

Postcolonial Appetites:  
Vietnamese American Literature and Refugee Aesthetics

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the crossing of global literary tastes and Vietnamese American culinary writing. Specifically, I argue that Vietnamese American writing illustrates how culinary and literary tastes serve as boundaries that define and manage racial expression across the colonial, anti-imperial, and neoliberal eras. As it is still a nascent genre, Vietnamese American writing has not yet been consolidated formally or critically, and therefore a new generation of writers and actors are actively experimenting with forms that will fuse the experience of refuge with the challenges faced in a racially charged United States. Through a close examination of various literary and cultural texts, I ask how, and, perhaps more importantly, why cuisine has become a popular organizing trope for these diasporic authors to work through the harsh legacies of the colonial project, the US intervention in Vietnam, and refugee life.

Using a transnational and comparative approach, I demonstrate how Vietnamese American artists engage their own history of European and American domination by turning to gastronomic literature. I contend this literary movement seeks to reanimate the sensual loss experienced during wartime and the period of refuge in order to articulate a uniquely somatic brand of “Vietnameseness” that can travel across the globe. This literature responds to the commodification of western multiculturalism and the global desire for manageable ethnic difference by providing intimate cultural touchstones that make social positions intelligible

without being completely translatable—resetting the terms of transnational cultural contact.

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## Introduction:

### What We Talk About When We Talk about Food

This dissertation is a literary-historical project that investigates the politics of global gastronomic tastes and the countervailing force of Vietnamese American culinary writing. Many academic accounts of food culture track how particular cultures come to recognize a group of culinary objects as their own cuisine. I approach the study of food through another direction, demonstrating how the rhetorical linking of identity and cuisine has developed as a geopolitically significant act. By historically situating how eating, cooking, and preparing food is represented in a number of literary works, I illustrate that the merging of culture into cuisine is a modern ideological invention rather than a found essence. My object of study is Asian American literature and media, where I argue that contemporary Vietnamese American writing, in particular, demonstrates how culinary and literary tastes serve as boundaries that define and manage racial expression. Using a comparative and transnational approach, I show how Vietnamese American artists turn to gastronomic literature to engage their own history of European and American domination. This public body of work, then, seeks to define their cultural position, both internally and to the US population at large. The material force of these artistic interventions, I suggest, has been refashioned into a new literary movement that seeks to reanimate sensual loss and articulate a uniquely somatic brand of “Vietnameseness” that can travel across the globe.

Entering the United States as refugees, the first major wave of Vietnamese immigrants had very little language training and institutional access, which resulted in very few books written in English by Vietnamese American authors. However, in the past decade a generation acclimatized, and often born, in the US have come of age, equipped with the English language skills and cultural capital to tell stories of Vietnamese immigration in a way that their predecessors could not. With the 1.5 generation finally making the requisite cultural and capital gains to shake off the enduring image of tired huddled Vietnamese refugees, this new wave of artists is searching for forms that pay homage to their forbearers, but are not solely defined by them. The simultaneous burden and opportunity these authors face, then, is to construct narratives that deal seriously with the material and psychic effects of the traumatic passage without reducing all of Vietnamese American experience to this one event.

A key strategy that Vietnamese American authors and artists use to narrate their place in the nation is to leverage a general interest in their food and cuisine to convey the complexity of Vietnamese diasporic identity and politics. As it is still nascent, Vietnamese American writing has not been consolidated formally or critically, and therefore a new generation of writers and actors are actively experimenting with forms that will properly fuse the experience of refuge with the challenges of growing up in a racially charged United States. Through a close examination of various literary and cultural texts, I ask how and why cuisine has become a popular organizing trope for these diasporic authors to work through the harsh legacy of the French colonial project, US intervention in Vietnam, and refugee life. I query what is to be gained by using this

seemingly tame and accessible device, rather than engaging in a more direct or confrontational “writing back” to exploitative power.

To examine the aestheticization of Vietnamese American experience, I transform Arjun Appadurai’s consideration of food as a “highly condensed social fact” from an anthropological observation into the basis for socio-political literary analysis (4). By proposing that the “event of eating” is impossible to describe in contemporary literature without using expressive language that catalogues communal values, I regard the way cultural producers write about, film, and perform with cuisine to be a unit of analysis that can be concretely compared across national traditions, genres, and media. Considering Vietnamese Americans first established a presence in the US over thirty-five years ago, the dearth of scholarship regarding their cultural practices is striking. This neglect, when coupled with the historical amnesia concerning US imperial endeavors, burdens Vietnamese American literature with the task of being both literary and ethnographic. Sensitive to the ways that authenticity and ethnicity have been deployed by American empire and consumed worldwide, Vietnamese American artists produce works that are, by turns, transparent and opaque. Here writers find ground to construct narratives that scrutinize affective orders of taste and sensory judgment, while complicating inveterate representations of Vietnam and its diaspora. By studying the reception of this work as well as the aesthetic techniques used by these authors, I argue that these food-driven creations provide cultural touchstones that make social positions intelligible without being completely translatable.

Attending to how artists in the Vietnamese diaspora face the legacy of empire in the neoliberal present is needed, as a lack of attention to the particularities of diasporic

aesthetic production and sociopolitical experience has allowed for the proliferation of narratives that claim refugees smoothly assimilate into new lands through education, discipline, and hard work, while ignoring their economic and academic marginalization. These omissions often reinforce myths of western exceptionalism, which is alarming for the international community as the rhetoric of American hospitality and benevolence is often used to validate military, economic and cultural interventions throughout the globe. By rereading refugee narratives that have been used to substantiate American benevolence, I show that Vietnamese American artists use culinary tropes to scrutinize western orders of sensory judgment and index the unfulfilled promises of the democratic capitalist state. Consequently, my research shows that while the American appetite for palatable difference has compelled Asian American authors to include agreeable cultural touchstones in their work, refugee literature, in particular, appeals to cuisine to reset the terms of transnational cultural contact.

This dissertation will consider the following central questions: Self-fashioning social practices like cooking and dining have been seen as a key site to recode received racial and ethnic positions, but what happens when these practices are represented artistically? Does food still retain its semantic density and socio-political flexibility? And, to these ends, when intimate social practices are translated into language, whose languages and aesthetic forms get used and how are they sold? Through this investigation I conclude that the overwhelming amount of Vietnamese American writers who turn to cuisine do so to intervene into a system of refugee aesthetics, using food as a palatable lure without serving up their life stories for complete consumption. These refugee authors are a profoundly literate and self-reflexive group versed in both the advantages and

pitfalls of the culinary turn. This population recognizes that aestheticizing ‘their’ cuisine in order to enter into the global literary market is a game of chance, and in this dissertation I consider the stakes involved in taking this gastronomic gamble.

### The Rhetoric of Culinary Identity

Vietnamese American authors who produce work where the self is constructed through tropes of food and food systems are conventionally read as an adhering to an Asian American literary tradition pioneered by Chinese and Japanese American writers. Primarily revolving around intergenerational conflict this relationship to food comes to function in the Asian American literary tradition as the extra-lingual medium *par excellence* that is passed through the individual to the social body, in an attempt to communicate the experiences that seem unrepresentable due to various historical and linguistic pressures. However, while Vietnamese American writers are aware of this formative work, only reading their artistic productions through this lens does not acknowledge the historical influence of French colonialism in Vietnam nor the refugee experience. This misreading renders Vietnamese American writing as just another entry in a long line of cultural products that seek to express multicultural difference. When food appears in literature it is also often subject to theorization that draws superficial equivalences and grand abstractions, as the domestic scene and the appearance of individualized choice suggests an opting out of larger social determinants—gesturing towards a depoliticized sacred space whereby ones’ intimate ethnicity can be enacted outside of the purview of the public sphere. Yet Vietnamese American gastronomic writings are not innovations out of time, beyond capitalism, or deterritorialized, but

rather, emerge from a colonial history where intimate cultural spaces were targeted in the “civilization” of the native, and transnational ideas about cooking and eating were used to stage the encounter between different populations across the globe. When Vietnamese Americans use the culinary form to announce authenticity to both the native community (i.e. Vietnamese Americans) and the broader American milieu, this should be read as a social act that gestures towards the initial politicization of the domestic sphere in the colonial context, and their own subsequent somatic marginalization in the neoliberal age.

To properly locate the force of Vietnamese American culinary writing it is important to consider the intellectual legacy of French culinary thought. Indeed, as the first innovators of cuisine with global pretenses, the French elevated their food from the bland quotidian demands of everyday life to the realm of artistry. Importantly, in producing this portable palette they shifted how cooking and cuisine were imagined, from a geographically situated social practice towards a discursive regimen.<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on discursivity has changed the way that food is thought, allowing food to become an important part of an individual’s self-fashioning, with Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s oft-repeated aphorism “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” becoming the dominant intellectual formation linking identity and eating in the modern era. Yet in its wide circulation the dictum’s historical origin, as a phrase deployed to imagine a distinctly national ethos, has long been forgotten. In both high and low cultural forms—like academic writing, book précis, restaurant menus, and the Japanese television cooking competition *Iron Chef*—the phrase has been indiscriminately, positioned as homologous to Ludwig Feuerbach’s equally famous saying “You are what you eat.” The essence of Feuerbach’s materialist phrase reveals a simple rule that should be evident to all and be

recognizable by anyone. By contrast, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” contains an important extra step that introduces the modern *process* of culinary identification, which requires specialized learning and expert behavior. Despite gestures towards hybrid fusion cuisines, mass standardized foods, and communal forms of consumption, Brillat-Savarin’s model of eating persists as the dominant paradigm of understanding modern culinary identity, where the individual exceeds him/herself and connects with the social body every time they participate in the eating event.

In Brillat-Savarin’s model the one who eats—who should have the closest relationship to the food prepared and ingested—must discursively present an intimate practice to someone else so that an external diagnosis can be provided. Feuerbach’s maxim holds the possibility of self-regulation, where by keeping a close eye on what one’s own self ingests then one can know who one is; however, contained within Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism is an implicit *estrangement* of food from the self, creating a schism between the body and the mind. This external register of bodily management diffuses power through a self-surveilling group of eaters, who are governed by an imaginary arbiter of good taste. In his thinking culinary identity develops and is mapped along a national hierarchy, where one’s ability to eat properly also measures how productive a subject one is. In this bio-political move the health of the subject is tied to the health of the nation, and nations whose subjects do not eat according to his rules and regulations are naturally conquered by more virile states. While Brillat-Savarin may not have foreseen its reach, his aphorism provides the framework for a populace to produce and reproduce social norms while feeling like they are acting out the practices of a social body—a transportable operation that became increasingly important in maintaining a

cohesive cultural hierarchy as French subjects were dispersed and created overseas to serve the appetites of the new empire.<sup>2</sup> In times of great political and social upheaval, then, this dictum provides a remarkably durable framework to articulate an accessible aesthetic that can be engaged by many, whether at home or abroad.

Attending to the ways food is spoken of and the particular ways this discursive act is consumed is important when constructing and maintaining cultural identity, especially as cuisine travels outside of its borders and is encountered by different groups of people. Defining oneself discursively through culinary experiences can be alluring for exiles and those in the diaspora, as national and ethnic affiliations can be worn even if one is not presently living in the space of the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> For the diasporic Vietnamese community, which is haunted by a history of forcible relocation and colonial subjugation, the control over one's body and the privilege to transverse spatial relationships on a whim, is no mere personal pleasure, but rather is an experience that carries with it social euphoria. Take for instance, Andrew Lam's recent collection of short essays *East Eats West* (2010), where Lam attempts to move past the well-worn narrative cliché of the Vietnamese refugee experience by describing a dashing new transnational figure that has emerged from the push and pull of lands old and new. Echoing the spirit of postmodern discourse theorists, in this book he is excited about the prospects of global citizenship and the possibilities of inhabiting multiple crisscrossing positions. With this relentlessly optimistic tone, Lam captures the explosive feeling of transcending the spatial constraints of the nation-state, and the ethnic and racial politics that accompany them. Specifically, he skips across space by gesturing towards shared sensory and oral experiences, captured most fashionably in his section entitled "Ph[o]netics." Waxing

eloquent about pho, which he dubs the “ingenious Vietnamese concoction” and an “incomparable and sacred broth,” he traces the global expansion of pho across different nations, tracing its far-flung reach directly to the diaspora of people forcibly moved by the Vietnam War (123). Proclaiming “wherever’s there’s Vietnamese there’s pho” he proceeds to catalogue six oral stories of encountering pho in unexpected places throughout the globe (124). The culinary return here, then, is not a physical return to a home country, but being able to return to a shared set of origins through a culinary essence. However, what Lam should be recognizing is not simply that “wherever’s there Vietnamese, there’s pho” but that Vietnamese across the globe are eager to talk about pho. The community building does not rely solely on the appearance of this emblematic dish, but also, the mythmaking that accompanies it. His phrase “Have broth, will travel” is an ethos that is actively constructed by Vietnamese people and himself, rather than a found essence. Lam’s essay tracks, then, how Vietnamese people around the world are turning Vietnamese food into a global cuisine to codify and invite others to join a unique diasporic vision of post-war Vietnamese-ness.

Yet there is a price is paid for this kind of easy ethnic transcendence, where a privileged global elite shapes a hierarchical community of taste built on the labor of others—mimicking structures of power produced during the colonial era. For when describing the present-day discursive quest to bring people together in ways that do not rely on the nation-state, Lam ends up leaving many behind. The desire for smooth horizontal comradeship, a migration without borders, represses historical and political disruptions, as near the end of Ph[o]netics he asserts that,

It may sound like a contradiction to say that a distinctly Vietnamese dish most likely has both French and Chinese influence, but it isn't ... Pho is indelibly Vietnamese because it incorporates foreign influences. Like the country whose history is one of being conquered by foreign powers and whose people must constantly adapt to survive, the soup has roots in so many heritages yet retains a distinctive Vietnamese taste. (128)

One must ask how much is sublimated in this passage under the rubric of "Vietnamese taste." For who does this taste belong to and what is its cost? While Vietnam has certainly survived, in part, by incorporating foreign influence, those who died fighting these invaders are lost in this muddy broth. Indeed, when considering the particular line of people involved in carrying the dish forward through multiple tumultuous times and bringing taste to life through a social practice, it is clear that much loss and suffering is hidden in this metaphor of incorporation. Reducing Vietnamese experience down to pho brings into question the weight that has to be carried by this edible object. Can it bear the stench of colonialism, the passage, and racism? And, if so, how is it possible that the eaters of pho choke down all of this history, conflict and suffering so gleefully?

Leading Vietnamese American literary scholar Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, in a blurb for the book, states, "Lam's vision is shaped by the past, not beholden to it, and trusting of the future." What I would add, however, is that critics must keep a close eye on the use of the Vietnamese past by those around the globe, to make sure that it does not get fully

subsumed, commodified, and/or incorporated, in order to ensure this American future lives up to Lam's trust. While a project like *East Eats West* seeks to transcend the past through the construction of a sensuous transnational Vietnamese present, in his desire to move past the past, Lam spreads the veneer of ethnicity and particularity so thinly that Vietnameseness loses its historicity and locatedness. Despite his desire to propel Vietnamese people into the future, the repressed must return, as his well-meaning approach ultimately obscures the very labor, value, and class positions that determine the current transnational Vietnamese political climate, and hence, the possibilities afforded to him as an artist. There is danger in this urge to portray the ingestion of food, either into a highly receptive body or by a nation, as an easy harmonious ingestion. For food is a sign loaded with history, labor, context, which demands reflection and interpretation.

