. These changes would then affect how they looked as well, as expressed here by Sonja:

If you go to a Latino area...you see what the foods are. The women are so big in the middle, I saw how they were eating rice, the corn tacos and the tortillas, how they just keep eating that food. That isn't healthy. It's so much starch.

Here, it is clear that the foods representing Latin culture in Sonja's mind (tortillas, rice) were too heavy in starch and that affected the women's appearances, and being "big in the middle" meant being unhealthy, making the wrong type of choices. Pat, another Finnish woman, agreed with this:

They are not getting enough sleep. They are watching too much TV. Not hiking and biking and exercising enough. Eating non-healthy foods, processed foods. They go to McDonalds too much. And not eating healthy. You know the fresh fruits and vegetables.

Finally, there were those among the Finnish women who did not agree with all of the food rules and norms related to health, and who considered that some of those norms went too far, and who also considered “unhealthy” eating habits as the result of something else than just the lack of knowledge. Leena told me that although there was a common perception about all Americans eating junk food and processed foods, there was a “group that eats really well” and that that group represented people who had higher incomes and who could afford buying more expensive foods and going to better restaurants. She also thought that Americans had to work so much that they did not have the luxury of always thinking “what they put in their mouths.” Others, like Krista, would also be reflexive about their dietary choices:

Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite when I go to the store and I talk about organic all the time. And then I end up buying chicken nuggets. Like what am I trying to prove with all of this. Sometimes I just buy the chicken nuggets because they are easy to pack for lunch for my son to school. I try to rationalize this to myself somehow. Because at one point I always drove myself crazy with this. So now I try to buy organic, but I’m okay with not everything being organic.

Krista’s comments here reveal that the food choices made in everyday life may not always follow the discourse that women had around food. For many, like Krista, it was perhaps unrealistic to expect to buy everything organic. If the focus of ethnographic work is often on what people say versus what



they do, then Krista's comments reveal some contradictions that may be present in many of the women's lives, that the discourse around health and healthy food in particular may not represent true everyday eating habits. However, what she does express here is how deeply engrained the idea of eating the right way is for White women, that deviating from that norm causes feelings of discomfort, shame, and failure.

### *Resisting Gendered Expectations*

Finally, there were those who did not abide by the "health rules" and decided to care less about them:

It is very easy to say that all Americans eat junk food. But that's not true. There's a lot of people who don't eat the junk. There's different kind of people here...it's almost like it's divided so that some eat the processed foods, they don't understand that maybe those are the bad products. And then there are those who eat so uber healthy that it is really absurd (laughs). We have some hippie friends who say gluten this, gluten that, and I find it completely ridiculous. One of my friend's children came to our house one weekend and she was not allowed to eat anything...because they were currently only eating vegan smoothies...they had some freakin' smoothies weeks at home. Something to do with detox and cleansing. I was like, the child is 11 years, are you being serious? The child talked more about hamburgers and breads than any other kid I have met...and had learned to lie to her mom about what she ate.

Veera continued to say that she thought that the parents' socioeconomic status was connected to "ridiculous" food rules, that it was the wealthier parents that she met in "Montessori schools" that would have all sorts of rules for their children on how to eat. She recalled a moment from a

playground where someone had brought cookies and one of the children, aged five or six, had asked their mother if they could have a cookie. Veera had then overheard the mother asking: are there saturated fats in those cookies? She also remembered being on a camping trip with some of her daughter's friends and their parents and the parents asking if the meat that they put on the fire pit was grass-fed. Veera concluded by saying that people who did not have a similar socioeconomic privilege would not have time to "be so petty about food," and that "if you work all day and come home, it is not the first thing on your mind what your food contains."

There were also those who reflected upon how dietary choices in the household were often considered to be the responsibility of the woman. I spoke with Armi over the phone. She told me that she while the generation of her mother prepared everything from scratch, her own generation was more flexible about such food rules:

I have to say there's probably a generational shift going on. My mother, for example, would always cook a meal at home. Sometimes even two warm meals a day. Cooking them from scratch. And when I think about my sisters who live in Finland, they don't do that. They use a lot of ready-made foods and sometimes they go to McDonalds. And when I think about my own cooking in this country, it's pretty similar to that of my sister. I often buy a ready-made food and complement it with a raw ingredient. Or we eat outside. I don't know many people of my generation who would cook every day from scratch.

Armi then went on to tell me that she was careful about how she wanted to spend her time, that she did not necessarily want to spend it cooking. She continued:

Although there are all these feelings of guilt attached to mothers and cooking. Because mothers are mainly responsible for what is bought, what is cooked, and you should know what is healthiest for the kids, and the healthiest would be to cook from scratch. But you don't have time for that. There are conflicts.

Here, she acknowledges that the type of cooking that her mother's generation practiced would perhaps be healthier, however, it was not possible for women who had demanding career or employment requirements. However, Armi was not free of the gendered guilt and expectations that she should take care of the household cooking and particularly children's health. In the next section, I will summarize conversations on food, diet, and health among Ethiopian women.

## **Ethiopian Participants**

### *Introduction*

So, especially coming directly from Ethiopia, our food is, um, it's simple, it's plant based. Yes, there is, like DDT that they spray on their crops, which is bad. But you know, before the effect of that on our bodies, something else kills us, so you never know (laughs). Um, and although sugar is important in the Ethiopian culture, like you cannot drink a coffee without sugar for example, it's too strong. Tea, we always drink tea with this much sugar (gestures with hands), oh my goodness. But those are luxurious things, and most people don't have them. So, our intake of sugar is very very minimal. Then you come to America. Everything is genetically modified, um growth hormones in the chicken and beef and things like that, and in everything, there is sugar. And mainly, how cheap food is compared to...and you can just buy, you know, fast food, conveniently. Food is cheap if you think about it. And then you don't have to work like the whole day to make something. So, you just stuff your face. And even if you don't, just

by virtue of having this food with all those hormones, and the sugar in everything, you start ballooning up. I think I am sicker in America than I was in Ethiopia. Definitely. Um, yeah. So, I think that's my two cents when it comes to that, based on my personal experience. Like orange juice and everything. You don't get that in Ethiopia. Here you can buy it with a dollar or something, and you just drink it every day, thinking that that's the healthiest thing, and then you buy white bread.

Birhan and I met over lunch near her workplace. In her passage, she highlighted several aspects of American food culture that she thought made it more difficult to lead a healthy life in the U.S. She contrasted everyday life in Ethiopia with everyday life here, how the sweetened food products were more abundant in the U.S., how foods are genetically modified, and meat is filled with growth hormones. She mentioned white bread and fast food as foods that made Ethiopians feel less healthy in their adopted home country. She described how a stressful lifestyle makes one want to eat a lot more. She did, however, not romanticize the Ethiopian food system either, however, she is certain that since coming to the U.S., she has been much sicker.

What follows in this chapter is a description of the conversations and conceptualizations around health among Ethiopian immigrant women in the U.S. Through these examples, I will demonstrate how the notions of the U.S. as an unhealthy culture were almost identical to the notions mentioned among Finnish immigrants earlier in this chapter, a certain "Americanization" being an undesired outcome and something to be avoided. And just as among Finnish American women, Ethiopian Americans also viewed their food culture back home through a nostalgic lens. I will then discuss the women's perceptions on how a certain kind of Americanization of diets in their view affects the health of Ethiopian Americans overall. Having this comparison between the Ethiopian and Finnish women proves the usefulness of an intersectional lens when studying dietary changes among immigrants: while Finnish women were careful to socialize their children into

individualized behavior regarding making the right and proper type of food choices and identified this behavior as key to resisting a certain kind of Americanization, Ethiopian women highlighted more structural factors, such as lack of time and lack of money which affected their everyday eating habits. I then conclude by presenting some of the ways that the Ethiopian women described resisting assimilating into unhealthy eating habits.

### *Ethiopian Exceptionalism versus American Realities*

During my interview with Birhan, at one point she burst out laughing and said: “Ethiopia is the America of Africa. We boast about our country, we think we are special, our country is the best. We were never colonized. We were never considered black in terms of slavery.” After this, she continued to tell me that Ethiopians are “snobberish” about their food. She told me that Ethiopian food among Ethiopians is “absolutely considered special”; not just the food, but the sociability around it, sharing it with friends, followed by a coffee ceremony, eating with one’s hands. She then continued to tell me that Ethiopians are very picky and wary about eating food at other people’s homes. When she said this, I recalled a similar story from another interview I had done. One of the women remembered from growing up in the U.S. that she was never allowed to visit an American friend’s house because her mother did not know what they would feed her. It also made me think about an earlier moment during my fieldwork, when I had invited the community over for lunch at our house. Everyone came, but the foods I had prepared (lentil salad, pizza) remained untouched on the table, even after a prayer had been said. It was only after Leensa and Layla, two of the younger women in my community, drove to Publix to buy ready-made foods – that is when everyone started eating. Today, Birhan was telling me that pickiness was a way to “keep one’s heritage”. There was pride in one’s food, and also suspicion in what others ate.

Birhan considered Ethiopian food healthier than American food. She, like other women, coupled this notion with stories about how there were less food options overall in Ethiopia, relative scarcity being the norm rather than abundance, compared to the U.S. where one could decide to go to a drive through and “buy the chicken instead of going home and cook the chicken.” The women would connect the fact that Ethiopia had never been colonized with the notion that it had been able to keep itself intact from Western influences and the Americanization of food systems overall. While the rest of the world was experiencing a nutrition transition, characterized by a homogenization of food habits in particularly low-income countries through globalization and disproportionate power of transnational corporations, Ethiopia’s resistance towards colonization was a source of pride for the women. Layla, a first-generation immigrant said the following:

When I first moved here, I didn’t like McDonalds. The only thing I would get from there was chicken nuggets. I hated cheese and stuff. So that never changed. You know how kids normally like McDonalds. I never liked McDonalds. And it’s scary how things are changing quickly in Ethiopia too. We’ve never been colonized, this is why we’ve been able to keep our culture intact for so long. And now the doors are open and we have to prevent from people coming to take our culture but also allow good things to come in. That balance is a very fine line.

Emebet, also a first-generation immigrant and the same age as Layla, would reiterate in a similar way that she was proud to be an Ethiopian and would always tell people about her food and her culture, and the fact that her country had never been colonized. But as Layla says in the quote above, “the doors were now open” for changes. This had not gone unnoticed among the Ethiopian women who were living in Tampa now. In one of the women’s meetings, we were sitting by a table, there must have been almost ten of us, and two of the women shared stories about their recent visit to Addis Abeba. “Can you believe they have a version of the ‘Biggest Loser’ in Ethiopia now?” or that

“They have Pizza Hut in Addis now.” Back when I lived in Ethiopia during the years 2013-2015, there were no foreign fast-food restaurants anywhere in the country, but since then, the food environment has changed. However, even during those years, I remember reading about studies which indicated that the diversity of foods consumed was decreasing across the country, and that diets had become more homogenous, resulting in researchers in local and international institutions speculating on how lack of dietary diversity was affecting the health of Ethiopians (International Food Policy Research Institute 2018). So, much like the nostalgic descriptions that Finnish women had about Finnish food, Ethiopian women also described something from the past that may not have been all that true anymore. This nostalgia, which may not always be based on facts, however, offers insights into the past (Reese, 2019) and in the case of immigrants may speak to the loss of control over one’s food environment.

As opposed to unhealthy, “processed” American food, Ethiopian food was described by the women as “organic” and “natural.” The women used the term organic broadly, referring nostalgically to a food system that was more authentic and connected to land, as opposed to representing a food system which was based on a largely industrial system. Adanech, who was a college student and a second-generation immigrant born to Ethiopian parents in Tampa, said the following about Ethiopian food culture:

Ethiopian food is organic. It’s clean. It’s basically things that you grow on your own. They’re basically made of spices and herbs, and then you just add either lamb, chicken, beef, whatever. You grow it yourself. We bring all the spices from Ethiopia. Our family sends it through the post office for us. For the most part, it’s healthy food. American food is filled with a lot of things that we don’t know what they put into it. Like I know there’s a lot of steroids. They inject it with a lot of things. But over there, you grow it yourself. You plant the food yourself.

So, there's like a lot of farmers back home. And they sell it on every street basically. Every corner. But here it's like, it's a lot of fattening foods. Lot of oil, lot of sugar, lot of salt. Over there, you can just put a little bit of anything, and it's perfect, it's clean, it doesn't make you feel heavy on the inside. You feel cleansed inside after eating that.

This theme of “not knowing” what was inside the foods purchased in the U.S. was a common theme and resulted in suspicion towards anything too processed. Living in the U.S., it was more difficult to trace the food chain, as opposed to Adanech's perceptions of Ethiopia where farmers farmed the food and it was sold in a street corner by the farmers themselves. She continued to say:

Over there, it is organic. Over here things aren't so organic. They'll say it's organic, but it's not. The majority of Ethiopians, they are diabetic or like have heart problems. A lot of them are diabetic or have high blood pressure or cholesterol. I feel like it's the food. And it has to do with drinking, all that. Over there, in our culture, if you're known for drinking too much, whatever, they call you zakkara. You do things for the people over there. Over here, you do things for yourself. You don't care. I feel like it has a lot to do with the food, if I'm not mistaken. It's like the food that they make in Ethiopia, they make it in a certain way.

Here, she acknowledged that a lot of Ethiopian Americans have chronic health issues, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. She associates these health issues with changes in both food and drinking habits. Her use of the term “organic” seems to not only relate to specific farming practices but to an overall healthier lifestyle where people were authentically connected to each other and not living only “for themselves.” This notion of doing things “for the people” rather than “doing things for yourself” is something that indicates that it is not just the individual components of the diet that should be scrutinized in studies of dietary



acculturation, rather they should be viewed together with the broader changes in a migrant's life.

Alysha Galvez (2018) writes about this theme in her book *Eating NAFTA*, asserting that the heartbreak and chronic longing that Mexican migrants in the U.S. feel should be taken into account when studying the often disproportionately higher rates of chronic illnesses such as type 2 diabetes among non-white migrant populations.

Indeed, when the Ethiopian women spoke nostalgically about their home country and its food culture, it was not just the food itself that made the culture healthier, but everything else that surrounded the process of making the food and the way it was enjoyed. In order to cook Ethiopian, you would have to have time, you could not rush it, and so the process itself forced you to slow down. To purchase the right kind of ingredients you would know which meat vendor to go to. You would know where that meat had been raised and who had been working on raising that goat. And after that process was done, sharing the food with family members or friends by sharing injera meant that eating was above all a moment of socializing. Layla said to me:

We take a lot of pride in how we have our family structures, and regardless of what happens you always eat together, and there's always time for family, there's always time for sit down time and just enjoy company and stuff. But here it's a lot of like, you're running around you're working all these jobs, if you get home, you're by yourself sometimes, you're eating by yourself, you're always tired if you're at home, you're watching TV, so it's a lot more different. In Ethiopia, majority of the time, people come from work, for their break, and have lunch with their families. Here that's crazy... work...have lunch...with family? (laughing).

Thus, notions of a healthy lifestyle circulated around a much wider topic than simply food or its contents. Moving to the U.S. meant potentially not only losing access to a certain type of diet, but more so, it meant losing one's privilege of time, community, caring, and socializing.

