

Remembering, Eating, Cooking, and Sharing: Identity Shaping Activities in Ethnic American

First-Person Food Writings

by

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During the past couple of decades, the topic of food and identity has become the subject of increased academic inquiry and scholarly pursuit. However, despite this increased attention, it is still more common to find interpretations of the food that appears in fictional writings than to find critical examinations of creative nonfiction works whose entire thematic focus *is* food. First-person food writings, like other forms of literature, are not only aesthetically pleasing, they have the power to evoke emotional and psychological responses in their readers. More specifically, ethnic American food memoirs and essays explore important twenty-first century questions concerning identity and the navigation of hybridity.

This thesis considers some of these questions through an investigation of three specific food-related acts in five separate literary works: Remembering in “Cojimar, 1958,” from Eduardo Machado’s book, *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile’s Hunger for Home*, and “Kimchi Blues,” by Grace M. Cho; eating in “*Candy and Lebehneh*,” part of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*, and “Eating the Hyphen” by Lily Wong; and cooking in Shoba Narayan’s “A Feast to Decide a Future” and “Honeymoon in America,” part of her food memoir, *Monsoon Diary*.

REMEMBERING, EATING, COOKING, AND SHARING: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTING
ACTIVITIES IN ETHNIC AMERICAN FIRST-PERSON FOOD WRITINGS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has believed in me: my family, my friends, my teachers, and my students. Thank you for sharing your stories with me, eating with me, teaching me, and allowing me to teach you in return. My life, and my bowl, would be empty without you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

You are what you eat. Many Americans have heard or even uttered this phrase. In fact, ever since Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote in the nineteenth century, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are,” the idea that food and identity are somehow linked is almost commonplace (13). Yet, it has not been until more recent times that the topic of food and identity has become the subject of serious academic inquiry and scholarly pursuit.

In the preface to their second edition of *Food and Culture* (2008), Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik note that food as a topic of academic study has only “experienced explosive growth across myriad disciplines and topics” in the past two decades (xii). These disciplines include Cultural Studies, anthropology, Environmental Studies, psychology, sociology, Literary Studies, and more. However, in the case of Literary Studies, it is still more common to find brief interpretations of the symbolic nature of food that appears *in* larger literary works, as opposed to examinations of entire works whose main focus and theme *is* food. What’s more, it is even rarer to find critical handlings of first-person food writings such as memoirs.

Also in 2008, *College English*, the professional journal of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), published a special issue dedicated to the topic of food literature, hoping to “encourage thought about the many ways that cookery might have a place at a college English table” (Schilb 345). This is because, as editor John Schilb notes, food-themed writings have been, for a long time, considered “unworthy of intellectuals’ love” (345). My thesis aligns with Schilb’s purpose; that is, I hope to increase the thoughtful consideration of ethnic American first-person narrative food writings as genuine literary forms.

In her article, “Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom,” Barbara Frey Waxman emphasizes that the memoir is a

unique and valuable place where writers can “clarify and implement the values, beliefs, and practices that make for a meaningful life” (Waxman 381). This is due to the unique nature of memoir, which allows one the opportunity to select and arrange events from one’s life into a single story which will “fulfill a specific purpose and invent a particular version of the self” (Waxman 381). A similar sentiment includes Virginia Heffernan’s claim that memoir is a form which “liberates writers caught between genres.” To me then, the memoir seems an ideal space for ethnic American authors, those often caught between cultures, generations, and even sometimes conflicting personal desires, to clarify, arrange, and liberate both their individual and group identities in ways they see fit – not in ways that are decided for them by others, namely mainstream American society. The question remains then, why food? Or more specifically, why food memoirs?

In her 2011 book, *Storied Dishes: What Our Family Recipes Tell Us about Who We Are and Where We’ve Been*, editor Linda Murray Berzok says that the fifty-one delicious food stories she has collected for her book come from people of “various walks of life and ethnic backgrounds” (xvii). In other words, the authors represent a “rich multicultural stew,” as she calls it (xvii). However, even though there are “striking cultural differences” between the book’s contributors, Berzok finds that all of their food stories fit into one or more of the following chapters: “Our Foremothers,” “Lost Times and Places,” “Restoring Balance,” “Life Lessons,” “Bonding Together,” and “Coming into Our Own.” What this means is while the authors vary according to categories like race, age, sex, gender, religion, and ethnicity, the food in their lives, like the food in our own, is ultimately used for remembering, restoring, learning, bonding, and growing. Once we realize that food marks our lives in very similar ways, we can use it to understand how we are alike. Once we do that, we can then begin to accept and appreciate our

differences, not fear and hate them. First-person food writings then, like other forms of literature, are not only aesthetically pleasing, but they have the power to evoke both emotional and psychological responses in their readers. It is to this end that this thesis seeks to give ethnic American food writings greater exposure while being critically examined. To achieve this, I have chosen to focus on three specific food-related acts in five separate literary works. First, I examine remembering, or food memories, in “Cojimar, 1958,” from Eduardo Machado’s book, *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile’s Hunger for Home*, and “Kimchi Blues,” by Grace M. Cho. Second, I explore both eating and not eating in “Candy and Lebehneh,” part of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*, and “Eating the Hyphen” by Lily Wong. And third, I analyze cooking in Shoba Narayan’s “A Feast to Decide a Future” and “Honeymoon in America,” both part of her food memoir, *Monsoon Diary*. Finally, in the conclusion, I take stock of the authors’ use of sharing not just food, but of their first-person food writings.

My purpose in choosing a range of writings by a variety of ethnic American authors is to not just show how they are alike. My goal is to demonstrate that even though authors may find themselves in racial or ethnic categories, by either their own volition or because they were assigned by others, each person is highly individualized in how they choose to remember, eat, cook, and share food and food writings. More specifically, each text varies in how it answers the following questions:

- 1) How does remembering food-related experiences allow for personal discovery, reconciliation, and self-actualization? In other words, how do people use food memories in very specific and individualized ways to construct or reconstruct their current identity?
- 2) In what ways does cooking and eating food provide opportunities for navigating hybridity and exerting personal agency?

- 3) Does the growing consumption of ethnic American food and food writings represent an increase in societal and institutional equality, or do ethnic American foods and food writings become commodities of multicultural food colonialism – a variation of what David Palumbo-Liu refers to as a “new orientalism”?

To begin my examination of food and identity formation, chapter one looks at the various roles of remembering, or food and memory.

The use of past memories on current identity formation can vary widely from person to person, which will be explored by contrasting “Cojimar, 1958” and “Kimchi Blues.” While Machado romanticizes his childhood food memories from Cuba, specifically his grandmother’s breakfasts of café con leche and toast, Cho recalls how her mother’s kimchi represented “survival,” not love and abundance (57). Waxman explains that food memoirists “perform [an] auto-ethnographic role in reporting on their childhood food culture” (365). Therefore, by grounding the first chapter in the autobiographical theories discussed in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s book, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, I will show how Machado and Cho, by performing the role of auto-ethnographer, specifically of their past experiences, are in fact engaging in and utilizing “a remarkably flexible set of discourses and practices for adapting voices, claiming citizenship, confronting grief... [and] resituating embodiment and sexuality” (Smith and Watson 165). However, unlike much of auto-ethnography which seeks to self-report for the sole purpose of understanding one’s location within a particular group or culture, I will demonstrate how the authors are also working to situate and construct their current personal identities in ways which differ from cultures, groups, or even their own families.

Chapter two of this project will move from examining the role of memory and personal identity, to an analysis of eating. This chapter will also shift from the use of autobiographical theory to the use of a post-colonial framework. While autobiography theory is useful in explaining the various reasons for recalling past food memories, and its uses in constructing identity, some critics rightfully point out its limitations. For example, autobiography often implies canonization and has “traditional associations with universal individualism and possessive masculinity” which is very specifically rooted in white Western patriarchy (Smith and Watson 129). Furthermore, Smith and Watson note that autobiography criticism also sometimes considers other types of life writing, such as memoirs, as having “lesser value” because they are not considered “true” autobiographical works (3). Conversely, post-colonial theory not only legitimizes food memoirs as valid forms of self-life writing, along with other writings, including diary and journal entries, it also provides opportunities to discuss the active processes the authors engage in while navigating hybrid identities. In a close reading of “*Candy and Lebehneh*” and “Eating the Hyphen,” I will consider hybridity, liminal spaces, and agency in terms of the food and meals the authors choose to eat, or not to eat. I will discuss the ways in which meals, because they are liminal spaces, become active spaces of identity formation, which often means the harmonizing of hybrid identities. Moving into chapter three, I continue the exploration of agency and identity construction, but I do it through the lens of cooking.

Agency is “particularly important in post-colonial theory because it refers to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 8). Cooking, or more accurately, acquiring, prepping, cooking, and presenting foodstuffs, allows for, like eating, conscious acts of rebellion and independence; however, I will highlight how cooking, more than any other food-related act, is the strongest tool

for preserving and reinforcing one's ethnic identity. To do this, I consider the ways in which Shoba Narayan, in "A Feast to Decide a Fate" and "Honeymoon in America," uses cooking to maintain her ethnic identity while she is living in the United States. This is made possible by cooking because, as a language system, it is encoded with very specific religious and cultural information about social structure, heritage, history, and religious beliefs. When Narayan uses her family's cooking language, it not only reinforces and maintains her ethnic identity, it provides her with the opportunity to communicate both values and love to her family members. Ultimately, her cooking ensures a continuation of the family's ethnic identity even though they are living in America, far from their home of birth.

Finally, in the conclusion of this thesis, I will take stock of each of the five authors' uses of sharing. This not only includes the sharing of foods and recipes, but the sharing of their stories – their first-person food writings. I will also be considering the following question: Does the growing consumption of ethnic American food writing represent an increase in the acceptance of ethnic Americans as well as increased societal and institutional equality? Or, do ethnic American food writings become a commodity of cultural food colonialism? To do this, I will continue to draw on post-colonial theories, introduce David-Palumbo-Liu's work on multiculturalism and ethnic literature in the United States, and re-introduce autobiographical theories, which not only discuss how narrative food writings become locations where authors negotiate personal identity, but how they can also become locations where readers can do so as well.

Ultimately, I hope to not only expose some of the ways in which personal ethnic American identity is preserved, shaped, or changed by remembering, eating, cooking, and sharing food, I hope to increase the exposure of food memoirs and lead to their growing acceptance as a legitimate literary form. In doing so, it is equally important to be aware of the

ways in which ethnic American writings can fall prey to pluralistic handlings, which encourages simply “passing through them appreciatively,” or using them as “proxies for ethnic peoples,” instead of seeing them as uniquely individualized tools for examining continued disparities in social and institutionalized power distribution (Palumbo-Liu 5, 13). Ethnic American first-person food writings are texts that are creative, insightful, purposeful, and instructive, and they deserve to be studied seriously.

CHAPTER 2: MY MEMORIES, MY LIFE: DISTINGUISHING THE PRESENT SELF BY REMEMBERING PAST FOOD EXPERIENCES IN “COJIMAR, 1958” AND “KIMCHI BLUES”

In this chapter, I begin the examination of food and identity by exploring how recalling past food-related experiences can allow for personal discovery, reconciliation, and self-actualization. More specifically, I seek to demonstrate how remembering can distinguish current ethnic American identity formations while also working to un-essentialize the ethnic American experience. In her essay, “Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom,” Barbara Frey Waxman explains that food memoirists “perform [an] auto-ethnographic role in reporting on their childhood food culture” (365). Through the examination of two very different pieces, “Cojimar, 1958,” from Eduardo Machado’s book, *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile’s Hunger for Home*, and “Kimchi Blues,” by Grace M. Cho, I will uncover the ways in which Machado and Cho, by performing the role of auto-ethnographer, specifically of their past experiences, are in fact engaging in and utilizing “a remarkably flexible set of discourses and practices for adapting voices, claiming citizenship, confronting grief . . . [and] resituating embodiment and sexuality” (Smith and Watson 165). They engage in these discourses and practices to better harmonize their cultural identities and American experiences, while also fighting hegemonic structures which seek to marginalize their existence. To begin these processes, they access very specific food memories from their early lives: those associated with smell.