#### Aestheticizing Cuisine Through the Commodity Form

Representing and aestheticizing food through discursive operations can turn cuisine into a valuable commodity, whose form comes to mimic that of capitalist expansion. Exhaustive searches for new products, terminology, and markets are required to "keep up" with an increasingly competitive culinary scene, with the rhetoric of difference being deployed in an attempt to tantalize the global elite to consume new gastronomic products and unique tastes. Turning to food to express an ethnic position can pose a threat to cultural self-preservation as particular foods become reified as mere symbols of identity, and, as a commodity, the prestige accrued to certain cuisines is subject to fashionable whims of the marketplace. This emptying out of the density of the culinary sign makes the cultural cohesion promised by cuisine vulnerable: for the same

accessibility allowing those scattered across the globe access to the social practices of eating and cooking leaves open the possibility that a dominant subgroup or an outsider will recode them.

The audacity and willingness to invent a narrative about another nation's cuisine to suit one's own momentary self-interest is evident in entrepreneurial rhetoric of chef Bobby Chinn, where in the beginning of his 2008 cookbook *Wild, Wild East: Recipes and Stories from Vietnam*, he states, "Vietnamese food is, has been, and will continue to be, one of the hippest cuisines of our time" (14). This declarative sentence dubbing Vietnamese cuisine as immutably hip is bold—creating an alluring yet frozen vision of the past, present, and future fecund with cool *bun* salads, tangy *nuoc cham*, and crispy *cha gio*. This statement is followed up with another rhapsodic suggestion, where he states: "Pick up any cookbook on Vietnamese cuisine and it immediately takes you through its history like no other cuisine" (14). Again Chinn places Vietnamese cuisine in a temporal framework that is exceptional, staging food as the gateway to both the history and present condition of the Vietnamese nation, so that it can be consumed in one easy gulp. These claims are especially daring coming from Chinn, a non-Vietnamese Asian American who has decided that the present moment is the time for Vietnam to be interpreted and put on the map for the global consumer. Chinn is forthright about the speculative and worldly logic behind his choice to own a piece of this gastronomic national asset, explaining that in 1995 he predicted that the international politics that opened up Vietnam to the American market, foretold, in his words, that "Vietnamese food was about to get discovered. I figured Vietnamese food would be the next cuisine and I would be on the crest of the wave when it did hit in San Francisco" (12). This

vision of interchangeable cuisines is telling, conjuring up an image of the world culinary marketplace where countries wait for their food's turn on the global stage, before attention turns towards the next new "hip" region.

Notions of taming and commodifying the 'unknown' lurks within title of his book "Wild, Wild East," which is of course, an updating of the American motif of the "Wild, Wild West." His re-imagination of this romantic American outlook is proudly displayed on the cover of the book, where Chinn sits, arms crossed, and head bowed, in a classic cowboy pose—but in this case he wears a conical hat, an international symbol of Vietnamese life, and is sitting on a plastic chair, a ubiquitous element of Southeast Asian street restaurants. Mediated heavily through this wrangler persona the cookbook works relentlessly to translate various aspects of Vietnamese cuisine for the global audience with Chinn devoting four out of the ten chapters to expositions that unlock the mysteries behind Vietnamese cooking by cataloguing different techniques, ingredients, and regions of Vietnam, while relying on his own biographical frame to keep the reader's attention. The latter six chapters relent to follow a more conventional mapping out of recipes along meal types. This division between exposition and recipes provides a panoramic if not idiosyncratic view of Vietnam and its culture. This is evident in the visual composition of the book, where alongside highly staged pictures of Vietnamese food he includes many different snapshots of Vietnamese life, such as tour boats floating in Ha Long Bay, war ruins, a woman's torso riding a bicycle, and, oddly, a picture of Chinn himself restringing a guitar. While at first these images could be considered to be non sequiturs, another look suggests that Chinn is providing historical context, a worldly glimpse of post-*Doi Moi* culture that catalogues how the economic opening up of Vietnam bleeds into everyday

life. The takeaway of this frontier narrative that Chinn is weaving is very clear—the race to discover Vietnamese food and culture is on—and a skilled group of culture translators are required to serve up this densely packed yet easily digestible reduction of the country’s present condition.

Chinn’s book is representative of a number of overseas cookbooks about Vietnam that have cropped up over the past ten years, which work to present an ancient but unsettled cuisine in order to manufacture a worldly taste for Vietnam. With Chinn’s 2008 book inaugurating this new frontier style of Vietnamese cookbook, increasingly Vietnamese Americans have thrown their hats into the ring, countering by presenting more ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ visions of Vietnam. Charles Phan is a Vietnamese American entrepreneur who is credited as being the first to popularize Vietnamese food in the San Francisco market. Opening the first iteration of his vaunted restaurant “The Slanted Door” in 1995, he has successfully expanded his culinary empire over the past nineteen years to include seven different eating establishments in the San Francisco area. While more demure in his tone and appearance than Chinn, Phan readily admits in interviews that he thinks like a businessman and is therefore open to altering certain traditional ways of preparing Vietnamese food to suit mainstream American tastes (Sung). In reviews his restaurants are often dubbed “fusion food,” although this designation is in many ways unwarranted as the actual dishes offered at his various outlets mirror those items found in more traditionally run Vietnamese American restaurants. What makes Phan’s present-day restaurants differ from thrifty family-run Vietnamese American restaurants is his very public persona, fine dining décor, and steep prices, which together cleanse his restaurant spaces of distinctive ethnic markers in order

to market an impersonal experience that reads legibly alongside other American high-end culinary ventures.

Considering Pham's willingness to adapt Vietnamese food to the American customer's whims, it is curious that when he finally created a cookbook of his own in 2012, twenty-four years after his arrival in his new country, he named it *Vietnamese Home Cooking*. In this title there is no reference to Vietnamese *American* home cooking, a genre or designation that he could be considered to be the quintessential arbiter of, preferring instead to invoke the country he left behind at age twelve. And it is telling that in this turn to Vietnam he appeals to the intimate domestic space of the home, rather than the restaurant life that he is well known for and so familiar with. What is especially curious about this title choice is his that the cookbook itself has very few pictures staged in domestic settings. On the contrary, immediately after the table of contents the reader is met with twelve pages of high-quality un-annotated pictures of Vietnamese street life. This is not to call into question Phan's authenticity as a Vietnamese cook, but rather to acknowledge the way that this cookbook trades off of the anonymity of the unaccredited characters that compose Vietnamese street life to extend his Vietnamese American culinary empire.

In both cookbooks Vietnam is positioned as a vast landscape that these male heroes must traverse in order to draw together a (trans)national Vietnamese ethnos, and recipes are turned into a print medium that offers a taste of this region to a wide variety of people. In each of these documents physical and social geographies are imagined to hold unique flavors that must be 'rediscovered' on personal quests that map the ancestral land for western audiences and the world marketplace. Vietnamese American writer Andrew

X. Pham notes that “food is about being in the present,” and, indeed, the vivid visual medium of a cookbook can provide immediate documentation of everyday life in Vietnam. By bridging the old and new countries through a common culinary bond, these cookbook commodities become living social records that displace the longing for absent historical archives. As flexible commodities these books can smoothly integrate into even the most guarded of states, as the Vietnamese government is sympathetic to this sort of transnational adventure where the discourse of taste allows for a profitable horizontal comradeship between the manufacturers of Vietnamese culinary products and the overseas Vietnamese who document aesthetic pleasures. Indeed, the diplomatic lure of these documents is that they reroute discussions of Vietnam towards a commodified sensual spectacle and away from dense unsavory subjects like war, communism, and refuge.

### Synopsis of Chapters

Interrogating how cuisine functions as a cultural tie and/or a border zone is not a novel idea within Food Studies scholarship. What I am interested in pursuing in this dissertation, though, is why and how these ideas about commensality are strategically represented and deployed at key historical conjunctures. In particular, I contend that aestheticizing cuisine is a political practice that negotiates the encroachment of crass commercial interests and cultural others who are eager to use native food for their own self interests. This perspective draws upon the extensive body of work produced by philosopher Lisa Heldke, where she discusses the symbolic violence perpetrated by curious cultural outsiders who describe native cuisines through terms like “exotic,”

“authenticity,” and “novel,” in order to index a traveler’s (or colonialist’s) personal growth without demonstrating deep concern for the native subject or land. To acknowledge yet counter this exoticizing impulse Heldke recasts the notion of authenticity as an “exchange” rather than a stable artifact that can be displayed and acquired—a perspective that calls for a critical examination of the power dynamics that underlie such transactions (Korsmeyer 389-390). Similarly, postcolonial feminist scholar Uma Narayan works to consider this exchange from the perspective of the colonial, migrant, and/or ethnic subject position. This grounded perspective seeks to derive a more complex understanding of the material practices of authenticity from the vantage point of those who are positioned as the exotic other (162). While both Heldke and Narayan’s projects are ultimately interrogate the *ethics* behind the culinary encounter, I examine the exchange by tracking the *strategic* act of presenting and representing what is considered a particular culture’s food. This methodology parallels sociologist Krishnendu Ray’s analysis of strategic authenticity, where he argues ethnic street food vendors and restaurateurs subtly exoticize and authenticate their food to reroute the fantasy of authenticity to commercially advantageous ends. Deploying a hermeneutic that draws from the humanities, my approach considers the representation and aestheticization of ethnic food as a social practice that locates and communicates the everyday demands faced by racialized subjects in a way that is alluring to readers worldwide.

More broadly, this dissertation, then, interrogates the desire to create all sorts of stories and origins for our foods—from slow food, to *terroir*, to national food—calling to light why persistent narratives are currently clinging to culinary products. In this contemporary moment every food seems to need a story to imbue it with a history and

*telos*, allowing the consumer to be content with the knowledge that it is going somewhere and is from somewhere. While scholars in disciplines like History, American Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology have secured leading roles in Food Studies, curiously, practitioners of literary criticism seem somewhat out of step with the vanguard of the field. This disconnect is troubling considering the large recent body of criticism investigating material culture, literariness, and migration that seeks to attend to culinary behavior but remains cloistered in disciplines like Asian American and Diaspora Studies. This dissertation will attempt to bring these fields together by analyzing culinary literature as a material social practice, and show how the act of culinary storytelling navigates the global literary marketplace.

In the opening chapter, “*The Contradictions of Culinary Collaboration: Producing Vietnam on Demand*,” I propose that the culinary encounter is often the place where anxieties are produced and contradictions play out in the construction of race and ethnicity. Through an analysis of television shows, Internet blogs, and Vietnamese American literature, I argue that since their arrival on foreign soil, diasporic Vietnamese have been compelled to produce narratives that explain their body’s existence in this space. The additional challenge that they face is an entrenched readership that by now demands a certain narrative of the Vietnamese experience—an audience who has developed an acquired taste when it comes to diasporic Vietnamese cultural production. In this chapter, then, by reading the work of author Bich Minh Nguyen alongside the plight of *Top Chef* contestant Hung Huynh, I argue that culinary encounters are defining events where bodily performances change and refigure the image of diasporic Vietnamese subjects, and that while the exceptional focus on the Vietnamese body is in

many ways a burden, this attention also provides an opportunity for transformation—as long as one is careful to choose the right collaborators.

In the second chapter, *Diasporic Still Life: Asian North American Storytelling and the Cultural Politics of Stasis*, I contextualize the Vietnamese American use of gastronomic literature within the Asian American literary tradition by arguing that the concomitant pressures produced by restaurant work, racist immigration laws, and changes in intergenerational communication, predicated the culinary turn in diasporic Asian writing. I argue that the appeal to cuisine in diasporic Asian literature has traditionally been an aesthetic strategy deployed to revive a lost sensual process of mouth-to-mouth storytelling that extends the event of cultural articulation. Using food as a central trope for a literary history demands that historical events be physically re-confronted, as the everyday presence of similar culinary products provokes an active cultural construction by the reader. Thus food writing has emerged as a durable strategy for ethnic storytelling because of its ability to hold sensual, material, and repeatable qualities—essential elements in passing culturally specific kinds of knowledge between generations. I advance this argument by putting Walter Benjamin and Maxine Hong Kingston into conversation, providing a history of modern Chinese immigration, while reading Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* and Judy Fong Bates' *Midnight at the Dragon Café*.

In the third chapter, *Gastrodiplomacy: Culinary Nationalism, Empire, and the Event of Eating*, I analyze the historical emergence of gastronomic literature, to consider how cuisine has come to be a way of imagining the world. By examining how 'new' iterations of globalized eating sit in relation to imperial attempts to use cuisine to transport ideas across borders, I demonstrate that food has become impossible to

encounter during the modern era without considering national interests and tastes. For instance, a movement dubbed “gastrodiplomacy” is proliferating among Asian governments, where policy-makers are making aggressive investments in the promotion of their national cuisines worldwide, identifying food as the gateway to the successful marketing of other cultural goods. These governmental programs pursue an educational agenda that introduces non-natives to historical qualities of their national cuisine, in the hopes of cultivating a ravenous market by translating ‘Asia’ into palatable terms. This diplomatic approach appeals to a foreign public’s mind and stomach through the careful distribution of culinary images and products, providing an opportunity to rewrite history and position a country’s cultural achievements favorably alongside other civilizations. While recent scholarship has emphasized that food is vital in the production of community, eating is as much about division as it is commensality, and culinary rituals become markers of civility that veil an underlying xenophobia—especially when cuisine is taken abroad as an instrumental marker of taste, privilege, and power. By discussing Roland Barthes, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, and the globalizing tastes of the Slow Food movement, I show that cuisine bears the legacy of being a colonial index of progress where the absence of certain qualities puts racial others “out of time,” and this social lack becomes implicit justification for the infiltration of cultural translators and empire.

The fourth chapter, *Postcolonial Promises: The Global Politics of Vietnamese American Fiction*, establishes that the study of Vietnamese American literature should turn to postcolonial analysis to make connections across geography and history. The Vietnamese example is ripe for postcolonial critique as it neatly demonstrates the transfer

of a traditional European colonial endeavor to a form of US imperialism buttressed by neoliberal initiatives, and the literature produced throughout this political shift must be considered as a unified whole. This final chapter declares that the study of Vietnamese Americans must include a postcolonial perspective to understand both its aesthetic and sociopolitical function within the American literary tradition. In 1993 Sau-Ling Wong suggested Asian American criticism's role was to disentangle Asian American literature from its "Orientalist expectations" and assert its "American presence." However, I argue that properly addressing this challenge, perhaps counter-intuitively, requires examining the threads that pre-existed the Vietnamese presence in the United States. It is only by carefully attending to the logic and power colonialism and capitalism asserted on Vietnam during the years before 1975, that we can properly comprehend the new web that has been woven for Vietnamese American subjects.