*Mirkanii and the Issue of Time*

To better understand what factors affected dietary changes at the everyday level among Ethiopian women, I had scheduled a meeting with Mirkanii, one of the newest members in the Oromo Women's Association. Mirkani opened the door to her apartment on the third floor, telling me that her husband and two children were at Raymond James Stadium at an event. "Something for fathers and kids," Mirkanii said. She pointed to the sofa and asked me to sit down, the sofa facing the TV which had a live stream of an Oromo News Channel on Youtube. "You drink coffee?" Mirkanii asked me. I told her yes, but that she didn't need to make that just for me. "It only takes 5 minutes," she said and walked to the kitchen. It was a Saturday morning, Mirkanii's only day off, and the last weekend in March before the pandemic lockdown began. We had been trying to schedule this meeting for a while and finally found a date which worked for both of us. While she prepared the coffee, I set up my recording device and notebook on the sofa. Mirkanii brought me the coffee and sat across from me. On a tray, she had bread and cream and sugar. Milk? I shook my head. "No milk?" she said, sucked her teeth, shook her head, and laughed at me.

Mirkanii, her husband, and their son arrived in Tampa in late 2016 as refugees, the same year as I moved to Tampa as an international student. They came to the U.S. from Kenya where Oromo refugees often flee from Ethiopia. Mirkanii told me that she had to leave her country at the age of 15 because of her family's politics: "It was not my problem. It was my family's problem." This was a common line from many of the Oromo women: that they had left because of their brother's, husband's, or father's political problems. She had been raised by her grandparents, only getting to know her mom a few years ago, after arriving in Tampa. When her grandfather died, "everyone separated because of the politics, and it was difficult for Oromo people to stay." In other words, her grandfather died because of politics, and now other people saw Mirkanii and her sisters as a liability and a burden. So they had to leave. The trip to Moyale, Kenya was long. They crossed rivers during

the night and were transported on top of animal carriages where they had to hide. It took days to reach Kenya. Mirkanii travelled with her sisters (which she then told me were “not really my sisters but my relatives”) and her brother-in-law. When they finally reached Kenya after days, she met her sister there, who had already stayed in Kenya since 2001. Her sister helped her begin the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) process in 2003. The paperwork, she told me, took a long time to complete, and was finished only three years later. They were given a chance to choose from countries such as Australia, Canada, and United States. Mirkanii told me that they chose United States because “our chance was in America” – the country has a worldwide reputation of being the land of opportunity. They were interviewed “four times a day, every other day,” and finally failed the process because, Mirkanii says, my “sister’s supporting the Oromo something.” The cases of her two sisters were eventually picked up by a non-governmental organization, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS.) They were able to help Mirkanii’s two sisters and they finally left to the U.S. in 2006. Mirkanii was not that lucky, instead she had to wait 10 years longer.

In Kenya, Mirkanii got to know a woman called Bifani. They were about the same age, lived in the same apartment complex for a while, and had the same plans for seeking refugee status. Both had left Ethiopia around the same time, stayed in Kenya, yet Mirkanii ended up waiting a lot longer than Bifani. Her case was not picked up in the same pace. She was able to get by – to rent a room and to buy food – with some dollars that her sisters sent to her from the U.S. She also worked as a maid, made injera and sold it, and also had a small roadside kiosk. She called this period “a life of waiting.” In 2010, she met her husband and started living with him. They started the refugee process again and in 2013 they were finally accepted to the United States. After that, they were in a waiting limbo, with nobody telling them why their case was on a hold, just that they had to wait. Eventually, Mirkanii said, the wait became too much, and she decided to stop believing that it would ever happen. She got pregnant with her first child. Shortly after, the decision came that they could leave,

and they were on their way on a plane to the U.S. When in Tampa, one of the Oromo community leaders had found out about new refugees arriving to town and went to meet them. To the surprise of all of them, this person was Bifani – Mirkanii’s friend from her life of waiting back in Kenya years ago.

I have contextualized Mirkanii’s story here to shed light on not only how different the stories of migration are between the Finnish and Ethiopian participants in this study, but also how different they are among the Ethiopian population. In the beginning of this chapter, I highlighted Birhan’s story, whose background is much different from Mirkanii’s – as is Bifani’s, who also arrived in the country as a refugee, but who had arrived at a different political time and who had already lived in Tampa for well over 10 years when Mirkanii got here with her family. Mirkanii’s “life of waiting” puts a focus on how the concept of time affects everyday lives. In Tampa, when Mirkanii’s wait was over, time still remained the issue that affected her everyday life. In relation to food, it was the most important issue affecting how well she was able to maintain certain traditions, such as cooking familiar foods. We had the following interaction:

Laura: Do you cook Ethiopian food at home?

Mirkanii: Now? No. I used to, every day. But now, with this work, I don’t. I’m too tired. I come home, I just want to make something quick.

Laura: What do you make?

Mirkanii: Macaroni, rice. Mac and Cheese for the kids.

Laura: Yeah.

Mirkanii: It’s too much work to cook Ethiopian food. I’m too tired.

Laura: It is a lot of work.

Mirkanii: My kids, they like the Mac and Cheese. I don’t like it though that they eat it.

Here, she reflects on how previously she was able to cook more Ethiopian food – this was when she spent more time at home with a newborn – but now, with the job she had currently been employed for, working night shifts cleaning the local hospital, she was too tired to prepare Ethiopian food. She did not like that her children ate mac and cheese, but more time-consuming dishes were not an option at this point. At this point of the interview, she walked to the kitchen and picked up a small plastic bag of shiro powder, and another plastic bag of berbere spice, sent to her by her mother, which she kept in her kitchen and would cook “like once a month” as comfort food for the family. This pattern, of not having enough time to cook one’s familiar foods as a migrant in a new country, has been recognized as several other scholars such as Himmelgreen and others (2007). It was the case for Mirkanii as well, whose job took most of her time. It is noteworthy that these type of jobs – which often meant working almost seven days a week – are much more common among migrants of color, reflecting that the issue of time is also affected by a racialized political economy. For example, despite “similar educational attainment as the U.S. population overall, the Ethiopian diaspora in the U.S. had a median annual household income of \$36,000 versus the \$50,000 of American median household income” (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). Contrastingly, the median household income of Finnish Americans is currently at \$77,365 (“Finnish Americans,” 2021).

Yet it would be insufficient to describe Mirkanii’s situation without taking into account her agency in all of it. Despite the constraint of time, it was not that Mirkanii did not want to work more. She said she would work even more shifts if it was possible to organize childcare. She described to me how her kids saw other children in school having new things and birthday parties and how she also wanted to provide them with the same things. Yet money was an issue, and the little help they got through social security programs was often cut if she worked more:

I have WIC but no food stamps. You know, my husband is in school, he started working like December last year. Now he's been working for three months. Back then, I got 100 dollars in food stamps. And this February they stopped, because he started working. They said the income is too high (laughs). 100 is nothing. If you go to Walmart, you can buy maybe for two, three days. It's nothing. I don't know, sometimes...I feel like they don't want you to go high. I don't know how to explain. But sometimes I say, they don't want you to die, but they don't want you to grow either. They want you in the middle. Or even not in the middle. Just stuck. You know, I wish, if they help us with food stamps, just food stamps. So, we could work, we could save some money, change our life. But now, we just live, just we live. The bills come. We pay. Just like that.

Food stamps are one of the longest-lasting federal aid programs which are directed towards food insecure families, most of whom are working yet earn too little to be able to afford enough nutritious and balanced food throughout the year. Countless studies point to the effectiveness of the food stamps – or SNAP, as they are called today, in alleviating poverty and food insecurity, and during the COVID-19 pandemic a record number of people signed up for the program, reflecting its importance as one of the longest-standing and stable sources of supportive income (DeParle, 2020). Here, Mirkanii describes how difficult it was to remain enrolled to the program even at the slightest increase in income. She reflects upon how this source of additional income might have helped her in saving a bit more money and to be able to afford a house of her own in the future, yet the income was cut out right after her husband started earning a bit more money. While reflecting on “staying stuck,” Mirkanii also describes a class structure which is evident not only between non-white and white populations in the U.S. but inside both communities as well. It was clear in the Oromo community, where women occupied very different socioeconomic positions. In summary, in Mirkanii's case, resistance to an undesirable “Americanized” diet did not look like cooking more

Ethiopian food - the women's meetings were the place for that. Frequently cooking traditional foods was a privilege for those who had free time. Mirkanii wanted to save money, so her priority was work, not traditional food.

#### *Dietary Changes and Health Issues Caused by Americanization*

Yet the health impacts of dietary changes remained a concern for many. Alemtsehay, who was a first-generation migrant, told me about her grandmothers who had lived in the U.S. and who had already passed away. Her great aunts, on the contrary, had lived in Ethiopia all their lives, were still alive and well over 100 years old. Alemtsehay told me that while "Ethiopia does not have the greatest healthcare in the world," they still had food "that benefits them." And while she recognized that her parents and grandparents had sought to cook the type of foods they remembered from back home, such as *doro wot* (a chicken stew), the taste was simply too different because of the way meat was produced here. The injera that they made in the U.S. was different as well, because even though they could buy teff, the naturally gluten-free grain indigenous to Ethiopia which was now farmed also in North America, it was "bleached" and thus tasted different, "gross," as Alemtsehay described it. She said that her and her Ethiopian cousins' stomachs were so "adapted to processed foods" that whenever they visited Ethiopia, they would get sick.

The women described several changes to their own diets as a symptom of "Americanization." Bifani told me that while she had always eaten together with her husband back home in Ethiopia and while being a refugee in Kenya, she started eating alone after they arrived in the U.S., because their work schedules were so erratic and different, reflecting similar concerns of time as in Mirkanii's case. Layla told me how she had started snacking more, picking up snacks more frequently "just to pass the time" or "because it's easy". Makda said the portions were so much bigger in the U.S. that it caused people to eat more. I remember from my time in Ethiopia how the

act of sharing injera resulted in feeling fulfilled just the right amount, never made you feel stuffed. The women would say that although they still ate injera at home with their families, they frequently used individual plates and the communal moments around injera were saved for special occasions such as holidays. They talked about how meat was a rarity and something that was consumed around holidays, rather than “constantly,” as was the case in the U.S.

Another issue affecting dietary habits, however, seemed to be the change in lifestyle which did not allow for a kind of slow cooking and everyday socializing around food, at least not in a similar sense than back home. Seena, who had lived in Tampa and the U.S. for over 20 years, described how the lifestyle in the U.S. was about being on the run all the time, working, being with the kids, taking the kids to school, picking up the kids from school, taking them to an activity, coming back. She described life as “more relaxed” back home as people were not rushing. She talked about how women in Ethiopia led very different lives than what she lived in the U.S., mentioning that “we got spoiled by America.” She explained to me how “most mothers in Ethiopia did not work,” rather they spent their days visiting each other, preparing coffee, socializing. She recalled an instance when she visited Ethiopia with her family and two children who had been born in the U.S. – how she had been grateful that the children were able to witness an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, where the women first made fire from the coal, roasted the coffee, smelled the aroma of the coffee, grinded the coffee, boiled the water, milked the cow. Birhan, too, was not nostalgic about life back home, yet did not romanticize it:

Here you have to work full-time. In Ethiopia, even the domestic help has help. Especially the labor-intensive things are done by somebody else. And then, if you want to put it together, at least the veggies are chopped already, the onions are chopped, and we eat a ton of onions. So those labor-intensive things are done by somebody else. That kind of lifestyle



can be managed, even if the woman has a full-time job. You come to America, both, I mean, men could expect the same kind of treatment, and then women, because it's so engrained in us that we are the domestic queens (laughs), we try to do both. I don't. Cause I never...I refuse to learn cooking, I refuse to do the coffee ceremony, it's stupid. It's time consuming. And my mom used to say, no Ethiopian is gonna marry you. Like look, I married a white guy (laughs). I absolutely refuse.

Here, Birhan reflects on the gendered expectations of maintaining "traditional" foodways in a family, although that often added up to an impossible equation, many of the women I spoke to working at least one job and six days a week, and with no domestic help. Finally, the women recognized that the price of food made it difficult for Ethiopian Americans to maintain a diet which was wholesome and healthy. Leensa said the following:

The food we eat back home is more organic. Nothing is really processed over there. We don't have fast foods. So, coming here, and you know, when you get accustomed to this life where you work all the time, you may not have time to cook injera all the time. So, people might eat fast food at night. And that might contribute to their health issue. Everything is so processed here. I don't see anything that's organic. And if it is, it's more expensive. So, people may not even purchase organic products. To cook them, it's expensive.

Similarly, Emebet also pointed out that healthy and affordable food were essential but not available for many because of the cost involved. She added: "You're doing minimum wage, you can't afford to buy everything organic." The women would often refer to "newcomers" who had a lot more challenges in adapting to a new home country, as it took years to settle and find reliable income, modes of transportation, a trustworthy community, let alone get to know the local food

environment. Thus, the changes that happened around food should not be viewed in isolation but were part of a bigger picture of many stressors:

And another thing, I think this is probably the main one, is that, I mean it is typical like learning a new language, culture, all that. That's definitely a stress. And that's when it starts affecting the health. You are stressed out, and I know, I can speak for this, especially if you're coming from a third world country. It's definitely difficult. In Ethiopia, they're gonna expect that everything's perfect here. They're gonna expect you to send money. And a lot of times, people don't start working, or they don't make enough money, so they don't really have money to send back home. And I think that's...I don't know, I feel like, that's just such a pressure. And that's why I think people get mental health, stuff like that, the cultural shock and the pressure they feel to, you know, it's like people here, they say, you work two jobs so you must have money. And back home they're like she's rich but she's not spending money. It definitely affects the health, I think.

While the interviews I completed did not explicitly address mental health, Emebet and others would bring it up indirectly in quotes such as the one above. Emebet's mother had told me about her husband's depression and the incongruence he felt by seeing the realities of the U.S. versus the expectations and having to work all the time to make ends meet and to support families at home. Some of the women in the community took an active role talking about the importance of mental health, and the women's group described in the first chapter, as well as the last chapter of the dissertation, demonstrates some of the active steps the women took in building community and providing mutual aid despite their challenges.

What was noteworthy about the above-mentioned discourses around health was that despite concerns about health, the women in this study did not typically see themselves as having issues with dietary concerns or health. Enku, one of the older women in the community, said the following:

I think other Americans eat canned food, maybe that's the health problem. But we don't eat canned food. We use tomato sauce, we use tuna fish, other than that, we don't do canned food. Never. And we cook spaghetti, rice, but we cook fresh. We never eat the frozen food. And I don't have no health problem. Only my knee problem. That's it. My husband is diabetic, only that. We don't have no other problem, blood pressure, whatever. Thanks to god. A lot of different countries, they eat a lot of canned foods, frozen foods. I don't think that's good, they preserve the foods, maybe with some kind of chemical.

Although Enku mentioned that her husband had diabetes, she did not see this as an outcome of eating habits which would have changed in the U.S., rather she was making the case for how differently she and her husband and family would still eat compared to the rest of the population.

Similarly, Emebet had also spoken to me about how perhaps during the first years after immigrating to the U.S., her family and friends would consume lots of soda, but “eventually we realized it is not good for us.” Similarly, Faizah, who had arrived in the country with a diversity visa lottery, said that she did not experience the adverse health outcomes but had seen “among people who have stayed here for longer” the prevalence of diabetes and blood pressure problems increasing. She associated this with “becoming part of the population or the new culture” and consuming more processed foods. However, as with the Finnish population, it is difficult to discern the exact impact of diet on health as there is no disaggregated health data available for people with Ethiopia and Finland as their country of origin. However, most health studies in the U.S. indicate a stark Black-White disparity in health outcomes, even among immigrants, although Black immigrants

tend to have better health outcomes than African Americans, however, this health advantage typically fades away at a certain point (Ghazal Read & Emerson, 2005).