In “Fragrant Flashbacks: Smells Rouse Early Memories,” Helen Fields reports on the more recent findings between memory and smell. One leading researcher in the field, Maria Larsson, after reading “a range of descriptions and stories from novelists like Marcel Proust and others,” turned to scientific explanations for the strong connections between smell and memory

in the literature she was reading; however, she found “very little scientific evidence” that “smells really do evoke emotional memories” (Fields). What was scientifically known was that “autobiographical memory peaks between the ages of 15 and 30,” and these memories are most often invoked by “visual and verbal clues” (Fields). It was not until Larsson’s subsequent work that she specifically proved the connection between memory and smell. She discovered that memories invoked by smell actually peak “around age 5” (Fields). And not only that, those memories evoked by smell can often be “more emotional and more vivid than memories brought up by visual or verbal clues” (Fields). This can be observed in the opening scene of Cuban American playwright Eduardo Machado’s food memoir, *Tastes Like Home: An Exile’s Hunger for Home*. The book begins with the chapter titled “Cojimar, 1958.” This chapter contains Machado’s earliest memories related to food, which he experienced as a very young boy in Cuba, before being exiled to America as part of Operación Pedro Pan in 1961.

In the opening scene of his book, Machado begins at daybreak, remembering what it was like to wake up to the smell of his grandmother’s coffee:

I awoke to the smell of boiling milk. Not 1% or 2% ... This milk had never touched a cardboard box. It had been freshly drawn, hours before, delivered at dawn from my grandmother’s small farm just outside of town...It was the milk boiling, the coffee brewing, and the quiet whispers that woke me up every morning. I would leave my room, go down the hall into the kitchen to sit at an expansive counter with twelve stools. My grandmother poured my coffee, topped it off with boiled milk, and added one, two, three teaspoons of Cuban sugar ... *Café con leche* with buttered toast is a true delicacy. It is so simple yet provides so much joy ... I was only five years old, but I knew one thing for sure. All I had

to do was dunk the bread into the cup. Chew, sip, and heaven in the morning was possible. (Machado 3)

This memory is extremely vivid and fondly felt, yet it happened to Machado decades beforehand, when he was only five years old. To account for his clarity, we need only turn to Larsson's research. She explains that while individuals are often less able to recall memories prompted by verbal and visual clues from such a young age, because the needed "brain structures ...are not fully developed" yet, olfactory-related memories, those having to do with smell and taste, can be permanently stored in our earliest years of life (Willander and Larsson). This is because chemosensory learning supported by the olfactory system is strongest when we are infants and young children, even in utero (Willander and Larsson). Before the brain increases in "neural complexity" as we age, we learn and store our earliest memories based on taste and smell (Willander and Larsson). While this can help explain *how* Machado remembers not only Cuca's boiling milk and freshly brewed Cuban coffee, but some of his other earliest Cuban food experiences, we must turn to other explanations to explore *why* he chooses to write about these things in the present time.

According to *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, "[R]emembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning..." (Smith and Watson 22). This means that while five-year-old Eduardo did drink Cuca's *café con leche* in the morning, it is the way he chooses to remember and write about it in the present that it becomes a conscious meaning-making act and a shaper of his current identity and ideals. In other words, the remembering, or more specifically, *how* the memory is remembered, "signifies and legitimates" Machado's "sense of self in distinction from

others” (Smith and Watson 2). A close examination of “Cojimar, 1958” reveals that by recalling some of his earliest food memories as a boy in Cuba, Machado is working to distinguish himself in two very specific ways, and through the distinguishing acts, re-create both his cultural and personal identities in the present time.

Immediately after recalling the smell of the boiling raw milk that woke his five-year-old self each morning, Machado remarks, “If it were in my apartment now it would be contraband, a smuggled delicacy, but then, the foamy, silky, still-warm sweetness was a familiar part of every day” (1). The sharp contrast he sets up between the milk that was available to him as a boy in Cuba, and the milk that is now available to him as an adult in the United States, works to distinguish his Cuban identity from mainstream American identity. It shows how something that was an integral part of everyday life in one place, Cuba in this example, is actually viewed as dangerous and illegal in another place -America. The illegal status of the unpasteurized raw milk in Machado’s American home, specifically in California, not only denies him and his exiled family the opportunity to continue an important everyday ritual, it denies them the agency to decide for themselves if the milk is safe or not. Cuca’s boiling of the milk not only suggests she is aesthetically concerned about the temperature of her *café con leche*, it also shows that she is concerned about her family’s health and safety. She is protecting her family by taking the precautionary measures of boiling the raw, unpasteurized milk. For those unfamiliar with raw milk, “The process of heating [it] above 161 degrees helps curb such illnesses as Tuberculosis” in addition to killing bacteria like salmonella and E.coli (Thomson). Yet in America, Cuca’s power and discretion as head matriarch of the family is stripped away. What’s more, her family members, including her grandson Eduardo, who is now an adult, are unable to carry on their cultural and familial traditions. In remembering this daily ritual in his writing, Machado engages

in “the reconstruction of repressed cultural identity,” which can help him and other marginalized individuals fight hegemonic structures (DeHay 29).

In “Narrating Memory,” Terry DeHay explains, “If marginalized cultures accept the dominant culture’s narratives as normative, they will be powerless to resist domination” (30). By working towards a “recuperation of residual cultural alternatives, as well as the recognition of the distortion of their history by the dominant culture,” individuals can find and create ways to resist domination either on their own or in collective groups (DeHay 30). These groups can even cross ethnic and racial lines, allowing marginalized people the opportunity to access multiple repressed cultural identities simultaneously. Interestingly, since the publication of Machado’s memoir, varying groups across the United States, including ethnic groups, have collectively fought against laws that ban the sale of raw milk. Of the fifty United States, twenty-nine of them, as of 2009, allow for some type of raw milk sales. More specifically, California is one of the few states that allows for “direct sales” from dairy farms, according to Assembly Bill No. 2505. Before this 2013-2014 bill passed, a fifty-one page report, the “Supplemental Report in Favor of Grade A Raw Milk,” was submitted to the state with the following passage: “Action against the law was initiated because the law was discriminatory and prejudicial, violated freedom of choice, etc., to minorities of racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and culinary preferences” (4). The movement to allow for the sale of raw milk was strengthened by the collective force of varying racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously marginalized individuals.

Another aspect of Machado’s remembering that resists domination is in his reflection on Cuca’s *teta*, the apparatus she uses to make her Cuban coffee. He writes:

With all the fuss over the machinery we use to make the so-called perfect brew today, I wonder why we don’t just keep it simple. Cuca did without automatic

drips, heatproof presses, or grind ‘n brew options. Instead she relied on her minimalist, functional gadget, her *teta*, nothing but a piece of cloth stitched around a metal hoop with a wooden handle. (Machado 2)

This passage shows that Machado is reflecting on the mass-consumption ideologies that mainstream America espouses. In *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*, Marilyn Halter explains that once the market became saturated with consumer products by the 1970s and 80s, companies realized they needed to change their marketing strategies. They soon discovered there was money to be made in products that defined ethnicity instead of erased or attempted to hide it (Halter 7-8). The next couple of decades saw a steady increase in the consumption of not only ethnically-related goods, but mainstream consumer products as well. However, as Halter also notes, by the twenty-first century, some ethnicized Americans increasingly came to associate "the modern life of material abundance" with "spiritual impoverishment" (12). Not only that, ethnic Americans are conscious of the fact that they are simultaneously objected to the unrelenting pressure to participate in mainstream consumerism as well. This is what Machado is acknowledging when he recalls that Cuca did not need fancy gadgets or a whole host of different machines to make her delicious café. In fact, he seems to also be suggesting that Cuca's "minimalist" gadget made better coffee than the "so-called perfect brew today" (Machado 2). Machado is, in his contrast between Cuca's *teta* and the plethora of modern coffee-making machinery, working towards a "positive recuperation of residual cultural alternatives, as well as the recognition of the distortion of ... history by the dominant culture" (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan 30). It is through the remembering of a food experience from his native culture that Machado then recalls the material culture involved, in this case, Cuca's *teta*. These types of memories can shape Machado's identity in the present time by suggesting, even encouraging,

alternative practices and ways of living that challenge the dominant consumer culture that is not only wasteful and excessive, but works to erase differences in a multicultural society by suggesting everyone must have the same, or some small variation, of products and appliances. While Machado uses the story of Cuca's *café con leche* to distinguish his current self from dominant mainstream American culture, he also, in the very same chapter, uses another meal from his young life in Cuba to distinguish himself from his own nuclear family.

After tenderly sharing the story of his five-year-old self's breakfast, he moves on to lunch. He says, "[T]he thing I liked the most about lunch was that it was the meal when the most choices were available... Would I dine at the table of my puritanical grandmother or down the hall with her wild-eyed husband? Perhaps ... cross the street to the home of my other grandparents" (Machado 4-5). Despite what seemed like a decadent breakfast, even if it was simple, the puritanical grandmother Machado speaks of just happens to be Cuca. One of the staples of Cuca's lunches was Newspaper Soup (Machado 6). Cuca originally got the recipe from a "newspaper in the 1930s," but when she "ripped the recipe from the paper, she missed the topmost portion" containing the actual name, so she just called it Newspaper Soup (Machado 5). Cuca's Newspaper Soup was "rich in fiber and nutrients" due to its key ingredients: "The waxy starch of *malanga*, the nutty thickness of *yuca*, and the sweetness and color of pumpkin" (Machado 5). He recalls how it was a "nutritive starter" and "familiar presence" at her lunch table. It might seem like Machado and his family would disagree about its flavor, the origin of the recipe, or even how often Cuca made it (he claims it was available every single day), but this is not the case. Machado and his mother disagree in their recollection of how often he ate it. Machado says he "remember[s] eating it nearly every day" (17). Meanwhile, his mother disagrees – she says he "refused it on many occasions" (Machado 17). By writing not just about

the soup itself, but this familial memory discrepancy, Machado is working to critique a schema that “fails to account for generational differences in the mediations of memory” (Smith and Watson 269). It is not necessary to ultimately decide who is right about how often five-year-old Eduardo ate the soup. It is important to instead, note the differences in memory as a way to analyze Machado’s *purpose* for remembering.

For Machado’s mother, the memory is part of her autobiographical storage and is cued by visual clues: she *saw* her son eating the soup. On the other hand, Machado’s memory of the soup is olfactory-related, making it “more emotional and more vivid than memories brought up by visual or verbal clues” (Fields). To revisit it in the present time is to engage in a “process of re-visioning that is essential to gaining control over one’s life and future” (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan 19). Machado is distinguishing himself from his family, and in particular, his mother, by choosing to remember things differently from her. Throughout his book he revisits many food memories from his life as a way to make peace with the turbulent periods between himself and his family as he broke away from their ideas of what it means to be a Cuban man in America. To be a singing, theater-loving, gay playwright was “fundamentally wrong” according to his parents and grandparents (Machado 180). In fact, as a teenager, it was something that got Eduardo sent to a psychiatrist – one his parents hoped would “get the singing fag right out” of him (Machado 181). But in the end, as an adult, he writes, “I am proud to say that even with all these influences, there is still one voice that comes through. This is my dish. My way” (Machado 354). Ultimately, Machado uses food memories not just to reclaim parts of his Cuban identity marginalized in America, but to claim all parts of himself: Cuban, American, gay, and artistic.

The theme of distinguishing oneself from both family and society in first-person ethnic American food writing can also be found in Grace M. Cho’s story, “Kimchi Blues.” Like

Eduardo, Grace and her mother's memories involving food are incredibly powerful because of the "strong connections between the hippocampus and the olfactory and emotional centers of the brain" (Allen 8). In other words, Cho also finds that she has several potent food memories associated with smell. However, unlike Machado, Cho does not find discrepancies between her memories and her mother's; in fact, she relies heavily on her mother's memories to craft her own story. Also unlike Machado, or more specifically, Machado's mother, Cho's mother's stories are highly charged with "an emotional connotation" (Willander and Larsson).