I conclude with an examination of what I call "refugee aesthetics," where by analyzing the work of Vietnamese American artists Bao Phi and GB Tran, I show that the refugee designation is being embraced and recoded by a forward-looking generation of writers. This section invites us to revisit the work of migration and diaspora more generally to figure where the refugee is claiming refuge. It is an opportunity to consider the forms and strategies used in refugee writing that do not always announce itself as such, and thus is not read within a larger body of refugee work. As Asian American studies and comparative literature age, it is imperative to root out unacknowledged styles and modes, rather than remaining enamored with the cannon or a desperate search for the new. This section is a call to revisit situated populations with subjects who express their particular form of belonging through their aesthetic forms.

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<sup>1</sup> Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson in her essential *Accounting for Taste* argues that cuisine codifies cooking practices by creating the form and grammar necessary to “think” food, noting that “[c]uisine constructs and upholds a community of discourse” (14). Western scholars analyzing Asian food cultures have only recently recognized this discursive turn. For a productive and diverse account of this scholarship see: West, Waley-Cohen, and Rath.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the gastronomic ties by colonial powers is one area of French culinary internationalism that Ferguson leaves relatively untouched.

<sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai, for one, describes contemporary Indian cookbooks as an exilic form that are filled with sentiments of nostalgia and loss (16). This reconstructs an Indian national cuisine in a way that emphasizes particular regions and often the food associated with past political regimes. On a different register, Richard Wilk in his *Home Cooking in the Global Village* notes how food practices were initially used as a ethnic sorting device during the colonization of Belize, a process that rewired native identification with cuisine and foodways. Therefore when contemporary tourists and those in the diaspora take an interest in Belizean cuisine they actually serve to spur the on a new process of cultural differentiation that seeks to construct a more authentic national past.

## Chapter 1

### The Contradictions in Culinary Collaboration:

#### Producing Vietnam on Demand

Near the end of Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), a memoir of a Vietnamese American girl growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the reader encounters a conspicuous two-page "Author's Note." In this section, found between the body of the text and the acknowledgments, Nguyen explains some of the decisions she made when writing the book—specifically, "owning up to my own memories rather than others'" (255). She continues:

Although I did need to rely on stories from my father, uncles, and grandmother to depict our escape from Saigon, I generally tried to avoid turning my family into collaborators. . . . I do not mean to speak for all of my family, or all of Vietnamese immigrants, many of whom have had entirely different experiences with, and opinions on, assimilation, culture, and language. (255-56)

This note, as brief and unobtrusive as it may be, is striking when one considers the dearth of Vietnamese American writing and scholarship, a field that is distinctly marginal even within Asian American Studies, never mind the humanities at large. With Michele Janette's warning that Vietnam is in danger of slipping away from the American psyche through projects that systematically erase memories of violence, contradiction, and defeat (280),

one might think that Nguyen, whose memoir traffics richly in the hardships Vietnamese refugees faced in America, would be more than happy to open up and submit her memoir as evidence of the trials that she, her family, and other Vietnamese American families have had to endure. Distinguishing her experience from others' avoids producing a broadly conflated image of the Vietnamese American subject. Considering the paucity of Vietnamese diasporic representation, this is surely a concern. But still a question lingers: what is behind this reluctance to turn her family and other Vietnamese immigrants specifically into "collaborators"?

For instance, Vietnamese American author Andrew X. Pham in the acknowledgments of his own well-received memoir *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) asks, "Where do our stories end and others' begin?" (343) and thanks his family for allowing him to include "our stories" in his memoir. Here we see collaborative memory as a potential site for communal formation, a technique to write and bind identity under the sign of common experience rather than essential racial, ethnic and/or national difference. For refugees driven off a unified geographic plain, dispersed throughout the world, this could certainly be a productive and tempting move. Why does Nguyen feel the need to distance herself, or her memoir, from being a document of collaborative experience? What would be the harm in turning her family into collaborators? In short, what is the underlying anxiety that compels her to take the time to include this "Author's Note" in order to make this clear?

The culinary encounter often is the material means where these anxieties are produced, and the contradictions play out in the construction of race and ethnicity. Since their arrival on US soil, Vietnamese Americans have been compelled to produce a causal

explanation for their bodies' existence in this space, and this demand includes accounting for their families. Now the 1.5 generation of artists is involved in a search for aesthetic forms that speak to this particular history, but can also gesture towards a more complex and dynamic future.<sup>1</sup> The additional challenge they face, however, is an entrenched readership that demands a certain narrative, having developed an acquired taste in Vietnamese American cultural production. Culinary encounters are defining events where bodily performances change and refigure the image of Vietnamese Americans. While the exceptional focus on the Vietnamese American body is in many ways a burden, this overdetermined attention also provides an opportunity for transformation—as long as one is careful to choose the right collaborators.

A recent Vietnamese American figure in popular culture who faced the quandary of collaboration was Hung Huynh, winner of Bravo TV's hit television show *Top Chef* in the third season. Martin Manalansan contends, "Today cooking shows, cookbooks, and restaurants have become the new sites for articulating cosmopolitanism, modernity, and multiculturalism," which suggests that these popular forms can be a means to track broader attitudes that underpin nationhood and nationality (180). Indeed, when different bodies and figures interact on screen, these media forms become crucial arenas where race and ethnicity are produced in the popular imagination. Manalansan points out the close symbolic and labor-intensive ties Asian Americans have had with food and food production and how these economic contacts can work to define bodies, spaces, and the consumer/ consumed relationship. For instance, as Lily Cho demonstrates in her book *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (2010), Asian North Americans have a long history of restaurant entrepreneurship in North America, often in

remote small towns, frequently becoming the first and primary encounters non-Asians had with people of Asian descent. These restaurants can come to function as important contact zones where, in order to eat, non-Asian bodies travel to spaces filled with textures, smells, languages, and etiquette, and make decisions about how to negotiate this physical and material encounter. Furthermore, bodies that promote, transport, and serve these foods carry out rituals in order to create an “authentic” culinary experience; the bodies themselves learn, are marked, and are stratified as identifiably Asian through their performance. Hence, the enduring image of the perpetual foreigner can be reinforced through these contacts and through commercial food products that are marketed, read, and tasted through the registers of exotic and palatable. Asian-branded foods, even those conceived and created in the US, are marked as commodities set apart from mainstream American food through market signification.

In *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2009), Anita Mannur does not see this as a passive relationship where culinary representations are unilaterally imposed on an unsuspecting Asian American population. Instead, while conceding that culinary narratives are often carefully constructed to include only palatable aspects of the culture, she argues “the culinary idiom mobilized by South Asian diasporic cultural brokers is both strategic and conjectural” (7). In other words, these South Asian diasporic agents are well aware of the historical conditions surrounding this type of representation and can use the attention on this particular relationship as an opportunity to leverage a form of resistance and upset expected outcomes while opening up space for new narratives. Furthermore, Mannur argues that working through culinary idioms is an intimate and important realm where we can find

residues of some of the internally contested contradictions of the community, such as the imaginations of race, home, and belonging (8). Considering the overabundance of attention these bodies acquire, then, those who perform these rituals are uniquely trained to negotiate this particular terrain; when faced with a demand to produce ethnicity, they are particularly well equipped to craft a sophisticated and strategic narrative.

A cooking show such as *Top Chef* can be seen as an important venue where bodies, culture, and etiquette are put into play through a culinary performance that is constructed solely for viewing entertainment.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, the show is a competition where the most skillful chef wins the title of “Top Chef” by completing top-tasting dishes under the pressures of unique rules and challenges. While each dish is important, the viewers do not get to ingest the food, and hence it is through the personal interactions between the actors where the narrative is played out. Therefore, it is at the actors’ bodies where the gaze is overwhelmingly directed and, for better or worse, each dish is supposed to be an expression of talent that will separate the individual from the other contestants. The format of reality television creates the possibility that disparate kinds of subjectivities can be displayed, which is particularly notable for Asian Americans, who in television, film, and theater have been limited to playing familiar symbolic and secondary roles, racially disqualified from playing more meaty characters written with white bodies in mind.<sup>3</sup> In this arena, the Asian American is no longer forced on screen or in the restaurant to play the role of the invisible waiter or deliveryman; rather, the contestant, in this case Hung, can take full advantage of this gaze to accrue cultural capital by exhibiting his skills as a master chef.<sup>4</sup> In other words, this form offers opportunities for Asian Americans to exceed pre-figured representations and use the

theoretically unscripted nature of the medium to constitute positions and personalities that run counter to pre-figured types.

Or so it would seem. One of the central features of many reality television shows is to include a judges' table manned by experts in the field who evaluate the creations the contestants make during the show. The judges are, indeed, a powerhouse collection of chefs and critics—quite literally the arbiters of high American culinary taste. However, in *Top Chef* the judges not only assess the food but also critique the actions of each chef individually before the chefs are given the opportunity to explain their decisions. After this dialogue of give-and-take at the judges' table, the participants are cloistered in another room while the viewer watches the judging panel deliberate, discuss, and eventually render the final verdict. Hence, it is on the basis of the entire performance in the episode—the food, team interaction, and this exposition—that the participants are judged by the panel, and implicitly, by the audience. In the penultimate episode of *Top Chef: Miami*, we find Hung being grilled by the panel of judges. The final judge, Tom Colicchio, is direct:

*Colicchio:* You . . . are . . . technically the best chef up here. [Cut to Hung making a slight bow in response; long pause; cut back to Colicchio.] Technically. [A low timbre drum drops in the background music to emphasize the abruptness of his comment.] We don't see you in the food at all. [Hung raises eyebrows, surprised.] You were born in Vietnam.

*Hung:* Yes, chef.

*Colicchio*: I don't see any of that in your food. Somewhere we need to see Hung, we really do.

*Hung*: Believe me if I go to the finals I could actually prove myself. This is Hung. [Reverse-shot back to Colicchio in thinker pose—reserving judgment, still skeptical.] (Aspen Finale, Part 1)

Hence, on *Top Chef* Hung may have full artistic license to craft whatever dishes he may like, yet his body still presents troublesome signs for the judging audience. Instead of critiquing his dishes, or his teamwork, Colicchio, unprompted, decides to probe and question Hung's birthplace. Hung is conflated with Vietnam, and indeed, the problem that Colicchio has is that he, as a judge, cannot properly "see" Hung's birthplace in the food. Hence, here, despite the implicit promise of a colorblind judging of foodstuffs, the archive of Vietnamese representation is so powerful that Hung is unreadable to Colicchio as anything but foreign. In fact, far from being a melting pot, this cauldron demands that he not only look the part but also perform his ethnicity through his food. The exceptional burden Hung has to face is that he must account for this not through cooking, the means through which he has proven to be an outstanding talent, but, rather, discursively.

Since this interaction occurred during the judging of the final four contestants, the exchange does not end here, as the contestants have an extra chance to also explain not only the dishes they made, but why they should make it through to the finals. Hung figures out how to win this game pretty quickly, and we see that he is able to express to

Colicchio and the others in the room what they would like to hear, to wit:

*Hung*: The reason I should be in the top three is that I cook with so much love, and I get that from my mother. I grew up in the kitchen sleeping in the kitchen. Cooking all my life. And when I think about my mom's food I get so emotional, I get tingly. Because it's all about soul and that's what I talk about all day—is the soul in the food. And I don't see myself doing anything else in this whole world. It's what I've done my whole life—my whole family, my mother, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my cousins' cousins, my cousins' daughters, and everyone in my whole . . . family . . . bloodline, is in this industry. It's what I love to do. You know it's in the love of food. That's all it is. (“Aspen”)

Through the smiles, nods of the judges and fellow contestants, and swelling music, we are told that Hung has produced and hit the mark with his storytelling. He has produced a narrative that successfully integrates his Vietnameseness within the aesthetic criteria of the judging order. However, in order to show, or make legible, his Vietnameseness, Hung has to turn to his family, listing them and submitting them into evidence to prove that his entire “bloodline” is committed to “this industry.” Hung, who throughout the competition is criticized as not being a team player and is criticized by the other chefs during team challenges for his selfishness, repeatedly absolves himself of any wrongdoing by proclaiming that this is an individual competition. Yet when the chips are down, and he is called, quite literally, to the table, he knows who his true collaborators must be—his Vietnamese family.

While it may be tempting to consider this matter an ethnic construction, it is the physical appearance of his body that produces the demand to evoke his bloodlines, which suggests that Hung is involved in a process of race making. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, race is a historical process rather than a timeless biological determinant, and it functions as an organizing social principle (200-01). Here, Hung's skin is read by Colicchio as a signifier that must be accounted for, and the body must be placed within a recognizable historical chain of events in order for it to make sense within the judges' social system. Far from being uncentered, de-stable, or fluid, the racial demand put on Hung's personality, body, and food is to chain it to an immutable essence, or "soul."

While the filmed judging performance concludes with Asian American Padma Lakshmi, author of her own cookbook *Easy Exotic: Low-Fat Recipes From Around the World* (1999), telling a disconsolate chef to "Pack your knives and go," the narrativization of the judgment does not end there, as many of the panel also contribute a blog on Bravo TV's website, which is posted the day following the airing of an episode. In these blogs, the judges have the opportunity to explain and elaborate on their edited on-screen comments. Following the aforementioned exchange, many of them took this opportunity to opine about the frontrunner Hung. Colicchio, who is a former co-owner and head chef of the Gramercy Tavern in New York and author of the prescriptively titled *Think Like a Chef* (2000), took the time to respond and expand on the comments he made during the episode:

Hung is a striver with an enormous, palpable passion for food. He has

absorbed the lessons of classic technique and gleefully brought them to the plate throughout the weeks of competition. And while his cooking experience was clearly evident, until now the rest of his experiences were not. Hung comes from an ancient and impressive culinary tradition. He grew up surrounded by hardworking cooks, and it is impossible for me to believe it was all wiped clean by classical training. When I spoke to Hung at the Judges' Table last week, I wasn't asking him to start serving up *phở* or *bánh canh* in a clay pot. But I did want the depth of his family's heritage and his own unique, quirky personality to emerge on the plate. For lack of a better word, I called it soul.

And the good news is, Hung was listening. He himself knows the difference between an excellent technical cook, and a great chef. He reveres masters like Tabla's Floyd Cardoz—whose classic Les Roches training in Switzerland marries seamlessly with his Bombay roots, or the great Daniel Boulud, whose rustic Lyonnaise childhood shows itself throughout his elegant menu—considered the epitome of New York haute cuisine. No one would ever accuse Daniel of cooking without soul. Hung got it, and I hope this final challenge was a turning point for him as a chef—the time and place where Hung finally gave himself permission to bring himself into his food. (9)

Colicchio understands he was unclear and works through the comments he made the previous night, yet in doing so he begins with a classic orientalist structure whereby Hung is the living instantiation of an immutable ancient tradition. This “culinary tradition” is not specifically the family that Hung invokes in his defense, but rather a

nameless and faceless lineage that is characterized solely by “hardworking” labor. They are a tradition so powerful, in fact, that even if he did want to wipe it away through “classical training” (code for French training) he could not do so, and thus Hung is posited into a line of supposedly hybrid chefs. These hybrid chefs can exhibit their foreignness yet they temper this foreign presence by sublimating it, rendering contradiction invisible. Hung, however, has an additional complication, for his food is beholden to French training and to his Vietnamese birth, but there is curiously no mention of his American citizenship—no direction on how to make this third side fit. Acknowledging his third (American) side would involve too many collaborators.