### *Not Everyone Eats the Same Way*

Not everyone considered Ethiopian food the healthiest option either. Zahra told me that if she was trying to stay healthy, she tried to eat less injera because it was “carb heavy.” She told me that most Ethiopian people have “the belly” because they eat injera at every meal, and she concluded that having too many carbohydrates in the diet was associated with diabetes, and therefore she did not want to eat injera every day. Similarly, Birhan described her family in Ethiopia as upper-middle class, which had led very different food habits already back home:

My upbringing really, really, really still dictates how I eat. So, growing up in upper-middle class, with a mother who was obsessed about nutrition and variety, we grew up, my siblings and I grew up, on a variety of food. She, my mom, prepared different types of foods for the children and for the grown-ups. For us, it was lighter, not too much butter, it’s not too spicy, and there is a lot of Ethiopianized Western food. So, for example, she didn’t like us eating injera because it’s heavy, and it’s just carbs. So, eggs, cereals, I don’t know why cereals was better than injera.

Birhan’s story demonstrates how discourses around food and health are not tied to events happening when immigrants migrate to a new country, rather they are already taking place in the migrant’s home country, with socioeconomic and gendered differences affecting what types of foods ought to be avoided. Birhan explained to me how any type of Western foods in her childhood represented prestige. This would affect how she thought about Ethiopian food overall:

My happiest memories are not based on injera. My happiest memories are always about the amazing pasta alfredo my mom used to make. The lasagna she used to make. So those are my happy childhood memories, European foods. The injera stuff is when we were going to my grandmother's house. My mom cooks as if she's a white woman. The way injera is made, she was always concerned about how hygienic it is for everybody, in one neighborhood to go to the same mills, and have your grain ground. And because we are not segregated like America by income, right next to us there is somebody who is in abject poverty, literally dirt poor, and next to is slightly upper, much richer than us. So, all of us go to the same resources to buy our grain to have it prepared. So, she used to be concerned about, you know, how hygienic that is. Because of the class difference. For her, poor people are dirty.

Birhan's description about her mother "cooking as she's a white woman" refers to her preference towards cooking European foods, while Birhan's grandmother was still cooking injera. However, what Birhan's account also demonstrates is how differently positioned Ethiopians are back in the home country. Exposure to Western foods and dietary transitions may have begun much earlier for some migrants, while those who have lower income backgrounds will perhaps have less exposure to those products. Finally, Birhan's account echoes similar notions as those mentioned in Finnish women's stories, in that upper-middle class parents, particularly mothers, are anxious and careful about the nutrition socialization for their children. Finally, this nutrition socialization and guidance towards healthy eating was geared particularly towards female children. Alemtsehay talks about her experiences of growing up in the U.S.:

My brother was the American in the house. My sister and I were not. But you know, boys are more spoiled in our culture. I never went to McDonalds, he went. I've seen it, but

nobody ever took me. When he said all of my friends are going to McDonalds, my parents were like okay. After church they'd buy him McDonalds and not us. They'd be like oh there's food at home for the girls. But it was like...it was fine because I'm not a big fan of McDonalds. But at the time, like my sister got jealous, because she's the youngest. And she'd be like why. She's also chunky so my parents would be, no, it's not good for you. But that affected her mind, like oh because I'm chunky I can't eat that. So, it's just a struggle. For the guys, it doesn't matter if they're chunky or skinny. They're men. They can live their life. So, they can eat as much food as they want, doesn't bother them.

Alemtschay's remarks demonstrate that experiences around food can change a lot even within a family. Gendered expectations of who was supposed to look skinny and avoid "junk food" affected Alemtschay's parents' decision-making around food, with the men in the family having the freedom to eat as they pleased, while the women had to avoid "chunkiness" and avoid foods that perhaps would have attracted them when they were younger.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have compared and contrasted the experiences of Finnish and Ethiopian women to understand how dietary changes and discourses around health affect two different migrant groups living in the same state. Both groups express a resentment or critique toward an unhealthy "junk food" or "fast food" culture. Both Ethiopian and Finnish women speak about the healthy, organic, and/or "clean" aspects of their food cultures, which they also refer to nostalgically. This finding suggests that although migrants experience pressures to assimilate, discourses around food are considered an acceptable area of critique towards the new home country. Among both groups, discourses around food and health are contrasted with real and tangible changes to diet. Both groups

mention that moving to the U.S. has led to an increased consumption of processed foods, of sweetened beverages and snacks, and less time spent cooking and socializing around food. Finnish migrants mention gaining weight when moving to the U.S., and Ethiopian migrants talk about chronic illnesses, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and mental health issues. Given that the literature on White migrants' dietary acculturation is virtually nonexistent, the findings in this chapter suggest that the process may be much more commonplace among this population as well. However, when comparing and contrasting the findings, there are differences in how Black and White migrant women conceptualize issues related to food and health. While Ethiopian women mention external circumstances, such as lack of money, lack of time, and lack of community as the main reasons for dietary shifts and inability to consume healthy foods, Finnish women focus more commonly on individual behavior and the lack of nutrition education as causes for unhealthy eating. Their discourse reveals that White women in particular frame their conversations around food on restrictions and dieting, as suggested by Mary Igenozza (2017). They engage in the type of nutrition socialization which teaches children about food through the lens of nutritionism which reduces food to its individual components. While Ethiopian women were also subject to patriarchal norms and gendered expectations about how they should eat, White women seem to center food rules and norms in their nutrition socialization, and while doing so, they comment on unruly bodies who do not abide by similar rules by choosing "wrong" foods. Through engaging in the "right" type of eating, they assert racial superiority through material practices. In the next and final results chapter, the focus is on how Finnish and Ethiopian women engage in creating transnational foodways, how foods may be important for building community and resistance, and how the life around food also reveals notions of nostalgia and loss.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### FOOD AS NOSTALGIA AND LOSS, FOOD AS COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE

“She decided to keep the things that made her feel like home deep within herself, where nobody could judge her, and inside the walls of their kitchenette apartment where she made turnip greens and peach cobbler and sweet potato pie flecked with nutmeg and sang spirituals like in Mississippi as often as she liked.” *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Wilkerson, 2010: p. 292)

#### Finnish Participants

##### *Introduction*

Early in my fieldwork with the Finnish community, I had sat down with members of the community at the cultural hall. There were three of us, and I had just told them about how my research revolved around food. They nodded, listened, shared their stories, and asked me about anthropology. Then they started telling me about all the changes that were going on in the community, particularly the demographic shifts which had led to the church, which has previously been owned by Finns in the area, now being owned by migrants from Latin American countries, and Finns becoming tenants instead. They told me how this was just one example of the larger shift that was happening in the community, at the root of which were racial anxieties. Sitting around the table, one of the individuals added: “Now *that* is an anthropological study for you. You could really write an anthropological study about *that*.” He was right. From early on in my research, it became clear that regardless of what I was observing on the surface about food, foodways, culture, and tradition, I would only be able to write a partial story about what was going on in the community had I not focused on “that.” Throughout my fieldwork, I could indeed not help but notice the palpable sense of loss in the



Finnish community. It came through in conversations, formal and informal, and although longing and nostalgia are part of every migrant community, this sense of loss seemed to be about more than that. Wherever I went, to the churches, cultural halls, coffee shops – an agreement or notion seemed to exist that there was too much change, and that this change was happening at the expense of what Finns had built for themselves.

This sense of loss came through in my interview with Liisa as well. Liisa had lived in Lantana for over 50 years. I had agreed to meet Liisa in her home in a central part of town in an apartment complex where she told me that 40 % of the tenants were Finns, sometimes speaking so loudly in Finnish at the community pool it made Liisa think that “perhaps we should keep it down a little bit.” Liisa opened her door dressed in a Marimekko dress, one of the most iconic Finnish design brands. The material symbolism of Finnishness was visible in her home. There were kitchen textiles with Moomin characters – part of a beloved Finnish animation series - on them. There was a sign on the kitchen wall that said in Finnish: “Liisa’s kitchen is the heart of the home.” Liisa gestured me to sit down at the table next to the kitchen area. After I sat down, she poured me coffee, added cream, and offered me two Finnish style biscuits because “you can’t drink coffee with a dry mouth” (a Finnish expression). Her Finnish American friend Marjatta, whose house she pointed to me from across the pond in the center of the neighborhood, had made the biscuits.

Much like I documented in parts of Chapter three, Liisa reminisced about the past: when she first arrived in Florida, “everything was about Finland.” There were Finnish services everywhere. People who retired and got older could move to the nursing home where all the tenants and nurses were Finnish. Two Finnish churches in the area had plenty of program and services. Now, she says that Finnishness is dying. “It is simply a fact Finnishness will die out.” Her husband Erkki, sitting on the sofa not far from the kitchen table where we are seated, confirms this. He sits with his back

turned towards us, nods, and says in a loud voice: “Yes, that is the case.” Liisa looks at him and told me that Erkki has trouble hearing. That’s why he speaks so loudly, she added.

Liisa, however, despite having lived in Florida for 40 years, told me she still largely consumed Finnish foods. She went on to list the different types of foods she planned every week: meatballs, meat stew, cabbage casserole, and others. Even though she would sometimes cook other dishes, it was still mostly Finnish foods.

I have never thought that I would need any other type of food. My mother has given me a lot of recipes. My mother and stepfather lived here half a year for a long time. She always gave me new recipes and cooked for us. And still today, I make all traditional Christmas meals because you cannot buy them from anywhere. The only foreign thing I cook is turkey on Thanksgiving. And sweet potato casserole and green bean casserole.

Liisa’s account demonstrates several things: first, she seemed startled at my question of whether or not she still cooked Finnish foods and paused before answering that she had never even considered needing any other types of foods. She looked at me and said that no one had ever asked such a question, and thus she had not given it any further thought. But it was all Finnish for her, recipes passed down from her mother. And so, there was a discrepancy between what she had just told me about Finnishness dying: it seemed to me that in her home Finnishness was well and alive. It was also clear to me, based on the interview data that her “hardcore” Finnishness seemed to be an exception. It was more common for the participants to associate their Finnishness with features such as healthiness rather than the traditional meals (see Chapter four). Finally, Liisa’s notion about “Finnishness dying” made me think that she was likely referring to the cultural halls, and the problems related to keeping them going:

It (cultural activities) has ended in other places. Well at least in other places. You know, if there are not enough people to keep the halls going, not enough people to work and fundraise, or when all these people who work for it die... I don't know if there will be enough enthusiasm left then, compared to when people arrived in Florida in earlier years. They would all work together and built all kinds of things. They always got together. And they got to know each other. Anything on that scale is missing now.

Liisa referred to how the Finnish community back in the day used to rely on each other much more than the current generations of migrants. She said that it may be a symptom of how different immigration had become for Finns now. Because it was not as easy for Finns to enter the United States anymore, "immigrants who come here now are in a completely different position than we were in." She said that people may still think it is "nice" to spend time with other Finns, but it was not necessary. This seemed to indicate that initial acceptance from the American society had happened, and community ceased to play such an important role anymore.

Liisa also acknowledged that the program that the cultural halls put together was not appealing to younger people. She told me the halls would bring "orchestras" from Finland and danced tango, while "no young American was interested in tango." While this sense of loss was palpable, it seemed remarkable to me that a community like this was able to have not one but two cultural halls in a small town in the first place. Not many migrant communities had large spaces like this to host regular events. It seemed like the opposite of "loss." Among the people I had spoken to in the field, what seemed to be causing a rift and a sense of loss in the community, then, was a sense of some Finns actively turning away from their roots, not wanting to have anything to do with the people at the cultural halls who were either considered "old-fashioned" and bigoted in their views by

many who represented the younger generation. Seeking to turn away from this sort of Finnishness, many younger Finns purposefully sought other tastes. However, as the following examples will show, even among those who considered to be more cosmopolitan (eaters), racial anxieties were widespread.

*“Eating the Other:” Turning away from “Bland” Food*

Liisa who was always cooking Finnish foods at home seemed to be the exception compared to the food habits of many others I met in the community. Liisa turned to her food roots every day to feel connected to her home. The halls represented the places and spaces where those traditions could be maintained communally. But many of the participants deliberately turned away from these traditions. They wanted to complement their “bland” diets with other foods. They may also have left behind a Finland that was much different from that of Liisa’s and had entered a U.S. at a point in time which provided them with more opportunities and a sense of less need for community. What these stories brought forward, however, was that although these women actively sought to taste different types of foods, the people that represented those more “cosmopolitan” and “international” and “spicy” food cultures in their living environments were also considered a threat to their way of living in Florida.

I met Ulla in her house on the outskirts of town. The location – although merely minutes away from I-95 - was rural enough to have only spotty reception for my phone. As I drove in, a gate opened, and I saw Ulla waiting for me at the door. Her dog jumped at me while I attempted to make my way in. “He’s super friendly,” she said, while patting the dog. “Okay, that’s enough,” she told the dog, as it would not stop jumping. “So nice to meet you,” Ulla said, and welcomed me in. She was in her forties and had come to Florida in early 1990s after she had won the diversity visa lottery. She had chosen Florida because already back then, Florida was known as a place with many Finns and

she had friends and networks who could immediately help her find a job and an apartment. Now she was married, had a daughter, and was also a citizen of the U.S.

As Ulla was describing to me her eating preferences and habits, she re-iterated a sentiment which seemed to be commonplace among the study participants: she spoke about Finnish food being most strongly present during the holidays – notably Christmas. It was that time of the year when everyone was notably Finnish, “the only time of the year when Finnish people wanted to be Finnish,” whereas during other times of the year the cooking of “traditional” dishes was more sporadic and mainly the consumption of occasional comfort foods. Instead, Ulla told me how her diet had shifted to include “more Latin flavors” as a result of living in the U.S. and particularly Florida:

I eat a lot more Spanish food. We eat much more of their stuff, and we like them. Rice and beans and chicken and all sort of quesadillas, that’s our everyday food now.

Despite her everyday food being “more Spanish” now than Finnish, during the same interview Ulla went on to explain to me how the increase in migrants from Latin America to Florida bothered her.

People don’t even need to know the English language if they live in Miami. They just speak Spanish (laughs). I am upset about that. But I’m used to it now. At first it was upsetting because when we came here, we had to learn English. But now there are these Latinos who all flock together and live together, and they get all their services in Spanish. They don’t have to learn. And they don’t learn. The generation that comes after them...their kids are different. They go to school and learn perfect English. But the generation that has just arrived, wherever they have come from, Cuba or...they didn’t learn, they didn’t have to. Why did I have to learn English? I didn’t get any of my papers in Finnish.

What becomes visible here in this interaction with Ulla is how new foods were something that could be accepted and incorporated to one's daily life. However, the interaction with the people who represented these foods was considered a nuisance and something that was upsetting the status quo of what they considered to be Florida. Much like what Ulla describes here, other Finns would also describe to me how "Florida was more like America 30 years ago," meaning that it was more homogenously White. Ulla also asserted that she had to learn everything on her own as a migrant, despite the fact that she had earlier told me about how Finnish networks in Florida helped her get started as a new migrant. She also used the expression "flocking together" of migrants from Latin American countries, while this sort of expressions is rarely used of Finnish migrants who gather at cultural halls or live in apartment complexes with many other Finnish people, such as Liisa. This notion that new types of foods were welcome substitutes to the "blandness" of Finnish food, while at the same time the people representing those foods were not, was a commonplace notion among other participants as well.

Hannele, a woman in her fifties, who had lived in Florida because of her husband's work for almost 15 years, told me how she today leaned towards other cuisines because she found Finnish food unappealing:

(At home) we make Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese. A while ago someone complained that Finnish food does not have taste. I have to say I agree. I find the taste and the spices the biggest issue. Personally, I can say that it doesn't taste like anything. Even my kids stopped asking for it. So, we eat more Asian food at home. More international.

