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**First Meals and Last Meals:
Vehicles of Food Meaning**

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Abstract

In this research, I explored the significance of the first meal consumed upon release from incarceration, reflecting changes in the meanings of food during the period of incarceration. Comparing last meals helped to explain comfort food and degrees of agency, facilitating a better understanding of first meals, and enabling an analysis of similarities and differences between the two. Creating a museum virtual tour of significant art by Julie Green, thoroughly reviewing the literature, and conducting an open forum observational study with formerly incarcerated individuals provided insight into the role of first meals upon release from incarceration and the degree of agency previously incarcerated individuals have over food.

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Introduction

I clicked a *New York Times* article titled “Julie Green, Artist Who Memorialized Inmates’ Last Suppers, *Dies at 60*,” and I immediately wondered what it means to memorialize a meal, and who is Julie Green (Green, 2021). After diving into this article, and subsequently many others detailing Green’s life work, I was blown away by the power of her art. In Green’s series titled *Last Suppers*, she painted on blue and white ceramic plates the meals of over one thousand people before their executions. I soon found Green’s most recent work titled *First Meals*. This is a series of twenty-five paintings based on interviews and questionnaires with wrongfully convicted and exonerated individuals regarding their first meal after being released from incarceration. After learning the stories of these twenty-five individuals, told largely through the paintings themselves, I wanted to learn more. Is this first meal experience significant for more formerly incarcerated individuals than these twenty-five people? What connection is there between the last meal on death row, and the first meal had upon release from incarceration? I began this thesis with the assumption that yes, this was a significant experience in some way, and I needed to learn more.

I began with an in-depth literature review to establish the significance of food overall, its relevance to prison, and how a last meal connects those two concepts. This literature confirms that food has the power to reaffirm personal identities. In this thesis, I explore the significance and values of food and commensality to demonstrate that first and last meals are both significant. During a last meal, this is the final opportunity to reaffirm identity and regain agency. I hypothesized that the connecting link between the last meal had on death row and the first meal had upon release from incarceration would be differing levels of agency. Due to the extensive previous research conducted on last meals, I relied upon those sources to make conclusions about last meals and agency. However, to gain knowledge about first meal experiences overall and the role of agency in them, I turned to Reddit. According to Joe Dawson at the Association for Psychological Science,

anonymity on the Internet has the potential for great harm, but also “offer[s] people a chance to self-disclose and offer support without showing their faces or giving out their real names” (Dawson, 2018). With the blanket potential of anonymity, Reddit users replied to my inquiry about their first meal experience with a variety of details, emotions, and formality. I aim to establish an understanding of what the first meal means to formerly incarcerated individuals and situate it in the literature regarding the overall experience of formerly incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, I will connect this understanding to the *First Meals* series by Julie Green, to extend her legacy as a criminal justice advocate and show how even now she continues to impact this field through her art.

Both the last meal and the first meal demonstrate different levels of agency, and the institutional constraints that lead up to these two meals can determine their content and the surrounding experiences. In this paper, I argue that first meals are rich with meaning concerning the power of food, and for formerly incarcerated individuals specifically symbolize the importance of agency, community, gratitude, longing, and taste. I infer that formerly incarcerated individuals feel and experience an intensification of food meanings during their first meal, proving that this meal matters to them, and should matter to others. Ultimately, I conclude the last meal is rich with food meaning. This parallels my argument that first meals are a significant moment of commensality because of the connection to the last meal’s place as a last chance at humanity and agency. This connection forges a strong relationship between the first and last meals of incarcerated individuals.

Literature Review

Food Symbolism

The study of food is important for understanding human existence because of its significant role in our survival and cultural traditions. Food rituals can transform or reaffirm relationships and reinforce cultural boundaries, either in a formal or informal environment (Mintz et al., 2002). Food is a code with

messages embedded within the pattern of social relationships. For example, my grandmother making me matzo ball soup while I was sick symbolizes her care and concern for my health. Food holds and transmits meaning by acting as a code. Food categories encode social events and different kinds of meals are associated with certain social or cultural experiences, such as births, weddings, or funerals (Douglas, 1972). In many contexts, food binds people to their values and beliefs because of the powerful connection between food and memory. Food identity comes from class, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and individuality (Mintz et al., 2002). One's cultural identities can be confirmed by the preparation and consumption of comfort foods. Comfort foods were classified as physical comfort foods, convenience foods, indulgence foods, and nostalgic foods by Locher et al. (2005). These different categories of comfort foods rest in individualized food habits. Food habits have fundamental moral and social meanings. Locher et al. suggest that the notion of comfort food is widespread based on their finding that people use food as a source of comfort during times of sadness or stress (2005).

The meanings attached to food come from food-related activities, largely from primary socialization in the family unit through commensality. Commensality is the act of sharing food together. According to Crowther, despite any potential for social drama, commensality is "based on an unspoken agreement to eat sociably with others, following rules conducive to maintaining ordered civility" (2018, p. 166). This indicates that commensality is a consistent reminder of a universal social contract to create society (Crowther, 2018). Food meanings result from a culmination of social interactions when consuming food, or commensality (Locher et al., 2005). Food can spur a variety of emotions due to its social and cultural power. Social and cultural systems influence and dictate our food choices, especially the foods we go to for comfort. Food is first influenced by culture, and then constrained by society.

Locher et al. conducted a study with 264 undergraduate students (2005). The students brought a potluck dish that provided them comfort and then were asked to explain why the food provided them with comfort. Comfort foods were classified as follows. Nostalgic foods were associated with a

particular time and place in a person's life. These were linked to being cared for by another, sharing food, food preparation, and alleviating homesickness. Indulgence foods were associated with feelings of pleasure that provided comfort. They were linked to feeling guilty after consumption, as a motivator or reward, and as a sense of security. Convenience foods were associated with the extent to which the food was available. Physical comfort foods offer comfort due to their physical characteristics or physical changes they cause in the consumer. Locher et al. concluded that feeling negative emotions like anxiety or stress eliminated the students' usual concerns about calories, fat, or sugar (2005.). Locher et al. determined that food nourishes the body and the soul (2005). Researchers also inferred that people respond to social structure by creating personal meanings with food. Consuming comfort food can be a solitary activity that reconnects us to our relationships. Relationships are maintained over time, irrespective of a person's physical presence. Therefore, the use of food in maintaining these relationships is significant to my research. While incarcerated, relationships are no longer maintained through day-to-day interactions. Incarcerated individuals can lose or maintain these relationships independently through food and reestablish them once released through commensality.

From looking at the scholarship, it is clear that cuisine is a language that explains the society it originates from. Biologically, food has value in terms of its molecular makeup. Culturally, food has a symbolic value that comes from the act of eating. Individual and collective experiences can construe taste as socially and culturally constructed. Taste changes over space and time and can determine one's social status based on their notions of pleasure. Cuisines cannot be reduced to a list of ingredients or culinary techniques. They are connected to social identity and incorporated by tradition. Cuisines exist together within the food system, from production through consumption. The universality of eating within a globalized food system then is specified by individual, economic, and sociocultural factors (Eunice Maciel et al., 2013). In congruence with the findings of the study by Locher et al., Desmet et al. conducted a similar research study to investigate what emotions were

associated with eating food (2005, 2008). In the first of two studies, 42 Dutch students reported how frequently they experienced 22 emotions when interacting with any food product. The second study had 124 Dutch students report when they experienced each of the 22 designated emotions with each food sample. The food samples varied from pasta meals, savory snacks, to sweets. Sadness, anger, and jealousy were experienced the least often. Desire, satisfaction, and enjoyment were experienced the most often. Expectations and associations were indicated as indirect conditions. Direct conditions such as experienced consequences and sensory properties were also reported. The reported feelings connected with food samples from the studies were the following: associated agents, personal or cultural meanings, anticipated consequences, experienced consequences, and sensory attributes (Desmet et al., 2008)

Each kind of meal differs based on the social interactions typically associated with it. Meals and drinks differ from one another as solids and liquids. Researcher Mary Douglas used the caste system in India and its subsequent food rules as a baseline to understand other food cultures and cuisines. She then applied this knowledge to create a universalized understanding of food and commensality. According to those findings, drinks are for family, workmen, acquaintances, and strangers (1972). Douglas deduced that meals are for family, honored guests, and close friends (1972). She continued to explain how meals have more intimacy and friendship than drinks, giving meaning to the boundary in-between the two. Meals are ordered by importance and grandeur and organized by the week and by the year. Meals have always been an essential avenue for relationships and social sharing (Visser, 1999). The meaning of a meal is found in this system of repeated analogies (Douglas, 1972). Food exchanges can produce an excess of meaning that creates space for the maintenance or renegotiation of social relationships, as seen in these repeated analogies (Shuman, 2000, Douglas, 1972).

Shuman argues that gift-giving is a social relationship performance, and that gift-gifting has a system of rules, constraints, and obligations that produce an excess of meaning (Shuman, 2000). An excess of meaning is understood as material goods and as symbolic goods in the form of reciprocal relationships. Gift-giving can be in the form of sharing food. Food traditions offer useful strategies, such as gift-giving, to create a form of daily identity performance (Duruz, 2001). Home cooking can be practiced as a comforting symbol of all our identities, past, present, and future. Duruz interviewed Australian women on their narratives of food and place to discover capitalism's effect on home cooking, and how home cooking has become commodified. Duruz argued that the cultural identity of the cook, cooking itself, and spaces in the kitchen are all under threat. Duruz concluded that traditions, specifically food traditions, do not just seek conformity and consistency, but produce great mobility and micro-inventions (2001).

In the United States, there is an overall tendency to prefer bland and unexciting when it comes to food, according to Visser (1999). Because of the great mixture of mass marketing and cultures in the United States, Visser believes the tendency to lean towards easily palatable foods rests largely in cultural diversity. Visser further explains that variety and flexibility are no longer values found in our food as we eat seasonal foods year-round with an over-extended feeling of choice. With such overwhelming choice, there is a constant opportunity for changes in our cultural diets. A change in diet can cause a change in culture (Visser, 1999). The fact that we must think about where our food comes from means that we can and should think deliberately about what it reflects about ourselves.

Food in Prison

Food is intimately tied to culture. When foodways change, the culture changes. A change in diet and subsequent change in culture parallels the changes caused by food choices during incarceration. Researchers Eves et al. analyzed the quality of a prison diet by analyzing the kitchen menu with a four-week cycle (2003). 159 prisoners participated by writing in a seven-day diet diary.

The food choices of the inmates varied across the sample size. There was a higher fat intake whereas carbohydrate intake was close to the recommended serving. Vitamin D intakes were low in comparison to the recommended amounts. Mineral intakes did not meet the recommended minimum (Eves et al., 2003). Although researchers did not investigate the emotional states of these men during their incarceration, their lack of proper nutrition in this seven-day diet diary is likely to have influenced their mental state, indicating where more research needs to be conducted.