Whereas Machado begins "Cojimar, 1958" with his earliest food memory, Cho begins her "Kimchi Blues" at what seems like an end. She writes:

The week after my mother passed away, I stopped at a grocery store in Manhattan's Koreatown and bought a jar of kimchi ... a weekly habit during the ten years that she lived in New Jersey [I] had almost reached Penn Station before I remembered that my mother was dead. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk ... peered into my shopping bag at the kimchi and watched dark spots spread across the brown paper where my tears hit the bag. *Why did I buy this? I thought to myself ... I don't even like kimchi.* (Cho 53)

With the line, "I don't even like kimchi," Cho seems to be immediately distinguishing herself from her mother, but what we find by reading the entire story is that Cho is actually working to distinguish her two selves, the person she was before her mother died, and the person she is now that her mother is gone. She is also working to reconcile parts of her identity. She says, "For years I struggled with my "Korean identity," first as a biracial person, later as a Korean whose diet didn't include kimchi on a daily basis" (Cho 57-8).

In “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Fake Books,” Debra Shostak contends that when “humans use narrative to make sense of the past ... memory can serve as a kind of narrating subject, making coherent wholes out of ... fragments” (234). After beginning with the realization that her mother is dead and she has bought a jar of kimchi that she does not even like, Cho goes back in time to collect various fragments. More specifically, she sets out to collect, in first-person narrative form, various memories involving kimchi. She begins with the earliest memory she has about her mother. This memory is not known to her because she was physically present when it occurred; she knows it because it is the only story her mother would share with her about her life in Korea during the Korean War, before she came to America. Cho remarks, “In the absence of her storytelling, I dedicated years to researching civilian experiences and learned of ... the atrocities committed by soldiers on both sides ... The only time she ever volunteered a memory of the war, she told me a story about kimchi” (54). Her mother’s war story, a small fragment of her experiences during that time, begins when “her family fled their home” due to the ever-encroaching battle lines (Cho 54). But because of the “chaos of war,” her mother became “separated from the rest of her family,” yet somehow “made her way back to her family’s home” (Cho 54). She was only nine years old and was entirely on her own. The only food she could find was “a little rice left in the pantry” and a “big earthenware jar of kimchi” that she had to dig up from the backyard (Cho 54). It was the kimchi that “kept her alive” for “three seasons” (Cho 54). This memory on its own is powerful and important, but it takes on even greater importance once Cho quilts it together with two other kimchi stories that occur much later and on an entirely different continent.

The next two memories Cho chooses to recall and include in her story involve her when she was a child. First though, she provides some context by explaining how Korean food was not

only “scarce in America” during the 1970s when her mother immigrated, but her mother was the only person of Asian descent in her American husband’s hometown. She became, as Cho puts it, “a pioneer” and a “taboo-breaker” (55). She would drive for many miles and even utilize the postal system in an attempt to secure Korean foodstuffs so that she might make the only thing that could alleviate her homesickness – kimchi. Once her mother was able to buy these things, including *gochu garu*, brine shrimp, fermented soy paste, *baechu*, and fish sauce, she not only made kimchi for herself, she made it for each new Korean immigrant and orphan that moved to their town. Cho says, “When I was five or six, I had two Korean girl friends. The first was named Ellie ... Ellie’s mom was younger than my mother, which made my mom her *eonni*, or “older sister.” Upon their first meeting, my mother greeted her with a jar of homemade kimchi” (56). In this experience, Cho’s mother is distinguishing herself as the Korean authority in town; furthermore, Cho’s inclusion of this memory in her own larger story demonstrates that she is beginning to distinguish herself, not separate from her mother, but aligned with her. In other words, she is beginning to embrace what she calls her “Korean identity” (Cho 57). She does this by recalling the small role she played in her mother’s local diplomacy.

Grace calls to mind how the “arrival of another Korean woman” to her hometown gave her mother a reason “to expand her Korean cooking repertoire” (Cho 56). Because Korean food ingredients were hard to come by, she decided to go on “seaside foraging expeditions,” bringing young Grace with her (Cho 56). While Grace did not do much in terms of collecting the “clams and seaweed and the little oily fishes that Americans did not regard as food,” she was still part of the outing (Cho 56). Purposefully remembering this as an adult is a conscious act of reconciliation with her Korean-ness.

Cho's second girl friend was named Kay. Kay and her younger brother were orphans who did not speak any English. They were abandoned in their home country of South Korea and almost immediately sent to the United States. They spoke no English, were far from home in a foreign land, and had no idea what had happened to their mother. They were adopted by a white family and when they began to "exhibit strange behaviors" and cry for "no apparent reason," Cho's mother was called to speak to them and "evaluate the situation" since she was the only one in town who could communicate with them since Ellie and her mother had moved away (Cho 57). Cho remembers that when her mother returned home after that visit, she was "clucking her teeth and shaking her head" (57). She told her daughter and husband that the children saw their new adoptive mother making what they thought was kimchi, but it turned out to be sauerkraut instead. They became hysterical and inconsolable, but Cho's mother knew they were "Aigu, dap-dap-eu-rah!" (Cho 57). In other words, "the weight of their emotions had become too much to bear," so Cho's mother set to work immediately making the children their own ceramic jar of kimchi. Cho remembers that it was the only time she ever saw her mother cry. Again Cho chooses to recall a kimchi memory that speaks to the connection between food and home, and food's ability to cure, or at least help in a small way, homesickness.

By taking these three separate memories involving her mother and kimchi, Cho is attempting to make meaning from them and not only connect them to herself, but rediscover who she is now that her mother is gone. Shostak explains, "Memory's ability to engender knowledge is ... significant in the development of a multiethnic historical record ... it must derive from at least two places, locales that are ... often great distance from one another" (234). In the physical absence of her mother, Cho attempts to distinguish who she is – both Korean and American. In doing so, she must make connections between her mother's memory of Korea and her own

memories as a Korean American girl. Kimchi is certainly the link because it is not only her mother's story, Cho has her own olfactory memories of kimchi from a very young age. In fact, as she wraps up "Kimchi Blues," Cho says, "I will admit that for a long time, I had a lukewarm relationship with kimchi ... but then my mother died and I started to keep it in the fridge" (Cho 57-8). What Cho reveals here is not just the fact that kimchi, a food item, and Korean identity are deeply intertwined, but that she was struggling with her ethnic identity up until her mother's death. In fact, her very writing, or remembering, in "Kimchi Blues" can be read as a way to piece together not just separate kimchi stories, but the pieces of herself.

Like Machado, Cho reaches as far back in her memory as she can to make the memories her own and define her identity in the present time. And in doing so, she discovers something in her mind she did not know was there. At the very end of her piece, she writes:

One night shortly after my mother's sudden death, I lay in bed doubting my capacity to live ... I began to drift off and a scene from my early childhood flashed beneath the surface of sleep. I am seated in a high chair, watching my mother. She stands at the kitchen sink ... rinsing a soft leaf of fermented cabbage ... I can see her slim nut-brown hands in great detail ... They work swiftly to remove the heat from the kimchi. She brings the little pieces to me and feeds me with her fingers...She is smiling, pleased ... I have already developed a taste for kimchi.
(Cho 58)

In recalling this, Cho discovers that she has a kimchi story of her own! It is not a memory borrowed from her mother, nor is it a memory in which she is simply an observer. In this kimchi memory, Grace is the main character. By remembering it, she finds that she too has a kimchi that can save her life. Though, instead of eating her life-saving kimchi, she will simply remember it.

Machado and Cho both demonstrate how remembering food-related experiences can allow for personal discovery, reconciliation, and self-actualization. They also provide a glimpse into the various ways ethnic Americans can use food memories in very specific, but highly individualized ways, to shape current identity. While some individuals might use the act of remembering to reconcile their in-group identities, others use food-related memories to distance or demark themselves from family or familial culture. Additionally, some authors use memory to align themselves with mainstream American ideas and ways of life, or to make peace with their hybridized identities. Ultimately, the purpose and value in examining the food memories of a variety of ethnic American writers is to un-essentialize the ethnic American experience by exploring and appreciating the many forms those experiences take.

CHAPTER 3: TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT: SHAPING IDENTITY THROUGH FOOD CONSUMPTION IN “CANDY AND LEBENEH” AND “EATING THE HYPHEN”

Continuing the exploration of the link between food and identity, I now shift from examining the role of memory, to the role of eating. Just as people can use past food memories in very specific and individualized ways to construct current identities, so can they use the act of eating, or, in some cases, not eating. What one chooses to eat, or not to eat, can be a conscious identity-shaping act that provides opportunities to navigate hybridity and exert personal agency through the creation of liminal spaces. In the context of ethnic American first-person food writings, liminal spaces are mealtimes. In other words, mealtimes become “interstitial passage[s] between fixed identifications,” and choosing to eat or not to eat “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). The freedom, even if imperfect, from imposed hierarchies, can provide opportunities to come to terms with the complexities associated with ethnic, cultural, and racial identities while also allowing individuals the opportunity to reject food items that are associated with a particular group. Examining what eating signifies, in “*Candy and Lebeneh*,” by Diana Abu-Jaber, and “*Eating the Hyphen*,” by Lily Wong, not only allows for the opportunity to explore these acts, but by contrasting these two literary works, we can continue to un-essentialize ethnic eating experiences, and by extension, ethnic Americans. For example, while Diana initially uses eating to distance herself from her Jordanian father and the Jordanian parts of herself, Lily uses the eating of a very specific meal to come to terms with her rigid ideas about what it means to be an “authentic” Chinese American. Both women, as we will see, use eating to “merge seemingly contradictory qualities into a unified whole” (Dalessio 16).

In Diana Abu-Jaber's "*Candy and Lebeneh*," part of her food memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, Diana and her father's disagreements have reached a fever pitch. While her father, Bud, wants a diminutive, obedient Jordanian girl, Diana wants to be an independent American teenager – more like the kids she goes to high school with. As Diana's friends and classmates get to go on dates, make telephone calls, and daydream about who they might marry when they grow up, Diana, under Bud's dominion, is not allowed to do any of these things; however, to his great dismay, and even fury, she does not quietly accept this. She refuses to be like her cousins in Jordan: docile, tranquil, and limpid (Abu-Jaber 183). She uses her voice to express her discontent towards Bud's domineering attitude, and as a result, the fights between them "roll like thunder" through their house (Abu-Jaber 182). Bud feels certain that the United States is to blame for Diana's behavior, or what she calls, her "whole adolescence" (Abu-Jaber 182). He wants his daughter to be his idea of a good Jordanian girl, not a bad American young woman. Since, in Bud's mind, Diana's desire for independence is the fault of her peers and American society at-large, he resorts to threats. He tells her that he will send her "back home to Jordan" to live with his Auntie Aya who will straighten her out "a hundred percent" (Abu-Jaber 182). Luckily for Diana, just when Bud threatens to send her away to live with their relatives, her high school guidance counselor informs her that she is eligible, due to the amount of credits she has earned, to skip her last year of high school thereby and attend college a year early. She jumps at the chance to get out of Bud's house, even though he decides where she will attend. He chooses "the State University of New York in Oswego, thirty miles up the road," where her aunt and uncle teach (Abu-Jaber 213). Despite her lack of choice, she says, "I've become convinced that college is where my life will begin" (Abu-Jaber 213). Ultimately she is right; the life she wants to create for herself does begin at college, just outside of her dormitory's dining hall.

At college, her parents have paid for her to eat “a year’s worth of breakfast, lunch, and dinner” at what she calls, the “loathsome dormitory dining hall” (Abu-Jaber 216). It may even be worse than “loathsome.” She says, it is “food misery” caused by the “en masse cafeteria-style meals,” which include “glutinous soups, curling gray steaks, and tissue salads,” not to mention the breakfasts that have her worried about getting trichinosis (Abu-Jaber 216). Because of the depressing and unappetizing food in the dining hall, so unlike Bud’s deliciously fresh Jordanian food she was used to eating at home, Diana decides to skip meals, and instead, snack “liberally at the Sweet Shoppe” where she works (Abu-Jaber 216). In fact, she says she begins “living on candy” (Abu-Jaber 216). While it is the unappealing nature of the dining hall food that leads Diana to dine instead at the Sweet Shoppe, her voracious candy eating actually becomes an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” which “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). It is in this space that Diana creates for herself that she begins her journey of self-discovery and self-exploration.