In Hanneles family, their diets had shifted away from Finnish cooking which they no longer found tasty, and she characterized their diets as "international." However, she went on to describe Florida

as a very different place and food environment compared to the rest of country.

Well, I often think about if we lived somewhere more up north...my answers would probably be different. You know, the Latin flavor that is and the conception of time and just getting things done and the way people drive, and the food. Even in our local food store we have a lot of this sort of Latin food. The food is good. But I have at times felt that I can't even get along with English here. And that made me so angry. But now I have adapted. It's not that big of a problem anymore. But it has taken time.

Hannele juxtaposes Florida with the "North" which she found to be more sophisticated. She then went on to equate "Latin flavor" with tasty food, however, she characterized the same "Latin flavor" with a different relationship to time and told me how frustrated she had felt in Florida when she heard so much Spanish around her, echoing the sentiments of Ulla. Similarly, Maria would describe to me how she would experiment with "tastier" foods and also teach her kids how to eat those foods:

In my family, my daughter loves spicy foods and foods with chili. My son, not so much. He wants the basic foods. I think my son would be okay with basic potato food and he would be happy. But me and my daughter, we need variety...we can't eat the same thing...if we had Chinese yesterday, today we could have Japanese, the next day could be Mexican, then we could be Finnish again, and then we'll have lunch someplace else again...maybe the Philippines.

Maria described how the food culture of her daughter and herself would change on a daily basis, so that it was possible to switch culinary identities – being Finnish was one part of it but getting the

tastes of other cultures was equally important. By stating this, she also is an example of the type of privileged Finns who are in an economic position that eating out several times a week, if not daily, is a possibility. However, as she was describing her family's experience in Florida overall, she also added the following:

I haven't felt discriminated against because I'm Finnish but let's say that there is a bit of isolation because this is such a Spanish dominated culture. Our family has noted that there is just this strong Latin culture here. Our kids said that we moved to a different country.

Here, Maria is clear about how she has felt isolated in a "Spanish dominated culture" and associates this culture with living "a different country" compared to the other state in which her family had lived prior to moving to Florida. Nea, a second-generation immigrant born to Finnish parents in the U.S., described to me the versatile food culture of the U.S., and the types of foods that she enjoyed:

It's hard to say what real American food would be. Probably a hamburger, hot dogs. Steak. You know, Midwest, they eat steak all the time. Roast beef. Maybe a fried chicken is a Southern thing. And then just the introduction of all these...like we love Thai food, sushi, and Chinese. If it's a good Chinese restaurant, you know, who makes it, it's so cheap to go and buy it.

Here, Nea describes what is characteristically thought of as American food: hamburgers, hot dogs, and steaks, all originating from the food cultures of European immigrants and "naturalized" into mainstream American cuisine. Nea also describes how the introduction of more recent food, such as Thai, sushi, and Chinese, has become a staple enjoyment for her and her husband, and notably Chinese food because "it's so cheap." Despite enjoying access to different types of foods, Nea later



went on to explain to me how she felt that White people were being discriminated against or would be discriminated against in the future.

Lately, the Hispanics, Haitian, all, they're getting a lot. Because of the minority (refers to their status as minority). It's shifting, we could be minority, and I have a feeling the Whites are gonna get the raw end of the deal, because of that slavery thing, that wasn't our thing, but I don't think the Blacks and all those...and I'm not prejudiced. But I'm thinking that it could be like 200 years from now, will it be those people saying, you know, we've gotta give only certain things to the Whites.

Nea's sentiment demonstrates that the sense of loss I described earlier in this chapter, and which was palpable in the field sites as well as the interviews, had to do with racial anxieties over losing one's status as a White person in the country. Here, Nea describes a commonly stated phenomenon that White people will be in the minority and "Black and all those" would be the ones making the decisions on how to distribute resources in 200 years. What she seems to indicate is that she understands that there is currently or has been an inequity in how power is distributed. And that if White people would no longer be in the majority, that would mean they would "get the raw end of the deal." And thus, the stories presented in this chapter, while highlighting that Finnish women had very different kinds of relationships to what "Finnishness" meant in terms of everyday food practices, their racial anxieties and racial identity bound them together. bell hooks has written about how "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture (hooks, 1992)." While hooks' essay is not solely focused on food but on sexual fantasies and desire for racially different bodies, it is applicable to thinking here about Finnish women came to consume Otherness with great pleasure yet resisting the presence of these bodies in their everyday life, highlighting how desire and resistance towards racial difference co-exist.

In the next section, I will discuss how the sense of loss was also fueled by internal struggles within the Finnish community.

*“Frozen-in-Time Finnishness”*

I talked to Tuire over the phone. She lived in the Midwest, but regularly visited Florida because her mother lived there. Tuire no longer knew Finnish, so we conducted the interview in English. She had moved to the United States with her parents and brother when she was ten years old. In the U.S., they settled in Michigan where a Finnish community already existed. She told me about how she eventually distanced herself from the very Finnish community when she went to college and ended up in Minnesota to go to graduate school there. She had not gone back to Finland since she was in her late teens, however, she recognized that her own roots from Finland gave her a different mindset than the one she was being immersed in the U.S. She described having a “somewhat more of a cooperative, collective kind of mindset” as opposed to a “this sort of rugged individualism, which is sort of the myth in the U.S.” She told me that although she felt distant from her Finnish community at this point in her life, food was one of the ways to connect back to her roots. She said that whenever she visited her mother in Florida, she would cook to Tuire the meals she liked as a child, because “that’s part of the way she cares about people, she feeds them.” She added:

Whenever I go down to Florida, I always bring back about three or four loads of bread, the dark rye stuff, because I can’t get that here. And I go down every couple of months, so I try to bring it up to last until I come back. I’ll make things at home like in the winter I’ll frequently make rice pudding and fruit soup. Or I’ll make some of the stews that I learned to make from my mom. But where I live, there really isn’t an option, unless I make stuff, for

purchasing Finnish foods. So, whenever I go down to see my mom, I will, you know, I love those little Karelian rice pies. And what else...the Finnish bread. That's probably the extent.

This passage demonstrates a typical story of transnational foodways among migrants: foods are memories, connections to one's past, and recipes are often passed down from mother to daughter. It was private, often shared, prepared, or consumed with the people one felt closest to. But Tuire had other things to say as well. She told me that it was the conservatism of the older Finns in the area which had kept younger people from participating in the activities of the cultural halls. She told me that while Finnish migrants had in earlier times been considered "radical rebel rousers", they had become more conservative after "making it" in the American society:

I think unfortunately what has happened is that a lot of those, you know, as the generations continue in the U.S., people kind of get their houses in the suburbs, they turn more conservative. And more "I have mine and what's your problem in not getting yours." I see it, you know, when I'm down in Florida, and understandably, this is my mom and her elderly friends that I hear this from. But there is very little appreciation or respect or understanding of more recent immigrant groups.

Here, Tuire talks about what came forward in many informal and formal conversations I had with Finns in the area: they would emphasize the values of hard work and for not "relying upon any government support" for making it. Other migrants were seen as less hard working and as an existential threat. And now, the Florida they had arrived in was changing all around them. Tuire continued:

People like my mom are sort of stuck in the 1950s, in their head, and a lot of times don't...number one they don't know history. Of how Finnish immigrants, you know, were viewed with suspicion and dealt with a lot of discrimination and violence against them. It was a really hard time. They don't know that. And they don't know enough about what is going on currently, you know, what the reality is currently with people coming in from another country or even being able to come here from another country. And so, they just kind of see their own experience and expand that out in both directions and think that it was the same for people before and think it is the same for people after them. When I think about my aunt coming as a 17-year-old kid from a very small town village in Karelia, Finland, with basically, you know, no money to her name, and no sellable skills, um...you know...those are the kind of immigrants currently that they make a lot of.. that my mom would say, why are they coming here? As opposed to seeing that hey, that's like my sister, and she was able to work her way up the food chain, because of the opportunities she was given.

In addition to Tuire, other participants would make the same connection too, as they spoke about the conservatism of the older generation which they did not want to be associated with, how they could not make the connection that they themselves had come to the country seeking for opportunities, and some even openly had told me that they had overstayed their visas and stayed in the country on an undocumented status. The divisions among the Finnish community seemed to stem from a fundamental disconnect: the older generations were deemed too racist for the younger generation, too stuck in the past, while the younger ones who had arrived in the country with a much different skillset – language and “cosmopolitan” values looked down upon the “traditional” Finns. Yet, as this chapter has shown, the younger ones – even though they distanced themselves

from the activities of the cultural halls and the older generation, were equally anxious about some of the demographic changes happening in Florida.

Tuire described her mother's generation as unwilling to change. And that caused the younger generations to steer away from their activities. However, she also acknowledged the work that the older generation had put into the area: it was precisely because of the older generation that Lake Worth had a Finnish community in the first place. She lamented on the fact that when the "frozen-in-time" Finnish generation would die out, there would be no one to replace the labor they put into maintaining the cultural halls. But she also recognized that "you can't keep something going by saying we're never gonna change." According to Mikael who was one of the few male members of the Finnish American community that I interviewed, Florida Finns were known to be "ultra conservative" among all Finns in the U.S., but the shift towards conservative politics among Finns, he told me, had happened in different parts of the country as well. He linked this shift to the post-civil rights era (the same era after which Ethiopian migrants started arriving in the country in larger numbers due to immigration reforms):

When we were kids, they would have these Democratic picnics with thousands of people. Now if you had a picnic there'd be twenty. If that. And you know, if you wanted to get in, you had to run as a democrat. And even in 1990s, there were still a few people who would have radio ads in Finnish language. And now, you can hardly run as a democrat. It changed very quickly. And it's switched mainly over these moral issues. Abortion, gay rights, and so ...you know, and that's happened, just, I'd say, in less than twenty years.

According to Mikael, "moral" issues had shifted the politics of the Finnish American community "very quickly."

*Food Alone Will Not Unite the People*

Back at the cultural hall, I stayed behind after one event in February 2020. People had come for the delicious food and the event and then people left. At the hall, two women – both retired – were in charge of coordinating most of the events. Olivia and Taina would spend hours in the kitchen putting everything together, planning and leading, coordinating, cooking, cleaning, training volunteers. Now Olivia was standing in the kitchen, wiping sweat from her forehead and shaking her head. “I am just so tired.” I nodded and said: “I get it, it’s a lot of work.” She looked at me firmly and said: “It’s a lot of work and no one else is willing to take over it.” So much of what was still providing a sense of community, at least in the sense of a physical space which provided connection to one’s cultural roots, was on the shoulders of women who put together the recipes and dishes that brought people to the halls. Yet the cultural halls were not the only place where communities stuck together. I had been told about informal groups that had formed among women, who got together and cooked and brought their kids to socialize. Perhaps the “disappearance” of Finnishness was not as bleak and deterministic a fate which I had been told it was.

What the stories brought forward in this dissertation indicate, however, is that the one untouched upon topic in the community was race. Armi reflected upon this:

Finnishness has been nothing but a benefit to me in this country. It is about skin color. If one was a dark-skinned Finn, the benefits of Finnishness would disappear.

Here, Armi articulates how “Finnishness” is tied to Whiteness and how the features deemed as characteristic of Finnish culture (hard work, honesty, trustworthiness), told as the recipe of Finnish success in the U.S. to me by several people I interviewed, really were not unique cultural traits but racialized stories about who had been able to claim their Whiteness. However, claiming this Whiteness had come at a cost – it had led to feelings of alienation and the contempt of other

migrant groups who were more recent, refused to give up their identities, and/or fought for their rights. Armi continued to reflect upon the importance of a collective cultural identity which would not be bound around Whiteness:

I think culture matters particularly in a globalizing world. Every person has a basic need to belong somewhere. Globalization seems to cause conflicts because people attach themselves to one culture tighter and stronger and see other cultures as enemies. And then what should be a changing and contextualized cultural identity becomes even more stagnant, especially when we interact with other cultures. Maybe that's a negative way to put it, but I do think cultural identity can be a positive thing too. If you move to another country, you're pretty much lost if you don't have a cultural identity because often the host culture does not accept you as a full member right away. It's a matter of years to somehow acculturate. For your own mental health, it's good to have your own cultural identity.

## **Ethiopian participants**

### *Introduction*

Back in Tampa, it was the middle of October in 2019 and I was attending the Irreechaa Celebration of the local Oromo community in a shelter in one of the local parks. Irreechaa is an annual Oromo celebration, as explained to me by Oromo women, "not too different from Thanksgiving," its origins in celebrating the harvest after a rainy season. Here, among the diaspora, it was also a way to familiarize younger members with their cultural roots. As the celebration was about to begin, women, men, and children in the community dressed up in Oromo style clothing. Some of the younger women in the community were taking selfies in their dresses, knowing they would wear them only on special occasions. What followed was an Irreechaa ritual: I found myself following the

crowd holding a leaf in my hand, with men and women in the front chanting. We walked in a line on the boardwalk along the river, with curious passerbys wondering what was going on. The younger ones next to me did not always know what to sing, improvising the lyrics and laughing as they went along. The ritual ended as we finished the walk and laid down the pieces of leaves we were holding in our hands to the water, thanking the water for a plentiful harvest season.

After this, we carried on to sit down in the shelter to begin the community meeting. Usually, these sort of celebrations that I had attended always had an official part where updates about the community were discussed, along with plans for the future. It was typically the men of the community who spoke the longest. On this occasion, Faayame, one of the male members was talking about how they had difficulties keeping their community together in Tampa. The meetings were not always well-attended and people did not participate. He went on to add: “But the women in our community seem to make it work though,” referring to the regular women’s meetings. To that, one of the male members, Demiksaa, added: “Well of course because they have the food!” People laughed at this remark, but there was more to it, of course. Food *was* a central part of the women’s meetings, and it *did* bring people together. What it required, however, was the time and effort and labor of the women involved. For example, at this particular Irreechaa meeting, there were no traditional dishes served because the women had not been coordinating it due to busy schedules. So, what was served, instead, was chicken wings, rice, and salads. What I will focus on in this the remainder of this chapter, then, is how the Oromo women of the Ethiopian community succeeded in building community and highlighting the role that food played in it.

The focus on Oromo women is important as their history in Ethiopia is different to other ethnic groups. As Jalata (1996) writes: “Official Ethiopian history has erased the Oromo name from history by replacing it with ‘Galla’, and frequently Oromos have been described in the literature as ‘barbaric, cruel, evil, ignorant, orderless, desctructive, and invasive.’” By being labeled as uncivilized



as opposed to the ruling Amhara elites who “sometimes classified themselves as white but always superior to the darker-skinned people of the south,” Oromos in the U.S. are often grouped together with any Ethiopian migrant experience although their stories are often vastly different due to this history. In this chapter I focus on how food plays a role in resistance and how transnational solidarities emerge among particularly Oromo women in the U.S., challenging prevailing notions that recent African migrants do not want to associate with the struggles of Black Americans. Rather, I show how Oromo women seek to ground their everyday resistance not only in Oromo resistance but Black resistance in general.