The importance of food in prison cannot be addressed without an understanding of carcerality. Reese and Sbicca quote Angela Davis, a famous prison abolitionist, who explains that prisons exist only for social institutions and governments to continue to avoid solving a range of social problems (2022). Many of these problems stem from and still rest in the racism embedded in our society. Reese and Sbicca explain how food can be the site of interrogation and change for carceral spaces, such as prisons, or the lasting impact and modern continuation of plantation systems (2022). Prisons and food culture are first connected by plantation geographies, both historically and in their present form. The prison industrial complex was modeled after the plantation blueprint, based on the logic that some live and some die without care. Plantation geographies then promoted confinement in place and Black placelessness. Even with the abolition of slavery, violent economic, spatial, and bodily practices first used in plantations continue in the prison system (Reese & Sbicca, 2022). Prison produces the antithesis of freedom, leaving food as a site for advancing freedom (Reese & Sbicca, 2022). In much of the literature on prison foodways, food becomes a site for the imprisoned to exert agency in an otherwise entirely restricted context.

Incarcerated individuals are forced to live with inadequate health care, overcrowding, and poor food due to extreme budget cuts, as seen in the representative scholarship. These individuals then must rely on their loved ones to provide funds for them to use the commissary. Bardelli et al. interviewed over sixty formerly incarcerated men in New York about their experience with the

commissary system (2022). Interviewees remembered a variety of details from incarceration, including moldy cells, overflowing showers, or mess halls with leaky ceilings. However, every single interviewee recalled a visceral feeling of hunger. From 1996 to 2018, the New York Department of Corrections and Community Services went from spending \$4.55 a day per person for three meals to \$2.84 (Bardelli et al., 2022). Additionally, sporadic, insufficient, or no financial support from outside forced prisoners to work within the prison to get what they needed. Interviewees stated that their spending limit of \$75 had to be spent partially on a survival kit of peanut butter, jelly, and ramen soups to avoid going hungry. Bartering and trading to sell goods became essential for getting what was needed. Prison became an economic activity hotspot where those without outside support suffered the most (Bardelli et al., 2022). In terms of the formal food economy of prisons, researcher Jou investigated the prison food industrial complex (2022). They explained how local, state, and federal US governments facilitated the expansion of private prisons which then profited from mass incarceration (2022). Correctional food services became privatized, and the US gave contracts to private food service companies. These companies hyper focused pursuit of profits caused opposition to social values of racial justice, the well-being of incarcerated individuals, business competition, and unionized public sector employment in the American food system (Jou, 2022).

The cost of being incarcerated has more consequences than the incarcerated individual's finances. Their health is impacted, psychologically, socially, and physically. According to research conducted by Fahmy and Wallace, rates of mental and physical health illnesses are higher for those who have been incarcerated than the general population (2022). Infectious diseases, acute and chronic stress, and barriers to social integration cause incarceration to harm overall health conditions (Fahmy & Wallace, 2022). Once these individuals lose access to housing, health care, and consistent food in prison, their health declines upon reentry. Being uninsured may be the single biggest barrier to satisfactory care upon release, according to Fahmy and Wallace (2022). Previous surveys found

that formerly incarcerated individuals tend to rate their health highly even though that rating comes alongside a tangible health problem (Fahmy & Wallace, 2022).

In a study conducted by Gesch et al., 231 inmates volunteered to participate in a randomized placebo-controlled trial (2002). Researchers divided participants into placebo and control groups by each of the four main wings of the prison. The control group received one vitamin/mineral capsule and four essential fatty acid capsules, while the placebo group received five placebo capsules. Researchers compared the inmates' antisocial behavior from before the supplements to after the supplements by comparing the number of disciplinary actions per inmate. Gesch et al. concluded that nutritional supplements in prisoner diets caused a reduction in antisocial behavior (2002). However, they were unable to control for a myriad of other factors including ethics and social relationships, indicating that this is a correlation but not necessarily a causation (Gesch et al., 2002).

Woods-Brown et al. analyzed 17 research papers outlining the experience of prison food in 10 different countries to investigate prisoner well-being concerning nutrition and overall food consumption (2023). Negative perceptions of prison food were reported in all ten countries and 11 of 17 studies reported too small of portion sizes. Feeling a lack of control over when and where food was served was found across all studies (Woods-Brown et al., 2023). A power imbalance prevails in all prisons, depriving those in custody of any agency. Taking food back to their cell to create a makeshift grill or boiling water in the toilet is dangerous on its own and is done with the threat of punishment. However, it is the only way inmates can exercise any form of food autonomy. Woods-Brown et al. concluded that these constructed foodways are an avenue to build social capital by recreating cultural dishes that reflect individual identities and serve as a delicious relationship builder (2023). This food-based resistance and the existence of facilities to cook one's food prove beneficial in the study by Woods-Brown et al. (2023). They found that anxiety was reduced and self-efficacy was increased in facilities that allowed inmates to cook communally. This then better reflects

individual and cultural identities, develops skills, and forms relationships. Ultimately, the lack of control over food choice negatively impacts human dignity (Woods-Brown et al., 2023).

Power is expressed through food inside of a prison. Researcher Godderis completed 16 semi-structured interviews with prisoners to investigate overt and covert methods of power control connected to food (2006). The extreme power of guards over prisoners allows for the fluctuation of quality and quantity of food based on what appears to be mere whims of guards, according to the interviews conducted by Godderis (2006). Prisoners limited finances from the small pay given to those who work within prison is highly regulated and limited at the commissary. This study determined that the commissary is the only place where prisoners can fulfill their food desires (2006). With fines, punishments, and minuscule wages, the prison system further maintains power control over inmates. Furthermore, Godderis discovered that kitchen staff were frequently fellow inmates with no training on how to cook, let alone how to follow health and safety practices in a kitchen (2006). Food consumption is filled with meaning, indicating that the complete control over inmate's food choices was a painful reminder of their complete lack of agency (Godderis, 2006).

However, food-related identities do bolster social connections and form communities in prison. Ifeonu et al. conducted semi-structured interviews with over 500 incarcerated individuals to determine the varying values ascribed to food within prison from a cultural perspective (2022). They found all prisoners interviewed mentioned the value of food, without it being a prominent part of their research, causing them to shift the study's focus. Inmates complained about an unbalanced diet and inadequate portion sizes. However, 30% of inmates placed a value on prison food as a reliable source of quality food in comparison to their life before incarceration. Having control over what food the prisoners are consuming makes a commissary important, but they often avoid it because of its high prices. Use value, exchange value, and sign value were used by Ifeonu et al. to define how food was valued in prisons (2022). Use value is defined as food having value because of its

sustenance for biological survival. Exchange value is defined as the value that products gain in a specific commercial relations system. Sign value is defined as the value assigned to a product through cultural meaning-making (Ifeonu et al., 2022). In the end, this study concluded that the use value of food makes the quality and quantity of it a hot topic among incarcerated individuals. This then indicates an exchange value, forcing incarcerated individuals to rely on illicit stores or makeshift meals to take back a scrap of power taken from them. The final sign value of food in prison comes from a person's place within a community. Food-related identity helps form communities within a prison, such as with the mentioned makeshift meals and illicit stores (Ifeonu et al., 2022).

For women in particular, supportive relationships and social networks are incredibly important for psychosocial and physical health outcomes following incarceration. Smoyer investigated women's narratives about prison foodways to understand inmate interactions and how central the food system is to their relationships in and out of prison (2014). Smoyer interviewed 30 formerly incarcerated women about prison foodways (2014). Primary factors influencing the foodways in the prison included the surveillance camera, commissary, and illicit preparation. Prisoners without an outside support system lacked commissary money and were unable to participate in food exchanges. 19 of the 30 women Smoyer interviewed had consistent financial support to use the commissary (2014). Receiving money was understood as a sign of support, and to not receive money was a sign of rejection. Food-related knowledge or skills were used to earn the respect of peers as they were often old-timers, had long sentences, or had been incarcerated frequently. Cooking groups brought limited resources together to create elaborate dishes and build important relationships (Smoyer, 2014). Self-catering in Danish correctional facilities was intended to bridge the gap between normal life and prison life. This allowed prisoners to have control over meal preparation and the right to choose.

Minke conducted 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish prison for men and 68 in-depth prisoner interviews (2014). The prisonization process is described by Minke as the process of acquiring roles or identities in prison that eventually oppose rehabilitation upon release (2014). The ability to prepare their meals may counteract this and facilitate the development of positive identities. Most prisoners were found to be catering to their personal tastes and cultural identity. Each section of the prison had a supplied kitchen and prisoners shopped for food at a small grocery store inside. Self-catering bolstered their desire for autonomy and caused the creation of food groups, a positive social relationship that also had its shortcomings. Overall, the Danish prisoners were pleased with the self-catering system as the food system within the prison was no longer an additional system of control. The social identity of being the chef had a positive impact on their self-image and were seen as highly regarded by others, the only role with such power (Minke, 2014). I surmise from this work that food is a fundamental need and the ability to have autonomy in food choice should be a right for all. All humans use food to understand relationships and identity. There is a great deal of research that indicates the impact of institutional meals on prisoner health, both mental and physical.

Food After Prison

Extensive research concludes that formerly incarcerated individuals have higher rates of food insecurity and more barriers to accessing food. Testa et al. found that a history of incarceration was associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing food insecurity (2019). Issues of social services such as welfare or housing additionally affect formerly incarcerated individuals. Wolfer conducted research by collecting data in 2 months through 256 surveys of incarcerated individuals to determine their needs for social service programs (2019). The sixteen areas surveyed were relationship counseling, obtaining a driver's license, obtaining food, obtaining clothing, mental health, housing, finding a job, finding religious services, education, drug/alcohol use, consumer

credit counseling, computer training, anger management, and AIDS education. Service programming needs were anticipated to address transportation, childcare, and timing. Wolfer found that every inmate anticipated transportation to be an issue affecting their attendance at such programs (2019). 81.6% of parents with dependent children thought childcare would affect program attendance. This study suggested that social service programs should target individuals who are Hispanic, female, and parents of a young child. Female inmates were found to have different needs than male inmates, and women were more likely than men to suggest computer skill development (Wolfer, 2019).

As another avenue of support, Marek told the story of nonprofits and food businesses that hire those with criminal records to make spaces for them to create positive change in their lives (2018). This philanthropic approach to hiring contrasts with punitive prison practices. Marek highlighted this as an abolitionist approach to using food to foster change and connections (2018). According to Marek, when a potential employer learns of a criminal record, there is a 50% decrease that the job seeker will even receive a call back (2018). This effect is greater with Black men with criminal records. Food-based strategies guide post-incarceration success, supporting the regaining of agency, political engagement, taking control of health, and promoting sustainability. Foodways can help people achieve a degree of agency in an oppressive context by nourishing their bodies and minds through memories that provide control over their situation (Marek, 2018).