Colicchio not only functions as a culinary authority and cultural gate-keeper, but from his reading of the Vietnamese body he also produces a pathway into Hung’s psychic life. While Hung’s dishes and body present some sort of a quandary, Hung-as-hybrid is recognizable inside and out. Colicchio provides a narrative ripe with colonial logic, where it is not the structure of constantly shifting aesthetic criteria that is unattainable and often defined in opposition to the native, but rather it is Hung himself who inhibits his ability to bring his own unique personality into the food. But is it really his own “quirky personality” that he is supposed to bring into the food? The Caucasian finalists are not notably “quirky,” nor are they asked about their families’ culinary traditions or to bring their gender or sexuality into the food. Rather, marked as a performing racialized body, Hung alone is asked to answer for his subject position, his past, and his history. Furthermore, he is burdened with the task of bringing his own family on to the plate—fresh, hot, and ready for consumption.

Finally, what is Colicchio really trying to say “for lack of a better word” through

the word *soul*? While any direct mention of race, class, and material history is seemingly off the table, Hung instead is instructed to conjure the “depth of his family’s traditions,” and to bring “himself into the food.” All of his supposed history, his body, the food, and his family are to be channeled into a reduction—an essence of the soul. Hung clearly anticipates this desire for his soul and dutifully serves it up with a side order of love. This rhetorical move toward the intimate and indeterminate soul, hidden away inside the cumbersome shell of Hung’s body, securely installs Colicchio in the position of ultimate authority without his having to make overt references to politically unsavory prejudices that would leave Colicchio’s own performance open to judgment by the viewers. Instead, he skirts any mention of visual traits or cultural behavior by positioning himself as an authority who judges whether or not he can taste another man’s soul.

Ted Allen, another judge on the show, who is probably most famous for his iconic role in the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, has this to say in his blog about Hung:

You can see how the drama is affecting Hung, too. Suddenly, even the icy competitor is talking about soul and love in food, and turning his thoughts to what a win could really mean—to the parents who busted their asses to get him into this country, to get him educated, to fill him with ambition and passion. I don’t think Hung expresses himself well in this regard. It somehow didn’t move me, somehow didn’t ring true. But I think it is true. I suspect that Hung was probably not raised to spend a lot of time on introspection (let alone on acting

classes—keep your day job, Chef Boy); rather, to stick his nose into the books, to work hard, and to be grateful for the chance.

Enough Oprahsizing: Casey brings a more straightforward story. She's just a hard-working, passionate chef who takes chances and knows her stuff.

Friends of mine who know her say she has always been badass, and she's really been bringing it lately, no?

For some reason, Allen feels the need to write Hung a history complete with parents who “busted their asses” to get them “into this country” (not out of another one), do not value introspection (thus the need for an out- side source to posit this for him), and, of course, keep Hung's nose in the books. Casey, a fellow finalist, is a white female competitor—the Hillary Clinton to Hung's Barack Obama—and it seems that by *straightforward* Allen means that she does not have to explain herself, nor her body's presence, and hence she does not have to perform herself or her history through her culinary creations. She is simply “badass.” With Hung it is different. He needs to not only say the words, tell the story that is needed, but tell it the right way. He needs to construct a story that will then be judged, in this case by Allen, as authentic. In Allen's opinion, this is an area in which Hung failed.

It is clear that how the story is told is an important facet of communicating a past experience. Here is a point where literary critics and *Top Chef* judges can agree. It is important to take narratives seriously as forms and not just as transparent cultural examples, the unfettered testimony of a native informant. As Rey Chow, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others, note, if the form of the expression is not

analyzed, this will inevitably lead to native or insider expression being read and incorporated as such into dominant hegemonic reading practices. Without formal analysis, the testimony can be read as apolitical information and subject to reconstruction for non-particular needs; as we see with Hung, the information can be used against the subject to trap the native informant. What is peculiar here is how the appearance of the Vietnamese American body at the table brings with it an accompanying demand to produce narratives that explain why the body inhabits this space—even when appearing in seemingly nonpolitical arenas such as cooking shows, where they are ostensibly to be judged on their individual aesthetic production. Hung, it seems, is well prepared for this performance, and knows how to select the details of selflessness, family, and hard work that elide his supposedly traditional background along with American liberal values.

How did he learn this, and how did he learn to produce this rhetoric so easily? One possibility is that from their first settling in the United States, Vietnamese refugees had to explain why they were here, through what Monique Thuy-Dung Truong calls the “interviewer/respondent relationship” (29). With widespread relocation programs enacted by the US government, Vietnamese immigrants were placed into close-knit and racially homogeneous communities in small towns across America; they came into these small towns most often as a racially marked group, but also as a population that had to answer for the United States’ most recent military conflict. Therefore, they had to tell their life stories to newspaper reporters, individuals, and/or church sponsors over and over again in order to explain their presence. Hence, this produced demands to consistently refit and contextualize their life stories, rewording them strategically so that they could diffuse the immediate suspicions that accompanied their physical bodies inhabiting this particular

geographical space; it was well known that more than half of the American public did not support the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the United States in the early 1980s (Võ 293). In response, there was a compelling need for a broad discursive image that could facilitate a less hostile environment for the newcomers.

Overwhelmingly entering the US as a population of refugees, the initial wave of Vietnamese immigrants did not have the opportunity to know which country they were about to go to, and hence, had very little preparation for language acquisition and cultural learning, which resulted in very few books written in English by Vietnamese American authors. It was left, then, for the first generation to construct proper oral narratives, and, despite their initial dispersal, a distinct style was able to emerge. As Nhi T. Lieu notes, especially with this first wave, there was a conscious aesthetic decision made to fight the image of the refugee, the nameless hoard of boat people that filled the pages of *Time* and *Reader's Digest* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as it was important for many Vietnamese migrants to assert their material and communal success to both Americans and Vietnamese populations alike (200-01). Hung and Nguyen, however, belong to a generation that has been acclimatized and/or born in the United States and is just coming of age, equipped with the language skills and cultural capital to tell stories of Vietnamese immigration in a manner that earlier generations could not. The burden and opportunity for this new generation of writers is to construct new identities and communities in a manner that deals seriously with the material and psychic effects of the traumatic passage and conditions of their immigration without reducing all Vietnamese American experience to this one event. Due to the relative dearth of Vietnamese American writing, the written form of this performance has not been

consolidated, and therefore this new generation of writers and actors is left to figure out forms that will properly fuse the story of refuge with the stories of growing up in the US.

It is important when reading a text such as *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* to pay attention to the literariness of Nguyen's memoir and in particular the techniques used to construct her language so that it stands as an aesthetic intervention. For example, one of the most striking features of Nguyen's book is how easily she creates an intimate relationship with the reader through clever asides, pop culture references, and humor, encouraging readers to "remember" along with her. Her character is seemingly open, inviting the reader to co-conspire and know her experiences. By providing a cavalcade of familiar popular commercial landmarks to an American readership, Nguyen creates a character that can be read as part of a broader population. There is an assumption of fluency in a common consumer discourse that all Americans of a certain generation will know, which can be the foundation to recognize or more deeply understand (or confide with) her marginal experience. However, this marginal experience is at once Nguyen's self-proclaimed nerdiness and her already-apparent Vietnamese-ness, and it is at times difficult to see when one ends and the other begins. With this, she performs a feat that is similar to Hung's; she creates a palatable American figure and then mixes into it some ethnic experience. Initially, the reader does not need to encounter Nguyen's Vietnamese-ness head-on; rather, her story can be read as one of social awkwardness in which her Vietnamese-ness is just another symptom.

The popular commercial landmarks, however, serve another purpose: not only do they create a sense of intimacy with the reader, but they also become the material means through which Nguyen comes to identify the racial symbolic order that loomed as she was

growing up in Grand Rapids. With this information swirling around her, the challenge is laid out: how to enter into this order without disturbing it. This was not easy. For instance, in a passage about cakes she notes:

But it frustrated me that I could never frost a cake in even waves the way the women on commercials and in the Sunday coupons. . . . I became convinced that such talents lay only in the hands of white mothers in aprons. To me, life lived in commercials was real life. Commercials were instructions; they were news. They showed me what perfection could be: in the right woman's hands, the layers of a cake would always be exactly the same size. (125)

As a child Nguyen is clearly held captive by the glow of the commodity fetish, and the lure it promises is of a universal presence—neutral, interchangeable commodities that are a part of a time with no future and no discernible past. If Nguyen could interact with this product properly, through the prescribed instructions, she could produce a standardized cake that is not marked with the uncertainty of subjective experience. The commodity itself does not allow for dissonance, holding out the hope of leveling the playing field by hiding Nguyen's unusual history and body in the object.

In contradistinction to Nguyen's imagination, her physical interactions with the commodity are disappointing, however, as she finds climbing the indeterminate apex of whiteness to be a rather slippery task. In one scene, after trying one of her friend's mother's blueberry muffins, she learns that they are the product of Jiffy brand muffin mix. With this news, she successfully pesters her stepmother to purchase a box of this

mix so that Nguyen can try her hand at making these golden mounds of delight.

However, despite the promise that she could “finally . . . have what [her friend] Holly had every day” (80-81), the project falls short, as “the muffins didn’t taste the same as her mother’s. They were ordinary, far from a phenomenon.” The boxed goods themselves do not hold the secret, measure up, or provide access to whiteness; rather, the magical ingredient remains elusive, for as she relates: “They were missing the one element that no one in my family could supply.” Despite its relatively light tone, the book is peppered with these moments of disappointment and abjection, where each episode follows the structure of Nguyen ramping up with excitement but then falling short due to an insurmountable lack, as she does not have anyone to help train her body. This is not merely a personal disappointment or neurosis, but rather, something structural and material. This indeterminate whiteness becomes physically embodied on a trip made in college to the Jiffy corporation’s compound, where she describes her encounter with a giant grain mill as “tower[ing], monstrous, creamy white, surrounded by a wisp of chain-link fence” performing the contradiction of being looming and unavoidable, yet at the same time cordoned off and denying access. This overwhelming physical presence threatens her with absence: “Something about that moment filled me with fear—as if the grain hotel would fall down, smother, and erase me” (81).

The idea that she could disappear speaks to her feeling of impermanence in the US; even in Nguyen’s advanced college years, someone like her could still be dragged down and smothered by these impersonal structures of whiteness. While there are a few moments of terror found in the narrative, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* for the most part has a lively tone, especially when describing the commodities. By writing this book in the new

millennium when most cultural references of the story are from the 1980s, Nguyen performs a subtle critique of the seemingly universal, ahistorical power of the commodity. When these products are recontextualized and stacked among unfashionable music, clothing, and hairstyles, they become disarmed and no longer exhibit the powerful glow that Nguyen encountered as a girl. Approaching them through her nostalgic, humorous encounters renders them less relevant and powerful, as it is clear that their history belongs to a *passé* time and space. Writing in a memoir form and relegating this wonderment to the past disavows the overpowering lure of the commodity and suggests that perhaps she has understood, moved past, and overcome aspects of this symbolic order.

However, what remains is the disciplining that Nguyen's body endured through these commodities, which is not something so easily discarded. For instance, in the above passages it is not only the product that is over-whelming, but also the physical ability to shape and interact with it in the proper way—she does not have the right (or white) hands to make the commodities perform as she wants. In the memoir she never quite achieves this mastery. She repeatedly reads her body as misplaced, inadequate, or ill-formed, remarking to her stepmother's family, "I was too ugly, my body too small, my face too stubborn. I was too aware of being Vietnamese" (171). The repeated use of the pronoun *I* in this passage makes clear that the peculiarity of her body was thoroughly internalized. In interviews, Nguyen is quite candid that the promise the culinary commodity held out was physical transformation—where eating provided the possibility to change her body from the inside out. Indeed, eager to fit in or pass with the overwhelmingly white community, she scorns her step-mother's attempt to create

healthy, home-made foods, does not speak of her grandmother's cooking to anyone outside the house, and never invites people to participate in her family's private sphere lest they witness the "foreign" dishes that have worked on her body, constructing her on a daily basis.

Diverting the gaze and hiding the home life was key for Nguyen, who notes, "No one at school knew how we really ate" (74). Far from being troubled by a lack of ethnographic interest, she felt that what her family really ate was conceived of as lacking in the magical commodities that promised transformation. For the most part Nguyen is skilled in concealing this difference; yet at school lunchtimes she faced her own judges' table, where her home life had to become public. Daily her domestic world would spill out, where "a student was measured by her lunch bag, which displayed status, class, and parental love." She negotiates this by packing her own lunch, mimicking the form of other girls' comestibles, agonizing over the types of bread she eats and the paper bags she carries; but somehow, we are told, this was unsuccessful as "the girls in my grade figured it out" (75). As a child she was not as technically skilled as Hung, was not fluent enough to adjust her performance to meet their standards, and did not have the economic purchasing power to raise her worth within this pre-packaged culinary hierarchy.

What is most exciting about both Hung and Nguyen as characters is that the particular food object is not overly important; rather, each has the ability to unearth the aesthetic magic in various food products through imaginative reformulations. This is a little more obvious with Hung, a master chef who deftly balances, draws out, experiments, and surprises with flavors, but also with Nguyen as an eater, who seems to

find meaning and desires that are held within the spectacle of the uniform packaged food. In fact, Nguyen bestows the food with a meaning that far exceeds what the marketers may have imagined or the regular users of these products might experience. She is excessive in her hoarding and pleasure seeking. She reinvests the object into a new imaginative constellation or economy, which changes the given-ness of the product. Her act of writing about these products is an active imaginative reordering of them within a social order in which she participates, and indeed, has a part in creating. Therefore, not only eating but also writing about eating becomes the transformative act that reshapes the existing rules and order into an individual pursuit whereby she can change her body and reimagine her interaction with these worldly cultural objects.

In the last chapter, Nguyen returns to the geographic space of Vietnam, where she finds herself unprepared and disoriented. She reflects that the stories and objects she received from her family about her past were not sufficient and indeed could never have been sufficient to prepare her for this homecoming that leaves her feeling like an outsider. While she feels that she is a visitor, she also finds herself haunted by the parallels of her existence: the presence of alternate lives, as “every girl I passed on the street was a theoretical double, a person I might have been, a life I might have had” (245). However, rather than pursue this contingency of her own subjectivity, Nguyen curiously does what she claimed she was not going to do and turns to her family’s experience, claiming her father’s choice to flee the country and bring the family to the US was the moment that turned all of them from Vietnamese to Americans. As she puts it, “In just a few minutes, in half a night, our lives changed. Our identities changed.

We were Vietnamese, we were refugees, we were Americans” (251), and indeed,

the multitude of experiences Nguyen recounts in her book linger and resist a singular identity and resolution. Writing a book that illuminates the cultural contradictions held within a Vietnamese American body while demonstrating the social pressures inherent in culinary choice is a testament to the complexities of becoming American—entanglements that cannot be contained within this one person. Despite her best intentions and careful considerations, the sheer material force of the relocation and the historical weight of her position demand that she gesture toward a social outcome.