#### *Oromo Women’s Meetings as Sites of Resistance*

To understand the history of the Oromo women’s group in Tampa, I had to speak to Bifani. Bifani’s family was the first Oromo family I had gotten to know in Tampa. I had first met Bifani’s husband, Demiksaa, who introduced me to Bifani and other Oromo women who had founded the women’s Association. Bifani and Demiksaa had four children, the youngest, Baati, born in 2018, and the oldest, Michael, born in Kenya while Bifani and her husband Demiksaa were waiting for a decision to receive asylum as refugees. They had not fled Ethiopia together. Instead, they met in Djibouti, to where Bifani had fled as a teenager because “there was no life for me in my hometown, no work,” and Demiksaa because of his political activism, telling me how he had witnessed his father getting shot. Bifani and Demiksaa’s relationship began in Djibouti, and while returning briefly to Ethiopia, it became too unsafe for them to stay. Demiksaa’s Oromo political activism was seen as a security threat, and so they left Ethiopia. Crossing the border at Moyale, a northern city in Kenya, they ended up in a refugee camp, and eventually in Nairobi, where they lived and sought asylum. Their case was picked up by a non-governmental organization (NGO), who argued for them receiving unfair treatment by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It was because

of this legal case spearheaded by the NGO that Demiksaa and Bifani and Ani were granted asylum. They first ended up in New York, which Bifani describes as a hard life. They both worked full shifts, one during the night, one during the day, just to get by.

Finally, they ended up in Florida to seek new opportunities and a warmer climate. Now, 14 years later after first coming to the U.S., I was sitting on the sofa at Bifani's house at one of the monthly women's meeting. Bifani told me that she had officially founded the Oromo Women's Association in 2015 after she realized that it would make sense to make official something she and a couple of other Oromo women were doing anyways: building community, supporting each other financially during tough times, and cooking Ethiopian food. Bifani lived in Wesley Chapel, an area just north of Tampa. When I arrived at the meeting, she was cooking in the kitchen with Atinaaf, her mother-in-law who lived in the same household. Baati had grown so much that they had to install a gate in the kitchen. Otherwise, she told me, he would run in and make a big mess by dropping all the pots and pans to the floor. So his older brothers, Araara, Michael, and Badessa were now looking after him while the women were preparing foods for the meeting. Shortly after me, other women started arriving: Edna, Leensa, Zahra, Aida, Enku. Then Sara, Layla, Dinqiii, and Mirkanii. Before the food, it was time to socialize, as usual.

It is no coincidence that the main event at the Oromo women's meetings was food. Black feminist writers such as Psyche Williams-Forsen have written about how food becomes a tool for self-definition and resistance among Black women (Williams-Forsen, 2006). Reese calls such acts "quiet food refusals", which include actions to increase self-reliance over food among marginalized communities (Reese, 2019). Thus, while in Chapter three I focused on describing how Oromo and Ethiopian women were in many ways marginalized through food shaming and food stereotyping, here I focus on their actions to keep memories of their culture alive by cooking the food they grew up with.

Bifani and Atinaaf laid the food out on the kitchen counter, after which we picked up *injera* and *wots* on our respective plates. To begin eating, some of us had gathered around the square shaped, high top table which typically held space for four but around which eight women were now seated. Discussions around the table revolved around food. Bifani mentioned that Baati refused to eat *shiro* (an Ethiopian chickpea stew). “I think he is allergic to it,” she said. Leensa, one of the younger women and a close friend of Bifani’s family, went on to ask: “What’s in shiro? What’s it made of?” To this, one of the older women around the table raised her eyebrows and yelled out in Amharic: “Atar! (peas).” She shook her head and continued in English: “That’s what shiro is made of.” She then rolled her eyes as if shocked that the younger generation did not know what one of the main dishes are made of. The younger women laughed, and in the background Baati was watching Baby Shark from the TV with Atinaaf.

Older women in the community indeed had knowledge of the best recipes. It was not at all uncommon among the Oromo women to talk about how their mother made the best Ethiopian food. One of the funniest stories, often shared with me, included that of one Oromo mother who had only half-willingly, after a decade of living in the U.S., gone to eat a local Ethiopian restaurant, only to be gravely disappointed by the taste. She packed the food, brought it home, and re-cooked it so it could be enjoyed. The disconnect between mothers’ knowledge on how to cook food the “proper” way and their children’s inability to recreate the same meals in the same way is part of what makes transnational foodways to always be in flux, rather than foodways “frozen in time.”

Yet food remained a constant theme in the Oromo women’s organizing. Bifani had described to me why Ethiopian food mattered to her:

For me it’s everything because...you know sometimes even, if I don’t eat Ethiopian food, I’m not even happy. I don’t feel like I’ve eaten food.

This same sentiment was repeated by many of the women that I interviewed, that they did not feel like their bodies were filled in the same way with food that was not Ethiopian, and that they “couldn’t imagine” living without Ethiopian food. Food was one of the main ways that Oromo heritage was kept alive. It was also one of the practical ways through which community was built. When Bifani and two other women decided to start the women’s association in 2015, one of the first things they included as part of the association’s activities was buying the pans necessary for cooking *injera* at home for those who were new in Tampa and had to get their life started. It was through making *injera*, and through having access to familiar food, that it was possible to feel at home in a new place. Food was comforting and the centerpiece of the women’s meetings, but the meetings also served many roles beyond the act of eating: they were places of consolation when a loved one was lost, they were places of grief when Oromo people back home were persecuted or killed, they were places of joy, places of raising children, places where women could be themselves and talk about what they wanted without interruptions from men.

After eating, we moved to the room adjacent to the kitchen to sit on the sofas there. The room was dimly lit and Dinqii, one of the women, prepared coffee by a small table filled with small coffee cups brought by one of the members from a recent trip to Ethiopia. While preparing this coffee ritual, she was burning incense and the room slowly filled with smoke. The mood was relaxed: people were laughing and joking. This was the official program part of the women’s meeting – the one following the act of eating – and this time the agenda included talking about potential funding sources for the association as well as the importance of everyone paying their membership fees (10 dollars a month). Those funds, Bifani reminded, were accumulated and could be distributed for purchasing *injera* ovens for new members and to financially support families who had to organize weddings, funerals, or graduations. Bifani’s oldest son – having special permission to attend today’s meeting although it was usually strictly only for women - was sitting on the floor, having his hair

braided by one of the women. Smaller children were almost always present. Bifani and others would feed their children directly to their mouth. This practice is called *gursba*, a sign of care and loving. Bifani had once told me that her kids, including the older ones, did not like to Ethiopian food anymore (rather they often preferred American food) unless they were fed in the *gursba* way, then they are all about the Ethiopian food.

*“Without Injera nothing is Complete”*

Both Chapter three and Chapter four demonstrated how the process of dietary acculturation affected Ethiopian women as a result of several issues, including food shaming, food stereotyping, lack of time, and affordability of food. However, spending time with Ethiopian women demonstrated how this process was far from deterministic. I talked about these issues with Seena who lived almost next door to Bifani in Wesley Chapel. We met on a weekday, and she told me that she was tired after just getting back from a wedding in Virginia. She offered me water and we sat in the living room space not far from the main door. Seena had lived in the United States for over 20 years, arriving in the country through a family reunification process, as her Oromo sister had first come to the country sponsored by her fiancé who fled from Kenya. Her first home state in the U.S. was Minnesota, and she told me that her transition was made easier because she already had family there: she could save in living costs by staying with them, they showed her how to open a bank account, how to get around, and how to find her first job. She only moved to Tampa in 2003 after meeting her husband who got a job offer there. They now had three children. Seena worked as a nurse.

It was after being removed from her community in Minnesota when she realized that she needed other Oromo people around her. She reflected on this by saying that while her husband was content on his own, “as a woman,” she needed somebody to “just go to and talk and socialize.”

Not having her community around also meant not having access to the type of foods she had been used to in Minnesota.

Seena: And then, down here, in Florida. I mean, food...I don't get the traditional food. In Minnesota, you can just go to any store and buy. And there is your mom, she can make it. Here, when I moved, I don't have the material. I became a new refugee. And now, when I ask my husband, he don't know where to buy teff, he's like I don't know. Why you need that, just eat bread?

Laura: Tell me more about the importance of food.

Seena: It's just your identity. You crave your own food. I know we have food here...but all the time you do that, you're just like oh no. Sometimes you eat different food and you're not like full. You're not satisfied. You're full but you're not satisfied. When you eat a little bit of your own food you'll be like, yeah, this was good. It feels like home. So I need it. Especially when I was pregnant with my son. All I craved was familiar food.

Seena relied upon other women to make the new place feel like home.

A girl told me that there is this Ethiopian store on this and this. I don't know where or how to get there. I asked for the directions, I asked for my husband to drive me there, I went to the store. But first my mother got me the flour when she came to visit me. She gave me the flour, and my mother-in-law gave me the pan. So, once I had that, and when that is done, I went to the Ethiopian store. Now I can start finding my ingredients. But mostly the sauces,

you can buy chicken or meat when you go for groceries...the spice we have imported from home.

Laura: So, without the injera it's never complete?

Seena: Without injera nothing is complete. Even though you can make the sauce. You can eat it with rice and bread. Which my husband enjoyed. But I need the injera part. Without it it's like...so once I start that, once I have everything I need, the place itself became familiar. It just became normal, like home. Then it's more comfortable.

These passages demonstrate several issues echoed by other women in the study as well. Experiences of migrant women can differ largely based on their geographical location in the U.S. In my case, studying Ethiopian women in Florida likely yielded very different results than, say, in Minnesota, which has one of the largest concentrations of Ethiopian Americans. On the one hand, in such "diaspora hotspots," it is very common to have access to stores that sell Ethiopian foods and items, active churches, and other community events. Arriving to Florida, on the other hand, was for Seena an experience likening to being "a new refugee." Thus, the study also highlights how varying the experiences of migrants are and how specific localities impact the way we understand and think about migrant foodways. Seena's reflection demonstrates that cultural knowledge on migrant foodways is typically passed on from woman to woman. Countless women in the study would refer to their mother's knowledge in cooking and saying that it was their mother's cooking that was the true, authentic Ethiopian food that could be found. In Seena's case, she did not feel at home in Florida before she could have access to her familiar foods: this meant having her mother and mother-in-law providing her with resources and getting information from another female about

an Ethiopian store. It was only after she could put together the necessary pieces of what constituted her familiar meals – *injera* and stews with the certain spices – that she could start feeling at home. In *Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South*, Michael Twitty (2017) writes about how ancestry and memories can be tracked through culinary memories. By tracking recipes, he could trace the lives of his ancestors.

*“When I See African American Struggle, I See Oromo Struggle Too”*

In Chapter three, I wrote about how some women in this study remarked that they made it clear to Americans that they were not African Americans. Yet with Oromo women, there seemed to exist a consistent effort to build transnational solidarities which resisted anti-Blackness. This effort existed alongside an urge to stay connected to one’s cultural roots. By the time I was interviewing Seena, I had learned from previous interviews that while my work focused on food, leading with questions on food would often stall the conversation and lead to short, descriptive accounts by participants, such as reciting what they thought constituted Ethiopian food culture. These questions, I understood during the course of research, were useful at some point of the interview, and they did elicit information that demonstrated how varying people’s perceptions are about their national food cultures. But they often also led people into thinking they had to provide a right type of answer. I remember at one community meeting when I was informally talking to Seena and asked her, while we were waiting for something to begin, perhaps a coffee ceremony. I somewhat awkwardly asked her: What is Ethiopian food culture like, what are the most typical foods? She started talking and was for a short moment at loss for words. Zahra, one of the women who was nearby, overheard her muttering, walked by and laughed: “Oh boy I wanna hear this too because I have no idea how to answer that...you’re just making stuff up, aren’t you Seena!” We all laughed. Over time, these experiences taught me that food itself is often a very guarded topic, influenced by decades of food



writing which often assumes there is an authoritative kind of voice that can speak of food cultures in the right way. Thus, as I was sitting down with Seena, and other participants, I let them choose the direction of the interview more freely, always returning to food, but on their terms. What Seena wanted to talk the most about was race, racism, and her experiences as a migrant, a Black woman, and as an Oromo woman, and how these identities intersected in her daily life. Food was part of those conversations; but food could not either be isolated from those broader social experiences.

She told me how being an Oromo woman in the U.S. is a story different than simply being an Ethiopian woman in the U.S. When she first arrived in Tampa, and yearned for the community, it was not like there was not one in Tampa. There was an Amhara community, but Seena did not feel comfortable joining that one, having been used to the Minnesota community where Amharas and Oromos were mostly separate communities.

The Amhara and Oromo have *baaaaaad* blood between them. Some place they (Amharas) force you to give up your (Oromo) language. They force you to give up your name. Your identity, in fact. If your name is Oromo name, they make fun of you. Growing up as an Oromo girl, my name is twisted, what's this name, why do you have this name. They tell you, us, Oromo, you are not smart enough. Because most of the Oromo land is fertile land, they are farmers. There are cows and stuff like this. So, they take that as you are only good to farm. You are not good for anything. This makes you angry about who you are. And they just want you to lose your identity. There are still a lot of Oromo people, they don't want to come out and say we are Oromos. Even in Tampa, I see a lot of them, the mother or the father are Oromos, but they don't say anything. Because of that discrimination, people are hiding their identity. Or they become good friends with some Amhara people, so they don't lose that acceptance. So, they don't speak their language.

Focusing on Seena's story on her experiences as an Oromo woman demonstrates the colonial and transnational impact of race beyond the borders of the U.S.: In Ethiopia's case, the ruling Amharas have historically been characterized by colonial European powers as a "White" race, a more "civilized" and "semite" race as opposed to the dominant majority Oromos who are darker-skinned. This racialization continued to have an impact in the U.S. where Seena explains that some Oromos are too afraid to "come out" and identify as Oromo, although she also said that the "America didn't care," referring to their ethnicities. Some younger members of the community had told me how another Ethiopian person had made fun of them because they called *injera* with its Afaan Oromo name, *bidden*. But having this experience as being ostracized as a dark-skinned Oromo woman back in her home country as opposed to the lighter-skinned ruling Amharas had, Seena told me, made her feel more solidarity towards African Americans as well, despite "not knowing anything" about African American history before coming here.

What we learn in history, is they twist the history to themselves. Or the good things Oromos did, they just killed it. The same thing with African Americans, they didn't get credit for what they did here. That's the Oromo struggle back home too. When I see African American struggle, I see Oromo struggle too. When police shoot an unarmed black kid, a 17-year old kid who died here in Sanford, in his hoodie, walking home. My son is 15. And he can get killed at any time. For what? Just by being a black teenager, every time I am scared. When he goes to the basketball court, I tell him just to go to the basketball court, don't go around...he had a white friend there. I tell him not to take his bike or go to gas station or anything. But his friends go there. I don't know what teenagers do in gas stations. Maybe they buy something, or they walk around. But he is the one who would be blamed for everything. So, you raise black boys in this country with fear. When black community went

out to speak, Black Lives Matter, the others say Blue Lives Matter. The point is not that police lives do not matter. But the Black Lives Matter says don't shoot us. We are humans. It's not comparing. It's the reality. Accept the reality. Say: we did wrong. Let's stop and think, why are these people a crime. And they say I'm not racist, I have a black friend. What's that supposed to mean? That itself is racist to begin with. I don't know how you become friend. And then the other thing that makes me sad is, if you don't like it, go back. What kind of mentality is this? Especially for Americans. The white Americans to say that. They would be ashamed of themselves. Because this wasn't their land too. So, I can tell them too, go back to where you came from. But here we are all together. We call this American land home. The way you want everything good for your kids, that's the way black people want too. I want my kid to grow and be a good citizen in this country, wherever he goes. All the parents want that. Black struggle is see me, understand my struggle.