To gain access to rehabilitative services, shelter, and food, formerly incarcerated individuals must expend excess time and energy. Haluksha conducted 45 interviews with formerly incarcerated men through ethnographic fieldwork to determine how formerly incarcerated individuals navigate welfare and criminal justice bureaucracies in their everyday lives (2020). Transitioning from incarceration to a free society is a tumultuous period in a person's life. Social integrations such as a place to stay, support network, and subsistence are large challenges. Emotional and physical exhaustion took a toll on the men Halushka interviewed as they dealt with a constant runaround by

bureaucratic red tape, creating severe poverty and reinforcing a distrust of state authorities (2020). A network of welfare and criminal justice bureaucracies made these men's lives harder. They waited endlessly, had conflicting obligations within these bureaucracies, and a mindset of cynicism and recidivism. These individuals became less likely to comply with the law after constant runaround, due to feelings of frustration and depletion. Becoming fathers or aging did motivate individuals to avoid reincarceration in Haluksha's interviews (2020). Ultimately, the shock of reentry combined with economic insecurity made this an even more vulnerable time (Haluksha, 2020).

Harding et al. performed unstructured interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals over three years to determine how the participants use public benefits, social support, and employment to make ends meet (2014). Sustained economic security was rarely achieved without social support or long-term public benefits according to Harding et al. (2014). Having a felony record excluded them from many occupations and led many employers to decline to employ them. Harding et al. defined five states of hardship and well-being as follows: desperation as extreme material need, survival as getting by, stability as secure sources, independence as stable and prospects towards middle-class living, and custody as periods in which the individuals were incarcerated (2014). One-quarter of their participants lived in continuous material hardship, in between desperation and survival. The most common trajectory was a fluctuation between survival and stability. Participants who experienced upward mobility had material support from loved ones and relied on social networks to secure better jobs (Harding et al., 2014).

Schnittker focused on the psychological factors that influenced former inmates' quality of life to determine if prisonization effects persisted after release (2014). Prisonization is defined here the same as outlined earlier. The structural barriers that formerly incarcerated individuals face upon reentry and the psychological effects of incarceration prevent former inmates from solving difficult problems to operate successfully in society. Schnittker made clear how inmates may rely on the

organizational structure of prison and have a reduction in their ability to advocate for themselves once released due to the lack of agency within prison. By using the National Comorbidity Survey replication, Schnittker determined that psychiatric symptoms were twice as high in formerly incarcerated individuals (2014). Former inmates with depression were also found to have more difficulty with home management and maintaining close relationships than those with depression who were not incarcerated. The first interpretation of these results is that former inmates have a higher rate of depression, anxiety, and social uncertainty. However, this is similar to other disadvantaged groups, indicating more research needs to be conducted. Incarceration shapes beliefs about the self, causing relevant consequences to daily quality of life. Importantly, the psychological effects of incarceration reflect reentry difficulties (Schnittker, 2014).

These psychological effects are not helped by the food insecurity factors that cause undue stress on formerly incarcerated individuals. Testa aimed to assess the amount of access formerly incarcerated individuals have to healthy food retailers (2018). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health and the Modified Retail Food Environment Index were the sources of data for assessing the association between incarceration, living in a food desert, and having low access to healthy food retailers. Food deserts were defined as geographic areas that lack convenient access to food retailers. Testa aimed to fill the gap in the literature surrounding what types of resources are lacking for formerly incarcerated individuals (2018). There was found to be no significant association between being formerly incarcerated and living in a food desert. Testa surmised that healthy food retailers sell products at a higher price and formerly incarcerated individuals live in disadvantaged communities, so economic hardship could explain why healthy food retailers are not located in such geographies (2018). An individual who was previously incarcerated was more likely to live in an area with lower access to healthy food retailers in this study (Testa, 2018). Incarceration could have a greater impact on neighborhood downward mobility

because it takes the individual out of their neighborhood physically, unlike an arrest. The mere presence of formerly incarcerated individuals in a neighborhood could create a stigma surrounding that area, stopping businesses from moving there (Testa et al., 2019). Overall, formerly incarcerated individuals face societal boundaries to form a newly established life including personal psychological challenges, food insecurity, and bureaucratic hoops.

Last Meals on Death Row

The last meal is a ritual that has long existed in United States history and for far longer than the U.S. has been a country. The last meal has been an administrative matter with a procedure and chain of events that lead to the execution. The last meal is then seen as a final attempt to be human and stop capital punishment from becoming extermination. The last meal has existed far beyond Jesus Christ's last meal which many believe was the first of last meals. Cultures around the world conducted this ritual prior (Gerwig-Moore et al., 2014). Many inmates use their last meal as a political statement as their requests are often described in news reports or various media. Meals such as a single olive, a plate of dirt, or a free meal given to a homeless person are examples of such statements. The last meal can give insight into the prisoner's psychological state of mind, such as Ricky Ray Rector who ate his final meal, but then saved the pecan pie for later (Gerwig-Moore et al., 2014). A refusal of a last meal similarly sparks conversation. With such limited opportunities for expression with the last meal, the ways that it is consumed or not, provides important insight. By analyzing the policies of the 35 states that had capital punishment as a possible sentence in 2010, Gerwig-Moore et al. collected the execution protocols to determine the last meal policies by state (2014). Fifteen states had no specific constraints on prison officials' decisions regarding the last meal, leaving it up to the individual officials. Five states permitted prison officials to purchase meals outside of the prison, without limitations on what could be purchased. Ten states had more restrictive policies, stating that last meals must be prepared with ingredients on site. Gerwig-Moore et al. concluded that, minus Texas, there was an association between the more flexible

last meal allowances and the states associated with high rates of capital punishment. Researchers Gerwig-Moore et al. also found that states with higher incarceration rates spent less on each inmate. The least restrictive state policies conducted more executions and had larger death rows than those with restrictive policies (Gerwig-Moore et al., 2014). States that executed the most thereby imprisoned the most, gave the longest sentences, and maintained prisons with more severe environments.

Execution is currently the ultimate example of institutional control and dehumanization. Both inmates and guards are stripped of all identity. Last words and last meals give a human edge to this inhumane procedure that can be unmanaged and unpredictable. Meyer explains that the last meal symbolizes the forgiveness of sin, unity, and gratitude for salvation by way of blood sacrifice (2011). Last meals are an opportunity for prison administration and guards to seek forgiveness for the upcoming execution. Eating a filling meal symbolizes a clear conscience that is at peace before death. Meals comfort the grieving and bring honor to the dead as giving food is associated with funerals. Meyer made this connection between food, honor, and conscience (2011). Humanity is defined by seeking meaning where all appears meaningless, and nothing feels more meaningless than the nothingness of death. Last meals offer an opportunity to explore that meaning in death, analyzed extensively in the scholarship. I surmise that the symbolism of the last meal can be deeply ironic because it only brings a spotlight on the absence of nourishment, forgiveness, and more. This irony stems from the lack of proper nourishment, both physical and mental, during incarceration, as proven in the literature on food in prison. Therefore, offering a last meal as an opportunity for autonomy and holistic nourishment contrasts with the prisoner's countless other meals during incarceration.

Meyer described in detail the last twenty-four hours of an inmate on death row's life and detailed the differences between states (2011). "Last meals or, more euphemistically, 'special' meals are mentioned in the execution protocols of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut (at discretion of warden), Florida (under \$20), Indiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania (from a

menu). South Dakota (only food items normally available), Texas, Virginia (any meal normally served), and Washington (from a menu). (Other states, like Louisiana and Georgia, may serve a last meal but do not mention it in a formal protocol). Kentucky, Nevada, and South Carolina do not have publicly available execution protocols” (Meyer, 2011, p. 184).

Most of the food inmates request is comfort food, a way of searching for community. I infer that comfort food subsequently means that people find psychological and physiological pleasure in the food that fulfills a particular need. According to Sikka, comfort foods work to revive memories, fix place, and represent our holistic identity from past, present, to future (2021). Searching for a last chance at cultural or social connection from a comfort food is one of the ways the last meal represents the last moment of agency in the person’s life. Sikka determined that the media’s obsessive nature related to death row prisoners and their last meal indicates an overall societal fascination with last meals. She examined the media coverage of food’s role in community-based end-of-life rituals and death meals (2021). The media acts as a site of convergence to understand the significance of food in the context of death. Sikka was inspired by the media coverage of a new phenomenon, the meals had by those undergoing a medically assisted death. She cites Douglas’ account of different kinds of meals and how they produce meaning like languages. Meals of conviviality are made of social bonds. Food choice can display taste and socioeconomic success via omnivory and cosmopolitanism. Sikka analyzed articles covering death meals and found a great deal of meaning in how food acts as a vehicle for meaning and memory. Abundance, plenty, and generous portions were essential ingredients for these medically assisted death meals. Commensality was emphasized in the communal nature of the meal as abundance and choice came together to define this meal. The socioeconomic position of the individual and their family influenced the food served and activities of the meal. The desire to communicate a sense of self through food remains important, even in this form of a last meal (Sikka, 2021).

LaChance explores the theme of agency through the rationalization of last words and last meals when on death row (2007). LaChance defines rationalization as “the organization of human action and environments such that a given endpoint (in this case, death) is attained as completely, quickly, and economically as possible” (LaChance, 2007, p. 708). This places a heavy emphasis on the most economical techniques and turns away from any dramatics or sacred inclinations that would bring a symbolic power to the participants. Further, this rationalization reduces agency, thereby inhibiting the power of an institutional execution. (LaChance, 2007). A previous claim was that there was no rational reasoning for last meals and last words, which contradicts LaChance’s findings (2007). The detailing of historical executions demonstrates a moralistic and religious aspect that has consistently existed in the moments before death. However, the leniency and empathy of last meals do not align with rationalization. LaChance concluded that emotions and symbolism allow the state to deliver retribution in an acceptable package for the public to accept the death penalty (2007). The inmate is offered an opportunity to distinguish their taste publicly while the state remains in full control, as seen in the frequent denial of requests. Overall, LaChance infers that last meals indicate a larger social control that demonstrates how our society still cares about individuality, personal responsibility, and free will during our harshest punishment. This punishment acts as an outward manifestation of faith and a continued historic theme of religious aspects of executions. (LaChance, 2007). This demonstration of faith is a devotion to liberalism according to LaChance and the individual’s ability to make a choice free of coercion (2007). The last meal and last words allow for a re-devotion to the liberal ideal of truly free choice, while the act of an execution reaffirms illiberal social control (LaChance, 2007).

Food fosters a sense of community and holds great importance in everyday life, confirmed by the current scholarship. Being in prison without choice forces sensory deprivation of food with detrimental effects on emotional well-being. The last meal while on death row stems from a ritualistic need to show humanity by the state, according to Walliss (2022). However, the inmate’s request is rarely

fulfilled. Less quantity, substitutions, and reliance on availability are common. All inmates can do is control what they ingest, allowing them to take on a last step of agency and take the power away from the amoralistic structure feeding them (Walliss, 2022). The food they request often takes on a new meaning in this high-stress environment, as inmates hope to transfer former feelings of comfort associated with the food onto themselves. The last meal creates a juxtaposition between a last chance of humanity and a callous justice system, which Jones explores in his analysis of the last meal (2014).