According to *Sweets: A History of Candy*, by Tim Richardson, “Sweets have always been the currency of children” (54). He continues, “Children first learn the joys of ownership through sweets ... which are indubitably and irreversibly theirs, like nothing else in their lives” (54). Though Richardson is probably referring to children much younger than Diana, at sixteen, and away from Bud for the first time, she is like a child with her newfound freedom. The first step in claiming this freedom comes when she shreds, and lets blow from her hands, the “list of rules” Bud made her “write out on a legal pad” before she left home (Abu-Jaber 221-22). However, the truest expression of her personal freedom is evident in her food choices, or more specifically, in her candy eating and candy-like coffee drinking. If “Sweets accompany the rites and rituals associated with belonging,” Diana is participating in these rituals in an effort to belong to

something of her own creation (Richardson 54). It is her candy eating, and the coffee sweetened “into candy” that she drinks at the Lowlife Café (the “inverse” of her father’s “blunt, black Arabic coffee”) that signals her independence (Abu-Jaber 223). She says it is nothing “Bud knows about or would approve of” (Abu-Jaber 223). She also says that her time in the café “is a creature of my own invention – a new, seductive country” (Abu-Jaber 223). If home represents Jordan, and the dormitory dining hall, with its “en masse cafeteria-style meals,” represents mainstream America, then the Sweet Shoppe and Lowlife café are a liminal space between them – Diana’s own country. Even though Diana’s eating represents her independence and efforts to define her own identity, two things arise from that eating that she did not anticipate.

Diana finds that “barely a month into the [first] semester” she feels a subtle homesickness and begins to “crave [her] father’s cooking” (Abu-Jaber 218, 223). Therefore, “two or three times a month” she takes a bus ride home so she might eat Bud’s “big special meals ... roasted chicken, shish kabob, grape leaves” (Abu-Jaber 217). However, late at night after the great meals have been eaten and everyone is in bed, she is overtaken by extreme bouts of nausea and vomiting. No one else in her family is made sick by the food; it is Diana alone who is ill. She says, “I consider that it might be psychosomatic, since it happens only when I return home” (Abu-Jaber 217). Interestingly, there are not even fights between her and Bud any longer which we might point to as the reason for her rejection of his food. In fact, she notes that the “sizzling stress” between them is gone (Abu-Jaber 218). They have become so calm and genial towards one another, Diana finds herself asking about her father’s early life in Jordan with true interest and curiosity. If we cannot point to the fights between Diana and Bud as the reason for her rejection, or vomiting, of his food, what might the reason be?

I suggest that even though they are kind to one another on the surface, Diana is still rejecting a Jordanian identity, which the food represents, because to her, being Jordanian, or even Jordanian American, means being the Jordanian girl Bud wants her to be. In other words, her only conceptions of what it means to be Jordanian are not just Bud's descriptions, but her memories of her cousins in Amman. She sees them in her mind, girls who are more like employees than daughters (Abu-Jaber 183). She remembers how they "kept their voices low and discreet" around their father (Abu-Jaber 183). They were regimented, tranquil, and limpid, and Bud never seemed to "notice the expression on their faces" (Abu-Jaber 183). Because of this, Diana is still trying to prove to Bud, and to herself, that she "is American!" (Abu-Jaber 182). Interestingly, even though we know she is rejecting the standardized mass-produced American food at the university cafeteria, she is in fact still eating American-coded foods in her candy and coffee, even though she was trying not to. This results in a physical transformation she did not intend on happening.

She says, "By midterm exams, I'm living on candy ... I start to lose weight. My tongue feels stripped and scalded ... my teeth ache, my skin looks ghoulish, and there are hollow blue crescents under my eyes ... I sit in my poetry class, my blood fizzy and acidic" (Abu-Jaber 216). It might be easy to pass over this passage with the idea that Diana is simply looking pale and thin from eating too much candy, but her choice of "goulish" is deeply telling. In "The Mythical Ghoul in Arabic Culture," Ahmed Al-Rawi points out that historically, ghouls find their roots in Arabic culture. In fact, the Arabic ghoul predates Islam, and the American word 'ghoul' comes from the Arabic word *غول* *ghūl* (Al-Rawi 45). An interesting link can be drawn between a passage in Abu-Jaber's writing and Al-Rawi's research: it is while sitting in a poetry class that Diana narrates her ghoulish transformation and "many Arabs (especially Bedouins) narrated tales

and recited poetry that featured or mentioned the ghoul” (Al-Rawi 47). As we know, Diana’s relatives in Jordan are Bedouin and eating with them are some of her earliest memories from when she lived there. These links between Bedouins, poetry, and Arabic ghouls speak to the parts of Diana that are undeniably Jordanian. Though she tried to resist this, even yelling at Bud, “My family isn’t Jordanian,” it really is, and her candy eating, or rather, her independence, has simply brought her around to the fact (Abu-Jaber 182). But because she has come to this on her own, she is more open and accepting going forward. I argue that it is for this reason that the flyer for the Jewish Foods Day, hosted by university’s Jewish student organization, Hillel, catches her attention.

When Diana first sees the flyer for Jewish Foods Day, she is drawn in by the menu, or what she calls, “the Trinity: falafel, hummus, and baba ghanouj” (Abu-Jaber 218-19). She is shocked and excited because she “never heard of anyone outside” of her own family who served these foods. She is also reminded of something her Auntie Aya said to her about food and culture last time she came to visit from Jordan. She can’t remember if food belongs to a nation, a culture, or neither, but she is intrigued enough to want to attend, and eat at, the event. Like many teenagers though, she does not want to go alone, so she tries to “convince” her dorm mates to attend with her. Not surprisingly for the time, 1972, most of the girls are completely uninterested in eating things they consider strange. Not only that, Diana has come to realize that the American girls she idolized and wanted to be while still in high school are “finicky, hothouse flowers” who are only interested in putting on make-up, doing their hair, and painting their nails (Abu-Jaber 219). Finally, she convinces her two roommates, Annie and Courtney, in addition to one Jewish friend, Elise, to go with her.

When the girls first arrive, Diana notes that the food is not only being served in the “cafeteria in the student union,” the types of on-campus dining locations she has been avoiding, but there are “orange heat lamps” keeping things warm (Abu-Jaber 219). They press on though, making plates then finding a table to sit at. Once they are confronted with what looks like American cafeteria-style Middle Eastern fare, Courtney rolls a falafel around on her plate, refusing to eat. Watching this, Diana wants to reach out and slap her, but she must admit, even to herself, the food is “lumpen and uninspiring,” and worse, it is dry and dull (Abu-Jaber 220). But then, something happens that changes how Diana sees the food. Courtney, aside from her bad attitude towards the food, suggests that there is no point in getting worked up about food anyway. In fact, she lets Diana and Elise know, in no uncertain terms, that there is nothing special about food. Period. Diana, “suddenly reinvigorated,” scoops up a hard-looking falafel with her pita bread and surprisingly finds that it tastes of not just any chickpeas, but the “golden . . . sun-soaked air of Jordan” (Abu-Jaber 221). She says with more emotion than she has shown about anything else since she arrived at school, “The taste is clear and direct as emotion, glowing inside me, keenly edged with longing – a wallop of a feeling” (Abu-Jaber 221). In that moment, Diana finds herself, specifically her Jordanian self, in the food.

Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, claim that “[T]hose who are older when they migrated, hang on to their foodways longer than the second generation, and children are often observed to adapt first to American foodways” (40). This certainly describes Bud: he is an immigrant who has clung, at all cost, to the food of his beloved Jordan. In fact, he cooks it for his family every day, but this passage does not describe Diana. She does not readily or eagerly adapt to the standardized mass-produced American foodways; in fact, when she goes away to college,

she outright rejects it. However, we know that she does partake in the American candy and Americanized coffee. While she did try to deny the Jordanian parts of herself, especially in the presence of her domineering father, on her own, when given the time and space she needed to decide for herself who she is, she begins to accept this part of herself once she eats the food at the Jewish Foods Day. In post-colonial theory, a liminal space is of course one in which “cultural change may occur,” but it is also a space where “strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated ... a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 130). The candy and coffee act as a liminal space for Diana. They give her some time and distance from Bud and they also allow her the opportunity to look at the American food, and All-American girls like Courtney, without the rose-colored glasses she had on while in high school (Abu-Jaber 225). While choosing not to eat allowed Diana the time and opportunity to merge contradictory qualities of herself, sometimes it is the act of eating that allows a person with a hyphenated identity to come to terms with who they are.

In “Eating the Hyphen,” Lily Wong explores a very specific eating experience in what she says is her “pursuit to try and discover who I am” (Wong 43). She begins her story with a most recent discovery: in thinking about who she is, she not only thought of food, she specifically thought of food in terms of what she considers to be truly authentic. She believes that for a person to be an authentic “Chinese American,” they must relish “authentic Chinese food” (Wong 43). More specifically, according to Lily, to be truly authentic, a Chinese American must eat “strictly what your grandmother cooks for you,” and not what can be purchased at a place like Panda Express (Wong 43). In fact, she has been known to inform her friends and acquaintances that they don’t even know what “real” Chinese food is (Wong 43). She, in contrast, prides herself in not only avoiding such abhorrent places like Panda Express, she puts

great stock in her traceable Cantonese background, in addition to her eager consumption of “pig’s ears and fungus of all shapes and sizes,” and “jellyfish and sea cucumber” (Wong 43). Her greatest gastronomical love though is dumplings, but not just any dumplings; she loves Chinese dumplings, also known as pot stickers or *jiaozi*. Unfortunately, and to her great consternation, she has come to realize that she has actually Americanized her favorite “authentic” Chinese meal.

According to “Festive Food and Its Fate,” it is not overly boastful to say that “Chinese cuisine is one of the greatest in the world.” This is due, in part, to the incredible diversity and variety of cuisines, as well as the fact that “few other cultures are as food-oriented as Chinese culture” (“Festive”). *Jiaozi*, or Chinese dumplings, have a long history with some archaeological evidence suggesting they have been eaten for over one thousand years or more. While they have a long history of being consumed during Chinese New Year, because they resemble gold or silver ingots that bring “fortune and luck,” they can be, and are, eaten any time of the year (Wang et al.). In fact, “dumplings have always been regarded as the best food that people can ever have” (“Festive”). Lily not only stresses how much she loves to eat dumplings, she shares what she considers to be the best way to cook them which is pan fried. She also feels very strongly about, and goes to great lengths to describe, what kinds of skins, or outer layers, the perfect dumplings should have.

She says, “Bad skin equals bad dumpling ... Until my dying day, I will vouch that the skin is the make-or-break feature of a dumpling” (Wong 40). Lily emphasizes that the skins must be “thick. I mean really thick” (Wong 40). Once she establishes her belief in eating “authentic” Chinese food, how much she loves dumplings, her desired cooking method for preparing those dumplings, then explains her favorite dumpling with just the right skin, she reveals the source of

her intense distress: she not only uses a fork and knife, in addition to her chopsticks, to eat them, she puts American ketchup on them!