Colicchio's performance at the *Top Chef's* judging table was a familiar reading of the out-of-place Vietnamese body that cued Hung to produce the dominant narrative of the Vietnamese American experience. He recognized and reacted to the familiar interviewer/respondent relationship and understood the narrative that was needed to win the competition. Whatever Hung produces orally or in his cooking, his body will, if the dominant structures stay the same, be read in the same manner—slotting him into a narrative of the embattled, powerless refugee overcoming and doing good by adhering to American ideals of hard work and sacrifice, erasing violence and other experiences enacted on his body. Therefore, when Nguyen demands in the "Author's Note" that one approach the book as a record of an individual experience, what she asks for is a different mode of reading. Placed at the end of the book, the note communicates to a popular audience to stop reading books, food, and these bodies in this manner; in other words, she is attempting to upset the demand produced by the interviewer/ respondent relationship.

Tired of the continual demand to retell or produce an acceptable life story, Nguyen most conspicuously intervenes to shake up the patterns of reading Vietnamese American bodies. Nguyen includes historical details of her family's refugee crises, but

by no means ends the account with this. Instead, she documents the material objects that haunted her life and expresses how important these material ties were for her. The refugee experience, which created many fissures and absences in her life—most strikingly, losing contact with her birth mother—remains but is not always at the forefront of her imagination, experience, or identity. Instead of constantly pining over her absent mother, she was often more concerned with seemingly trivial objects such as Wagon Wheels, Big Macs, and the prancing Pillsbury Doughboys, which filled her childhood imagination. These small material details were extremely significant parts of her experience, as shown by their ubiquity in the memoir, the decision to write them down, and their persistence in her memory of events. They only seem unimportant because of the dominant mode of reading Vietnamese American stories. Furthermore, these very real material objects both repressed and gave her an active foothold to read, access, and place dominant culture. These objects, not her family, were her collaborators.

The word *collaboration* is a relatively recent entry into language, first recorded in 1860 to describe united labor—in particular, an endeavor that creates an artistic, literary, or scientific performance (“Collaboration”).

To paraphrase, it is a method for creative teamwork, where differing ideas held within the collaboration help to produce a new product. In this early iteration, the multifaceted approach is the strength of the collaboration, where the team can produce something together that exceeds the limitation of individual imagination. During the 1940s, the word grew to acquire another less desirable valence: traitorous cooperation with the enemy. This was likely due to the connotation it acquired from those called the “Collaborationists,” who were sympathetic to fascist Germany during World War II in

France. Collaboration became suspect, as the spirit of collegiality is undermined by the suspicion of allying with the wrong types of people, particularly across national lines.

Yet perhaps collaborators and the lure of collaboration should have been suspect from the very beginning. The word appears around the same time as Matthew Arnold's wielding of the concept of culture in a series of essays eventually compiled in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which sets political standards of aesthetic judgment for the era. His project strives toward a dissolution of the classes by bringing the best of thought everywhere and, indeed, blanketing the world in sweetness and light.<sup>5</sup> However, this distillation of cultural production to the highest order homogenizes difference by using the ideals embedded in worthy or "high" cultural products to neutralize the anarchy simmering in the lower classes. Hence, in the environment of the seemingly collegial and productive model of collaboration, the achievements of collaboration—artistic, literary, and scientific objects and performance—can also become the oppressive standardizing agents of those in power. Here, aesthetic judgment and political worth become one and the same, as a culture's ability to regulate its unruly citizens is a measure of a nation's march toward civilization. Indeed, the idea of cultural education creating docile and more easily governable subjects becomes manifest as an important mode of late-colonial practice in both England and France. In second-stage colonialism, the civilizing mission became the justification, goal, and projected outcome of a colonial endeavor, effectively masking acts of capital-driven racial domination and brutality under a veil of aesthetic and moral harmony.<sup>6</sup>

The decade of the 1860s was also when France consolidated its domination over what they called Cochinchina, the foothold needed to turn Vietnam into a colony. By

refusing to turn her family into collaborators, Nguyen may be resisting a formal structure that has roots in a colonial history, an appeal to a seamless nation underwritten by high literary culture that serves those in power. In this memoir she does not allow for a unified, representative Vietnamese American experience to be held up and judged under the unforgiving scale of aesthetic worth, which will then decide if it is authentically native enough. Indeed, she recognizes that her artistic performance could stand in for the achievements of the US and/or Vietnam. Instead, she short-circuits this authorized reading with her author's note and writes a book firmly in the trenches of popular culture, gesturing to her own subjective experience and bypassing the headiness of high literary objects, preferring a diffuse general audience to a single, withering, objective gaze.

By reading these two social performances together, we understand how food contacts can be transformative through ingestion and also through the economic and racial relations they generate. Nguyen shrewdly identifies the commodity as the means through which whiteness was conceived and promoted, while Hung's ordeals amply demonstrate that thirty-five years after the first Vietnamese refugees hit the US mainland, Vietnamese American bodies are still subject to rigorous review. In response, the task laid for academics is to situate texts and practices as material objects and to identify how they act in this politicized environment. With this in mind, I propose that especially when dealing with "minority" literature we should be careful about the appearance of the culinary product within a narrative. We must be wary of a simple conflation of culture and cuisine and produce close readings that historicize the way that Asian Americans and what stands for their cuisine continue to signify in this country.

Therefore, Nguyen's contextualization of her body through a variety of recognizable culinary objects can be read as a political strategy through which she moves from being *the* universal representative to *a* representative within a historical system. Her life is a part of Vietnamese American history but does not complete it, and by writing this book she provides a blueprint for other Vietnamese American writers to produce more memoirs and histories. Indeed, Nguyen's act of writing a memoir at the young age of thirty-four leaves us wondering what comes next. If she once believed that by eating and performing what she saw on television she could fit in and transform her body, what does it mean now when intrepid Vietnamese American bodies such as Hung are televised? Who is watching them? Currently there is a shift in the narratives and forms Vietnamese American bodies are authorized to produce, and one hopes this will have an effect on how these bodies are read. These performances are important aesthetic battlegrounds, where the fight is not to announce who Vietnamese Americans are, but, like the ingredients of a dish, what will be made of them.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1.5 generation is the generation of individuals between first-generation immigrants and second-generation children—i.e., individuals born in the country of origin, yet brought to the new country in their childhood or early teens. This generation has an important bridging function connecting their elders and American-born peers, working as cultural brokers to mediate between ways of life and thought (Chan xiv).

<sup>2</sup> See Grace Wang for a discussion of the techniques that reality television uses to construct race and ethnicity for Asian Americans. Wang pays particular attention to Hung Huynh on *Top Chef* and Chloe Dao, a contestant on another Bravo TV show, *Project Runway*. In particular, Wang shows how the Asian “technical robot” (Wang 405) has become a stock character in these shows and that a purported lack of passion then becomes an implicit justification for why Asian Americans should continue to stay in labor

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niches that limit their integration into the US.

<sup>3</sup> For a history and discussion of Asian American theater and performance, see Josephine D. Lee.

<sup>4</sup> From this point forward I will refer to Hung Huynh as he is addressed throughout the show, as Hung rather than Huynh. Thus I make the distinction that Hung is the character created by the producers through editing and staging for the audience's consumption.

<sup>5</sup> For his discussion of "sweetness and light," see Arnold (29-48).

<sup>6</sup> France's *mission civilisatrice* is an example of this kind of thinking, which was articulated and emerged through their invasion of Indochina.

## Chapter 2

### Diasporic Still Life:

#### Asian North American Storytelling and the Cultural Politics of Stasis

The plenary panel at the 2011 Association for Asian American Studies conference entitled, “Eat, Pray, Puke,” concluded with culinary scholars Martin Manalansan, Anita Mannur, and Robert Ji-Song Ku, expressing a palpable sense of fatigue with narratives such as *Eat, Pray, Love* that present food as particularly palatable form of engagement with the exotic other. Providing journeys of self-discovery for a generation of privileged white travelers, these narratives of cultural mobility posit taste experiences and imagination as convenient stand-ins for the unequal power structures that underwrite culinary consumption. Narratives of culinary exoticism reinforce market signification along the lines of national difference—an important construction for those selling ethnicity and ethnic products, in the late capitalist west—that posits winners and losers along the lines of recognizable dishes and brands, and bestows prestige to nations whenever ‘their’ foods can fill commercial restaurant spaces.

While it is a worthy endeavor to attend to the power imbalances that coercively ethnicize particular foods, a wholesale suspicion of writers that link food and ethnicity would undermine those who turn to food to help communicate internal cultural experiences that, for various historical reasons, are otherwise unrepresentable. Stories of culinary ethnic affiliation are marketable, and Frank Chin’s calls of “food pornography” should echo in our ears whenever a predominately white audience wolfs-down overly saccharine stories of ethnic culinary solidarity. But in the same breath it must be

remembered that the genre is commercially viable because of its unique ability to communicate culturally specific stories in a way that is appealing to younger generations unfamiliar with vital cultural customs. Furthermore, these stories are unique insofar as they often produce material histories of how socioeconomic institutions reproduce racial inequity; yet remain palatable for those outside the ethnic group, even if these readers are those whose subject position comes under review. This chapter will serve as a much-needed reminder, then, that ethnic culinary writing remains a robust literary form that makes use of its market appeal to pass down experiences from one generation to the next, in a manner that is at once personal, material, and historically potent.

The sheer number of contemporary Vietnamese American authors who posit selfhood through tropes of food and food systems indicates that this literary technique exceeds a simple nativist appeal to authenticity, and is instead an agile social practice formed in response to multiple cultural and geographical displacements. However, to investigate this social practice in Vietnamese American literature, it is essential to understand the larger Asian North American tradition that prefigured the literal and literary arrival of Vietnamese Americans, as these other histories have defined the genre and trained readers to expect certain plots, characters, and scenes. While there are many examples of food narratives in Japanese American and South Asian American literature, Chinese North American literature, in particular, has offered an overwhelming amount of culinary writing that tracks the history of their own cultural displacement. Therefore, I propose that Vietnamese American artists who use food prominently in their work unequivocally must reckon with Chinese North American literature when looking to make their literary mark.<sup>1</sup>

While it is commonplace to note that there is an abundance of gastronomic writing within Asian North American literature, few are willing to tease out the aesthetic and material histories that show why this literary form has endured in Chinese North American storytelling. In this chapter I propose that the concomitant pressures produced by immigration, restaurant life, and a subsequent crisis in intergenerational communication and representation, predicated the culinary turn in Chinese North American writing. I argue that the use of food in Chinese North American literature persists as an aesthetic strategy deployed in order to revive a lost sensual process of mouth-to-mouth storytelling that serves to extend the event of cultural articulation. Using food as a central theme for this literary type of history demands that past events be physically re-confronted, as the lingering presence of similar culinary products provokes an active cultural construction by the reader. Therefore, food writing has emerged as a durable strategy for Chinese North American storytelling precisely because of its ability to hold sensual, material, and repeatable qualities—essential elements in passing culturally specific kinds of knowledge between generations. I advance this argument by putting Walter Benjamin and Maxine Hong Kingston into conversation, providing a brief history of both Chinese American and Chinese Canadian immigration and restaurants, and close reading Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (2006)—an inventive work about Chinese migration and restaurant life—alongside Judy Fong Bates' *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2005). While there are certainly more famous examples of diasporic Chinese culinary writing, these two stories are explicit in presenting the two great challenges Chinese North Americans have faced in maintaining a sense of culture in the new land; namely, storytelling and restaurant life. I conclude by examining why authors feel compelled to

then *write* this history, for if tradition is effectively passed down in a community through an intimate culinary corporeal lineage, I ask why is there also a need for this more public and commercial declaration.

### Stasis

While contemporary analyses of diaspora are often concerned with issues of global mobility in this section I wish to explore the cultural politics of stasis. Specifically, I propose that narratives of restaurant life can expose how socioeconomic institutions reproduce dominant social relations in the nation by limiting movement and representational possibilities for immigrants. To these ends I read Chinese Canadian author Judy Fong Bates' debut novel *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2005) as an intimate map of the social geography of a small Canadian town that illuminates how diasporic Chinese life is both constructed and constricted by the institution of the 'Chinese restaurant'. The book follows a family of recently migrated Chinese Canadians toiling over a version of 'Chinese food' that is prefigured by Orientalist expectations, as they contort their bodies, cuisine, and restaurant to the disciplining whims of a small town's aesthetic taste. The stultifying demands of this restaurant economy produce dramatic conflict, as the smooth flow of capital accumulation becomes stunted by contradictory intergenerational desires. When the commercial and racial pressures of the small-town restaurant space are coupled with changes to the family's social structure, they cope by retreating towards food, dining, and cooking, whereby a surplus of meaning becomes condensed into the gastronomic form—a surplus that, at times, even usurps linguistic communication. However, I argue that despite potential narrative opportunities, here,

food does not become an elixir that gently coalesces multiple generational, national, or ethnic affiliations, nor is it tool used to move beyond biculturalism. Rather the abundance of attention Bates pays to sensuality and cuisine forces the characters, and subsequently the reader's gaze, back to the stifling small town restaurant space itself, which highlights how institutional stasis works to reproduce limited opportunities for these diasporic subjects in Canada.

*Midnight at the Dragon Café* suffers from a virtual absence of critical attention, due perhaps to Bates' plain uncomplicated writing style and the book's thematic distance from migrant tales addressing the challenges of integrating into modern city life. Yet decentering Chinese Canadian experience from lively urban Chinatowns to languid small-town settings is valuable, as it interrupts a narrative of progress that projects a linear transition from national to global commerce—where 'new' migrant entrepreneurship seamlessly adds another stitch to the social fabric of an increasingly profitable multicultural Canada. In fact, the advantage of turning to the small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant is that its isolation from the circuits of other Chinese businesses clearly shows how these institutions remain and continue to sit at the crossroads of diasporas old and new (Cho 161). In *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives*, Eleanor Ty demonstrates how many present-day Asian North American narratives negotiate the feeling of unevenness that comes with globalization through a "critical globality" that identifies and critiques the social fissures produced by this ostensibly universalizing global order. Ty characterizes this writing as "unfastened" whereby the loosening of borders and subjectivities generates an opening for Asian North American authors to present everyday tactics as challenges to social and

political inequality (2010: xiii). Despite an impressive and diverse array of examples put forth in Ty's excellent study, Bates' book is telling insofar as it resists such a characterization—as in the story everyday tactics fail, the generational conflicts remain unresolved, and the cyclical societal structure perseveres. Thus *Midnight at the Dragon Café* provides an opportunity to reflect upon the synchronous existence of Ty's unfastened narratives and Asian North American writing that does not reach lofty subversive heights. Mirroring the recalcitrance of the unfashionable yet still-present small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant, we must consider, then, what work writing of diasporic stasis performs in the age of unfastened global mobility.