Each state has a different protocol regarding how inmates ask for their last meal, some do so in person, some by preprinted form, or in some cases, there is a designated last meal. The maximum cost of the last meal ranges along with limitations on the locality of ingredients and restaurants. The symbolism of the last meal can be more meaningful than the last words according to Walliss (2022). It can be a reconciliation ritual between inmate and prison administrators to give both parties an avenue for forgiveness. Food brings comfort, indicating that a meal can symbolize a clear conscience or can conversely signify the absence of forgiveness or nourishment. These meals can bring about memories of happy times from before incarceration. Luxury foods, savory foods, and sweet foods may be selected because the incarcerated individual did not have access to them while in prison. The research conducted by Walliss indicates that inmates select foods that bring them some form of comfort by eating high-calorie or calorically dense meals, or brands with positive associations (2022). Those who deny guilt are significantly more likely to also refuse a last meal, possibly because it would be a form of consenting to the execution process (Wallis, 2022).

In practice, declining the last meal was consistent with self-perceived innocence as “those who denied guilt were 2.7 times as likely to decline a last meal than people who admitted guilt (29% versus 8%)” (Kniffin & Wansink, 2014, p.1). These results were found by Kniffin and Wansink in their research on last meals and perceived innocence. Kniffin and Wansink also found that those who admitted guilt requested 34% more calories of food than the remaining sample, which is consistent with

the theory that people who admit guilt feel more at peace. Those who denied guilt ate fewer brand-name food items. Kniffin and Wansink analyzed the 247 people executed between 2002 and 2006 in the United States to analyze last meal requests' relationship to claims of innocence. They concluded that inmates selected 2.18 items of meats and fried foods compared to 1.02 items of starches, fruits, and vegetables (Kniffin & Wansink, 2014). Van Hagen took multiple resources compiled on the significance of last meals on death row to establish the drastic shift represented from a no choice environment wherein the structure has full power, to one last chance at agency (2020). This regaining of agency before death adjusts the last meal from simple food consumption to a last statement, a last source of comfort, and a last form of empathetic humanity. Van Hagen noted the consistent reoccurrence of carbohydrates and proteins in last meals, indicating their significance as comfort foods and the ability of foods to transition meaning in this last-ditch chance of legal benevolence. Van Hagen briefly examined the role of food when first emerging from the prison system. This short analysis of the difficult transition back to overwhelmingly unlimited choices leaves the open question of what more this first meal might mean and contain (van Hagen, 2020).

Wansink et al. conducted a quantitative analysis of last meals on death row and detailed how last meals can be compared to typical food patterns to assess the difference in meaning when facing death. Wansink et al. found that carbohydrates and proteins were highly requested with meat being the most requested item, further supporting this finding (2012). Last meals were calorically rich, containing 2.5 times more of the daily recommended servings of fat and protein for an adult. (Wansink et al., 2012). Wansink et al. conjectured that when facing death, the biological response is the same as in times of stress, causing our evolutionary adaptation to crave high-calorie foods during stress to result in similar food requests. Regional differences aid or inhibit regained agency according to Wansink et al. (2012). This extensive scholarship offers a quantitative analysis of last meals on death row, allowing me to analyze why food preferences remain the same in and out of this specific circumstance. Additionally,

Wansink et al. claimed that people with restricted diets tend to continue to choose similar foods when given food freedom (2012). This pertains directly to my questions of agency upon prison release regarding food choices and how this impacts a formerly incarcerated individual's decision.

Right to Food and Food Insecurity

Currently, the global food system is capable of feeding twelve billion people according to Burgess (2010). The United States has never had a constitutional right to food. However, there are substantial government programs tackling hunger. It is the health of the economic system and the government's commitment to ending hunger that matters most (Burgess, 2010). Rights-based social systems consist of the duty bearers, the agents of accountability, and the rights holders. The agents of accountability ensure that the duty bearers fulfill their obligations to the rights holders. Rights are meant to be enforceable claims in which an institutional authority upholds them and can be questioned if they are not upheld. Duty bearers are then held accountable for their performance and its quality. Human rights are a part of the responsibility of duty bearers, making it related to human dignity and universal. There are two distinct issues at hand concerning the human right to food. One is the immediate biological issue of hunger and malnutrition. The other concerns the actual content of people's pantries; how appropriate that food is to their identity, where that food came from, and how it arrived at, or did not arrive at, their pantry. The inherent issue is the lack of access to available food. Political science scholar George Kent identifies adequate food as meaning that it must be appropriate for the context (Kent, 2010). The United States Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a "household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food" (Rabbitt et al., 2023). The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines sustainability as "to create and maintain the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations" (*Learn About Sustainability* 2023). From the literature, I deduce that the human right to adequate food is connected to the

dignity of the individual and social justice, specifically the issue of sustainability. Kent concluded that government obligations should emphasize facilitating conditions that allow people to provide for themselves. Dignity does not come from being fed but from providing for the self (Kent, 2010).

According to conclusions made by Hospes, dialogue-based approaches are the way to overcome barriers to implementing the right to food, especially amongst different states (2008). Rights holders and duty bearers need to work in tandem to implement the right to food, who are the federal and state governments in the United States. The right to food is not the same as the right to be fed by the government. The right to food means the right to feed oneself. National governments are the duty bearers for their populations, as deemed by themselves (Hospes, 2008). SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program are a few examples of attempts to create adequate food access by the United States government. Kent criticized international agencies for taking a distanced and out-of-touch approach to solving hunger crises (Kent, 2010). People should have institutionalized remedies available if they feel their rights are not being respected. Fulfilling a human right to food is separate from fulfilling a nutritionally biological need for food. Kent explains how serving a Jewish or Muslim prisoner pork for dinner still violates their human rights. The hunger issue should be managed as a partnership based on genuine concern for the hungry through direct engagement with them (Kent, 2010). Both the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights deemed food as a protected right (Kent, 2010). Therefore, adequate food is included in an adequate standard of living and should be granted to every human being. Colosio indicated how both the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Food Program of the United Nations work to grant access to food (Colosio, 2020).

Gundersen et al. analyzed cross-sectional population surveys in Ontario with over 90,000 adults (2018). The primary variable in the survey was food insecurity. Food security was classified as ““food secure”, “marginally food insecure”, “moderately food insecure”, or “severely food insecure”” (Gundersen et al., 2018, p.1). This was surveyed alongside mortality within 4 years of the

interview. These researchers determined that food insecurity was associated with higher mortality rates. The higher rates of mortality were even more significant for the most food insecure in the survey. Food insecurity status had a strong association with mortality independent of other covariants (Gundersen et al, 2018.). This dramatic finding correlated food insecurity with mortality. This makes food insecurity a desired topic of interest and adds to the weight of my research.

Bhattacharya et al. conducted a related research study by analyzing the data from National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey III from 1988 and 1994 (2004). Their survey collected data on food insecurity, hunger, demographics, income, and health. They aimed to determine the extent to which standard poverty measures and food insecurity measures correlate to nutritional outcomes. Rather than looking at total life outcomes as Gundersen et al. did with mortality, Bhattacharya et al. investigated active life influences with food insecurity (2018, 2004). In terms of adults, Bhattacharya et al. concluded that both poverty and food insecurity were predictive of nutritional outcomes (2004). Adults who were food insecure were more likely to be low in essential nutrients and less likely to have a healthy diet. Adult nutritional outcomes were found to be more correlated with food insecurity than children, and younger child nutritional outcomes were found to be more correlated with poverty than older children (Bhattacharya et al., 2004). I found this study to present findings that additionally support the importance of addressing food insecurity. Biological consequences based on poverty and food insecurity are seen here. These consequences are drastic and indicate the relevance of adequate nutrition throughout one's life, including while incarcerated.

What is Agency?

Anthony Giddens developed the structuration theory and defined a few important terms as follows. Structures are “rules and resources, or sets of transformation relations, organized as properties of social systems” (Giddens, 1999, p. 133). Systems are “reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practices” (Giddens, 1999, p. 133). Lastly, Giddens

defines structuration as “conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems” (Giddens, 1999, p. 133). Agency then is “not the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (Giddens, 1999, p. 124). Giddens posited that an individual’s agency is influenced by structure while simultaneously structures are maintained through the exercise of agency. Social structures have no stability or place in society given that they are socially constructed. Individuals act within the context of these social structures and are the sole reason for their existence, so long as individuals act compliantly. Giddens explained three kinds of structures in structuration theory, which are signification, legitimation, and domination. Domination relates to how power is applied, particularly when concerning resources. Legitimation concerns normative perspectives in their application as societal values and norms. Signification relates to how meaning is a part of all language and discourse (Giddens, 1999). Emirbayer and Mische argued that agency is when agents come from different structural environments and engage temporarily (1998). Agents connect with their past, present, and future to create their imaginative or reflexive reactions to other agents or structures. Problems in life are addressed by agents reconstructing the contexts in which the moral or practical dilemma exists to directly address their values with the situation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998)

Julie Green and Prison Art

The inspiration of my research study comes from a series of twenty-five paintings by Julie Green titled *First Meals*. They are based and inspired by questionnaires completed by exonerated people about the food choices they made upon their release. This project came after Green’s work on capital punishment, *The Last Supper*, where she painted on ceramic plates the meals of over one thousand people before their executions. *First Meal* is a collaborative project with exonerees and the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University.

Each painting is the size of a flag, and for an important reason. Green explained that flags are usually displayed as symbols of pride, and she uses this associated grandeur to point to the deep flaws in our legal system (Green & Johnson, 2023). The first meal experience can either be transitional and magical for people or can be a barely noticeable event. Green wanted each piece to be different from the next, so each painting was as unique as the first meal. Green aimed to share the stories of wrongfully convicted exonerees specifically and show the highs and lows of the American criminal justice system. Some exonerees were interviewed extensively and some not interviewed at all, which is why the variance between each painting is important to highlight (Green & Johnson, 2023). Through my research, I too aimed to share the first meal stories of formerly incarcerated individuals with a variance in the detail of each story shared in my data collection. Green's in-depth interviews and subsequent art pieces were the inspiration for me asking individuals about their first meal experience.

I will highlight three of Green's *First Meal* pieces, but strongly encourage readers of my research paper to go to the Appendix on page 62 to view the virtual art museum I created. There I highlighted thirteen of Green's 25 *First Meal* paintings with their own descriptions, which further immerses the reader or viewer in the experience of first meals. One piece titled *Golf to Red Lobster* tells the story of Valentino Dixon. Valentino Dixon was featured in an article of *Golf Digest* for his art, drawings he had created of golf courses in prison while serving time as a wrongfully convicted man. Although Dixon had never golfed, his drawings were surrealistic greens that reminded Green of Giotto's 14th century paintings of angels. Dixon's drawings saved his sanity for 27 years and were what Green drew inspiration from for this painting. Dixon was arrested when he was twenty-one years old for murdering a seventeen-year-old boy in a street fight, even though another man confessed to the murder during Dixon's arrest. He was sentenced to thirty-eight years to life based on unreliable eyewitnesses who revealed later they were pressured by police. In prison, art saved

Dixon as he poured over it for up to ten hours a day, and eventually became compelled to draw exclusively golf courses. The golf ball and the hole can connect in a million ways and there is no perfect way to do it, leaving the opportunity for the golfer to exercise their agency to make it happen. Dixon liked the additional peaceful quality of the golf hole, the combination of wildness and precision. A lobster takes the place of a Giotto-like angel, cutting through the sky because Dixon had lobster at Red Lobster for his first meal. This lobster soaring through the sky reflects the surreality of Dixon's release and first meal. The Victorian transferware plate background was replaced with Roy Lichtenstein's paper plate to complement contemporary colors and composition that Green sanded until it was as smooth as glass. Green said, "an attempt requires an assertion of wildness, which is an assertion of freedom itself," shown through the stark colors and fanatical nature of this piece (Green & Johnson, 2023, p. 116).