We can safely assume, before Lily even tells us, that the fork, knife, and ketchup are not something considered “authentic” by her or anyone she lives with. In fact, her grandmother makes a face “filled with disgust” when she sees Lily rush to the refrigerator to retrieve her ketchup bottle before a meal of dumplings (Wong 42). Once she has her utensils and ketchup in hand, she informs us that she performs the following steps before actually putting something in her mouth: first, she shakes the ketchup and squirts some on to the same plate as the dumplings. She remarks that she doesn’t want any red ketchup water to ruin her whole process. Second, using her knife and fork, she “cut[s] each dumpling in half width-wise” being sure to go all the way through the bottom skin (Wong 42). Third, using the backside of her fork, she pushes down on the outside of “each dumpling half until the meat abruptly pops out” (Wong 42). Finally, only once the dumplings have been cut and the skins are separated from the meat middles, she picks up her chopsticks. Only then does she dip each piece in ketchup and eat. If Lily’s grandmother is the standard of authenticity in terms of the food in her life, it is not just her grandmother’s disgust towards the ketchup that has Lily feeling guilty; there is also a discrepancy between the way she and her grandmother eat them. Lily’s grandmother, when eating a dumpling, leaves it whole, dips it in black vinegar, then “takes small bites ... careful not to lose any of that broth from inside” (Wong 42). Meanwhile, the broth from Lily’s dumplings has either completely run out of her halves onto her plate, or, it has spattered all of her clothes and the table (Wong 41). This is of course because she has cut and smashed them. It is only then, after preparing her ketchup and dissecting her dumplings, that she eats each one in just three ketchup-soaked bites. There is no knife, no fork, no smashing and separating, and certainly no dipping in ketchup for

her authentic grandmother. It is of great interest though that it is not just the direct contrast with her grandmother's dumpling eating that has Lily feeling "less" Chinese. She has long "unabashedly criticized and ridiculed Americanized Chinese food for being fake and something of a disgrace" (Wong 42). Indeed, this criticism has been openly extended to those who *eat* what she considers to be "fake" Chinese food. This is why Wong feels so perplexed about her "grand mutilation" of one of the most well-known and traditional Chinese fares (Wong 42). Interestingly, embedded in her story and descriptions are hints as to why she might Americanize her dumplings in the first place.

Lily explains that she has been "ostracized by American culture for looking "different" (Wong 43). Because of this treatment, she says that she enthusiastically embraced her Chinese heritage; it gave her "something larger to cling to" when she felt alone and set apart from the white people she grew up around in the suburbs of Boston (Wong 43). However, Lily also mentions that she felt apart from the people in Chinatown who speak "the language – whether Cantonese or Mandarin" because they "seemed so much more Chinese" than she "ever could be" (Wong 43). This double bind creates a conflict within her, making her feel marginalized and alone. This feeling can be shared by other ethnic Americans, and in this in-between, or liminal space, cultural hybridization can occur. By acknowledging her unique dumpling eating, Lily seems to be at the cusp of exploring not only her hybrid identity, but the ways in which that identity has been shaped by her many life experiences, many of which were beyond her control.

One way she begins to explore this is by examining her idea of the perfect wrapper for her dumplings. She insists that the skin must be "thick. I mean really thick" (Wong 40). This brings to mind the American idiom 'thick-skinned'. A person who is thick-skinned is not easily offended or has the ability to ignore criticism or even harsh, unfair remarks. Lily has had to

become thick-skinned in a country where she has been “ostracized by American culture for looking “different” (Wong 43). Also worth noting is that it might not just be around mainstream or white Americans that Lily has had to be thick-skinned. Perhaps she been ostracized or even criticized by Chinese Americans who were born and raised in China. We know for a fact that she has had to, in the very least, endure her own grandmother’s disapproval of the way she would like to eat her food.

Another way we might assess her hybridity is in her description, or lack thereof, of the filling in her dumplings. She claims that the fillings of her “authentic” dumplings are “peripheral” (Wong 41). How can the filling, one of only two parts of a dumpling, not be important? She brusquely claims that the filling is just “standard” (Wong 41). She does add that this standard filling might contain something called “Chinese vegetables,” but she has “never been entirely sure” what those vegetables are (Wong 41). Additionally, she seems nonplussed about finding out. After cross-referencing many sources, there does not seem to be a “standard” filling for Chinese dumplings. In fact, authentic *jiaozi* can contain many ingredients, including things like mutton, chili peppers, medicinal materials, celery, leeks, cabbage, mushrooms, fish, beef, pork, chicken, shrimp, scallops, tofu, garlic, chives, scallions, and more. Even if specific fillings are not added “in order to symbolize certain wishes,” which they often are, the dumpling itself holds great symbolism in Chinese cuisine and culture (Wang et al.). In fact, according to Annie Wu, author of “Chinese Dumplings,” “[E]very part of the dumpling demonstrates a part of Chinese culture” (Wu). If the filling does not matter much to Lily, and she has never even bothered to find out exactly what is inside the ones she like to eat, then it is not just her method of eating dumplings that makes her more Americanized than she wants to admit, at first. This is because her disinterest about the ingredients actually makes her more like the people she

criticizes for eating at Panda Express; those people who cannot discern between the ingredients in truly authentic cuisine and the ingredients in Americanized Chinese food.

Another interesting aspect of Wong's story is not only the alterations she makes in how she eats dumplings, but how she obtains them. She reveals that they are not made by hand by her or someone in her family, namely her grandmother, they are purchased frozen in "plastic bags of fifty each" (Wong 41). She admits that according to her previously held ideas about authentic food and identity, this "store-bought and frozen" purchase is "strange" (Wong 41). And while she fears that admitting these things to those who know her might make her "less" Chinese, in their eyes and her own, ultimately, in her "pursuit" to discover who she truly is, she must try to "come to strange terms" with the deep contradiction between her beliefs and her eating habits. Eventually what Lily is starting to discover, through the analyzation of her dumpling eating, is that, in part, her strong feelings about "authentic" Chinese food eating and Chinese American identity are in response to the racism she has felt in America. Being able to explore her personal enjoyment of cut-apart dumplings drenched in ketchup allows her to make peace with the fact that she is both Chinese and American; she is Chinese-American, and for her, embracing that hyphen means "Eating the Hyphen."

While many ethnicized Americans find that they have been relegated to a marginalized position in a binaristically structured society, or what Bhabha calls being between two "fixed identifications," where one of these identifications is always dominant over the other, some, like Abu-Jaber and Wong, have discovered eating, or mealtimes, to be liminal spaces that allow for the opportunity to "merge seemingly contradictory qualities in a unified whole" (Bhabha 5; Dalessio 16). These "interstitial passage[s] between fixed identifications" not only allowed Diana the opportunity to come to terms with her Jordanian identity, it allowed Lily the chance to see

her hyphenated selfhood and work to harmonize it with her strong beliefs (Bhabha 4). Life in the United States for many ethnic Americans means life in a borderland – between one’s ethnic familial culture and dominant mainstream culture. To inhabit this mental and even physical space means making decisions, both conscious and unconscious, about who to be, or more specifically, what to eat or not to eat. “Participation in and identification with a culture ... is not achieved instantaneously through an accident at birth. Enculturation is a process of becoming” (Brown and Mussell 195). This “becoming” is not only done through what we choose to eat or not to eat; as we progress to chapter three, we will see that cooking and other food prepping activities are also spaces for personal discovery, rediscovery, creation, and erasure.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHEN COOKING SPEAKS: MAINTAINING, REINFORCING, AND RESTORING ETHNIC IDENTITY THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF COOKING IN SHOBA NARAYAN'S *MONSOON DIARY*

So far, I have explored how both recalling food memories and eating food can be opportunities for claiming, reclaiming, harmonizing, and even rejecting aspects of identity. While both remembering and eating are important identity-forming experiences, it is cooking, food acquisition, preparation, and presentation, that just might allow for the greatest amount of either, autonomy and flexibility, or, as we will soon see, stringency and cohesiveness. The reason for this is cooking's innate ability to serve as a holistic informational system. In other words, "the cooking of a society is a language" (qtd. in Brown and Mussell 12). Using a structuralist approach, Brown and Mussell examine the ways in which culinary traditions serve as linguistic systems, similar to the spoken languages of the world. To "decode" a culinary tradition is to discover a "deep structure of meaning" (Brown and Mussell 12). This means that on the surface, cooking can appear to simply be the preparation of materials needed by the body to satisfy energy and nutritional demands; however, underneath, or encoded in the cooking, are significant cultural messages. The messages that are transmitted by various cooking-related activities range from information concerning "hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions" to the "pattern of social relationships" within a group (Brown and Mussell 12). Ultimately, while cooking can be fluid and experimental, allowing individuals the opportunity to create new facets of personal selfhood, it can, more than remembering and eating, maintain and reinforce one's ethnic identity. In this chapter, I will show how two cooking experiences in Shoba Narayan's food memoir, *Monsoon Diary*, not only contain the five components of a cooking language, but that cooking language is used to maintain, reinforce, and restore ethnic identity, particularly when living in the United States.

Not only do I agree with Brown and Mussell that cooking is a language, I argue that it can contain the same key components as a spoken language. These components include expression, meaning, context, recursion, and displacement. According to *Language: Its Structure and Use*, by Edward Finegan, the first three parts, expression, meaning, and context, are known as the “faces” of a language (Finegan 6). This means they are the basic building blocks of a communication system. Expression “encompasses words, phrases, and sentences,” while meaning is what those words, phrases, and sentences stand for (Finegan 6). Context is the social situation in which the “expression is uttered” (Finegan 6). Context can change the meaning of an expression thereby giving some expressions multiple meanings. In a cooking language, I propose that expression includes food ingredients, spices, and cooking supplies. Meaning can be what a particular cooking act represents and the messages it transmits. And finally, context includes how a dish or meal is arranged and served and the reason for the cooking. Context can also include for who the food is cooked. Also important in understanding a language is recursion and displacement.

Recursion is the ability to follow a procedure based on a written or spoken set of rules, guidelines, or instructions (Finegan 12). In a cooking language, I suggest that recursion is not simply the use of verbal or written recipes to recreate a dish or meal; the meal itself can be a literal adherence to a cultural, religious, or familial rule or instruction. For example, during Passover, a roasted lamb, “set on a fire over the gas burner” is “a symbol of the animal sacrifices practiced by early Hebrews” (Ehrlich 207). Since the destruction of the Holy Temple, when literal sacrifices were replaced with symbolic sacrifices and prayer, acts such as these maintain the continuity of the religion and culture by remembering the past, acting out important rituals in the present, and communicating to future generations the importance of restoring “the balance of

nature and community” (Waskow 32). In Judaism, this balance refers to a “just and conscientious relationships between the earth and society” which is a part of an important “continuum of [the] orderliness in God’s universe” (Waskow 32). Each time the lamb is cooked in this way during Passover, both the cooking and the presentation demonstrate past ideas and events while also renewing a hope for the future.

Displacement, on the other hand, is the human ability, through the use of expression, meaning, and context, to communicate something that is not currently in existence in the present time (Finegan 13). This can include communicating past ideas or events, in addition to communicating hopes, desires, and concerns for the future. Displacement can not only preserve a group’s history and genealogy, it can be also influence future generations as well. An example of displacement in a cooking language includes a food we actually examined in chapter two: *jiaozi*. Though dumplings can be eaten at any time, as demonstrated by Lily, when eaten in a particular context such as Chinese New Year, they become wishes and prayers for a future filled with good luck (Wu). Before looking at the five aspects of Narayan’s cooking language, and how that cooking language shapes and maintains her ethnic identity while she is living in the United States, it is imperative to understand the role of food in the Hindu religion.

In Hinduism, the ultimate goal is to “make humans one with the Universal Spirit or Supreme Being” (Kittler and Sucher 53). To achieve this, followers strive for personal purity and self-control. To achieve and maintain purity, there are “elaborate rules regarding food and drink,” as well as guidelines for regulating “appetites and cravings” (Kittler and Sucher 53). The reason for this lies in the belief that particular foods not only represent the Supreme Being, Brahman, but that they are a literal part of him and the “ultimate reality,” explains R.S. Khare, in his introduction to *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and*

Buddhists (5). Therefore, Hinduist beliefs are not just spoken or written in sacred texts, they are encoded in the cooking language of the followers. What is chosen and prepared during the cooking process is both an offering to the Supreme Being and the active “formation of a Hindu’s inner being” (Khare, Introduction 5). Transformation of the inner self is essential to achieving a better position in the next life (Khare, Introduction 5). Therefore, Hinduism has “elaborate rules regarding food and drink” (Kittler and Sucher 53). Also in accordance with Hinduism, all gods and goddesses are “partial manifestations” of the Supreme Being, so adherents are free to worship Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, or any of their avatars or manifestations (Kittler and Sucher 53). This means there are many different sects of Hinduism in India. When these differences are combined with the differences between caste status, as well as regional cultural differences, cooking languages can vary widely. Narayan’s specific ethnic group not only worships Vishnu, she is also of the Brahmin caste and is originally from the Southern Indian state of Kalara. The cooking language of her South Indian Brahmin Vaishnavite family transmits very specific religious and cultural information about social structure, cultural heritage, history, and religious beliefs. And while her memoir is full of many different personal and familial food experiences, two very specific instances of cooking demonstrate the ways in which her family’s cooking language is used to ensure the continuation and maintenance of her ethnic identity while she is in America.