Previous scholars have demonstrated that Ethiopians in the U.S. carefully distinguish themselves from African Americans because they see there are benefits to creating a distinct ethno-racial category for themselves (Habecker, 2010). I wrote about similar results in Chapter three. However, remarks such as Seena's suggest that researchers may find more heterogeneity in these processes and experiences if they take into account Oromo history within Ethiopia. In Seena's case, she described her struggle as "Black struggle" and made comparisons between the history of Oromos and African Americans, a common history which has been written in a way that does not reflect the reality and a history which results in her having to live in fear because her Black son might get killed. By speaking out against racism, and by speaking for Black Lives Matter, she resisted anti-Blackness, and aligned herself rather in a movement rooted in transnational solidarity for racial justice.

Thus, food was a part of this larger resistance for Seena and others. And it was Oromo women like Seena and Bifani who also sought to help the newcomers, whose "struggle is fresh,

different than ours,” as Seena put it. This effort to help was often made practical by focusing on food, as Seena reflects here:

We buy them traditional teff, at least when you come first, you don't want to adapt this food. So, we buy them familiar food, the pan, their lentils, and some seasoning, all those things we buy if they don't have them. Whatever they need help with. You get some injera, buy some injera, I make some sauce, and we take it to them. And then we socialize with them. And take them to social work if they need any transition or interpret any help with the language. We take them to Walmart, this is where you buy this and that. Because we're used to that. That's the reason why we start the women's association. Because we're already doing it. Why not come together and put together money, instead of picking our pockets every time something happens. That's how it started. And it's done a really good job so far. Somebody passes away, we just help each other. That's how we create new community and live together by helping each other.

### *Creating Transnational Foodways*

The stories highlighted in this chapter demonstrate how Oromo women sought to build community and resistance, and the role that food played in that process. However, there were also those who saw themselves as being in the intersection of several cultures. For example, those women who described going through the American school system (highlighted in Chapter three) had differing experiences. Among these women, resistance and self-definition would also look a bit different. I talked to Neela who was a second-generation immigrant. She had been born in Florida a year after her parents had arrived there as refugees in the 1990s. Back then, as Neela described it: “For Ethiopians at the time, America is like heaven on earth. Um, so everyone at the time was trying to

get to the States.” Neela described to me that she remembers being fully immersed in Ethiopian culture for the first years. Her family could not afford childcare, so she was taken care of at a friend’s house (also Ethiopian), almost all of their friends were Ethiopian, and her parents never really learned how to speak English and never lost their accents. As she got older, Neela described to me as having a sort of “split personality:”

We’re not fully American, we’re not fully Ethiopian. We’re somewhere in the middle, that’s what we are. Like an Ethio-American culture that we’ve got.

This sort of “Ethio-American” culture complicates notions of what is considered “authentic” and/or “traditional” Ethiopian food. By accounting for the different generational experiences and different viewpoints of immigrant women, we can better understand the creation of transnational foodways which are always in a state of flux, and not simply adapting and changing in regard to the host culture (in this case United States), but in regard to the original culture (Ethiopia). Neela describes that just as she and her friends in a similar situation would merge their language into a mix of English and Amharic – and later speaking English that was indistinguishable from a generic American accent (as opposed to their parents), they would also take a lot of freedoms in re-creating the foods that reminded them of home.

We’ll make, when we’re making pasta, and we’ll make red sauce, we’ll use berbere instead of the red sauce. It’s berbere but it’s still a pasta dish. Or we’ll use, um, we’ll make collard greens the way they make gommon (cabbage) back home. But rather than eat it with injera we eat it with rice or something, rice and chicken. So, we’ll still make, but it’s an Americanized dish, because none of us know how to make injera. I think that thing died in

our generation. We don't know how to make it. So, it's like, how can we make our food but Americanize it.

What Neela described here is a wish to still make one's familiar food but in an "Americanized" way that will allow them to make the necessary adjustments, mainly because their generation is the generation that no longer knows how to make *injera*. I was told this repeatedly by many of the younger women, how making *injera* was a form of art, in particularly related to how one could master to make the type of fermented dough that created the optimal size and amount of "eyes" that are supposed to be on the final *injera*. So, while Seena said that "without injera nothing is complete", the younger generation would still eat the food without it because the knowledge for making it simply was not there. For the younger ones, getting to know how to cook Ethiopian food often coincided with becoming a grown-up when they no longer could rely upon the steady supply of *injera* from their mom's kitchen.

Not being able to cook certain types of foods would also result in a lot of jokes about how the women were not fulfilling the role of what was expected from an Ethiopian woman. Neela would joke:

You know we fast a lot in our culture, so I can make the vegan dishes. But anything meat-related, no...my mom is like how are you gonna find a husband if you can't make doro wot? It's an ongoing feud we have. And then I say I guess I am a lost cause.

After saying this, Neela would laugh. *Doro wot* was the quintessential Ethiopian meal that has a legendary reputation. According to this legend, to make perfect *doro wot*, which is spicy chicken stew, the chicken needs to be slaughtered and plucked fresh, and then cut into eight different pieces. Neela's mom would have "so much patience" and she would start the process a whole two weeks

out. She would begin with roasting the onions, and then continued next week putting “the stuff in.” Neela told me that her mother would never do it inside the house (because the smell would be too overpowering), instead she would cook it outside the house, which then evoked the curiosity of her neighbors. According to an Ethiopian legend, before a girl gets married, she has been taught by the older women in her family how to make *doro wot*.

Especially *doro wot*. Because that’s the one that she gets tested on by her in-laws family. So, she has to be able to break it up in eight pieces and cook it properly. She has to know what pieces have to be in there. Or how to break up those eight pieces and cook it properly. She has to know what pieces have to be in there. Or how to break up those eight pieces. There’s a whole science to that. And so, if she doesn’t do that properly, sometimes people will actually say like, you people can’t get married, you have to learn this before you get married.

Apparently, if you break the pieces the wrong way, something will go amiss with the tendency. Each one of the pieces has a name to them. The younger women would memorize these stories although they also laughed at them, noting that to “continue culture” in that way would pose “ridiculous requirements on women”, echoing generational divides between gendered expectations mentioned also by the Finnish participants. Instead, the younger women in the Ethiopian community would tell me about how they wanted to be something else than the Ethiopian that was the stereotypical image in Western culture; they would not be the face of hunger, rather they would be unapologetically Ethiopian but also Americanized, with their dreams, and their cars. They would also tell me that perhaps it was something about Florida that made them feel more strongly about their culture, that made them keep their culture more, because “in D.C. and stuff, cause there’s so many Ethiopians there, they tend to be like oh, this is like a common thing, so they’ll let it go a little bit easier.”

While creating new, transnational foodways, almost all the women emphasized that Ethiopian food was meant to be shared, as a sign of love and affection, characterized by eating stews from the same, shared *injera*, and by always having something available when visiting another person's house. It was the shared sociability around food that women emphasized as very Ethiopian, but also something they shared with African Americans.

Our food is intended to be a community food. Because it's one plate, everyone's eating of that one plate, one piece of big injera bread, that's everyone's breaking off the same food, and we're all eating together, laughing, joking, and you know. That's the moment when we have all of our talks about our day, what troubles we had, and we have jokes, we talk about politics, all of these different things.

Here, a participant describes the communal aspect of eating in her culture. Among the Finnish community, I had often been told that "politics" was off the list as a discussion topic around the dinner table because of the uncomfortable feelings it would bring. Here, an Ethiopian woman highlighted how politics was dealt with, alongside humor, when enjoying an Ethiopian meal. While time constraints in the U.S. made it sometimes impossible to always eat in such a communal way, the sentiment and the shared understanding of this purpose of food, however, was there. When some of the women went back to visit Ethiopia, they would come back stating that "back there everyone eats *all the time*." They would describe scenes where they were forced to "eat, eat, eat" when visiting relatives' households, laughing at something they felt slightly disconnected to by now. They would describe the people, especially women, as idly making food, making coffee, and then starting to prepare the next meal. And then they would say "I guess we have been spoiled in America." These accounts from the younger generation demonstrate that transnational foodways are both a way to signify one's roots and identity but also a way to resist the parts of the "old" culture



that one does not want to be particularly part of, highlighting the many differences that exist *within* migrant communities.

*Epilogue: Maalan Jira - Do I Exist?*

In late September of 2020, I went to see Bifani at her house in Wesley Chapel. We had not seen each other for almost three months. The last time I saw her was at a vigil organized for Oromo artist and activist Haacaluu Hundessaa who was assassinated in Addis Abeba in June 2020. His song, *Maalan Jira* (Do I Exist?) had been a resistance anthem particularly for younger Oromos in Ethiopia and in the diaspora who fought for their rights and freedom in the country. Now, I wanted to meet Bifani to pick up two t-shirts that the community had made for fundraising purposes. I parked in front of Bifani's house and saw that the garage door was open. Bifani's second oldest son greeted me and invited me in. Bifani was sitting on the couch in the living room watching TV, and as she stood up and turned to greet me, we first thought of hugging each other but then greeted each other with a pandemic appropriate elbow bump. Bifani had just gotten home from work for which she woke up every day at 4 am. Having worked there for over 15 years, she had been promoted from the manual work to doing mostly office work, which consisted of supervising others and "creating Excel charts." "I don't have any food for you yet, I'm sorry, I just came home," she said next. I gestured with my hand to show that I was not expecting food. We sat down and talked about the months that had passed. Bifani told me about how things were in Ethiopia now and how everyone in the community was doing (too many people were not paying their membership fees, which she was not happy about). Michael, her oldest son, walked in. He was now 18 and had graduated from high school this past summer and had just began studying in a state college. "He don't know how privileged he is," Bifani told me while looking at him. "His parents pay his tuition, can you believe that. This is not something he understands." Michael asked her mom if he could borrow her car, to

which Bifani replied “absolutely not.” As Michael left the room, we stayed in the kitchen. “You know, Michael makes all the Ethiopian foods now?” Bifani told me. “He makes dabbo, shiro, and he is really good at it. And many women in the community, now they started making injera.” Maybe it was the pandemic which had resulted in these changes in foodways. Maybe it was that food habits and foodways were always in a state of flux. Bifani asked me if I wanted some Ethiopian food to go, and before I could answer, she was already walking towards the freezer in the garage from where she picked up frozen bags of *besso* and *shiro*. She put a stack of frozen *injera* on the table as well, telling me that they last long. She told me she was planning to visit Ethiopia soon to see her mom. “Do you miss her?” I asked her, adding: “Wasn’t she here at one point.” “Yes, I brought her here. But she did not like it. She wanted back. She’s used to her socializing, she couldn’t take it,” Bifani began and continued: “You know, old people don’t like it here. You know, Dinqii’s mom was here too. She said she was going to return home. Dinqii said she can’t, and so one day she walked out of the apartment and just started walking. They were so worried, it took them hours to find her. She wanted back to Ethiopia.” We both laughed. Bifani walked me to the driveway, and we agreed to meet again soon. As I drove off, I greeted her neighbor who was mowing the lawn. Some had already put their Halloween decorations up. I thought about what Seena had told me at the end of her interview some months back, knowing that I was doing a comparative study, “I hope this has been useful to you. This is our life in America. I don’t know... I don’t know what the Finnish women will say.”

## CHAPTER SIX:

### DISCUSSION

#### **Immigrant Foodways as Racial Projects**

In his 2008 article on food and diaspora, the late Sidney Mintz wrote: “When an ethnic food loses its ethnicity and becomes American – like the bagel, or pasta, which used to be called spaghetti – somebody of that ethnic identity usually gets appointed to our Supreme Court” (Mintz 2008, p.520). This quote captures how intimately food and eating are connected to larger issues of migrant incorporation, belonging, nationality, and citizenship. Once your food is naturalized to become a part of American culture, the notion goes, a migrant becomes a full-fledged citizen of this country. Similarly, Gabaccia (1998) has noted that sentiments towards migrant foods ranged from disgust to fear during a nativist time of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the latter half of the century saw a more open embrace of diverse cuisines, paralleling the country’s shift towards a more multicultural democracy in the wake of the civil rights movement. What these notions in the study of food have in common, though, is that they leave unexamined the issue of race. By centering race in the analysis of the everyday experiences around food among Ethiopian and Finnish migrants through utilizing an ethnographic methodology, I have demonstrated that focusing merely on the cultural aspects of migrant foodways leaves unanswered questions such as why certain foods have remained “exotic” and “ethnic,” while others have been largely rendered invisible. This omission has implications for public health as well, as the following discussion will show.

As I have pointed out in the introduction and literature review sections of the dissertation, studies on food and immigration have in the past been quite rigidly divided into macro and micro

approaches, studies engaging in the latter less commonly focusing on the large-scale, structural policies undergirding both phenomena. The food-immigrant nexus (Agyeman & Giacalone, 2000) as a conceptual framework for this study helped see connections between macro level (transnational migration, structural racism) and micro level (identities, practices) issues. Utilizing this framework, I relied theoretically upon critical race scholarship, while methodologically I engaged in ethnographic work which allowed to see how macro level processes, including race as a master category, are experienced at the everyday, intimate level. The findings from this dissertation support the theory of racial formation which asserts that race is given meaning in everyday life through racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2015). These racial projects can reproduce, reflect, or resist meanings of race, highlighting its fluid and socially constructed dynamic. For example, Ethiopian women describe instances of food shaming and food stereotyping in their everyday life which led to them hiding parts of their identity in spaces shared with Americans. Having one's foods constantly scrutinized or surveilled – whether by shaming or associating foods with “poverty” or “exoticness” – is similar to what Psyche Williams-Forsson has named “eating while Black,” referring to how legacies of surveillance of Black people extends to everyday practices, such as eating (Williams-Forsson, 2016). In the case of Ethiopian women, the sensory properties of their foods (eating with hands, smell of food, texture of food) were reminders of their Otherness and aspects which rendered them unassimilable, which is reflected in one of the participants' comments about the narrative of the American melting pot and how “that's not our story.” These instances demonstrate how food carries meanings which help people make sense of race without explicitly mentioning race, and challenge the assumption undergirding current literature on dietary acculturation.

Similarly, among Ethiopian immigrants, being associated with hunger, famine, and poverty, and lacking a refined food culture led to many of the women to hide their identities. Food shaming resulted in changes in everyday dietary practices and in strategic choices regarding foodways and

where to bring foods that would automatically mark them as too visible. In the school and workplace, their foods, by virtue of being “exotic” *and* the women being “exotic” themselves, had the potential to disrupt status quo by being pungent and visible. Previous scholars have noted, for example, how the smells of food become markers of the racialized immigrant body in predominantly white spaces (Classen, 1992; Manalansan, 2006). Similarly, additional sensory characterizations of food, such as its spiciness, composition, and the way in which it is eaten, have been used throughout U.S. history as a way to create distinctions between civilization and “savagery,” notions which have elevated Whiteness and reduced Blackness to a subhuman position (Veit, 2015; Wazana Tompkins, 2012). In other words, sensory properties of food are not race-neutral. And although the tastes, smells, and other sensory qualities of food are often considered merely ethnographic anecdotes, they are in fact useful clues to how themes of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and resistance, are negotiated and experienced in everyday life (Holland et al., 2014).

While the instances described by Neela and other women in this dissertation about food shaming and food stereotyping might be easy to dismiss with the notion that all kids can be picky or that some people tend to be risk-averse when it comes to trying out new foods, the way that food shaming was brought up consistently and regularly by Ethiopian women rather than Finnish women, the question must be posed whether certain people are at a more natural position to critique food and label certain kinds of foods as “weird.” Previous studies done in school environments in the U.S. suggest that children are particularly sensitive of food shaming and participation in, for example, free/reduced price school lunches is affected by how children think they are perceived in the school cafeteria, with stigma and the notion of being “uncool” leading to decisions that might result in children being food insecure in school all the while having access to food (Burriss et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2018). The notions of the Ethiopians women in this dissertation point to the fact

that such stigmatization around food is not limited to socioeconomic class only, but that notions of “otherness” around food are also racialized.