Lily Cho, in her *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (2010), revisits Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1975) to argue that the relegation of the non-urban to the non-modern in Canada attempts to sublimate, or even forget, an ongoing structure of hardship and labor that underwrites the modern cosmopolitan industry (Cho 161). Building on this line of thinking, I propose that Bates dramatizes the process of relegation, humanizes this consignment of the non-urban to the past, challenges the completeness of the modern, and records hardship and labor in an attempt to guard against such forgetting. While Cho identifies the Chinese restaurant as a particularly resonant and productive site for Chinese Canadian writers, she assesses Bates' novel as follows:

Although [W.O.] Mitchell and Bates do set their stories in small town Chinese restaurants, the restaurants in their writing function as a backdrop for human drama. Canadian literary representations of Chinese restaurants tend to use them

as settings in which human drama unfolds. They are places where the stories happen. What might it mean for the restaurants themselves to be understood a dynamic part of the story? (132)

Admittedly Cho uses this paragraph to springboard into the undeniable dynamism found in the poetry of Fred Wah; however, in doing so she underestimates the power and presence of the Chinese restaurant space in Bates' novel. She is certainly correct that Bates' Dragon Café is not a dynamic space, yet I argue that this lack of dynamism, or stasis, *generates* the human drama. The novel form allows Bates the opportunity to map the position of the restaurant in relation to the constricted space of the small town, and the human drama specifies how the economic, racial, gendered, and intergenerational pressures produce rigidly defined roles for diasporic actors. Far from a limp backdrop, then, the restaurant is an ominous presence in the book, becoming both a retreat and a pressure cooker for the Chinese Canadian characters, and, as Bates meticulously details, shaping the horizon of their everyday lives.

Set in the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* is a *bildungsroman* chronicling a young girl's experience growing up as the daughter of the only Chinese family living in Irvine, a fictional small Ontario town. Driven from China to Canada by the threat of the communist revolution, the story unfolds around the girl, Su-Jen, and her mother in the culturally isolated setting as they become involved and embroiled in her father's business of running a Chinese restaurant. Initially encouraged when encountering a substantial Chinese population upon her arrival in Toronto, Su-Jen's mother sinks into a deep depression as she travels to the remote location of Irvine and

realizes the life she will have to endure as a service worker in the small town with her elderly husband. Things seem to change, however, when Su-Jen's handsome half-brother, Lee-Kung, arrives, and ends up challenging both the power structure of the family and the business model of the restaurant. Forming a romantic alliance with Su-Jen's mother, Lee-Kung's new ideas of commerce and innovation clash with his father's values of sustainability and consistency, and this conflict between old and new provides the central tension for the narrative. Moreover, this fight over the restaurant is, at its core, a battle to articulate Chinese Canadian identity through this small rustic space. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel it is clear that, despite culinary and personal innovation, the determined place and function of the restaurant in the social fabric of the town overwhelms any symbolic advances.

In this story of small-town Chinese Canadian experience Bates stresses how particular historical conditions determine and limit the choices of the central characters in the novel. While, as per the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, the young protagonist's development is tightly yoked to her environment, here, Bates illustrates how larger political structures and institutions significantly influence the economic and cultural welfare of Su-Jen's entire family. Su-Jen's father, it is told, emigrated to Canada around 1940 (we are never provided an exact date), had irregular work upon his arrival, and struggled to earn enough money beyond subsistence living. He consistently reminds the family it was because of these difficult working conditions that it took many years for him to scrape together enough money to buy the Dragon Café with Su-Jen's 'Uncle' Yat and, eventually, to bring the other members of the family over from China. We are told that "[t]hey considered it a good buy, as it was already a Chinese restaurant, with woks in

the kitchen and a rectangular sign with gold Chinese-style script above the front window” (5). Hence, the Chinese restaurant was a ready-made enterprise, already fully equipped with both the material and aesthetic tools to allow these two inexperienced entrepreneurs to slip into the social fabric of the town.

However, without the requisite amount of capital needed to purchase a restaurant in an urban setting, the family must live outside Toronto and, in turn, far from a Chinatown with valuable infrastructure for material and social mobility. For instance, Chinatowns can help new migrants gain upward class advancement through economic networks, as culturally specific business associations can extend capital loans, while ethnic media provide the opportunity to market products and services in familiar languages to an ethnic clientele. An urban setting also offers a more diverse labor market for the particular cultural and language skills that a new migrant is equipped with, and thus with this greater flexibility the worker could, in theory, demand higher wages, shorter hours, or at least move to another job if conditions were dire. Instead, as Su-Jen’s father and Uncle Yat can only afford to start a business in Irvine, they are left out of the circuits and circulations of urban diasporic Chinese culture, and are forced to interact with a white populace in their everyday lives that permits only a singular place for Chinese migrants in the social order.

This cultural isolation is dramatized in the novel through Bates’ manipulation of the claustrophobic space of their home. These tight quarters are often depicted through an uncomfortable corporeal closeness, with Bates’ squeezing the family together in their sleeping arrangements, described by Su-Jen as, “unbearable lying in the bed between my parents, our bodies so close together, the air weighing us down like a hot, invisible

blanket (94). In addition to the spatial metaphor, the psychological pressure of having to serve as the arbitrator between her father and mother becomes manifest through the tactile image of a “hot, invisible blanket” suggesting a presence that is unseen, enveloping and weighing down the entire family. However, Bates is not content to leave the reader with an esoteric suggestion and proceeds to note that the underlying source of this physical discomfort, the air, arises because “[t]he second floor seemed to absorb all the heat from the kitchen below” (94). Showing that the workspace bleeds into and shapes the upper unit into a stifling environment, the emotional conflicts, then, are generated by the material proximity of the business below. Thus Bates uses spatial manipulation to foreshadow unrest, but in the process concretely identifies the restaurant business as the agent that will make the family’s private spaces become increasingly intolerable.

Due to these environmental pressures Bates frequently pushes the family out of the cramped dilapidated upstairs and into the restaurant proper for much of the story. Without the benefit of multiple rooms for living space each character comes to inhabit a different part of the restaurant: Su-Jen usually sits in the back booth, providing physical mediation between her father stationed at the counter in the front of the shop and Su-Jen’s mother and Lee-Kung cooking and tending to their romance in the back. With the clientele providing an omnipresent backdrop to whatever family drama is occurring, economic demands often take precedence over emotional resolutions, something we see on numerous occasions when her father or mother has to leave a family dispute in order to tend to a customer’s needs. Hence, Bates’ stylistic decision to have the characters’ personal lives in plain view illustrates the collapse of private and public space in the

small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant, burdening the actors' everyday acts with symbolic weight.

The clientele are not the numerous families that populate and hold key positions in the town but the anonymous workers from the tanning factory, as well as nameless teenagers “hanging out” late into the evening. Su-Jen mentions that late at night she is not allowed to serve the workers who come in to drink at the restaurant and that her mother is often harassed by these men. Describing them as “*sei doo mow gweis*—dead drunken ghosts,” these unnamed members of the town make visible the dark repressed desires and behaviors of the community, leering at Su-Jen’s mother while talking openly about “ordering chink food” (245). The social make-up of the clientele provides physical evidence that this establishment does not hold privileged place in the community. For the community at large the restaurant is a venue for those who do not fit neatly into a hetero-normative experience, serving as a place for vice and individual indulgence, where the customers can eat or drink alone without the regulating eye of the town watching. Indeed, because the adult members of Su-Jen’s family are not entirely fluent in the English language, the proprietors are less likely to circulate and tell stories of what goes on in the restaurant and the clients enjoy a small escape from the normal surveillance networks of the small town. The family, then, becomes part of a space that sits outside the regular town circuits and, as an institution, remains perpetually foreign, hidden on the fringe yet somehow still in plain view.

It is precisely the family’s social isolation—looked at, but not spoken to—that produces a sense of stagnation amongst the older characters, which, ironically, ends up upsetting this tight order. Communal advancement is difficult for this Chinese Canadian

family as the remoteness and estrangement of both language and culture confines the adults to the grease-splattered space of the business. The adults in the story are rarely seen in the town, and again, Bates presents the restaurant as their sole *habitus*, with Su-Jen noting, “how small their world must have seemed, never extending beyond the Dragon Café” (47). However, the ballooning complexities of their lives become packed into the small restaurant—a pressure cooker that ends up twisting and withering the familial roles. This smoldering segregation produces the romance between Su-Jen’s mother and Lee-Kung, anchored around a dream of escape as they lean over the balcony railing smoking cigarettes, longingly peering outside while still safely clinging to the fringe of the restaurant space. Without the social network that Toronto’s Chinatown could provide, the two are squeezed into an unconventional sexual union that crosses generational lines, which upsets linear structures of filial piety and produces an illegitimate son. If they did live in Chinatown, Lee-Kung would have more options in finding a bride (a central tension in the story), and could have found, married, or at least dated, a ‘suitable’ woman sooner, which would have allowed for a linear progression of generational advancement. Instead, at the end of the book the arrival of their illegitimate baby signifies the breaking up of the family, and Su-Jen, her mother, and the child are sent away to Toronto where this small unsavory history is hopefully forgotten in the cosmopolitan swirl of the big city.

Social isolation also stunts the chance to develop their Chinese language, limiting forms of expression. Far away from a population that uses Chinese in an everyday context, their spoken language calcifies and does not grow to incorporate new vocabularies of political terms, fashion, or slang. Instead they can only communicate with

each other, and as such, the language becomes an increasingly banal secret code that merely allows them to speak and live out their private lives in front of others, gazed at, without being fully understood. Su-Jen's mother slowly stops communicating with her husband and even finds very little to speak of with Su-Jen herself. The language has no room to expand and find itself proper representations for this dull, new, isolated existence, and hence Su-Jen's mother, while still being able to talk, cannot express her experience. Su-Jen, on the other hand, being bilingual, is able to traverse both the spaces of the town and the space of the restaurant, even though she finds herself increasingly distanced from her parents as she slowly loses dexterity with her mother tongue (61). Language in this setting, then, delineates a very clear inside and outside world for the family, where circuits of communicable experience are highly dependent on finding new forms of expression, and the inability to do so distorts language circulation even inside the home.

In lieu of direct verbal exchanges Su-Jen's family increasingly communicates through cooking and food. The Dragon Café, as a business, serves mostly 'white food' or mutant egg rolls, yet when the family sits down to eat in the living space, a common transition in the book, Bates is vigilant in documenting what and how they eat. Throughout the first part of the story, when the family unit was still intact, they constantly mention the terrible 'Chinese' food that the white people eat. Consuming 'their' version of Chinese food cements the family's bonds with each other in opposition to the outside town, and while other forms of communication break down, food never loses its resonance as a marker of their commonality and, indeed, love (83). As the story unfolds circuits of intimate communication are produced through culinary gift giving, as

during times of crisis Lee-Kung prepares Su-Jen's mother's favorite foods in order to soothe her (304). Furthermore, while Su-Jen's mother becomes distant from everyone except for Lee-Kung, she continues to greet Su-Jen with a query as to whether she has eaten.<sup>2</sup> This repeated questioning, while read by Su-Jen as rote nagging, is one of the few ways that her mother can communicate and display that she is still present in Su Jen's life. Despite her isolation, Su-Jen's mother can contribute through this essential everyday routine, holding on to the culinary connection even when feeling distanced from her daughter's education, interests, and values. The importance she puts on this one remaining ritual is evident when Su-Jen mentions, "since moving to Canada, my mother's concern with what we ate had grown into an obsession. Cooking was the only thing here that gave her real pleasure" (64). Cut off from language, community, and other forms of commerce, Su-Jen's mother can use food to demonstrate her worth and express creative value, which distinguishes her from another replaceable laboring body. Indeed, Lee-Kung and Su-Jen's mother often enjoy "experimenting" with Chinese food together and take great pains to prepare elaborate dinners for the family, while reserving the privileged dishes for each other—a perceptible, yet subtle, display of their bond that does not explicitly upset the family hierarchy or business (138). Hence, through cooking Su-Jen's mother gets to actively create different forms and combinations, experiencing the pleasures of open experimentation without having to shape the end result to fit commercial needs.

Food in the diasporic context, then, can provide an important site for cultural innovation that is not enclosed by essential racial qualities or binaries of native and other. Through individual gustatory taste one can express uniqueness, and by demonstrating

cultural culinary knowledge one can also try to redefine roles within in the family and/or community. One of the advantages that cuisine offers as a marker of ethnicity is that it is not a stable, locatable construct, as it literally disappears into the body during consumption and demands another act of creation in order to experience the taste again. As it is constantly being recreated through the adaptation of cooking practices to the environment, as well as the telling and retelling of food stories, the shaping of ethnic food traditions is for the most part left in the hands of the subjects themselves. David Wu explains the importance of the continual reconstruction of Chinese cuisine for migrants:

It is not a result of the often-assumed global process of a direct flow of cultural traditions from the centre to the periphery; nor is it characterized by the diffusion of capitalized cooking industry pushed from the Chinese homeland by professional chefs and restaurateurs. Rather, Chinese cooking overseas demonstrated re-creation, invention and representation of cooking, especially in restaurants. Immigrants who are self-taught cooks improvise both cooking materials and how they present the dishes, to satisfy the imagination of a Chinese eating culture compromising both Chinese migrants and host (non-Chinese) populations. (Wu 56)

Hence, for Wu, cooking Chinese in North America under a new set of material and historical conditions is not *a priori* a failed attempt to achieve a lost authenticity, but rather the continual “re-creation” of Chinese cuisine is a practice that works to shape their subject position to multiple populations. Without the tools and ingredients to perfectly

produce the former cuisine, instead, the diasporic restaurateurs and home-cooks alike must represent Chinese cooking through inventive means. However, this does not condemn the migrant representation to always be a poor facsimile of the past cuisine, but rather this iteration of Chinese cuisine can be read as an expressive document that tells of the Chinese migrant experience, tracing a path from the past through to the present.

Yet I contend that the institutional history of the small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant limits the inventiveness of cuisine and thus the possibilities for self-representation, as the menus and expectations surrounding décor, prices, and social function, have stayed relatively the same even with diverse new waves of Chinese migrants entering the country. The rural or small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant dates back to the Gold Rush boom, where with racial tensions pronounced, explicit, and often violent in British Columbia, Chinese Canadian laborers increasingly turned to the railroad to make their money. Without the safety of a moderately tolerant (or at least distracted) urban populace many Chinese Canadians were forced to move far across the country, dispersing across the frontier. This dispersal, in combination with the enacting of stringent immigration laws, created conditions in which there was not a critical mass of Chinese Canadians to patronize Canadian Chinese restaurants, and many of those who did open restaurants across the prairies served primarily inexpensive ‘Western-style’ food in small towns (Roberts 153). These small-town operators were, for the most part, not trained to be professional cooks, but rather, conceived of themselves as entrepreneurs, seizing an opportunity to own their own businesses with a predictable income that was not subject to the whims of white bosses. The restaurateurs, then, relied heavily on the template model of Chinese restaurants, exchanging ideas, dishes, and even workers, with

the ultimate arbiter of culinary aesthetic worth being that which sold. Hence, if cuisine can be considered an expressive document of the history of migration, the fixity found in the small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant menu suggests that repetition and standardization became the dominant cultural practice, rather than innovation and dialogue with the host populace.

The small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant has often served as a bridge, providing new migrants with temporary employment and housing, functioning as a place to live and work. As Wu suggests, the profit motive, while important, is at times weakened in this context as the imperative of the business is merely to sustain itself and help others survive, rather than expand and propagate. The goal is economic and social stability, allowing for family members to acclimate to the new culture while their progeny acquires a Western education, providing them with enough cultural capital eventually to leave the business behind (Wu 64). Therefore, aesthetically, the small-town Chinese restaurant in Canada is not encouraged to expand or push the limits of what it already is as an institution, for this might upset the stability presented by this tenuous foothold in the new country. A primary tenet of this business model is that future family members are not necessarily assumed to take over the restaurant and, as such, the site must stay aesthetically similar so that *another* immigrant wave can fill the role of the previous proprietors. We see here, then, a strategic and inherently forward-looking reason why a restaurateur would work to maintain a prefigured Orientalized image of Chinese food and restaurants—as this allows another group of immigrants to slip right in, in many ways, unnoticed. The restaurateurs' cultivation of the interchangeability afforded by broad stereotypical images is an opportunity to consider critic Rey Chow's call to

“engage, rather than simply dismiss, the contradictions embedded in everyday social practices, whereby people defy the rationale of enlightened academic critique even as such critique is intended to address the historical injustices they suffer” (21). Indeed, the institutional stasis is instrumentally effective, as long as the business functions only as a temporary station for each incoming wave.