The first cooking experience is actually a test, one she does not know she will have to undertake, let alone pass, when her chapter, “A Feast to Decide a Future” begins. At this point, Shoba is in her final year of higher secondary school, or high school, as it is known in the United States. She is preparing for what she calls the “ultracompetitive” process of getting into college (Narayan 99). While she wants to attend Women’s Christian College (WCC) in Madras for her

undergraduate degree, she has her heart and mind set on earning her graduate degree from an American university. Of course, she knows that this is more than a delicate subject for her parents – she is already prepared for their outright ban of her idea, yet she refuses to relinquish her desire. As a Brahmin family, the caste of priests and academics, with a professor as a head of the household, Shoba knows her parents hold education in high esteem, but she also knows they will not agree to let their daughter attend a school in a place they believe to be a “promiscuous society” that is full of “muggers and rapists” (Narayan 103-4). Because she will not give up her wish, she decides to announce her request on the day her brother, Shyam, is going to tell their parents that he wants to be a merchant marine. Shoba knows that Shyam’s announcement will be a devastating blow to their mother and father. The expectation is that their only son will go to college for medicine, law, or engineering (Narayan 99). Shoba hopes that in comparison to Shyam’s announcement, she just might have a chance at gaining their approval of hers. Not surprisingly though, she does not get what she seeks, at least not at first. In fact, when she tells them about her desire for an American graduate education, it produces “a worse reaction than Shyam’s announcement” (Narayan 100). This interesting experience is our first indication that in Shoba’s culture and family, the female is the culture bearer.

As Shoba tries to argue with her parents that America is the only place where she can receive the specialized kind of education in psychology that she wants, her parents only get angry and tell her “You are not going to America, and that’s final” (Narayan 100). When she continues to try and bring up the subject, her father ends the conversation by telling her to “Get a bachelor’s degree first” (Narayan 100). Shoba knows that her father hopes she will forget about her plan, but the opposite happens once she becomes her university’s cultural secretary during her final year at WCC. She says that during that year, the “most interesting boys and girls” she

met all had “one thing in common: they all wanted to go to America for graduate school” (Narayan 103). Even more convicted, she applies, behind her parents’ backs, for the coveted Foreign Fellow position at Mount Holyoke. The Foreign Fellow scholarship is only given to one student a year from WCC and Shoba gets it (Narayan 103). It is a full-ride scholarship, so the only thing she needs from her parents is the money for the plane ticket, and of course, their approval.

Even though Shoba’s parents know to be a foreign fellow at Mount Holyoke is a great honor and opportunity, and they proudly claim to all of their friends and family that she was awarded this great honor, they still refuse her. She tries to convince them that the education will be unparalleled, but they reply “But can you promise that you’ll come back just the way you left us?” (Narayan 105) She is not quite sure what they mean by this, and she becomes even more bewildered when her mother says, “Get married and then go to Timbuktu if you want” (Narayan 105). This is our second indication that Shoba’s responsibilities differ greatly from those of her brother. In fact, in her bewilderment to her parent’s refusal, and her desperation to go to America, she seeks out the support of Shyam. Since she is supporting him in his decision to be a sailor, instead of an engineer, lawyer, or doctor, she assumes he will take her side. Unfortunately, and to her astonishment, he does not. When she confronts him about this he tells her, “It isn’t just about education” (Narayan 104). When she presses him further, he says, it is “about juggling cultures, straddling lifestyles” and “questioning the values that you’ve grown up with” (Narayan 104). Finally, she begins to understand what her family is concerned about: it is not just that she will forget her identity in a land so far away and so different than the one she grew up in, it is that she will not continue the strong line of female culture bearers in her family.

Once Shoba understands this, she decides to continue to ask with even more conviction since she knows she can remain true to her ethnicity and family while earning her degree. It is at the lunch party before her brother's departure for the marines that her uncle comes up with an idea that will finally give her a chance to prove she can come back the same daughter that left. While eating the elaborate celebratory meal her mother prepared, her uncle says, "Cook us a vegetarian feast like this one. If we like it, you can go to America. If we don't, you stay here" (Narayan 106). On the surface, this may seem like much too simple of a solution, especially since Shoba's parents have been against her going to America for nearly three years. How can cooking one meal remove their objections and dispel their worries? The answer lies in what Shoba can communicate to her parents and elders with the cooking language she uses to prepare and serve the meal.

"Using tattered family recipes" and her "mother's earlier instructions," those she repeatedly heard while growing up, Shoba gets to work on the morning of the auspicious day, determined by the Hindu calendar, chosen for her culinary debut (Narayan 106). She says, "I had to cook, for in it lay my destiny" (Narayan 106). As she pores over the recipes and begins to make her first dish, she says, "the litany I learned at my mother's knee echoed in my head. Ghee for growth, ginger to soothe, garlic to rejuvenate, asafetida to suppress, coriander to cool, cumin to warm, and cardamom to arouse" (Narayan 107). The use of the word "litany" is very telling. Considering how intertwined food and religion is in the Hindu religion, specifically to Shoba's vegetarian Vaishnava family, it is no surprise that what her mother has taught her about foods and spices reads like a religious recitation. In fact, what Shoba witnessed her grandmother and mother doing in the kitchen was nothing short of conjoining "the worldly to the otherworldly, and the microcosmic to the macrocosmic" (Khare, "Food" 28). Food is a "powerful, polyvocal

interlocutor between matter and spirit, and body and self” (Khare, “Food” 28). As this comes into focus for Shoba she decides on a menu: fried okra with “a paste of cumin, coriander, and green chiles”; spinach “sprinkled with asafetida”; a *rasam* made from tomatoes and red lentils with cilantro, mustard seeds, and cumin; basmati rice, cooked until tender; ghee; a *payasam* with raisins, cashews, and saffron for dessert; and finally, to end the feast, “frothing South Indian coffee” (Narayam 107).

What Shoba communicates to her family, through the language of her cooking, is that she is aware of important ethnic, social, religious, and familial values. More specifically, she communicates that she understands her role as a female, which is to transmit this cultural and religious information to future generations. In fact, as we more closely examine her food choices, cooking techniques, and final presentation, we will see that she demonstrates a working knowledge of Hindu laws concerning cleanliness, purity, and cooking techniques. We will also witness her clear understanding of socially appropriate gender roles, important cultural and religious color symbolisms, ethnically correct food choices, and respect for family and elders.

First, Shoba expresses her understanding of the laws concerning cleanliness and female gender roles. One must “bathe before entering the kitchen” (Kittler and Sucher 375). Shoba recalls learning this at a very young age saying, “Like her mother and grandmother before her, my grandmother would not light the stove until she had taken a bath” (Narayan 15). In fact, her grandmother not only bathed before entering the kitchen, she would first “light the lamp in the *puja* room (prayer room)” and recite a “few Sanskrit prayers” (Narayan 15). We can see too that this behavior does not just adhere to strict rules of cleanliness and purity according to Hindu teachings, Shoba is becoming the next caretaker and culture tenderer in a long line of female tradition in her family. She is also demonstrating that she understands the female duty in terms of

food preparation. In *Cultural Foods: Traditions and Trends*, Pamela Goyan Kittler and Kathryn P. Sucher explain, “The role of women in food preparation is extremely important throughout Indian culture. Feeding the family is an Indian woman’s primary household duty” (378). Before Shoba can go away, to possibly be influenced by a very different culture than her own, her family must ensure that she understands her future duty to her family and their future generations.

Secondly, Shoba exhibits her capability in not just following Hindu guidelines concerning vegetarianism, she shows that she is competent in what is referred to as Hindu gastrosemantics. In “Food with Saints,” R.S. Khare explains that in India, food is loaded with meanings and these multiple meanings are “so central to the culture,” there is an entire body of knowledge, known as gastrosemantics, with which to communicate the “powers of multiple symbolizations and communications via food” (29). For example, there are “six tastes” that can be present in a traditional Indian meal (Kittler and Sucher 371). These include sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent (Kittler and Sucher 371). Additionally, there are five textures which can include foods that need to be chewed, not chewed (such as soup), licked, sucked, or drunk (Kittler and Sucher 371). These tastes and textures are not just present for aesthetical reasons; they are part of an important symbolic system. These tastes and textures must be balanced with spices that are used in accordance with specific rules and guidelines (Kittler and Sucher 371).

These rules and guidelines are part of the Ayurveda belief system which dictates both the medicinal properties of spices and the digestive attributes of certain food combinations. Shoba also learned these things as a girl. Not only are her maternal grandparents, Nalla-pa and Nalla-ma, Ayurvedic practitioners, she was also continually instructed by her mother as to the purpose

and correct usage of these many things. The “litany” her mother taught her concerning spices and food combinations are important because they bring a “balance of humors” as well as contentment, physical strength, emotional stability, stamina, vitality, and creativity” (Kittler and Sucher 378). Some of these combinations include “Carrots with ghee for growth, potatoes with ginger to soothe, beans with garlic to rejuvenate, onions or asafetida to balance” (Narayan 15). In addition to the “pageant of colors and flavors, all combed together with an array of spices,” there is also important symbolism regarding colors and ingredients (Narayan 15).

“For the Hindu, colors play a very important role in the religion and culture and have a very deep significance, transcending purely decorative values” (“Color”). The main colors used in ceremonies are green, red, yellow, and white (“Color”). First, Shoba chose spinach, cooking it until it was “deep, bright green, like the eye of the ocean” (Narayan 107). Green symbolizes “peace and happiness” and it “stabilizes the mind” (“Color”). Second, the tomatoes with red lentils seasoned with tamarind, turmeric, salt, cilantro, mustard seeds, and cumin bring to mind the color red which “is of the utmost significance” on “auspicious occasions” such as this one – the day of Shoba’s proving (“Color”). The third item of color significance is represented by the ghee Shoba cooks. Not only is yellow “the color of knowledge and learning,” it symbolizes “happiness, peace, meditation, competence, and mental development” (“Color”). Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna, and Ganesha all wear yellow (“Color”). Not to mention, ghee is also extremely significant for other reasons in the Hindu belief system. For instance, many sacred texts, including the Vedas, reference ghee as a *sattvic* food used for “purifying the mind, awakening knowledge and developing intuition” (“Ghee’s Role”).

Fourth is the color white. Shoba notes that she “hovered over the virgin basmati rice, cooking it until each grain was soft but didn’t stick” (Narayan 107). The white of the rice “represents purity, cleanliness, peace, and knowledge” (“Color”). These are all things that she must have to not only satisfy her family, but satisfy her religious aspirations. White is also associated with her caste, the Brahmins. Shoba recalls that on the day of the feast, her family arrived in “their silk saris and gleaming white dhotis” (Narayan 107). Even more, rice is also culturally and religiously significant in Kerala, the South Indian state where Shoba’s family has lived for centuries: “Rice particularly plays a significant role in some Hindu *samskaras* -- rite-of-passage ceremonies that signify transition periods in an individual’s life and personality development” (Alexander). If we recall, Shoba’s earliest food experience is during her *choru-unnal* ceremony in the Guruvayur temple. *Choru-unnal* is a “ceremony that marks the first meal of a child” (Narayan 3). The meal consists of mashed rice mixed with ghee. While it is being fed to the baby inside the temple, a priest chants sacred Sanskrit mantras.