This turn to art during incarceration as a source of strength is not uncommon. The importance of art within the prison holds its own significance. Fleetwood compiled the artwork of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals to highlight how they turned ordinary objects into imaginative works of art (2020). Cultural production does not cease in prison, and the breadth of visual art, theater, music, and literature produced in prison indicates a unique politics of art-making in prison. Dixon participated in this specific politics of art-making that ultimately led to his freedom. Fleetwood detailed how this is part of a long history of captive people imagining freedom and how they express their desire for freedom artistically. For Dixon, the discovery of his art by the *Golf Digest* and later investigation by *The Golf Channel* promoted the reinvestigation of his case and ultimate dismissal. Within the prison system, creating art can lead to re-personification while fighting unbearable isolation. Prison-made art in the US prison system is so common that the Federal Bureau of Prisons has pages of guidelines explaining the regulations on selling, distributing, and making art in carceral facilities (Fleetwood, 2020). Most of these guidelines leave decisions up to the warden, making it so that access to art-making and owning art varies

across carceral facilities. Art acts as an avenue for community with other incarcerated individuals and to communicate with loved ones or the public, and has the potential for great positive consequences, seen in Dixon's case (Fleetwood, 2020).

A powerful piece titled *Holding an Orange for Strong* tells Jason Strong's first meal. Strong had fantasized for years about this mundane moment when you are asked, "What do you want?" in a restaurant. At the restaurant of Strong's first meal, Strong and his companions told the waitress his story. He had been convicted of murder when he was twenty-four years old and sentenced to forty-six years in prison before a reinvestigation and exoneration. She overheard him share that he had deeply missed oranges during his confinement, and then brought him one with the check. Strong does not even remember eating the orange, but rather how he admired it, smelled it, and enjoyed every moment of holding an orange in his hands. Strong explained how it was an "ordinary orange, in other words, and therefore unforgettable" (Green & Johnson, 2023, p.49). Green struggled with how to paint the absence of an orange. An idyllic scene with a hand holding out an orange and Strong's burger compliment the Victorian water scene. The red and white coloring of the Victorian style plates brings the weight of the moment to the forefront of this painting as the viewer in turn focuses on the content rather than color composition of the piece. Green incorporates the Illinois state bird and flower to center the location of Strong's eight years of wrongful imprisonment (Green & Johnson, 2023). Green also included a written paper of the interview answers in the top right corner, hidden partially underneath the red plates. The plates, representing the meal itself and Strong's freedom, overshadowed the details of his story as that moment with an orange came into focus. During his wrongful imprisonment, Strong coined the term improvisations for "choices driven by a lack of choices" for when he would make his own ramen with an extension cord and paper clips that heat up the water (Green & Johnson, 2023, p. 45). Strong's lack of choice during

incarceration and subsequent struggle to supplement food with these improvisations directly connects to the values of hunger and agency that I examine in my Discussion section.

Another painting in this series is titled *Thank God I'm Home, Said Marcel Brown*. Marcel Brown could barely eat his first post-release meal. His stepfather and mother ordered take out and he had a corned beef sandwich. He felt as though he was eating contraband because it was so flavorful, explained by Brown that "My mind was kind of like still in there, because I was free no more than what, two hours" (Green & Johnson, 2023, p. 29). Brown was wrongfully interrogated for thirty hours at the young age of eighteen years old. Brown's lawyer was not allowed to see his client, a fact that years later lead to the interrogation and false confession to be thrown out, but only after Brown served seven years unjustly. The unbleached titanium and turquoise in the painting reference the bottom of Oregon State University's Dixon Pool which Green stared at when she swam laps as she considered how to depict Brown's story. The royal purple comes from the Northwestern University colors Marcel Brown and Karen Daniel worn when leaving the courthouse. Movement was essential to this painting, with the corned beef moving three times and the paint itself moving across the page to blur the church, in a blurring of faith, and sense of urgency to save Brown. Brown's words on his interview form stand strongly at the center, "Thank God I'm home." (Green & Johnson, 2023). This centering of the word home comes both from Brown's statement after being exonerated, and from the horrific 30-hour interrogation where he asked to go home twenty-three times, with an increase in excruciating pain and urgency each time. Green placed this phrase at the center of this painting rightfully to display the immense gratitude that comes with deserved freedom and both the youthful innocence and legal innocence of Marcel Brown.

Ultimately, Julie Green is the inspiration of my research study due to the power of this art series and because she provided an additional insight into the experience of first meals. Looking solely at wrongfully convicted exonerees gives each painting an additional breadth of weight,

pointing to the deficiencies in the United States legal system. Each painting incorporates the physical contents of the first meal while simultaneously showing the rich emotion and, often pain, associated with the experience. Green's use of Victorian era plate ware as the foundation for many paintings in this series allows for a deeper understanding of the influence of plantation systems on the current prison system (Reese & Sbicca, 2022). From a time with prolific slavery, Victorian era plate ware style in *First Meals* paintings shows how those effects are still felt, especially with the wrongful convictions. Green explained how "the National Register of Exonerations states Black individuals are seven times more likely to be falsely accused of murder. Police misconduct, lack of good representation or both may lead to a wrongful conviction" (Green, 2021).

Methodology

My thesis utilized multiple research methods to examine this interdisciplinary topic: discovering the meaning and role of first meals. This variety of methods included 1) an open forum observational study, 2) a literature review, and 3) an art analysis of the relevant selected work. My research was approved by UVM IRB for Human Subject Research. Approval was relevant only to qualitative work. My study received UVM IRB approval on May 23, 2023.

For my research, I created what I term the "open forum observational study." An open forum observational study is the use of an online forum to post the research question and a more specific questionnaire for potential participants. Then, participants voluntarily comment on the forum, creating the data set for the research study. A standardized initial post inquiry was created to submit to Reddit, the open forum in this study. This inquiry explained the focus of my research study and solicited answers from individuals who were previously incarcerated about their first meal upon release from incarceration. This inquiry was posted to different Reddit threads, including r/Prison, r/AskReddit, r/excon, and r/prisonwallet. Following the posting onto these threads, 152

comments accrued from the four separate threads with the most coming from r/Prison. I stopped collecting data on November 15, 2023. These Reddit threads will not be deleted following the completion of this research, meaning more data and first meal experiences will accrue as users continue to comment.

Commenters who gave the most detail about their experiences were replied to and asked to email an address specific to this research study to inquire about an interview. Two of the six individuals who were given the email address offered to give more information but did not reply to further communications. However, given the breadth in variety and quantity of responses, the Reddit forums on their own allowed for enough data to code in NVivo. Using NCapture, the Reddit threads were uploaded to NVivo for an initial round of open coding. Following this, axial coding ensued to further analyze the connections and groupings of different meals had upon release. Finally, selective coding was completed to finalize the cases that illustrate themes and compare them (Neuman 2011). Both the content of the meals and the psychological states experienced were coded into themes for analysis and conclusion.

In my research, I used the previous literature on last meals to understand first meals. Themes of agency and structure in the literature provided a relevant comparison to the structures that either constrain or do not constrain people during reintegration. The analysis of structural constraints on the agency of death row prisoners served as a framework for understanding the structural food limitations that follow previously incarcerated individuals into reintegration. The literature regarding formerly incarcerated individuals' food access guided my comprehension of first meals as well as an understanding of food symbolism in general. The extended literature review in the artwork analysis and the open forum observational study served as a basis for my understanding of first meals and their role in agency and food meaning.

Next, I analyzed the artwork of Julie Green, specifically her works titled *First Meals*. The *First Meals* art series acted as its own data set in a virtual museum exhibit. The paintings acted as a supporting link for my conclusions and emphasized the importance of social justice within our criminal system in the United States. I intend this virtual museum to help audiences explore each painting as a visual example of the symbolism of a first meal. My inclusion of a virtual museum will allow the viewer to fully experience Green's work in conjunction with my research. Beginning with a curatorial introduction to the selected works by Green in the virtual exhibit, the viewer becomes immersed in an online museum that highlights both first meal symbolism and social justice issues. Each work then has a short explanation of its contextual and formal analysis. This includes the use of a color palette or medium and the author's intention or meaning behind the visual. Overall, my methodology uses a combination of anthropological observational techniques, literature review, and art analysis to prompt my investigation into the first meal had upon release from incarceration.

Results

After collecting my data through an open forum observational study, I distinguished the contents of each meal to parallel how researchers Wansink et al. examined the contents of last meals in their own study (2012). Wansink et al. divided the last meal content by meat, vegetables, fruit, starches, dairy, drinks, and dessert. Each of these categories had sub-categories that included the specific kind of meat or dairy. Then, Wansink et al. compiled data on brand beverages and brand restaurants for last meals. I followed both data organizations to properly compare my data on first meals to Wansink et al.'s data on last meals (2012).

Firstly, Wansink et al. found a variety of patterns in last meals. Wansink et al. identified that "the most requested meat was chicken (37.3%) followed by hamburger (23.8%), steak (21.8%), pork/bacon (17.3%), and fish/seafood (8.8%)" (2012, p. 839). Overall, meat was the most made

request. French fries (40.9%) were the most requested starch, followed by other potatoes (20.7%) and bread (17.1%). Overall, there were low levels of fruits and vegetables requested with high levels of carbohydrates and proteins requested. Additionally, in terms of branded items, branded fast food meals were only 4.2% of requests, while soft drinks were 60% of requests with 31% of those requests for a specific brand name (Wansink et al., 2012).

My data on first meals had similar results to Wansink et al. in terms of proteins and carbohydrates. For meat, chicken (18%) was the most frequently consumed with hamburgers (16.4%) and pork/bacon (14.8%) as the runners-up. This reflects last meal content with chicken being the most sought after and hamburger as the second most (Wansink et al., 2012). However, while steak was a part of 21.8% of last meal requests, it did not appear at all in the first meal data. For carbohydrates or starches, first meals also favored French fries like last meals, with 14.6% of meals containing them. The prevalence of bread and other potatoes in last meal requests was not reflected in first meals, with only 8.2% of first meals having bread and 4.9% having other potatoes. Both last meals and first meals did not have a high prevalence of rice or pasta, with only 2.3% of each in first meals (Wansink et al., 2012).