These experiences are contrasted with those of Finnish migrants in Florida who reported that Americans often had no idea of what their food culture was, nor were they interested in hearing about it. Rather, Finns in the area were known for being “honest and hard-working,” however, as the historical review in this chapter showed, this had not always been the case. Rather, Finns had at one point in time during their immigration history been considered inferior and racially ambiguous, at first not being accepted as White in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Descriptions around inferior Finnish food would reinforce these stereotypes, however, those stereotypes faded once Finns came to be accepted as White, and in that way assimilated into the American mainstream which Mintz also refers to. While scholars have argued that this process often meant that European immigrants gave up their habits and customs, this does not seem to be the case in my field site, where Finnish halls and activities are still ongoing. However, it does seem to have suggested that in order to be “American first,” Finns gave up their activism and progressive political ideas to maintain their Whiteness, which in turn seems to have caused a sense of alienation and loss in the community. These experiences of Finnish migrants around food demonstrate how meanings of race change over time. This suggests that food is an “easy target” which can be weaponized to convey “common sense” racial meanings, further demonstrating how foodways operate as racial projects and are tied to historical racial formations (Omi & Winant, 2015;

However, the research findings demonstrate how assimilation among White immigrants comes with a price, as it seems to have led feelings of loss, alienation, and racial anxieties. This process of White immigrants is well captured in this passage by Toni Morrison in *The Origin of Others*:

The cultural mechanics of becoming American are clearly understood. A citizen of Italy or Russia immigrates to the United States. She keeps much or some of the language and customs of her country. But if she wishes to be American – to be known as such and actually belong – she must become a thing unimaginable in her home country; she must become white. It may be comfortable for her or uncomfortable, but it lasts and has advantages as well as certain freedoms (Morrison, 2017: p.48-49).

This process of “becoming White” also came with the notion of what I called “learning the rules of anti-Blackness” in this dissertation. The migration of Finnish people internally in the U.S. tells a story about anti-Blackness: the formation of a Finnish community in Florida seems to have been fueled by White flight from Northern cities where Black people from the South fled the violence and lack of opportunities. In Florida, Finns learned how to be physically separated from Black people for decades through segregation. The notions of anti-Blackness had been internalized by newer and younger immigrants as well, who avoided certain “dirty” grocery stores where there were “many dark-skinned people.” This shows that the modern food environment perpetuates anti-Blackness and the racialized symbolism attached to different grocery stores highlights one mechanism through which race is reproduced in the everyday even in a “post-racial” or so-called colorblind era.

Ethiopians were not immune to such anti-Blackness either. While the women describe frequent experiences of food shaming and food stereotyping which they observed did not affect other immigrants (Asian, European), some also used their cultural aspects as a way to distance themselves from African Americans. Americans’ interest in Ethiopian food culture, as described by some of the women, was a way to forge connections and to assert cultural capital. Similar findings have been found in earlier studies among Ethiopian immigrants in places such as Washington D.C. (Habecker, 2010). Similarly, Grillo (2000) has written about Afro-Cubans in Tampa and how

prejudices waned against Cubans once they started “denouncing and distancing” themselves from the African heritage of Cuban culture and instead associated themselves with Iberian culture. In other words, racial projects at the everyday level may reproduce meanings of race and communities of color can participate in such racial projects as well (Omi & Winant, 2015).

### **Food, Femininity, and Power**

While this analysis builds on the notion that race operates as a “master category” in the U.S., the findings point to the importance of engaging in a more intersectional analysis. Among both groups, women were largely responsible for continuing the cultural traditions of their home country, including cooking, which often conflicted with their schedules of working. Among both groups, women described their situations as different from previous generations, with Ethiopian women describing women back in Ethiopia being able to rely on domestic help, thus making cooking easier, while Finnish women described their mothers’ generations as cooking everything from scratch, while they themselves did not always find the time or energy to do the same. These intergenerational conflicts among migrants, often played out as tensions in the household regarding eating choices, have been found by other researchers as well (Vallianatos & Raine, 2015). However, the findings also support the theory that White and Black women, while both being subjected to gendered expectations in relation to food and eating, also experience these pressures differently due to the impact of race, and White women are able to assert their sense of superiority through the everyday practices of eating as well as the meanings construed around food.

While both White and Black women in this study described how they viewed American food culture as less healthy and more processed as opposed to the healthier, “organic” food in their home countries, there were differences in how the women viewed dietary changes in their everyday life, as well as what they identified as root causes for so called “Americanization” of diets. Finnish women



described being knowledgeable about “what is healthy and what is not,” and about teaching particularly their female children about the virtues of eating a healthy diet, which meant avoiding “junk food,” processed food, or restricting oneself from products which had too many suspicious ingredients. Finnish women also associated healthy eating with an ideal body type that is thin and concluded that eating certain types of food (salads, greens) was key to creating the conditions for achieving this type of body. Finally, there was a common understanding among the Finnish participants that nutrition education was key to possessing this sort of knowledge and contrasted themselves with other migrants who “ate too much junk food” or the wrong types of foods, or the Black person who added too much sugar on a particular dish.

This analysis supports the intersectional work of previous food scholars, such as Mary Igenoza (2017) who has written about how White femininity is linked to food practices. Writing about the differences between White and Black women’s practices in teaching their children about health, she found that White parents communicated to their children that “dieting was perceived and learnt as a ‘normal’ way to eat,” while Black women framed food not as something to be restricted but “as something to be shared out and enjoyed (Igenoza, 2017: p.109).” As Finnish women spoke about how they wanted to teach their children to abide by certain food rules to be healthy, they were engaging in nutrition socialization. While previous work has focused on how non-White immigrant children are socialized into the broader American system which then changes their food habits, less attention has been given on how this nutrition socialization then impacts White immigrants. This work suggests that learning how to “eat well” is part of how White immigrants perform their “morality” and “goodness” as opposed to “undisciplined, unruly” non-White bodies. In other words, the analysis supports the notion suggested by Sabrina Strings that race acts as a “double agent” which simultaneously represses “savage” Blackness and disciplines Whiteness (Strings, 2019: p.6).

Furthermore, Strings (2019) has written about how feminine aesthetics have been central to race-making projects throughout American history. In the context of immigration, this meant elevating and paying extra attention the ostensible superiority of Northern and Western European migrants who according to early 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenic notions produced offspring of superior beauty, highlighting their thinness and height, as opposed to the Black body which was at the time considered so inferior that it would “die off,” being unfit to reproduce. Indeed, Veit (2015) has written about how eugenics, a sister science of eugenics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “a new discipline that emerged at the turn of the century to address environmental effects of race (Veit, 2015: p.104).” Eugenics became a dominantly feminine field concerned about hygiene and food and was largely led by White women in the home economics movement. Food played a central role in the eugenics movement, asserting that it was possible to discern by a person’s facial features what they ate, and that “a new, superior race would result from the radical dietary improvements made possible by modern nutrition science and self-control (Veit, 2015: p.104).” The movement targeted migrant women as well, arguing that if migrants ate a proper American diet, they “could become a new race” within one generation. Central to the eugenics movement was also the claim that Black people were “greedy” and “wasteful” with food and could not resist pleasure-seeking.

However, this focus on reforming White bodies and leaving Black bodies to “die off” changed during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly from the 1980s onwards as the medical and public health field started paying attention to minority health, particularly the “obesity epidemic” among Latinx people in the U.S. (Strings, 2019). White women in this study expressed disdain over the dietary choices of migrants of color as well as their body shape – while admitting that they themselves had experienced dietary changes upon arriving to the U.S. This demonstrates how notions of healthy eating and differing foci on healthy eating among White migrants versus migrants of color has been connected to racial formations. As Biltkoff (2013) argues, discourse

about diets is also about “delineating social norms and imposing the values of the middle class through the seemingly neutral language of diet (Biltekoff, 2013: p.3).” In conclusion, food and feminine aesthetics become part of how Whiteness is preserved and communicated in the everyday life through various embodied acts. Additionally, the broader focus of the literature of dietary acculturation on migrants from Latinx countries must be viewed in this context as well: by not studying the phenomenon among White migrants, “problems” in diet are not considered problems in White migrant communities.

The Ethiopian women included in this study were not free from the gendered expectations related to making sure that their children were socialized into knowing their cultural roots – which often meant connecting through food – and to what it meant eat “right.” For example, not eating unhealthy American food such as McDonalds could be off limits for a female child in the family, while a male child was allowed to be “the American in the family,” and the body size and shape of a girl child was up for free commentary in the community. Further research is needed to understand these intrafamilial and gendered patterns of nutrition socialization that take place within the family unit itself. The analysis here suggests that particularly females internalize the message of “Americanization” being a threat to one’s proper way of eating, while male members in the family are free to explore and assert their freedom, including in the consumption of food.

However, while the analysis found that Ethiopian women experience similar gendered expectations and reiterate similar food rules, they would identify structural rather than individual reasons for not eating in a way that they perhaps were supposed to eat. While Finnish women emphasized the role of nutrition education and their individual knowledge of healthy food, singling out other migrants or other persons for their unhealthy habits, Ethiopian women explained how time and money were the main concerns behind dietary choices. Moving to another country had led to drastic changes in the household dynamics, including not having access to domestic help, and

having to work most days of the week. These findings suggest that time is also a racial equity issue, affecting Black and White women differently (Ahmed, 2017). The Ethiopian women also cited cost of food and affordability of food as one of the main reasons for not being able to purchase the types of foods that they always desired, further highlighting the structural constraints to healthy eating.

Finally, while I have analyzed differences between Black and White migrant women, there were also stark differences among the women representing the same countries of origin. These differences included socioeconomic status, ethnicity, immigration status, age, language skills, and generation, among others. Among the Ethiopian women, I spent the most time with women of Oromo background who have historically been marginalized in their country. This marginalization, it turns out, also has a racialized origin. Dark-skinned Oromos have historically been contrasted with more light-skinned Amhara and Tigray people within the country (Jalata, 1996). This has its roots in European influence and colonialism. While Ethiopia was never fully colonized by European powers, “the 1884/1885 Berlin conference where Africa was ‘scrambled,’ European colonizers supported Abyssinia’s plan to be one of the colonial powers (Dugassa, 2005: p.154).” This led to a racialized, hierarchic system where the indigenous Oromos were made into colonial subjects and stripped of their sovereignty (Dugassa, 2005). This history also explains why most of the Oromo women in this study had arrived in the U.S. as refugees (due to ongoing political and social oppression) versus those who were not Oromo and had arrived either through family reunification visas or diversity visa lottery. In other words, Oromo women occupied not only a gendered and racialized position in the U.S. but also carried with them the potential stigma of being Oromo, leading potentially and often to discrimination among their “own” people. Thus, there were intersecting issues in the lives of Oromo women, which transcended the notion that they were “Ethiopian,” demonstrating the importance of studying immigrants beyond being solely representatives for their ethnicity (Wilcox & Kong, 2014).

Finally, differences among the women also explained some of the preferences in foodways in the U.S. For example, Birhan explained how her upper-middle background in Ethiopia led to her having a different type of diet compared to many others in her country. Birhan's mother had preferred European foods and cooked "like a White person." Her mother wanted to make sure Birhan and her sibling's food was clean and healthy, as opposed to the food of "dirty" poor people. As a result of this nutrition socialization, Birhan explained to me how in the U.S. her comfort foods were not necessarily Ethiopian, but European foods. Similarly, among the Finnish women, the differences in generation among the women led to some women questioning the choices of their mothers' generations, when all foods were prepared from scratch. The women who represented the newer generations in the U.S. would seek to challenge those gendered expectations and instead, often sought to cook Finnish foods only during holidays or special occasions, utilized ready-made foods, and would also outright seek to turn away from the food traditions from their home country, preferring more 'cosmopolitan' tastes. These findings demonstrate that rather than viewing immigrant foodways as static, they are in a constant state of flux.

### **Food as Resistance**

According to Omi and Winant (2015), racial projects continuously help make sense of race at the everyday level. I have demonstrated in the previous sections of the discussion how everyday food practices and encounters around food reproduce and reflect racialized notions belonging and acceptance. However, racial projects can also be anti-racist and challenge the prevailing racial order. In *Black Food Geographies*, Ashanté M. Reese builds on the notions of self-reliance to demonstrate the agency of Black residents living in an area labeled as a "food desert" (Reese 2019). Similarly, in *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, Williams-Forsion (2006) demonstrates the agency of Black women as they used food to assert their power in a racist environment, while battling with the racialized,

stereotypical imagery associated with chicken and Black people. These works serve as models for seeing not only how food is central to constructing difference and “Otherness” in everyday life but for how it can also serve as a tool for self-definition and resistance.

Among the Ethiopian women, particularly Oromo women, the women’s meetings served as a main site of resistance and building of community. Food was the central theme binding these meetings together – as remarked by one of the male members of the Oromo community in one of the larger community celebrations – and all of the women’s meeting activities revolved around the act of eating, things that happened before it and after it. The women’s meetings played many roles, yet it would have been difficult to imagine all of it happening if there was not the labor put into having a table filled with foods being served. What these acts of resistance and “quiet food refusals” among Oromo women also demonstrate is that while migrants of color are often described to undergo a process of dietary acculturation – which does happen due to food shaming and food stereotyping, among other factors, migrants also resist these processes by carving out spaces and by practicing their culture in ways that allows them to strive for self-definition despite external oppression.

Contrastingly, among Finnish migrants, conceptualizing food as resistance looked much different. In the past, Finnish migrants had actively resisted the injustices they encountered as workers, which in turn had led to their marginalization in the form of categorizing them as something else than White. Over the years, this resistance faded as Finns, along with other European migrants, became accepted as White through political and legal projects (Roediger, 2007). This assimilation had led to many Florida Finns to feeling alienated and yearning for a past that was different and “more Finnish.” In this context, the cultural hall can be seen as active form of resistance to maintain a connection to one’s cultural roots. In the cultural hall, familiar foods represented cultural identity. In that sense, both Ethiopian and Finnish migrants chose safe spaces –

outside the views from others – to practice their culture. However, the difference for Finns was that outside of those safe walls, they could choose to be something else than Finns – they could blend in as White, going unnoticed. For Finns, ethnicity and culture thus became more of a pick and choose kind of thing, which had led to many of the Florida Finns to practice “Finnishness” only during holidays and special occasions. This further seemed to divide the community, as those who contributed volunteer hours at the cultural halls felt resentment over keeping the activities going while not attracting new people to help them.

Many of the Finnish women I spoke to also actively turned away from their food roots, seeking more “cosmopolitan” and “international” tastes as opposed to the “blandness” of their own culture. However, the same women would also feel resentful about the demographic trends in Florida, telling me how they felt that living in Florida was like “living in a foreign country” as opposed to more “northern places.” These findings demonstrate how food diversity can be considered an acceptable form of multiculturalism in multiracial democracies, while scholars such as Lisa Heldke have argued that cuisine driven multiculturalism reinforces social relationships of power, arguing that acceptance of multiculturalism varies based on how and where different cultures practice their food traditions (Heldke, 2003). She continues that the seemingly accepting veil of multiculturalism and diversity may still assume a racial order at which Whiteness is considered the norm, leaving White identity feeling lost, confused, and defensive when confronted about such practices (Heldke, 2003). What the fieldwork with Florida Finns showed me was a community oftentimes unable to address the racial anxieties undergirding it, which made it so that the cultural activities alone, including food, was not enough to build a cohesive community connected to its roots. Building a community from scratch would have meant reckoning with racial injustice in the country. Unable to do that, many of the sentiments echoed in the interviews with Finns, however,

put the blame of their anxieties on those who possessed less power: Black people and migrants of color.