Finally, “Dessert was a simple almond *payasam* with plump raisins, cashews, and strands of saffron strewn over the top like swimming red tadpoles” (Narayan 107). In selecting the saffron, Shoba chooses “The most sacred color for the Hindu” (“Color”). Saffron represents fire “and as impurities are burnt by fire, this color symbolizes purity” (“Color”). So far, Shoba has demonstrated a great deal to her family through her cooking language. She is proving that she can combine individual expressions, or ingredients, in ways that make clear meanings. As we will soon see, she also clearly understands the context of the meal, and the important decorum that will not only wrap up the meal, but will send her message loud and clear.

When Shoba’s family arrives, they find, in the dining room, on the ancient rosewood table, all of the food she prepared in stainless steel containers (Narayan 107). Traditionally, in

India, food is not served sequentially; it is “placed on the table all at once” (Kittler and Sucher 372). This is because tastes and textures are combined to achieve the optimum balance between not only the six tastes and five textures, but the heating and cooling foods. The designations of hot and cold do not necessarily correlate to food temperature; they are designations that have to do with how the food reacts in the body. Because, in Hinduist beliefs, each human being is viewed as a microcosm of the universe, the fundamental elements of wind, fire, and water have human counterparts known as *pitta*, *kapha*, and *vata* (Kittler and Sucher 378). To keep these in balance, digestion must be closely regulated resulting in the “hot-cold classification system” (Kittler and Sucher 379).

Shoba presents her family with a meal that harmonizes these two types of foods while still giving each person an amount of personal choice in what they will select for their own plates. In addition to presenting the food all at once, and balancing the hot and cold properties, her choice of serving dishes also communicates to her family that she understands important religious and cultural values: “Certain substances are considered both pure in themselves and purifying in their application” (Kittler and Sucher 56). For instance, food served in bowls and platters made of clay have a greater chance of being polluted than food served on brass or stainless steel (Kittler and Sucher 377). As we know, pollution and purity are of the utmost concern according to Hindu beliefs and dietary customs, which is why Shoba doesn’t just clean herself before cooking; she carefully selects the serving dishes for her food as well. In fact, she demonstrates an awareness of this principle throughout the entire meal, including at the very end when she serves “steaming, frothing South Indian coffee, with filtered decoction, boiled milk, and just enough sugar to remove the bitterness” (Narayan 107).

In South India, filtered coffee is a cultural institution. The state of Kerala is not only known for its rice production, it also grows coffee beans. The coffee is made by first creating a coffee decoction that sometimes includes ground chicory. Once the strong decoction is made, a small amount is added to frothed milk and then sugar is blended into it. Finally, it is served to guests in metal cups or tumblers. Shoba demonstrates her knowledge of proper decorum by serving the coffee last and by serving it in pure vessels; it is the only part of the meal that is served sequentially. This part of the meal is so important, that later, just before Shoba and her parents meet her prospective husband's parents for the first time, her mother says, "You can tell a lot about the family just from the way they serve coffee" (Narayan 172). Once Shoba's elders finish the coffee she has prepared for them, she looks to them to decide her fate.

Ultimately, Shoba's family is testing her. They are testing her understanding of their cooking language, because as their only daughter, she will be responsible for using it to pass on key information to the next generation. Learning a language is something that is taught to children in all human groups. In fact, schooling might be viewed as a formal system that ensures the youngest members of a group become fluent in not just the language, but other concepts and ideas deemed important. Students are taught and tested to make sure they become proficient. Shoba is also being tested in her proficiency. If she can communicate, through her use of their cooking language, her understanding of their important cultural, familial, and religious values, then she is ready to go far from home. Additionally, they know that if she is proficient in their cooking language then she can, while living in the United States, engage in the recursive process as a way to maintain her religious and cultural duties.

Shoba's cooking language fluency can also allow for displacement, which can connect her to her family and culture when she feels alone. This is because "foodways have a unifying

ability so symbolically powerful that they can unite members of the group separated geographically” (Keller and Mussell 13). Displacement can also ensure that she will not cause a breakdown of caste status, bloodlines, and cultural ties in future generations. Her continuation of the cooking language allows for the continual communication of her family’s hopes and desires for the future. As we know, Shoba’s family allows her to attend graduate school at Mount Holyoke because ultimately, she clearly demonstrated to her parents and to her elders that she has an appropriate awareness of not just each expression, or ingredient, but how to combine these expressions into culturally appropriate meanings, or dishes. They are reassured that she will be able to maintain her ethnic identity. Interestingly, Shoba will find that her cooking knowledge will be needed at another time in her life – when she is a new bride.

Shoba’s second experience involving her knowledge and use of her family’s cooking language is slightly different from her first experience. Interestingly, she does not even begin her marriage by cooking what she proved to her family that she could cook, and the *anjala potti* her mother gave her goes unused for some time (Narayan 192). An *anjala potti* is a “stainless steel container” with “six compartments filled with black mustard seeds, *urad* dal, cumin, coriander seeds, fenugreek, and *channa* dal” (Narayan 192). Shoba knows that its purpose is so she can cook South Indian dishes for Ram and herself; however, she does quite the opposite. Instead of cooking the very food she proved to her family that she could cook for her future husband and, one day, children, she decides to embark on a whirlwind adventure in gastronomical experimentation. In fact, in the beginning she does not just tinker with ingredients or the occasional culinary experiment, she tries on some entirely new food-related lifestyles and identities such as veganism and macrobiotics. Inevitably, she brings Ram along for the ride. After her vegan and macrobiotic phases, she decides to invent her own culinary tradition.

All of the new meals in Shoba's fusion cuisine are newly invented, not borrowed from past experiences, cook books, or even visits to restaurants. For example, one evening she serves stir-fried potato pierogis with mustard oil, sesame seeds, and cilantro (Narayan 193). She says that she was trying to attempt a Polish-Chinese approach, but she does not know enough of Polish or Chinese cooking techniques and flavors to make this a success. Both she and Ram agreed that the pierogis were awful – almost as bad as the “layered Indian vermicelli with some Stilton cheese” and covered in “tangy pizza sauce” (Narayan 193). The worst, though, was the “sticky, yellow mass” that was the result of trying to make a curry out of “fava beans, buttermilk, garlic, ginger, and tofu” (Narayan 193). She stuffed this into pita bread and served it by candlelight, but they both found it too disgusting to eat. Not only was the consistency off, she admits that the tofu was the fermented variety, that which is often used as a condiment. The tofu became incredibly intensified by the additional seasonings and garlic she added to her “curried concoction” (Narayan 193). Interestingly, there seems to be an inconsistency between where Shoba is living and her failed attempts at fusion cuisine. This is because America is a prime location for learning to create successful fusion.

According to historian Donna R. Gabaccia, America is an ideal place to create fusion cuisine because it has “no single national cuisine” and is a country made up of many different nationalities and ethnicities (225). Yet, Shoba's fusion still goes wrong. For example, in addition to the fava bean curry disaster that she calls a “morass of taste” she could not eat, there was the inedible meal involving completely congealed spaghetti that resembled a white dome (Narayan 193). Seeing the dome, Ram “complained bitterly and went on a hunger strike” (Narayan 193). In fact, he asks, quite desperately, if she can just cook Indian food, “please?” (Narayan 193). Interestingly, Shoba's meals are not just aesthetically unappealing and lacking in good flavor,

they do not communicate anything to Ram. In other words, this unusual cooking language does not communicate any of the things he understands, especially since her family vouched, on the first day they met, that she could cook traditional and authentic Indian food. Not only is the “role of women in food preparation extremely important throughout Indian culture,” strong abilities in the kitchen are considered “essential for a Hindu woman in obtaining good marriage offers” (Kittler and Sucher 378). When Shoba and Ram’s family first met, Ram’s family were served a great deal of food, more than they expected, and Ram’s mother asked, “Did Shoba make all this?” (Narayan 177). Shoba’s grandmother confirmed that “Shoba is an excellent cook” (Narayan 177). What Shoba is currently serving Ram is not excellent, and after another particularly disgusting meal, she tells Ram that she will take “pains to make traditional Indian recipes” (Narayan 194). Interestingly, she continues to experiment. Only this time around, her experiments are in secret, hidden from Ram’s eyes and ears.

The question is why would Shoba continue to experiment in secret? Why, for months, would she appear to be cooking authentic Indian food, when she was actually adding “a pinch of paprika here, a touch of lemongrass there” (Narayan 194)? She even dabbled with a “hint of miso” and a “spritz of wasabi” (Narayan 194). One of the most curious experiments that occurred during this time involved a *rasam* and Ram’s discerning taste buds. After she prepares and serves the *rasam*, Ram takes one sip then tells her that it “tastes funny” (Narayam 194). Inwardly, after hearing him say this, she begins “rapidly calculating” in her mind whether or not she “had hidden the bottle of Japanese *umeboshi* paste within the innards” of her pantry (Narayan 194). Outwardly, she replies to him with an innocent sounding “Oh, really?” (Narayan 194). She does not acknowledge that she is still trying her hand at her multinational cuisine, even if it is only half-attempts compared to what she was concocting before. Later though, after the

rasam meal is over, she admits to herself that she is surprised he noticed the taste difference since she only “added half a teaspoon” of the paste (Narayan 194). Again, some deep probing questions come to mind: Why is she surprised he noticed? Why does she need to hide the bottle? Why does she feel compelled to continue the experimenting after she has told Ram that she will cook only traditional and authentic Indian food? And most importantly of all, why would she experiment or add anything to the dish if she does not want it to be tasted since the whole purpose of adding ingredients is to change and enhance flavors or overall compositions? The answer to this is worth exploring and lies in an examination of her social situation at the time.

Kittler and Sucher explain that not only is “food a form of self expression,” it is also intimately linked to our “social needs for fellowship” (11, 15). Simply put, many human social interactions are filled with specific food habits or food-related activities. By entertaining the world in her kitchen, Shoba is in fact harkening back to earlier times in her life when she had multicultural social circles that involved food. The first of these experiences was when she was in second grade at a Christian school run by Catholic nuns. She recalls that lunch time was what she lived for (Narayan 44). The reason for this was the socializing and the food. Shoba and her friends would “congregate under the jacaranda tree for a shared meal” (Narayan 44). There was Amina, a Muslim girl; Annie, a Syrian Christian; and Sheela, a Golt from Andhra Pradesh (Narayan 45). Each day, the girls would sit in a circle, open their lunch boxes and begin to trade food. Shoba, many years later, still recalls with distinct clarity the deliciousness of Amina’s “fragrant *biriyanis*”; Annie’s “pancakelike *appams* with a spicy stew of potatoes, onions, peas, and coconut milk”; and Sheela’s hot mango pickles (Narayan 44-5). The girls had formed their own social group that was knit together by the meals cooked by their mothers. In fact, even though they weren’t the ones doing the cooking, they were still using their food as a language. In

the context of their group, the multicultural expressions came together to form meanings of friendship and even excitement. Shoba experienced this food fellowship again in college. While attending MSU, she regularly met with friends to eat. She says, “We would gather in someone’s house on a Friday night [and] indulge in a potluck dinner” (Narayan 161). Each person contributed something different to the meal and the socializing would go on late into the night. As a new bride living in a new place, Shoba is without the type of social network she is used to. What’s more, she cannot even go to work. She explains that she had to wait on her green card to get processed, so while she waited, she cooked (Narayan 193).

During this time, cooking becomes Shoba’s friend. Even though the food was frequently unrecognizable, and oftentimes inedible, there was still a cooking language present; Shoba created a cooking language to speak to herself. It provides her with comfort and allows her to engage in the process of displacement. Each shake of a spice or dab of an ingredient that is not from her *anjala potti* was a communication with something that was no longer existent in the present time – her multicultural friends from the past. Difficulties arise when Shoba and Ram must rely on, for their sustenance, the food created by this cooking language. Even more, there are no meanings Ram can comprehend from the meals. To him, Shoba appears to be haphazardly throwing together completely disparate expressions, or ingredients. He has no context for her fusions, and after several months of enduring it, he finally says, “Look, if you can’t cook Indian food, don’t ... I realize it’s tough” (Narayan 194). Interestingly, this ends up being just the thing that clears away all traces of experiments and unusual fusions in Shoba’s kitchen. It is only after Ram honestly questions her ability to cook authentic Indian food does she wholeheartedly consent.