Based on the first meal data on vegetables and fruits, I determined that there was little to no consumption of these products. There were no apples, bananas, or strawberries consumed. Only one individual ate cantaloupe as a part of their first meal. Salads were consumed in 4.9% of meals, with only 1.6% relating to beans, coleslaw, mushrooms, and vegetable medley respectively. Wansink et al.'s last meal data had similar results with very low fruit and vegetable requests (2012). Last meals did however have a higher number of salads requested at 26.9% (Wansink et al., 2012).

I found that dairy was consumed for a first meal as either cheese (18%) or eggs (8.2%) as the highest consumed items. Yogurt was a part of only one first meal. Milk was also a part of one first meal but was 11.4% of requests for last meals (Wansink et al., 2012). In terms of dessert, my data

showed a very small number of meals including any form of dessert. Cake and pie were not mentioned for first meals, while they were 16.1% and 23.8% of last meals respectively (Wansink et al., 2012). Milkshakes, ice cream, cookies, and chocolate were each mentioned one time. The drinks of last meals in order of most consumed included coffee/tea (8.2%), alcohol (6.6%), and soft drinks (2.3%). Wansink et al. note that alcohol was not permitted in any last meal requests (2012).

There was a great variety of brands of drinks or restaurants for first meals. The most frequently consumed brand beverage was Coke and Pepsi, both with 2.3%. This is a low number compared to the last meal data with 16% requests for Coke and 7.7% requests for Pepsi (Wansink et al., 2012). Sixteen brand restaurants were eaten at for a first meal. 16.4% of first meals were consumed at McDonalds. 6.6% of first meals were consumed at IHOP. With a tie for third most frequented at 4.9% for Chick-fil-A and Denny's. Last meal requests were only for three brand restaurants, McDonalds (1.6%), KFC (1.6%), and Wendy's (1%) (Wansink et al., 2012).

After compiling data on the contents of each first meal, I coded my data to determine what values were the most important aspects of each meal. I then determined that agency, community, gratitude, longing, and taste were the five most important values of a first meal. I found 12 mentions of agency in the 61 first meals. For the other four values, I separated them into subcategories. For community, the subcategories were family, friends, significant other, strangers, rejection, thoughtfulness, and positive interaction. The highest number of mentions were family and positive interaction. Positive interaction was defined as any interaction between commenters on the Reddit thread that was related or not related to first meals, but in some way fostered a sense of community. Then, gratitude was categorized by freedom, kindness, new life, and shock. Freedom and kindness were the highest of these values. Longing was categorized by craving and fantasy, with fantasy being mentioned the most. Lastly, taste was categorized by aversion, hunger, ideal or best, unaccustomed, and unfulfilled. Ideal or best and hunger were the most mentioned of these values.

Table 1***Meat in First Meals and Last Meals***

Meat	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals ($n = 192$), Percentage
Beef	2, 2.3%	NA
Chicken	11, 18%	74, 37.3%
Fish/Seafood	4, 6.6%	17, 8.8%
Hamburger	10, 16.4%	46, 23.8%
Meatballs	1, 1.6%	NA
Pork/Bacon	9, 14.8%	34, 17.3%
Ribs	2, 2.3%	NA
Steak	0, 0%	42, 21.8%

Table 2***Vegetables in First Meals and Last Meals***

Vegetables	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Beans	1, 1.6%	NA
Coleslaw	1, 1.6%	13, 6.7%
Mushrooms	1, 1.6%	NA
Salad	3, 4.9%	52, 26.9%
Vegetable Medley	1, 1.6%	NA

Table 3***Fruit in First Meals and Last Meals***

Fruit	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Apples	0, 0%	1, 0.4%
Bananas	0, 0%	4, 2.1%
Strawberries	0, 0%	2, 1.6%
Cantaloupe	1, 1.6%	NA

Table 4***Starches in First Meals and Last Meals***

Starches	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals ($n = 192$), Percentage
Biscuits	3, 4.9%	NA
Bread	5, 8.2%	33, 17.1%
French fries	9, 14.6%	79, 40.9%
Potato - Other	3, 4.9%	40, 20.7%
Pasta	2, 2.3%	3, 1.6%
Rice	2, 2.3%	3, 1.6%

Table 5***Dairy in First Meals and Last Meals***

Dairy	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Cheese	11, 18%	NA
Eggs	5, 8.2%	NA
Milk	1, 1.6%	22, 11.4%
Yogurt	1, 1.6%	NA

Table 6***Drinks in First Meals and Last Meals***

Drinks	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Alcohol	4, 6.6%	NA
Juice	0, 0%	11, 5.7%
Soft Drinks	2, 2.3%	108, 60%
Coffee/Tea	5, 8.2%	17, 8.8%

Table 7***Dessert in First Meals and Last Meals***

Dessert	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Cake	0, 0%	31, 16.1%

Chocolate	1, 1.6%	NA
Cookies	1, 1.6%	NA
Ice cream	1, 1.6%	47, 24.3%
Milkshake/Float	1, 1.6%	NA
Pie	0, 0%	46, 23.8%

Table 8***Brand – Beverages in First Meals and Last Meals***

Brand - Beverages	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Coke	2, 2.3%	31, 16%
Diet Coke	0, 0%	3, 1.6%
Dr. Pepper	0, 0%	14, 7.3%
Pepsi	2, 2.3%	15, 7.7%
Root Beer	1, 1.6%	NA

Table 9***Brands – Restaurants in First Meals and Last Meals***

Brands - Restaurants	Reddit Data, First Meals, ($n = 61$), Percentage	Wansink et al. Data, Last Meals, ($n = 192$), Percentage
Arby's	1, 1.6%	NA
A&W	1, 1.6%	NA
Carl's Jr.	1, 1.6%	NA
Chick-fil-a	3, 4.9%	NA
Chipotle	1, 1.6%	NA

Denny's	3, 4.9%	NA
IHOP	4, 6.6%	NA
Jimmy John's	1, 1.6%	NA
KFC	0, 0%	3, 1.6%
M&Ms	1, 1.6%	NA
McDonald's	10, 16.4%	3, 1.6%
Outback Steakhouse	1, 1.6%	NA
Royal Farms	1, 1.6%	NA
Taco Bell	1, 1.6%	NA
Texas Roadhouse	1, 1.6%	NA
Wendy's	2, 2.3%	2, 1%

Discussion

What are First Meals?

Although I found some content differences between the physical content of first meals and last meals, there were, more importantly, significant similarities. Both first meals and last meals had chicken as the most consumed meat and French fries as the most consumed starch. Although first meals did not include steak, potatoes, bread, dessert, vegetables, or fruit in the same high percentage as with last meals, the same most requested meat and starch remains significant. According to Kniffin & Wansink (2014), Wansink (2012), and Van Hagen (2020), the recurrence of carbohydrates and proteins in last meals has been linked to their role as primary comfort foods. Last meals were calorically rich and usually luxury foods, savory foods, or sweet foods because inmates wanted foods to bring them comfort. These were also the most calorically dense types of foods, according to Walliss (2022). Searching for a connection to memories, identity, or relationships during a last meal

parallels the same search during a first meal. Both formerly incarcerated individuals and inmates on death row experience a pull toward food as a source of comfort in facing life-altering, or life-ending, transitional points.

This connection is furthered by both first meals and last meals consuming McDonalds the most in comparison to other brands mentioned or requested. The proliferation of McDonald's as a part of American culture situates it as a convenience comfort food for many (Locher et al., 2005, Rivera, 2016). McDonald's was found to be a ritualistic comfort for children in a study conducted by Rivera in 2016. Childhood memories in addition to the inherent convenience of McDonald's makes it the understandable comfort food for inmates on death row and recently released individuals. The content of both first meals and last meals are filled with powerful meanings, such as this childhood connection to McDonalds.

What Do First Meals Mean?

When coding for identifying values in my Reddit threads, I found that agency, community, gratitude, longing, and taste were the five most important principles during a first meal. Although many of the values I found blend and lead into one another, there are coherent groupings that I have distinguished below in my analysis. Comments on the Reddit threads varied from simple answers about what their meal contained to in-depth personal stories about their experience.

First Meals are Agency

An important value that emerged from the comments was agency. During incarceration, incarcerated individuals have no agency in their food choices and have their every move surveilled and controlled by a larger institution. Upon release from incarceration, they are suddenly welcomed back into a world of freedom where their food choices are concerned. Levels of agency in the first meal and last meal differ but remain significant because of the larger institutional constraint that controls the agent, and subsequently influences their meal decisions. I will explain this connection

first by establishing the relevance of renewed agency found in a first meal, and then comparing that to last meal experiences. Formerly incarcerated individuals go from an entirely constrained environment with their agency controlled by an institution, the prison, to the first moment of open-ended choice. Although this moment can be constrained by financial, social, or health factors such as the ability to pay for a meal, having someone available to pick you up upon release, or dietary restrictions, there is still a significant opening of choice in comparison to the complete lack of choice while incarcerated. Commenter “ianmoone1102” wrote,

“My nerves were so destroyed upon my release that I could barely eat” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

Being so nervous that they were unable to fully eat, and likely unable to fully enjoy, their first meal points to inherent problems in the United States prison system. While regaining freedom may be a time for celebration like it was for many commenters, for this individual regaining freedom brought about negative emotions. As previously stated in the section Food in Prison, Fahmy & Wallace found that incarcerated individuals often look at their time in prison as more stabilizing than their circumstances prior to it (2022). Haluksha reaffirmed this finding and explained that formerly incarcerated individuals receive housing and food that they know they can rely on during their incarceration (2020). Being released is not as simple as just rejoining the free world. There is a myriad of factors that influence their well-being outside of prison, such as the bureaucracy of probation or parole, limitations on employment opportunities, or a lack of social support (Halushka, 2020, Harding et al., 2014, Testa et al., 2019). When comparing this experience to last meals on death row, prisoners rarely receive exactly what they want for this meal, taking away their last chance at agency and freedom before death (Gerwig-Moore et al., 2014). Death row inmates have their last chance at social or cultural connection ripped away, along with their agency according to Sikka (2021). LaChance explains how the state remains fully in control of the incarcerated individual

during their last meal while performing the execution's last meal which gives the illusion of agency (2007). This performance is for the broader society that is watching the state during an execution, usually through media coverage. The state attempts to be seen as benevolent and merciful to lessen the harsh reality that a life is being taken. For a recently released individual, the first meal does not always hold up to expectations or feel as freeing as their renewed agency might be assumed to entail. Wansink et al. claimed that when given freedom around food after being restricted, people continue to consume the same foods even with more opportunities (2012). My data from Reddit threads directly contradicts this claim, as many commenters mention foods not available in prison, explained by their longing for them.