This strategy of temporary stasis imagines that a martyr-like sacrifice made by the first generation will underwrite an indeterminately profitable future for generations to come. This vision of endurance and stability, however, comes to chafe against real-world desires and limitations triggered by the stimulus, racism, and routinization found in the new land—which is especially disquieting for those of the second generation who did not play a part in developing this plan, but may have to bear the brunt of its failure.

Furthermore, many did not fit neatly into the generational divide and, thus, did not have a privileged role to play in the advancement of the society. Brides and female relatives eventually brought over by early bachelor communities were especially prone to being left behind in the restaurant space, facing an unplanned and unpleasant life of hard labor in an unfamiliar, isolated environment. Hence, while at first the unusual aesthetic demands of the non-Asian populace may draw a family and/or ethnic community closer, this unity can slowly fray as gendered and generational gaps create new desires that cannot be serviced through this model of temporary stasis.

While in some ways it is profitable to keep things the same, a longer view that considers cultural and social futures may resist the stasis strategy. This is dramatized in Bates’ book when Su-Jen becomes upset at her father shrugging off the customers’ sexual comments about his wife or hailing him as “Hop-Sing”, as, for Su-Jen, this perpetuates

the image of 'Oriental' subservience that she will continue to be limited by if she stays in this small town (245). Even when the romance between Su-Jen's mother and Lee-Kung threatens to overturn the internal family structure, her father maintains that the business and their public presence must always remain the same. While Su-Jen's father construes this as just another form of sacrifice, noting that as long as the customers pay the bill and contribute to the commercial enterprise they can behave however they want, Su-Jen anticipates this surrender of symbolic worth will not easily be left behind with the passing of time or with economic gain. However, despite Su-Jen's father's instrumental reasoning, this strategy of stasis perpetuates the dominant geography of the town, where by playing their pre-determined role in the community the family reinforces their own social imperceptibility, as Su-Jen herself notes that:

To the people of Irvine, we must have seemed like the perfect immigrant family. We were polite, hard-working, unthreatening, and we kept to ourselves ... Even when things went wrong, we blended so seamlessly into their everyday life, we remained invisible. (112)

In the small town the public imagination has direct material effects on the sustainability and function of the restaurant for current and future generations. Yoked to commercial pressures, cooks and restaurateurs are actively producing the imagination of both the Chinese migrant and non-Chinese population. Therefore, with the family being socially invisible, unreadable, and unknowable outside of the restaurant, the self-Orientalizing practices of the family elders underlines that representative expression must correspond

with the broad images of Chinese identity that allow them to remain, unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> Yet although the family does have a hand in shaping the image of Chinese Canadians in the town their actions are consciously fashioned to the commercial and aesthetic principles of the dominant population. For as her phrase “we blended in so seamlessly into *their* everyday life” suggests, the town’s imagination is not developed through an equal mutual accord, as the readership of their bodies—the white townspeople—are seen to recode any symbolic intervention through pre-figured conceptions that perpetuate Chinese invisibility. To phrase this in the terminology of Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre, in this story the hegemonic class, which is invested in maintaining and reproducing social relations, dictates the social production of space to maintain their dominance. Thus while individual Chinese Canadians may even be permitted to leave and ‘move on’ from this outpost, for those who stay the place of Chinese Canadians must remain the same.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in her seminal *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), cogently identifies food-related enterprises as industries that new Asian migrants are historically placed, arguing that all Asian American populations have at one time worked as cannery workers, farmers, farm workers, fisherman, or grocery store owners, while noting that the restaurant trade “has the greatest staying power” (56-57). However, in Bates’ representation of a small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant “staying power” is more about being stuck than possessing a plucky vitality. While for Wong the restaurant can “install itself at the interstices of major economic trends” Bates does not produce the *longue durée* necessary to see institutions or characters develop with such agential motivation, nor are larger economic “trends” meaningfully apparent (Wong 57). A more dynamic story of Chinese Canadian history

can be found in SKY Lee's swirling multi-temporal Chinese Canadian novel *Disappearing Moon Café*, in which various generational voices reverberate in the restaurant space alongside a rapidly developing city, and the narrator's uncovering of this long history helps her disrupt a cyclical and destructive form of Chinese Canadian identity formation. But while briefly beginning with a narrative frame, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* is rooted within a singular time and place, and no such character development or catharsis is evident in the text, which forcefully limits the reader's horizon to the small-town restaurant institution and its remains.

Paul Yee's short story "Prairie Widow" is another tale of Chinese migration to a small Canadian town that examines cultural stasis—although in this instance the story is told from the perspective of an older female agent who comes to Canada after living much of her life in China. The story takes place as the protagonist, Gum-may, weighs her options after her husband has died. Not unlike Su-Jen's mother, Gum-may is a bride who was brought to Canada after her husband had labored for many years and started his own small town restaurant. As she sifts through papers and her memories Yee presents the problems that her social position has brought up: having lived separately as they awaited her migration her and her husband grew apart in life experiences, cultural expectations, and economic desires; enduring the personal isolation of living in a town where "she spoke to no one and no one came to visit"; and the helplessness she feels watching her children "depreciat[ing] daily" in a setting that provides little opportunity for social advancement.

A decision hangs over Gum-may, as a cousin has offered Gum-may the opportunity to move out to Vancouver, a large cosmopolitan city, to start the life of her

and her boys anew. Yet the bombshell revealed at the end of the story is that Gum-may decides to stay. This comes as a surprise because the narrative consists mainly of Gum-may painfully revisiting her experiences of cultural exclusion, which suggests the future in this lonely outpost, portends, at best, a continuing stasis. While this decision means that she will continue to live amongst townspeople who “had watched [her husband] with distant, guarded eyes for twenty years” (335), when faced with the prospect of moving she can only imagine the café and the “routine she had lived for six years” (340).

Describing her mood as “weary and energized” in the final paragraph Yee presents Gum-may as worn-out by a lifetime change and movement, but “more than ready to show everyone her determination to succeed.” (343) For her, who, like the elders in Su-Jen’s family had little English language or other professional expertise, her cumulative experiences shaped her so that “within the four walls of the café... she had finally arrived at a place she understood.” Yee’s story provides psychological depth needed to explain decisions made by those of Su-Jen’s father’s generation who chose to stay in these small towns, as the horizon of prejudice and social placement at least provided a familiar routine to follow for those who had suffered through the uncertainty of migration over many years.

Yee illuminates the contradictory desires held by the agents who shape the Chinese Canadian experience, and Gum-may’s recollections serve to catalogue many of the types of prejudices that Chinese North Americans could have expected to face when starting a small business in an isolated outpost. However the length of the short story does not allow him the time to thoroughly index the social environment of the restaurant space, nor the small town itself, relying instead on a few vignettes and the sympathetic

figure of Gum-may to drive the narrative. Bates, on the other hand, is able to produce more complex characters through the novel form, and actively engages the small town through an authorial strategy that Wong refers to as “map-making.” Through a close reading of Carlos Bulosan’s transnational narrative of Filipino American migration *America is in the Heart*, Wong argues that Bulosan systematically lists and sequences the cities that he was forced to move to in order to survive economically in the xenophobic US, which provides the reader with an Asian American map of the new country. The chaotic disorienting blur of place names that we find in *America is in the Heart* contrasts sharply with the few places Su-Jen’s family visits. I propose that instead of using this technique to demonstrate “unrelieved [n]ecessitous mobility” Bates turns mapping inward, concentrating her efforts on producing a detailed Chinese Canadian spatial mapping of Irvine that illuminates the limited and degraded commercial opportunities offered to Chinese workers in the town (Wong 135). It is conspicuous that the town is anchored both economically and aromatically by a tannery—a place where immigrant labor certainly could be put to use—however, this business is never mentioned as a place of possible employment for any of the family members, nor any other Chinese Canadian. Therefore by mapping the tannery without having the main characters venture towards the complex Bates suggests the town accords the family the one space of the restaurant, and from their interactions with the school, customers, and even the police, it is clear they are only permitted one physical role to play.

Bates also maps the town sensually as the contours of Irvine’s buildings are detailed inside and out by Su-Jen’s discerning eyes, ears, and nose. Often the space of a business is described even before the owner’s characteristics are introduced,

foregrounding the difference between the Dragon Café and these other institutions, and, by analogy, Su-Jen's family from the other inhabitants of the town. For instance Dooley's Bakery is provided with an olfactory introduction where its wafting scent, described as "mouth-watering, sugary, comforting, dry," draws the reader into the bakery proper, replete with a "giant-sized mixer with a round-tub that came up to my chest," and "high ceilings and long tables and huge mixing bowls big enough for me to hide in" (Bates 38-39). With a sweet sensorial lure, Bates introduces the overwhelming aura of the privileged business space that literally dwarfs Su-Jen's bodily presence, making the décor of the Dragon Café seem subdued, drab, dated, and insignificant by comparison. Again, mapping this fictional municipality follows formal conventions evident in many Canadian small town narratives but by also contextualizing and rooting the Dragon Café sensually she succeeds in describing how the racial and economic imbalances manifest physically and relate to the living bodies. While a book like Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* performs exercises of linguistic elasticity to capture the exact rhythms, aromas, and textures of the Chinese Canadian restaurant, Bates' plain style prose simply shifts attention to how bodies move through space, and demonstrates the effect prosaic restaurant life and labor has on them. Hence, whereas Wah's *Diamond Grill* tends to pop, bubble, and spit, to capture and transform spatial imaginations of the Chinese restaurant, in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* Bates is content to let the smell of stale grease linger and hang in the air.

Though *Midnight in the Dragon Café* is set in the past, literary critic Wenying Xu's assertion "a healthy and secure community does not agonize over its cuisine and rituals" suggests that Bates' gesture to cuisine speaks to a continuing anxiety about the

place of Chinese Canadians in the present (18). Anxiety is evident throughout this bleak story but nowhere more so than in her portrayal of the small-town Chinese Canadian restaurant. Bates' choice of setting suggests the psychosocial presence of these institutions remains trenchant as they continue to haunt the countryside, and the demand for stability produces broad images of Chinese Canadians that impedes future cultural growth. Furthermore, when moving from these physical spaces to reports, histories, and other forms of aesthetic representation the stereotypes found in these locales can drift into the national consciousness and inform debates surrounding the role of migrants, visible minorities, and workers in Canada. Yet what the work of Bates, Wah, and Yee demonstrate is that an unintended outcome of small town Chinese Canadian restaurant life is this setting has become a valuable site for Chinese Canadian writers to seize upon when producing literary and historical records of those who fall through the cracks of 'official' histories.

To conclude this section, then, I would like to consider exactly what *Midnight in the Dragon Café* records. Bates' first person narration attempts to redress these previously absent narratives, but what specifically does this representation say about the workers and the world they lived in? It is clear that the first generation, while quietly earning a living, sacrificed their comfort, both psychically and physically, in the name of the second; however, Bates' book documents how high the price of this strategy can really be. With the book littered with deaths and disappointments, Bates exposes how figures like Su-Jen's mother get caught between the decisions made by the first generation and the second, while subsequent generations find the image of the perpetual foreigner decidedly difficult to shake. Food emerges as a site for intergenerational

communication, creativity, and expression, but I would like to caution that we cannot quickly move past the labor and sacrifice that is required to make it so. For every flash of creative culinary expression there is a corresponding moment of silent crippling despair. The objective demands of the restaurant come to crush the family unit—fragmenting and scattering them so that a gastronomic literary record becomes the *only* means to bring them back together into a legible whole. Considering this evidence, Bates does not turn to food as a rupture or escape, but rather as a living history and text of the bitterness that continually has to be swallowed.

Furthermore, Bates' book illustrates why the study of diasporic life should consider coercive stasis as an important corollary to coercive movement. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, while characterizing Asian American writing as a "literature of movement," is also careful to reflect upon the history Chinese detention on Angel Island and Japanese internment in both the US and Canada; however, Bates' record differs from accounts of Asian American imprisonment by telling instead of the socioeconomic history of stasis (120). While stasis is certainly not the most popular topic in a global age characterized by mobility, as academics we must resist the urge to privilege, to use the language of Raymond Williams, dynamic new emergent forces at the expense of unfashionable residual ones. For as Williams explains in *Marxism and Literature* (1978), the residual differs from the archaic insofar as it remains and contributes to our current situation, with the most enduring residual forms aligning themselves with, and providing some form of use-value for, the dominant culture (115-121). Therefore understanding how these residual forms operate is key to understanding how the dominant culture reproduces social relations. Stasis—a state of motionless or unchanging equilibrium—is

etymologically related to the Greek *statos* or “placed,” which aptly describes the fixed position of workers in small-town Chinese Canadian restaurants. Here, each wave of Chinese immigrants’ physical, economic, and social characteristics fit the operative structure, and reproduce the social geography. Bates’ dramatic work details the ways in which the Chinese Canadian restaurant functions in an inveterate manner, producing social stasis, and perpetuating the town’s communal structure. She demonstrates that it is in the town’s interest for each subsequent newly landed population to be confined and cut off in the claustrophobic space of the restaurant, subjected to the same problems faced by the earlier generation. Ultimately left behind by the protagonist of the story and overshadowed by the family drama, nipping at the margins of the page is another wave of immigrants destined to take the protagonist’s family’s place and repeat this structure of social organization and representation. While Bates identifies and, implicitly, critiques the social fissures produced by the global economic order, she does not propose a program to challenge these inequalities. Instead the work that this particularly ‘fastened’ book does is map this kind of diasporic life as both endemic and systemic.

### Storytelling

Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* is a provocative piece of “biofiction” that explores the construction of race and family through a series of loosely assembled literary snapshots. Anchored around the unifying presence of his father’s Chinese restaurant, the Diamond Grill, an array of prose segments are compiled to build an extensive sensual context by elaborating on memories drawn from Wah’s youth. While the book is promoted by his publisher as a distinct stylistic break, marketing *Diamond Grill* as his first prose work

after publishing sixteen books of poetry, Wah himself bristles against the description instead insisting that the inclusion of prose pieces merely opened his existing *oeuvre* so that his writing could travel through another genre. Reading the change in his work as organic, this elasticity of form can be considered a response to the complex and contrary demands produced by immigrant life.