### **Implications for Public Health**

The findings from this dissertation have several implications particularly for the field of public health nutrition. Studies have shown that particularly migrants with minority background experience a decline in their health status after moving to the U.S (Ayala et al., 2008). This phenomenon has been well researched among migrants from Central and Latin America. Coined the “Hispanic health paradox”, Latino/a migrants who arrive in the U.S. tend to be healthier than their counterparts who have lived in the U.S. longer, and healthier than the general, non-Hispanic, white population (Markides & Coreil, 1996). This pattern is considered a paradox since Latinos who arrive in the U.S. often have lower incomes and levels of education than the general U.S. population (Ayala et al., 2008; Guarnaccia et al., 2012). However, within a few generations this health advantage disappears. In other words, acculturation, which ostensibly provides a protective factor for migrants through socialization, language fluency, and potentially an elevation in socioeconomic status, seems to do the contrary by making people less healthier (Martínez, 2013; Pérez-Escamilla, 2009).

This phenomenon of declining health among minority migrants has been part of a broader trend which started in the 1980s as a result of the 1985 Heckler report which for the first time paid national attention to the issue of racial health disparities, and lower health status among minorities, as well as an article published in the Journal of the American Medical Association JAMA on the “obesity epidemic” among people with Latinx origin (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1985; Mokdad et al., 1999). As pointed out by Strings (2019), before these reports, the health sciences had hardly paid attention to minority health and the disparities that occurred. After the reports, more attention was given to minority health and particularly Latinx immigrants



who arrived in the country. Those studies often associated the decline in health among migrants from Latin American countries with dietary changes, given that diet is considered one of the most salient determinants of obesity and numerous chronic health conditions (Ayala et al., 2008). For instance, changes in diet which lead to high consumption of foods rich with sugar and fat, combined with lower physical activity, and an increase in portion size has been associated with chronic conditions such as obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and even cancer (Popovic-Lipovac & Strasser, 2015). Hispanic children and adolescents have the highest prevalence of obesity in the U.S., while Mexican Americans the highest prevalence of diabetes (Weinstein et al., 2017). Thus, it has been argued that public health interventions that take into account the linkages between diet and health, in particular among migrants with minority background, are crucial for efforts towards achieving health equity.

Recommendations in public health nutrition have then taken various forms. They have included initiatives that aim at “educating” migrants on how to maintain a healthy diet (Crowther, 2013; Gabaccia, 1998). Often suggestions include designing nutrition education programs as well as interventions that promote the maintenance of culturally specific foodways, particularly after the association between dietary acculturation and health outcomes has been discovered (Popovic-Lipovac & Strasser, 2015). However, such recommendations focus on individual action and tend to pay less attention on the structural factors influencing the everyday lives of migrants. Public health nutrition would benefit from approaches which factor in the impact of structural factors, such as racialization processes in migrant health outcomes (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). Particularly critical race scholars have argued that persisting racial health disparities in the U.S. call for the consideration of racial inequalities in the U.S. society, given that these disparities exist independently of socioeconomic status (Colen et al., 2018). In other words, gains made in socioeconomic status in the U.S. do not necessarily translate into a reduction in perceived discrimination or unfair treatment

among minority populations, and among migrants, longer exposure to the U.S. may thus have a deleterious effect on health (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012).

The findings from this dissertation support such notions. For public health nutrition, structural considerations mean that the direction of the research should move towards looking at what socio-historical processes, decisions, and ideas have influenced the ways in which the U.S. food environment is structured, the ways in which different foods are attached different meanings, and the ways in which minorities have access to employment, educational opportunities, and loans (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Slocum, 2011). First, while the focus on minority health and particular racial health disparities is a necessary step towards striving for health equity, health interventions may also end up reinforcing marginalization of non-White immigrants. This is particularly true for nutrition education, where notions of healthy versus non-healthy food easily (1) reinforces Western notions of what “healthy” food is rather than allowing multiple interpretations of health (2) conflates healthy eating with morality and being able to make the “right” and “good” choices (Strings, 2019; Yates-Doerr, 2015; Biltekoff, 2013)

The food shaming and food stereotyping experienced by Ethiopian participants demonstrates how pivotal social spaces shared with others can be in redirecting dietary choices out of pressures to assimilate and to not stand out. Ethiopian women described how in workplaces and schools they would frequently experience commenting, shaming, and stereotyping related to their food, which led them to change their diets in those spaces. As a result, public health interventions which seek to communicate the message of “healthy eating” and “culturally sensitive healthy eating” to migrant audiences should be aware that there may be many situations in which this advice is counterintuitive and does not make sense from the migrants’ point of view who is also seeking to fit in. On the other hand, ethnographic data such as the one presented here will likely yield insights which may inform public health nutrition interventions (Patil et al., 2009). For example, while the

Ethiopian women depicted instances of food shaming and food stereotyping, they still carved out spaces in which they could resist such instances and seek to maintain connection to their culture. Such moments may not as easily be captured by large, quantitative datasets. Finally, conceptions of “health” may differ based on context and groups, for example, the social aspects of eating may be as important if not more important than the composition of macronutrients or micronutrients in diet (Williams-Forson, 2013). Indeed, the Ethiopian women in this study specifically mentioned that their food culture was about “sharing” and “love” while the Finnish women spoke about the need to abide by certain food rules to ensure that their diet was healthy.

Finally, public health interventions and programs should take into account that many of the dietary decisions happening at the household level are still dominantly the responsibility of women. Thus, recommendations which seek to help migrants, particularly Black migrant women, should be sensitive to how they may serve as additional responsibilities and burdens. Solutions to this may be easier to find if interventions are led by the community itself. For example, among the Oromo women, by self-organizing the women in the community, they were able to help each other purchase the types of foods they wanted to consume and prepare. Similarly, as the results show, messages conveying notions about “proper” and healthy eating disproportionately affect female children in the household, subjecting them to feminine and gendered ideals about body shape and a potentially unhealthy relationship to food. What would a public health nutrition look like that would be more focused on the joys of eating together rather than restricting food to its sole components of micronutrients and macronutrients, which inherently leads to socializing children into learning about “bad” and “good” foods? Such initiatives, which seek to unsettle the morality of eating are already taking place and could be expanded (Clark, 2021).

## **Limitations**

While being the first of its kind to compare and contrast the experiences of Black and White migrants to study the associations between race and food, this anthropological study comes with a set of limitations. This research is based on fieldwork in Florida, while both populations have large diasporic concentrations in other parts of the country, namely Washington D.C., Michigan, Minnesota, and the Pacific Northwest. The practices, traditions, and experiences of both Ethiopians and Finns in those places may have looked wholly different. Also, given that nearly half of the Ethiopian participants in this study had arrived in the country as refugees while all Finnish people had migrated voluntarily, limitations include whether or not these experiences at all comparable. However, throughout this research project I have relied upon the definition of a “migrant” which according to international conventions is any person who is moving or has moved across an international border, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status 2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary 3) what the causes for the movement are 4) what the length of the stay is (International Organization for Migration, 2011). Additionally, I encountered some challenges when planning my fieldwork in two locations. Unable to secure a large grant to fund portions of the fieldwork as per the proposed schedule, I had to swiftly adjust the practical aspects of my field. Thus, instead of spending the planned 5-6 months in the Miami Metropolitan area, I completed several shorter trips to the area. However, despite these setbacks, I was still able to complete 31 interviews with Finnish participants. While the number of interviews I completed with Ethiopian participants in Tampa was smaller (n=19), the amount of participant observation I was able to complete with this community made up for some of that discrepancy.

I was also limited by language in this study. While all the Ethiopian participants who agreed to participate in an interview spoke English, I may have gained more insightful findings had those discussions been held in the Amharic or Oromo languages. Finally, since this dissertation builds

theoretically on racial formation theory and intersectionality – both more used in sociology - one of its limitations may be the lack of engagement with anthropological theories. However, the study's ethnographic methodology has been consistent with anthropology, and its theoretical orientation fits well within the interdisciplinary nature of food studies (Alkyeman & Gyacalone, 2020). Finally, this work adds to the relatively unexplored field of study in anthropology, namely that of White supremacy. According to Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre (2020), “the fetishization of a particular kind of ethnographic localization (a trained disciplinary compulsion to focus on “the particular”, the small-scale experience-based analysis) that tends to eschew broader structures of power” continues to act as an impediment to anthropological analyses of White supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre, 2020: p.65). The same authors conclude that anthropology, “as the discipline that gave us racial science,” bears a special responsibility in “addressing the consequences of this history.” While food may be an unlikely, seemingly trivial topic in the call for the anthropology of White supremacy, this study reminds about how power also operates in the most mundane places.

### **Recommendations for Future Work**

Future work can expand upon the findings from this dissertation by seeking to understand the many ways through which race may affect food and eating practices among migrants. One potential avenue to expand upon this study is to center educational facilities, starting from preschools, where children are first exposed to different foods by glancing into each other's packed lunch boxes – to understand how race impacts nutrition socialization. Such observational studies could also take place in elementary schools and middle schools. Given the impact of popular culture on notions of race, studies could also systematically assess how meanings of race and gender are communicated through food in various TV shows, as well as Youtube channels which provide nutrition education on healthy eating for toddlers. Another avenue to study how meanings of race are reflected in the food

system is to do a study on how grocery stores are “ranked” based on notions about race and class. Findings from this study suggest that White immigrants in particular have racialized notions about “dirtier” grocery stores which reflect the legacy of segregation and its impact on the food environment (Reese, 2019). Future studies may also look at differences within migrant communities, as this study has shown that factors such as ethnicity, region, socioeconomic class, and immigration status may be impactful social factors (Wilcox & Kong, 2014). Studies may also focus on how intrafamilial dynamics look like in regard to nutrition socialization. Participants in this study – from both Finnish and Ethiopian communities – highlighted that female children are subject to more pressure about making correct food choices. How this gendered dynamic may affect both Black and White migrants’ nutrition socialization in the U.S. should be studied in more detail. Finally, more quantitative approaches could seek to create scales to measure dietary acculturation in larger and more representative data sets. Building such scales could tap into ethnographic studies which have demonstrated the importance of taking into account the social and affective dimensions of food systems.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **CONCLUSION**

During the past decade, food scholarship in both anthropology and other social sciences in the U.S. context has increasingly centered race in the study of food inequities, ranging from understanding the disproportionate impact that food insecurity has on communities of color, to investigating the legacy of anti-Black segregation in the modern food environment, to exploring the experiences of particularly Latinx immigrants as laborers and landowners in the U.S. food system. This dissertation contributes to this growing body of scholarship by centering race in its analysis of immigrant foodways and dietary acculturation. Building on 49 in-depth interviews, 13 months of participant observation, and multi-sited research completed with Finnish and Ethiopian migrants in Florida U.S., this study asserts that the everyday politics around food and eating offer important clues to not only how people make sense of race in everyday life but on how racialized assimilationist pressures impact the process of dietary acculturation. In each of the three results chapter in the dissertation, I have compared and contrasted the experiences of Ethiopian and Finnish migrants living in the same state. Chapter three “Food as Otherness: Construction of Difference in Everyday Life” demonstrated how food shaming and food stereotyping disproportionately affects Black migrants, how assimilation into Whiteness has granted White migrants an invisibility around food but also resulted in a sense of alienation, as well as how anti-Blackness is sometimes reproduced by both groups through everyday food practices and meanings construed around food. Chapter four “Good Migrants, Bad Migrants: Moral Food Choices and Resistance against Undesirable Americanization” showed that both Black and White migrants experience changes in their diet and foodways which

they perceive as unhealthy. However, while Black women describe constraints to healthy eating as largely structural, including affordability of food and lack of time, White emphasize that unhealthy eating is the result of others' lack of nutrition knowledge. Both groups also describe experiencing gendered pressures to perform a "right" way of eating, which among White women is also largely connected to the ideals of slimness and dietary restrictions. Chapter five "Food as Nostalgia and Loss, Food as Community and Resistance" focused on the role that food plays in community building, demonstrating that for Black migrants, food is central for self-definition and for building transnational racial solidarities. For White migrants, food still brings people together but underneath that community-building is the notion of loss, the deliberate turning away from one's food roots, as well as racial anxieties over demographic changes in their environment. As argued by Omi and Winant (2015), racial formations allow for race to be negotiated in different ways during varying historical moments. Because eating practices are such an integral part of one's identity and cultural expression, foodways cannot be decoupled from these historical racialization processes and power formations. Instead, they should be acknowledged as everyday cultural practices through which migrants negotiate, resist, and reproduce racial and gendered inequalities in the U.S. society.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

Themes covered in interviews:

- Migration story: How did you end up in the United States?
- Descriptions of Finnish food culture
- Descriptions of American/Ethiopian food culture
- Differences between American and Finnish/Ethiopian food culture
- Dietary changes since moving to the U.S.
- Social aspects of eating
- Food encounters in spaces shared with other people
- Healthiness of American vs. Finnish/Ethiopian food
- Typical day of eating
- Children's eating habits
- Grocery shopping: where, why
- Prices of foods
- Health and immigration
- Racial identification
- Experiences of racism
- Benefits/drawbacks of being a Black/White immigrant
- Any other topic suggested/brought forward by the participant

## Appendix B: Script for Obtaining Verbal Informed Consent

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called: Changes and Resilience in Food Habits and Preferences among Migrants in the U.S.

The person who is in charge of this research study is Laura Kihlstrom. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

You are being asked to participate because you are a person who has moved to the U.S. from another country and fulfill the criteria for participation. The purpose of this research study is to understand how the diets of migrants change when living in the United States and how traditions are maintained in the new home country.

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in 2-3 interviews in which you will be asked questions related to your experiences in the U.S. Each interview will take approximately 1.5 hours. The interviews will be conducted in your home.

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer and should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

This research is considered to be minimal risk.

As a compensation for participating in this research, you will receive a \$10 gift card to a local grocery store. If you participate in more than one interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card for each interview.

We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and the Advising Professor.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:
  - The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
  - The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are. However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the investigator Laura Kihlstrom ([lkihlstrom@mail.usf.edu](mailto:lkihlstrom@mail.usf.edu), 813 464 5931). If you have a question about your rights as a research participant please contact the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

Would you like to participate in this study?

## Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



### APPROVAL

March 5, 2020

Laura Kihlstrom  
15201 Plantation Oaks Drive  
Apartment 2  
Tampa, FL 33647

Dear Mrs. Kihlstrom:

On 3/5/2020, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Modification and Continuing Review
IRB ID:	Pro00035150_MODCR000001
Review Type:	Expedited 7
Title:	Changes and Resilience in Food Habits and Preferences among Migrants in the United States
Funding:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approved Protocol and Consent(s)/Assent(s):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">Protocol, Version 1 12-20-2018</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Verbal Consent, Version #1, 12202018</a></li></ul> <p>Attached are stamped approved consent documents. Use copies of these documents to document consent.</p>

The modifications, as described by the study team below, have been approved:

This is a required continuing review.

The study is still ongoing. I am still recruiting participants for interviews.

There have been no modifications to the study protocol.

The IRB approved the protocol from 1/7/2020 to 1/7/2021. Within 45 days of 1/7/2021, submit a continuing review/study closure request in BullsIRB by clicking Create Modification/CR.

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#### **Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance**

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