“RepresentativeSun588” stated, “That first meal when we get out almost makes us feel human again” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison). The dehumanization of incarcerated individuals is one of the leading causes of the decline of mental and physical health for prisoners, especially for those on death row (Fahmy & Wallace, 2022, Gesch et al., 2002). Meyer's research established how execution is the ultimate example of dehumanization and institutional control (2011). The rationalization of the execution process, detailed by LaChance, shows that death row prisoners become a prop in a mechanized process that ultimately takes the life of a person (2007). This is the extreme end of what incarceration results in: dehumanization. “RepresentativeSun588's” remark regarding how a singular meal can reinforce humanity indicates the power of food. As outlined in the section Food Symbolism, food holds the power to establish and reinforce identities. Mintz et al. and Locher et al. investigated the relevance of food with cultural identity and concluded that cultural identities are confirmed through the consumption of related foods, often comfort foods (2002, 2005). I add to this by stating that formerly incarcerated are re-humanized through their first meal, proving the significance of this moment of commensality.

The Reddit threads I created reached audiences beyond those who were formerly incarcerated. Curious commenters left their opinions on the topic. Public defenders offered their thoughts because of their connection to formerly incarcerated individuals. Former military members left comments on their own experiences having a first meal. “polardbear48” wrote,

“Never incarcerated, but military. I've lived places I wasn't allowed to leave, having to eat the same for long stretches of time. First thing I did once I got off the base was hit up a McDonald's and I was in heaven. Just having choice...never realized how much we take choice for granted” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCons).

The first meal experience does not just apply to formerly incarcerated individuals. After reading about the experience of the former military having their agency restricted, I infer that the first meal could be a more widely applicable experience. With further research, the concept of a first meal may prove to be a moment fraught with meaning during any transitional period, from coming out of the military to being released from prison to graduating from college. “polardbear48” emphasizes the importance of choice in any first meal. They recognize the importance of taste, discussed in a later section, for its connection to agency. When a food is to our liking, it holds a more empowering meaning. When food is forced upon us, it holds a meaning incongruent with our identity and dismantles our self-view as active agents.

In one of my Reddit threads, two commenters named “ayeefuck” and “ConscientiousObserv” interacted over the phrase “free meal.” Rather than referring to the first meal after incarceration as a first meal, one “ayeefuck” called it a “free meal.” “ConscientiousObserv” expressed how they “Appreciate the definition of free meal I had never considered before” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison). This interaction prompted me to question why I had phrased this as a first meal, and if I should change my vocabulary to adopt the term “free meal” rather than first meal. After searching through my data to find any other reference to the first meal

upon release from incarceration as a “free meal,” I found no other use of this phrase. While I did not change the vocabulary of my research, this reframed my understanding of what a renewed sense of agency upon release from incarceration means. The recognition by formerly incarcerated individuals that this meal reaffirmed their new freedom indicated that agency should be one of the most important, if not the most important, value associated with this meal.

Overall, I conclude that there is a renewed sense of agency in the first meal upon release from incarceration because of the previous lack of agency. This meal is rich with meaning, which is reaffirmed by the previously established understanding that last meals are also full of meaning.

First Meals are Community

Community was consistent throughout my Reddit threads. In 50.8% of comments, there was a mention of community. I coded the term community to be divided into the following sub-codes: family, friends, significant others, strangers, rejection, thoughtfulness, and positive interaction. Family, friends, significant others, and strangers were coded when those relationships were mentioned. Rejection referred to when those relationships, most frequently family, resulted in a rejection or disapproval. Thoughtfulness referred to when a community or social support specifically did something thoughtful for the incarcerated individual. Positive interaction referred to any interactions between commenters on the thread that were positive, whether it was related to first meals or not. The highest number of mentions were related to family and positive interactions.

In terms of how family and thoughtfulness came together, this was frequently in the form of a family member cooking for the recently released individual. This also was expressed by having their favorite dishes, or an array of options. This once again reaffirms the power of renewed agency, and the importance of social support upon release. “no_name_yo_name” explained how their mom deeply cared for them during this transitional point with a family feast and new clothes.

“My mom came to pick me up, had a brand new outfit for me and everything. She took me straight home and made everything I loved to eat! We had fried chicken, steaks, pork chops, ribs, shrimp, and all the sides you could imagine. My entire family showed up, and we just feasted and enjoyed our time together, as it had been a long, long time. Wouldn’t have traded it for anything else in the world” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

Here, the formerly incarcerated individual’s first meal was centered on reuniting with their family, and many other comments proved the same. Commensality has a huge power to bring families back together at the dinner table. Sharing a meal lends to sharing culture and beliefs, and can reconnect those separated, as argued by Douglas, Locher et al., and Sikka (1972, 2005, 2021).

“Silent-Branch-9523” expressed a similar feeling of not wanting to trade that moment for anything else in the world.

“When I got picked up, grandma had a container of freshly picked and cut cantaloupe, with a real metal fork to eat it with. When I got home it was steak and eggs. It’s been over 20 years now and I still get a little misty thinking about that meal” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCons).

Rather than focusing on the importance of a gathering of their entire family and their mom’s thoughtfulness, “Silent-Branch-9523” focused on the significance of a single family member, their grandmother. Their first meal was simple food, but rich with thoughtfulness on behalf of their grandmother and gratitude from the consumer. Their intense emotion even 20 years later when reflecting on this meal leads me to believe that the first meal is as weighty and noteworthy as the last meal. Additionally, this commenter mentions how they had a “real metal fork to eat it with.” In one ethnographic interview I conducted, the interviewee also relayed the significance of eating with a real metal fork as follows:

“And I remember, I’ll never forget this. Um, I had the fork and the knife. And you don’t realize how heavy these things are. Unless you eat with plastic spoons and forks, you know,

all your life. Right? I'm saying, right. So as I'm sitting there cutting into my pancakes and stuff, all you can hear is the noise of the utensils hitting the plate. So it was just like ting ping ting and I'm staring. I got my head down and I'm sitting eating and then when I look out my sister, my friend, his wife, they're looking at me like, bro, you don't have to be so aggressive. And I didn't realize. Yeah, like, yeah, you're right. I'm cutting, you know, cutting up these things real heavy. So that's the one thing that I remember a lot about that moment.”

This individual was incarcerated for twenty-seven years. When he explains how he ate with plastic utensils for his whole life, he is being literal. The weight of real silverware in hand was completely foreign to him and required the caution of his loved ones to make him ease his grip. The significance of a real fork and knife points to the many ways in which incarcerated individuals are fully subjected to the control of their institution and the dehumanization that follows.

In an article about the significance of using plastic utensils, the author Daniel X. Cohen describes how he had forgotten how to use a fork while being in a prison that only allowed sporks. Cohen explained his experience as follows, “It’s a surreal and utterly demoralizing feeling when you are confronted with the reality that you have forgotten how to be human” (Cohen, 2023).

All three of these individuals lost, in some way, their ability to use every day silverware as they had prior to incarceration. Ultimately, I infer that this experience is not isolated to these individuals. In every aspect of incarcerated individuals’ lives, the prison system seeks to dehumanize them and reduce them as agents as much as possible.

Additionally, the prevalence of positive interactions between Reddit users on my thread could not be dismissed, even in instances of discourse unrelated to first meals. Users expressed gratitude for the scope of this research and confirmed the validity of this as a moment filled with meaning for formerly incarcerated individuals. One thread started with this comment by “camccorm” and continued with the second by “RepresentativeSun588”.

“Hi, I’m a public defender and I just wanted to thank you for doing this research. It may seem trivial, but something as simple as the showing the importance of a meal of your choice, or a meal prepared with love, really humanizes the prison and jail population. People, especially in the US, seem to forget that people on the inside are just like most of us. Food (and often the family and friends with whom we enjoy it) is so universal” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “camccorm”).

“And honestly, picking a subject such as the first meal a prisoner has when they leave incarceration shows that the OP has a lot of insight already into how prisoners think as a whole.

There were many, many conversations had when I was inside about what our first meal on the out would be and what foods we were looking forward to eating most, and food in general.

Every time a fast food advert came on TV, it would start a brief debate about which menu item is superior, or people would have random short stories about experiences at X, Y or Z restaurants.

That first meal when we get out almost makes us feel human again” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “RepresentativeSun588”).

This sub-thread went on to discuss the pros and cons of being a public defender, what it takes for them to be disbarred, and why someone would want to be a public defender. Although these discussions were unrelated to my research at hand, they distinctly showed the power of virtual community through anonymity ((Dawson, 2018). These users were able to ask open and honest questions about a career and express their own opinions, no matter how brutally honest. More positive interactions were held between users regarding their life trajectory following incarceration,

whether it improved or declined in quality. An interaction below between “Admirable-Lecture-42”, “Wartstench”, and “sonofasnitchh” details, once again, the potential of a virtual community.

“Interesting idea, reflects real world aspirations of inmates while detained .

For me, in Australia. I went straight to the pub and had a steak lunch with fresh salad and chips. I have now been sober and well for 12 months.

Every other time I'd go to a fast food place (KFC. Etc) or straight to a bottle shop fir whiskey.

My thinking patterns were very different this last time.

Hope that might help you” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “Admirable-Lecture-42”).

“Congrats, on a year my friend! Have you found stable employment and have your life going in a good direction now?” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “Wartstench”).

“I have, I'm working from home doing English tutoring, which is certainly not something I'd ever considered before LOL.

I'm focusing on maintaining sobriety and really enjoying life, not just trying to get through every day. Life feels worth living for the first time I can recall, and I'm grateful.” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “Admirable-Lecture-42”).

“12 months sober is fantastic! Glad you're able to focus on enjoying life and not just surviving. Everyone is always going “career trajectory” but being able to identify your own priorities and values and living accordingly is a rare gift” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison, “sonofasnitchh”).

Overall, this interaction is filled with a sense of community between strangers who are sharing intimate parts of their lives by being protected by anonymity. The community that is created during a first meal remains powerful, but so does the community that is created because of a shared understanding of the experience of a first meal. First meal consumers have a community that will last a lifetime because so many others have experienced it as well. Just as most of the food inmates request as a last meal is comfort food, so too is the food in a first meal. Both meals are a way of searching for community (Meyer, 2011).

Community held an important role in most first meals and an important role in these Reddit threads in general. Interpersonal relationships are essential to human flourishing, and their rekindling, rejection, or creation is seen here clearly.

First Meals are Gratitude

A sense of gratitude after release from incarceration was commonly referred to in my Reddit threads. The two most referenced values of gratitude were freedom and kindness, with the two lowest being new life and shock. Users consistently referred to their gratitude for their freedom and often connected this feeling to moments of kindness they experienced upon release. These moments of kindness were often associated with first meals. “ianmoone1102” experienced a variety of the values I found in the data including gratitude, through freedom and kindness, longing, and taste.

“Over the years, I always heard guys fantasize about their first meal after release, but I never cared about food that much. That simple meal, though, was something special. I think it was the care that she put into it that made the difference” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

“ianmoone1102” did not fantasize about their first meal but recognized the significance of that experience for their peers. Their historic lack of care about food was entirely irrelevant to their first meal. The care their stepmom put into making their first meal was what made it special. Expressing gratitude for their stepmom’s kindness was a significant part of this comment. Kindness between

family members connects back to the value of community in a first meal, indicating the linkages between the five most significant values. In terms of gratitude for freedom, users indicated that this feeling was present at their first meal. “MiLkINgTabLe187” wrote,

“But truthfully, while I'm in prison, I think of a million and one things I want to eat when I get out, but once Im out, it really doesn't matter. Im just so grateful to be out Id eat anything. Okay, almost anything - no Ramen noodles!” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCons).