When Shoba does finally start to cook unadulterated Indian food, she realizes that she needs a little practice. It has been a while since she cooked full Indian meals since she ate mostly single dish comfort foods in college. There are also many things from her family's cooking repertoire that she has never attempted to recreate herself. She begins calling her mother regularly to get more recipes and cooking tips. She also says that learning to cook a multitude of full Indian meals became like a challenge that she took to "with the fervor of a graduate student" (Narayan 194). As a matter of fact, she soon finds that the "goals and achievements" that mark student life translate perfectly into her new quest to master the cooking of her mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law. When she served *sambar* to Ram that tasted like his mother's *sambar* she felt not only accomplishment, but enjoyment as well. She is also surprised by the great pleasure she finds in feeding Ram authentic Indian meals. As his pleasure grew, so did her desire to "dazzle him" (Narayan 195). It may seem, to some readers, that Shoba is actually denied her personal right to take on a more multicultural identity through her cooking, but her subsequent pleasure in feeding Ram Indian food suggests that she does not mind. In fact, she says that her preparation, cooking, and serving of Indian food to both herself and her new husband creates an even stronger bond between them, hence the name of the chapter, "Honeymoon in America." It was not their literal honeymoon, but it became an extended period of "halcyon days" as she cooked "a different Indian dish each day" (Narayan 195). What she came to discover is that the cooking language of her family's past would actually become a language of love between herself and Ram. This cooking language of love not only exhibited the language aspects expression, meaning, and context, Shoba also utilizes recursion and displacement in her new authentic meals. For example, when her "*rasam* tasted like Nalla-ma's *rasam*" she was not just recreating an aesthetically pleasing and flavorful meal, she was using

food to recursively adhere to cultural, religious, and familial rules and instructions. Additionally, when she and Ram found “comfort in eating fried potatoes on a winter night,” with their correct “piquancy of cumin,” she was discursively connecting them to home and family – the home and family that was thousands of miles away.

In both instances, when she cooks to come to America, and when she cooks while living in America, Shoba utilizes the authentic ethnic cooking language of her family and culture. That language is encoded with very specific religious and cultural information about social structure, heritage, history, and religious beliefs. When she uses it, it not only reinforces and maintains her ethnic identity, it allows her to communicate values and love to her family members because they understand the meanings of the various meals and techniques she uses. Ultimately, her cooking ensures a continuation and maintenance of her family’s ethnic identity and legacy even though she is living in America, far from her original home.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

My interest in food, particularly in ethnic American food literature, began as an undergraduate student when I enrolled in a course called *The Food Memoir: Tales of Family and Culture*. It was while reading the food-related essays and books for that class that I came to see how food could be a literal and metaphorical device for constructing aspects of not just group identity, but personal identity as well. As I devoured those first few food texts, I inevitably learned about more than just food. I learned about people, places, and histories that differed from my own. In doing so, I expanded my understanding, acceptance, and appreciation for things, that at one time, may have struck me as odd or unusual because of dominant culture's role in shaping my early thoughts and beliefs. In short, I broke bread and shared meals with the characters of those texts, and as a result, I came to see not so much how we were different, but how we were alike.

This journey began with M.F.K. Fisher's *The Gastronomical Me*. From the characters in that text, I learned about the role food could play in intimate relationships, not just between two people, but between one person's multiple sides. Mary, the main character, uses food to broach difficult subjects like unconventional love, marriage, and gender roles, especially for the time period it was written. It was through her food experiences that she discovered and claimed who she wanted to be, not who society said she should become. Interestingly, while reading that text, I realized that I was attempting the very same thing in my own life.

Next, I read *Daughter of Heaven*, and through the author Leslie Li's characters, I began to see that food could wish an eater good fortune, prosperity, happiness, abundance, long life, and family unity. When I sat vicariously at Leslie's grandmother's table, I learned, along with young Leslie, that sometimes "it's the unspoken words that count" and that a meal is often "the

message” (Li 31). Before Li’s text, I had never thought about what food could represent, or what it could say. And though Leslie and her family ate different things than me and my family, and they came from a different country than my family and I did, I found similarities between our families’ food languages and loves. As a result, the cultural gap between us narrowed. While Li showed me the ways food could communicate and reinforce cultural values, it was Bich Minh Nguyen, in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, who introduced me to some of the ways in which eating, and not eating, could be used to adopt entirely new aspects of identity.

After coming to the United States from Vietnam, the main character Bich finds that even though she lives the “dual life” every immigrant knows, the one “marked by a language at home and a language outside,” she could become more American in the eyes of her school friends by eating what they ate (Nguyen 65). In the 1980s, this meant Nestlé Toll House Cookies, white bread sandwiches with the crusts cut off, Happy Meals, and Little Debbie Snack Cakes, not her grandmother Noi’s pho, green sticky rice cakes, and *cha gio* (Nguyen 56). Through her experiences in the story, Bich opened up to me the world of food and identity construction. Before reading Nguyen’s work, I had never thought too deeply about how our food choices, what we accept or reject, can make us more or less like someone else. Nguyen and Li also helped me begin to see that food and food writings could be sites for accepting, rejecting, and harmonizing hybridized identities. Additionally, I began to suspect that eating was not the only food-related activity that was both important and symbolic. It was with this suspicion and curiosity in mind that I chose the works for this thesis: “Cojimar, 1958,” “Kimchi Blues,” “*Candy and Lebehneh*,” “Eating the Hyphen,” “A Feast to Decide a Future,” and “Honeymoon in America.”

If we recall from chapter one, Terry DeHay, in “Narrating Memory,” shows how remembering past food experiences can allow for “the reconstruction of repressed cultural

identity,” which then enables marginalized individuals to fight hegemonic structures (29). This is what adult Eduardo engages in when he recalls his childhood memories of Cuca’s café con leche made from the freshly boiled milk and her simple *teta*. When marginalized individuals “accept the dominant culture’s narratives as normative, they will be powerless to resist domination” (DeHay 30). On the other hand, when they can gain a “recuperation of residual cultural alternatives, as well as the recognition of the distortion of their history by the dominant culture,” they can find ways to resist that domination (DeHay 30). Machado is recalling his earliest food experiences in Cuba not just so he can recoup precious early memories; he is doing it to gain access to alternative cultural values and actions that enable him to resist the aspects of dominant American culture’s attempts to silence and erase his Cuban-ness.

Unlike Machado, Cho uses her recall of past food memories to gather the pieces of herself after her mother dies. In other words, after her mother’s death, Grace is not sure who she is. In recalling her mother’s memories of kimchi, those passed down to her while her mother was still alive, she finds that she has kimchi memories of her own! The reconciliation of these separate parts of herself leads her to a new understanding of who she is. As a result, she begins to claim her ethnic identity, something she did not necessarily do while her mother was alive. Like Machado, she also accesses her early olfactory-related food memories, but instead of doing it to assert her ethnicity in the face of domination, she does it to claim her Korean-ness in the empty space created by her mother’s death. While Machado and Cho’s texts help answer how remembering food-related experiences can allow individuals to discover, reconcile, and actualize aspects of selfhood, in chapter two, Abu-Jaber and Wong’s food writings show us how eating can provide spaces where exercising personal agency can ultimately harmonize hybridity.

Eliot A. Singer explains that “Participation in and identification with a culture ... is not achieved instantaneously through an accident at birth. Enculturation is a process of becoming” (195). For Abu-Jaber and Wong, this process of becoming is doubly difficult because they have to come to terms with multiple identities. Each of them has a part of themselves they are struggling to embrace. For Diana, it is her Jordanian heritage, and for Lily, it is her American-ness. Amidst these struggles, both young women find that eating, or not eating, can be what Bhabha calls an “interstitial passage[s] between fixed identifications” (4). Diana’s candy eating becomes a place where she can have some distance from the parts of herself that she associates with Bud and her cousins in Jordan, while Lily’s dumpling mutilation allows her the chance to confront her “fear” that she might be “less Chinese” than she previously was willing to admit (Wong 43). If Abu-Jaber and Wong demonstrate how eating provides opportunities to embrace hybridity, Shoba Narayan, in “A Feast to Decide a Fate” and “Honeymoon in America,” shows us how cooking can be used to actually reinforce and maintain authentic ethnic identity.

Cooking can ensure a continuation and maintenance of ethnic identity, including family histories and cultural values, because of its communicative powers as a language system. A cooking language carries within it information about a “group’s hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions” and even the “pattern of social relationships” (Brown and Mussell 12). Shoba’s fluency in the components of her family’s cooking language, namely expression, meaning, context, recursion, and displacement, enables her to not only maintain her own authentic identity, she is able to preserve it for her family members. In other words, when she cooks for her family, the meals she shares with them not only communicates care and concern, they impart very specific religious, cultural, and historical information that is integral to preserving their ethnic identity. Speaking of sharing, another layer of sharing that occurs as a

result of these food texts is the sharing the authors themselves do by writing and publishing their food stories for us to read. Interestingly, the sharing of these stories benefits not just the author, but the readers as well.

The sharing of these food stories benefit the authors because in writing them, they are selecting and arranging various events from their lives into one single story which can “fulfill a specific purpose and invent a particular version of the self” (Waxman 381). This act can be especially powerful and beneficial for individuals who are marginalized by mainstream society. Life in the United States for many ethnic Americans means life in a borderland. This borderland can be between one’s ethnic or familial culture and the dominant mainstream culture, as well as between a person’s own conflicting desires. While these borderlands can be difficult spaces to inhabit and maneuver, they can also be places where identity can be explored and “elaborated” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 130). In other words, during the “process of movement and interchange between states,” individuals can make decisions about who to be or who not to be (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 130). One tool that can be used to accomplish this is writing. When “humans use narrative to make sense of the past,” they are taking part in a process that can make “coherent wholes out of ... fragments” (Shostak 234). The writing not only becomes a liminal space for the author, through the sharing, it becomes one for the readers as well. It becomes a space where readers can come to terms with their own hybridity. While I believe in the possibilities and opportunities opened up by ethnic American first person food writing, I feel it is also important to be aware of the ways this writing, like ethnic foods, can become objects of “cultural food colonialism” (Heldke 328).

David Palumbo-Liu’s warns, in his introduction to *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, of a multiculturalism in which “certain texts” deemed worthy of

representing the “ethnic experience” actually “smooths over the rough grain of history and politics” instead of truly interrogating the unequal distribution of “power and resources” in society (2). Additionally, he is rightfully suspect of readings that simply represent a “plurality of cultures” by allowing readers an opportunity to simply pass through them “appreciatively” (Palumbo-Liu 5). Lisa Heldke, in “Let’s Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism,” seconds Palumbo-Liu’s concerns, but narrows the focus to ethnic American food eating, writing, and reading. Heldke warns against ethnic food eating and reading that becomes a form of adventurism which allows members of dominant society the opportunity to mindlessly consume “an exotic Other” (328). According to her, this consumption is a form of “imperialist nostalgia” characterized by an “obsessive attraction to the new, the unique, the obscure, and the unknown” (Heldke 330). In the eyes of the food adventurer, consumption of an exotic Other makes them more interesting and exciting (Heldke 331). While these are important concerns to keep in mind as we read ethnic American food literature, I find that Waxman offers one of the best arguments *for* the continued consumption of ethnic American food stories.

She writes, “As American readers are given keys to interpreting the symbolism of different cultures’ foods, they become more accepting of those cultures’ practices, and an initially negative perception of the foreignness of these practices may diminish” (Waxman 368). Yes! This is precisely what I experienced as I read Li, Nguyen, Machado, Cho, Abu-Jaber, Wong, Narayan, and more. In discovering how I was similar to the characters of their stories, I came to respect, not fear, our differences. In turn, I felt an increased desire to advocate for the inclusion of these texts in the literature classroom and literary canon, not so they could uphold hegemonic structures, but so they could work to dismantle them. Because after all, if we are what we eat, imagine what could happen if we became what we read.

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