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2016-2017
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“McDonalds as Slow Food, or Slow Death: Eating Practices Among the Urban Poor in Chicago”

Berkey Hall Rm 457

Friday, April 7, 12:00-1:30pm

The food lives of the urban poor are often described in terms of ignorance, disease, and deprivations of supply. These analyses often map on to disciplinary concerns, and emphasize “slow death” that requires expert intervention as a solution. Sitting alongside these frameworks are another set of studies of self-help, often conceptualized as gardening projects, which leave the poor less “dependent” on the rest of society, but which also carry with them the language of “survival.” Yet these relatively homogeneous stories of deprivations, ignorance, failures, and attempts at self-help are only a partial image of the foodways of the urban poor in Chicago. Using ethnographic observation, mapping, and in-depth interviews with low income Black and White Chicago residents, I illuminate their joyful and nourishing food practices that create deep social bonds, carved out of both the racisms and mistrusts that are endemic to life in Chicago, and the embeddedness of food in complex social lives. These practices include food and knowledge sharing, slow meals at fast food restaurants where they feel welcomed and comfortable, cookouts and other activities. I thus examine foodways that already exist as means of living and thriving, counterbalancing the politics of slow death that is usually used to understand the food lives of the urban poor.