Maintaining humor surrounding an emotionally charged transitional moment is important and demonstrates this formerly incarcerated individual’s resiliency and adaptability. Two commenters named “MarquisDeVice” and “Commercial-Ad-5813”, replied saying “Facts. I pray I never eat Ramen again” and “I still do. Can't shake it” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCon). This humor formed another positive interaction, and therefore a mini-virtual community, within this thread. Either aversion to or inclination to Ramen noodles forms another part of the first meal that can be generalized to some first meal experiences. Certain foods will have been so prevalent during their incarceration that individuals either avoid them for the rest of their lives or cannot escape them after incarceration. In addition to this more generalized experience, this commenter has connected gratitude, community, and longing in their first meal experience.

“mthw704” explained how,

“It was a burger & fries but the feeling of freedom was overwhelming. My wife & I had only been dating a few months at the time so it all was new to me” (Warth, 2024, r/prisonwallet).

The description of freedom as “overwhelming” connects back to a sense of renewed agency. Not only is this user grateful for their freedom, but that freedom comes with negative emotions as well. There are a variety of options, new people, and hard-to-navigate interactions that they will experience during or after this first meal. Gratitude for kindness enhances the first meal experience

to make it more fruitful and beneficial for their well-being. Gratitude for freedom reconnects with agency while showing how this first meal can be momentous as a transitional point.

First Meals are Longing

Many commenters referenced what they had fantasized about while in prison, and what they craved once they were released. There were more mentions of fantasies than cravings, so that is the value I focus on as the most important part of longing for a first meal. A fantasy could range from not being thought about at all, to being the most important conversation they can remember during their incarceration. The three significant quotes for the value of fantasy were also relevant to other values explained above. Their repetition does not reduce their merit but enhances it.

“ianmoone1102” did not give the same consideration to a first meal as their peers but understood why it had been a relevant topic once they had their own first meal.

“Over the years, I always heard guys fantasize about their first meal after release, but I never cared about food that much. That simple meal, though, was something special. I think it was the care that she put into it that made the difference” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

Recognizing their dismissal of food as a powerful vehicle displays the thoughtfulness that this commenter put into describing their first meal. A change from a neutral or aloof attitude towards food to appreciating how it can be special further displays the power of a first meal. This meal not only provides the opportunity to fulfill a food fantasy but can change attitudes about the very concept of a food fantasy. Other users explained how talking about their food fantasy while incarcerated was a significant part of their experience. “RepresentativeSun588” wrote,

“There were many, many conversations had when I was inside about what our first meal on the out would be and what foods we were looking forward to eating most, and food in general

Every time a fast food advert came on TV, it would start a brief debate about which menu item is superior, or people would have random short stories about experiences at X, Y or Z restaurants” (Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

Here, there is a clear explanation of how food connects incarcerated individuals while in prison. While experiencing the same harsh deprivation of food through their senses and the deprivation of food through an absence of choice, incarcerated individuals can forge a community through this shared traumatizing experience. Not only is community fostered at the table during a first meal and a food fantasy fulfilled, but community is fostered before the event itself by discussing those fantasies and desires.

In contrast to a fulfillment of food fantasy through the first meal, there is the alternate reality of not having that desire met. For “MiLkINGTabLe187,” they use humor to subdue, what could be, larger feelings about their lack of fantasy fulfillment upon release from incarceration.

“But truthfully, while I'm in prison, I think of a million and one things I want to eat when I get out, but once Im out, it really doesn't matter. Im just so grateful to be out Id eat anything. Okay, almost anything - no Ramen noodles!”

Ultimately, many individuals do not have their desires met in their first meal upon release from incarceration, or in the other new aspects of their lives as formerly incarcerated individuals. According to both Haluksha, Harding et al., and Marek finding employment as a formerly incarcerated individual is incredibly difficult (2020, 2014, 2018). There is a 50% lower chance that the job seeker will even receive a call back once the employer learns of their criminal record (Marek, 2018). Schnittker further explained that formerly incarcerated individuals face structural barriers and psychological health concerns that can prevent them from flourishing upon reentry (2014). Therefore, using humor as a coping mechanism and the forging of community within these Reddit threads while discussing fulfilled or unfulfilled food fantasies ultimately demonstrates the power of a

first meal to display meaning, such as the difficulties of reentry. This too parallels the experience of inmates on death row when they are denied their last meal request, diminishing a chance at re-humanization for both death row inmates and formerly incarcerated individuals.

First Meals are Taste

A large part of any meal is its taste, and whether the consumer likes the taste or not. In my Reddit data, taste emerged as the following values: aversion, hunger, ideal or best, unaccustomed, and unfulfilled. The two most common values were hunger and ideal or best. Hunger was expressed through moments when the commenters felt hunger or how they experienced hunger. Ideal or best was defined as moments when the commenters felt as though their meal was their ideal for that moment or the best they could have. In terms of hunger, users explained how hunger was all consuming while in prison. “RoTTonSKiPP” said,

“The prison I was in, forced you to eat very quickly. We were only given a few minutes to eat before they would make the entire table get up and dump our trays. If you didn't force your food down quickly, you left hungry (or I should say "more hungry" as I rarely felt full the entire time I was locked up). It took me some time to re-train myself to eat slowly”

(Warth, 2024, r/Prison).

While in prison, not only were their food choices out of their control but so was how they could eat the food in front of them. Hunger is a repeated negative feeling experienced during incarceration. Bardelli et al. researched incarcerated individuals' experiences in prison, and every single interviewee recalled a visceral feeling of hunger (2022). The inability to ever feel full during incarceration further dehumanizes inmates and positions the first meal as ever more powerful as their first opportunity to eat as slowly and as much as they want.

Two commenters explained in their responses how the transition from bland prison food to food after release was its own difficult transition. “The1andonlycano” said,

“It was early in the morning. I got a steak skillet, pumpkin pancakes, hot green teen with honey, and chocolate milk. Still one of the best meals I've ever had. After eating soy filled garbedge for awhile a meal like that will send you to cloud nine” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCons).

“Miserable-Towel-9761” similarly explained,

“At first everything tasted rich and way too seasoned when I got out” (Warth, 2024, r/ExCons).

Both Douglas and Sikka explained how food choice can display socioeconomic success, and most importantly, signify taste often through cosmopolitanism and omnivory (1972, 2021). However, while incarcerated, there are no options to display personal taste through food choice. These individuals experienced the harsh transition caused by food sensory deprivation during incarceration. Food not in prison was too rich, too seasoned, or tasted beyond taste bud comprehension. Prison diets were not of quality according to daily recommendations, as found by Gesch et al. and reaffirmed by another study completed by Eves et al. (2002, 2003). Reliance on a commissary to supplement nutrition or quell hunger is only applicable with reliable financial support from the outside (Bardelli et al., 2022). This connects back to the importance of social support upon reentry and establishes its importance during incarceration. Ultimately, the power of the guards and general prison institutions over prisoners completely controls their consumption. Godderis determined that this complete control was a painful reminder of their lack of agency and allowed for power dynamics to be expressed through food in prison (2006). I argue this applies both to death row inmates with their last meal, and formerly incarcerated individuals with their first meal.

In terms of death row, an inmate on death row can only control what they ingest, as Walliss explains (2022). Their sensory food deprivation in prison qualifies this moment as the last, and only, opportunity to demonstrate agency. The connection between both first meal and last meal

consumers going from complete sensory deprivation of food to an opportunity for potential sensory experiences reaffirms my argument that these two transitional meals are connected and matter.

Conclusion

The primary finding of my research emphasizes the importance of food choice for formerly incarcerated individuals. Given the profound significance attributed to their first meal, the meaningfulness of food among this demographic should be found within discussions concerning reentry support mechanisms. The similarities I found between first meal and last meal contents lead me to conclude that they hold a similar weight of importance to incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals. This further supports previous literature regarding the harsh food conditions of incarceration and its subsequent negative physical and mental health effects. I believe that the same social and cultural weight ascribed to last meals in the United States media could be ascribed to first meals. The common question of what would your last meal be, could easily be changed to ask what would your first meal be? The first meal expressly designates agency, community, gratitude, longing, and taste to be the five most pertinent concepts. I conclude that both the first meal and the last meal contain multitudes of indispensable meaning through the food consumed and the circumstances that surround that food. This positions the first meal had upon release from incarceration to be meaningful and significant, requiring the attention of researchers, policymakers, and advocates for reentry initiatives.

In the realm of reentry studies, the significance of the first meal moment in the journey of a formerly incarcerated individual remains under researched. While there exists a substantial body of literature examining the symbolic significance and psychological implications of last meals on death row, this focus has not yet highlighted the first meals of those reentering society after incarceration. While research on food insecurity among formerly incarcerated individuals is considerable,

particularly in explaining the challenges they face in accessing nutritious and culturally meaningful food upon release, the nuanced exploration of the broader meaning ascribed to food within the reentry process remains relatively sparse. By bridging these divergent strands of inquiry, my research attempts to shed light on the intricate interplay between food symbolism, experiences of food insecurity post-release, and the broader significance of the first meal moment in the reentry journey. This holistic examination not only contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the reintegration process but also underscores the need for nuanced interventions that address both the material and symbolic dimensions of food within the context of reentry support programs.

Some limitations of my research include anonymity. Although anonymity can provide confidence to share information in a virtual space, it also reduces the credibility of my sources. An additional limitation of my study is the smaller sample size of 61 total first meals. This offers a helpful comparison to last meals but could have more reliable conclusions with a larger data set.

Further research on this topic could continue to investigate the value and role of a first meal had upon release from incarceration. This could provide evidence as to whether there are impacts on the formerly incarcerated individual's life if their first meal does not meet their desires. Marking the first meal, and the last meal, as two significant meals in an individual's life could provide enough evidence to change policies related to restrictions on last meals, or provide more support for first meals, socially or financially. Research could additionally explore food insecurity for incarcerated individuals and how the current prison system structure influences their reentry food security status. This could be used to influence policy in regulating prison food, giving more agency to those incarcerated, or providing more tangible and approachable support upon reentry.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to those who commented on Reddit and shared their personal first meal stories. This research could not have been completed without you.

Thank you to the Food Systems Research Center at the University of Vermont for providing funding and support for my research.

Thank you to my friends and family for supporting me throughout this research process.

Thank you to my research committee, Dr. Tyler Doggett and Dr. Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio, for your advice and feedback.

A special thank you to Dr. Teresa Mares for endless support as my advisor and invaluable guidance over the past four years.

Appendix

First Meals Museum Exhibit

<https://visit.virtualartgallery.com/firstmealsjuliegreen>

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