Straddling the boundary of poetry and prose, these self-reflexive pieces vary in style, launching into a hyper-subjective description of noises erupting in the Diamond Grill in one moment, before quickly deflating into a dull third-person inventory of the restaurant space in the next. Because of its unified narrative arc the book can be read as a prose memoir, however, Wah's relentlessly disrupting style foregrounds the elusiveness of one representational mode capturing the essence of any particular moment. Wah's tactic of defamiliarization, then, reminds the reader they are always reading an incomplete representation, and that they are involved in a language event. He writes in a reflexive style where the event in question becomes both the writing *and* reading of his material, which leaves the experiences of his childhood incomplete, remaining active and accessible for cultural transmission. A possible critique of Bates' book is that her straightforward recognizable style is prone to an easy mapping of broad notions of Chineseness that misses the vitality of the historical experiences she presents. If the form of the text is too familiar the particularity of the text will be subsumed by already 'known' interpretive structures, mapping back onto the dull formations that have been repeated *ad nauseam*.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" ruminates on this problem of trading experiences (*Erfahrungen*) in the modern era. In the piece Benjamin posits that when the

novel eclipsed storytelling as the dominant mode of passing stories memories became calcified remembrance, as the reader had no recourse to living council. This modern inability to pass on experience is addressed in a provocative passage where he remarks that following World War One the returning troops, mysteriously, had very little to say:

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. (Benjamin 84)

This was unusual, of course, because the travails that the troops experienced would surely be worth telling and retelling. Such a marked catastrophic series of events would, one would think, bring many stories, and these men would bubble over at the opportunity to express their pain, frustration, rage, pride and envy. Instead, however, they came back silent, and the question that Benjamin's asks is why. He assumes they must have had the desire to communicate intimately, "mouth to mouth," and share their experience with loved ones and communities.

In response, Benjamin suggests that a sustained ritualized experience broke a communicative link that the soldiers previously had with society. What they had done, seen, and experienced was too large, its horror too wide, to translate back into an everyday form. Representation itself was no longer adequate to describe the experiences of these changed men and language failed them. The battlefield experience consolidated

them as a community, however the very conditions of their consolidation left them out of step, or out of their own time, and unable to express their subjective position. Without recourse to adequate language, the troops were unable to adequately represent themselves, and, therefore, vulnerable to other types of representation.

What subsequently “poured out of war books,” instead, was not a record of individual experience, the secrets that constituted their subject formation, but what Benjamin describes as “information”: a reporting that flattens out experiences and relegates events to the tomb of the past. This reportage neglects the social continuities that shape an individual’s life experiences and can only describe phenomena in terms of estranging events. As he explains: “The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at the moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself without losing any time” (90). These collections of cold, hard, dead facts, once fleetingly expressed, are left bereft of contemporaneity—as there is no current-ness, or present-ness, in this kind of history—and therefore there is nothing for the receiver to reckon with. By the time the reader has read the report they are left powerless, removed from the productive forces of history itself, and not directly culpable in the lived experience of the event. Furthermore, because of its brief lifespan the narrative provided by “information” will necessarily omit what it cannot contain, with stories that linger and take time to explain or unfold being cut. Readers are then more likely to discard this information, producing absences and aporias instead of continuities. Quite simply, instead of remembering, as a collectivity they forget.

Benjamin, in this essay, mourns the loss of the oral tale where under the unrelenting production of modern forces the “tiny, fragile human body” is downtrodden

and alone, no longer having the “ability to exchange experiences” (83-84). However Benjamin is not calling for a return to an oral culture, for he knows that the past cannot be undone, instead, he takes the time to illuminate the artisanal qualities of this dead art form that structurally lends itself to a retelling and a passing down. He speaks of a “chaste compactness” and “psychological shading” which allows the reader to integrate it into his/her experiences and also, importantly, making it easy to repeat (91). The storyteller figure can transform the singular into the social, where he is able to “take what he tells from experience—his own or that reported from others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those listening to the tale” (87). For Benjamin storytelling produces community, drawing people together through the sensual shared action of listening. The artistic form that dominates in his time, however, is the novel, which, for him, ends up reducing all the incommensurability of life to an individual’s pursuit. Even the *bildungsroman*, which one could argue attempts to communicate the depth of one’s experience, ultimately deadens the alive-ness of the social within the crypt of one solitary individual, reducing resonances, as the development of one character comes at the expense of others.

Throughout *Diamond Grill* Wah wrestles with finding a literary form that allows for coherent communal dialogue, yet also expresses the unstable subject positions that he inhabits. Born to a Chinese-Scots-Irish father who was raised in China, while his mother was a Swedish-born Canadian from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, Wah himself is marked by a whirlpool of hyphens, citizenships, and names. Wah’s multiple-lineage is foregrounded in the book, as many of the stories deal with the challenges of articulating his cultural place within a small Canadian town, and indeed, even in his own family. By

outing himself in this manner, he places in plain view that his lineage does not fit into simple binary constructs. He is not easily read as ‘native’ or ‘other’, yet he is not comfortable suggesting that he is caught-in-between or hybrid. Rather, his style illuminates how his lived experiences engage with a multiplicity of traditions on an everyday basis. For instance, the sheer abundance of everyday details in the *Diamond Grill* resists easy abstraction, and by including pieces in the book that are not directly about race or culture Wah does not allow for the book to be positioned *only* as a piece about the construction of ethnic identity. Foregrounding his constant movement through different identity positions disrupts a singular or complete reading of the author, and instead Wah’s constant shifting positions himself as a storyteller whose presence is felt throughout the text.

Maxine Hong Kingston, perhaps the pioneer of Asian North American literature in the popular American imagination, brings out the voice of a storyteller by integrating what she calls “talk-stories” into her written work. A self-described word warrior Kingston strategically deploys these talk-stories in an attempt to make a Chinese North American history. Specifically, the talk-story highlights the intersubjective relationships involved in the telling, retelling, and interpretation of history, myths, and beliefs in Chinese North American culture. Kingston sees the talk-story as actively wrestling with existing literary conventions that constrict writing herself and other Chinese Americans into history. When read in this light her landmark creative non-fiction work *The Woman Warrior* (1976) becomes a treatise on the materiality of language, and an a map of the intergenerational pressures involved in bringing memories into the present.

The first chapter in the book, “No Name Woman,” announces this intersubjective history making by beginning with the voice of a mother warning her daughter, “You must not tell anyone...what I am about to tell you” (Kingston 3). What follows is a mother’s breathless tale of her sister-in-law’s death that came as the result of an illicit affair. The mother’s story concludes with the narrator’s aunt committing suicide by throwing herself and her baby down a well. However immediately after the mother ends the tale, the voice of the narrator appears and quickly deflates the horrific details offered in the story by announcing that she had researched the events of the story and found that there were numerous structural and historical inaccuracies. This story, then, presents a riddle of content, but also form; for why would the mother tell the story of the narrator’s deceased aunt with fabricated details. The narrator interprets this particular example of storytelling, or of history making, as functioning as a disciplining myth. Told on the occasion of the narrator’s first experience with menstruation, the story is understood a warning about the perils of pre- or extra-marital sex.

Yet even while resolving the troubling counterfactual content of the story by providing a context, this still leaves open the formal question of why the mother chose to include biographical and historical details in the myth. Surely, the mother could have told her daughter a common parable, drawn upon a short fictional story, or even directed her to a textbook. Instead, Kingston explicitly uses the narrator’s voice to explain how stories like this function:

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities.

Those in the emigrant generations who could not assert their brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways – always trying to get them straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence. (5)

This rich passage posits that there is a specific generational *style* through which older Chinese North Americans can tell and receive these stories of community building. The unevenness of the story, the difficulty of it, gives the narrator something to revisit and reflect upon. It does not ‘pass by’ like a newspaper report or other forms of “information,” rather, it lingers and contains riddles that Kingston has to resolve in order to “establish realities.” Hence, the story presents itself such that receiver has to take time to digest it, linger, and piece through the details. The story’s temporal elongation and ellipses demand the receiver revisit it throughout one’s life, lurking as a constant presence, through which the young girl can “grow up on.” As well, an oral story demands either a memorization of the details or a retelling, if one is involved in the business of fact checking. Hence, there is a need to physically revisit and recreate the intimate mouth-to-

mouth communication, paying attention to the tones and the gestures, if she is able to get the story ‘straight.’

Kingston clearly does not find solace in an immutable Chinese essence, nor in a pleasurable unhinged play of language, rather, the story’s style is the result of a negotiation between Chinese North Americans and particular historical pressures. Lisa Lowe famously argues that immigration is the critical locus by which all of Chinese American identity is formed, an event that plays a key role in Kingston’s story and, particularly, in the “hiding of names”—an strategic combating of the racist American immigration policies directed towards Chinese migrants. Beginning in 1882 with the ten-year Chinese Exclusion Law, renewed through the Geary Law and consolidated with the 1924 Immigration act, Chinese migrants were systematically excluded from immigrating to the United States unless they fell under a few exclusive job-titles, or had a family member already living in the US. In response to this policy, from 1882 through 1965 the vast majority of migrants entered the US by claiming familial lineage with existing Chinese Americans, with varying degrees of exactness.<sup>4</sup> This marked the emergence of the so-called “paper sons” where a large number of Chinese Americans entering the US took on ‘false names,’ and, paper son or not, one had to memorize elaborate family genealogies in order to pass the extensive immigration screening process. To facilitate the entry of Chinese migrants a full-fledged industry arose within the Chinese community, exploited by immigration brokers and immigration guards, whereby information, names and genealogies were purchased so that the migrants could stay in the country legally. Within this elaborate system, surveillance did not cease at the border, as agents were known to investigate or spy on families to make sure that they were behaving in a

familiar manner. Even Chinese Americans themselves could, and would, snitch on other Chinese Americans if disputes arose over unrelated issues of finance, sex, and so forth. Thus, the surveillance of the Chinese immigrants did not end once they crossed the border, and indeed, it was to their advantage to never let anyone get their identities' straight, government agent or not (Lee 189-220).

This hiding of names placed a tremendous burden on second and third generation Chinese Americans as they had to piece together genealogies by sorting through these names-that-could-not-be-spoken if they had any hope of accessing their cultural history. However accessing these names came with a price, as transparency was potentially a legal liability, and also the investigation itself could upset familial hierarchies and personal arrangements. In Kingston's story the narrator explains that mentioning her aunt in the presence of her family was taboo, as the utterance of her name served as a reminder of what was lost and left behind, and would serve to upset the narrator's father. Considering the socio-historical context, it was impossible, then, for the mother to tell an 'accurate' story because of the threat of governmental surveillance and persistent familial norms. This limits the mother to certain forms of representation if she wishes to maintain a cohesive family. In other words telling the story 'straight' is impossible as the intimate pleasures, pain, and events of the passage are too complex and politically sensitive to fit into a rote historical presentation. Therefore, the mother turns to myths and stories to give the daughter glimpses of her tradition, relying on imaginative context-bound impressions rather than historical fact.

The task of reading inherited by second generation Chinese Americans is to transform these circular semi-fictitious stories into a translatable form of American

history. This invisible world filled with ghosts challenges a hyper-rational interpretation of the mother's stories and Kingston's narrator has to "make sense" out of the meager details that she is given. The test to establish realities, in other words, is this play of taking unrepresentable people and bringing them from the past into the present. Through this act of history making those of the second generation can establish a chain of being, or manufacture a tradition. Without this Chinese Americans would be read as underdeveloped people—constructed like the colonial other—primitive, without a history, with only wholesale assimilation as a viable alternative. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston actively retells her aunt's tale, directly disobeying the command of her mother to not tell anyone these stories. This is a political act. By taking this stand Kingston refuses to be implicated in the silence about her aunt that the older generation perpetuated. Her aunt's history was erased, not only because of the passage, but because her pregnancy went against societal norms; norms that Kingston now wishes to disavow, or at least not perpetuate during her own life in the US. In "breaking the silence," Kingston writes a feminist history that pays attention to those who did not fit into the older societal structure, and serves up for public consumption the violence involved in sacrificing an aunt to maintain family cohesion. Writing Chineseness in the contemporary context requires Kingston to record, learn from, and then use these histories, without having to follow them perfunctorily. The history she creates is not in a linear march through untroubled information, but rather a self-reflexive narrative that tells of the history making process, while producing a literary rhythm that captures the stakes, stops, and starts involved in creating such a history. By using this form neither she nor the

narrator comes to stand-in for all of Chinese American experience, but rather she shares with the reader the process and challenge of “establishing realities.”

Chinese Canadian immigration policy in many ways mirrored that of its southern neighbor, which was no coincidence as there was a sustained concern that Chinese migrants would be able to enter the US after landing in Canada. Due to the diplomatic ties that the British Empire had with China, however, Canada could not exclude Chinese immigration altogether like in the US. Hence in 1885, when the Chinese government was weakened and the building of the Canadian Pacific railroad was finished, the Canadian government enacted a uniform “head tax” that charged Chinese immigrants the then exorbitant sum of fifty dollars on arrival. Fueled by a strong belief in white supremacy and Social Darwinism, the head tax was raised to one hundred dollars with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1900, and then with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1903 the sum was quintupled to five hundred dollars. Finally, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 (known colloquially within the Chinese Canadian community as the Chinese Exclusion Act) was so stringent that only eight Chinese people were able to successfully immigrate from 1924-1946 (Tan and Roy 13). This restrictive law was only repealed in 1947 when the psychological impact of the holocaust made explicit racial discrimination unpalatable for the population at large. Thus, in 1947 Chinese Canadians were ‘given’ full citizenship, yet immigration was still restricted to immediate family members and spouses. Again, as with their American counterparts, until 1967, when the “place of origin” section of the immigration policy was eliminated, family lineage became the most important discourse of citizenship for Chinese Canadians.

Piecing together a complete Chinese Canadian history is particularly difficult for a biracial figure like Wah, who did not grow up in a bustling community or household filled with Chinese Canadian figures. Since Wah's mother, or any known female relative, is not of Chinese descent, the position of a Chinese immigrant woman is missing from his own biographical history. Wah foregrounds this problem of genealogical absences in a section where he imagines the social pressures faced by a Chinese immigrant woman entering a new country. While he cannot speak to this experience directly, his family history—which involves his father's courtship of his white mother while losing contact with his “other” wife and children left behind in China—still serves to haunt and color this dense passage:

Yet languageless. Mouth always a guaze, words locked behind tongue, stopped in and out, what's she saying, what's she want, why's she mad, this woman-silence stuck, stopped – there and back, English and Chinese churning ocean, her languages caught in that loving angry rip tide of children and coercive tradition and authority. Yet.

[...] Yet the oceans of women migrant-tongued words in a double bind of bossy love and wary double-talk forced to ride the waves of rebellion and obedience through a silence that shutters numb the traffic between the eye and the mouth and slaps across the face of family, yet these women forced to spit, out of bound-up feet and torsoed hips made up yarns and foreign scripts unlucky colours zippered lips. (5)

In the first part of the passage, Wah addresses the migrant woman's loss of language, or perhaps more accurately, the loss of being able to communicate her experience through an oral representation. By inserting commas Wah creates syntactical breaks, which produce a sonorous mirroring of the choppy waves of the Pacific Ocean, symbolically tossing the woman backwards and forwards between the demands of two cultures. This mimics the stops, starts, and stuttering of one stuck between two linguistic forms, not being able to get-out what they are trying to say, contorting the mouth into unfamiliar shapes and unable to get words "unlocked" from behind the tongue. While she faces these linguistic impediments it is the cultural demands that are particularly jarring, captured by the dehumanizing series of questions posed about her in the third person.

The second part of the passage creates the opposite effect, as there are too few commas and the passage is seemingly spiraling out of control, when, interestingly, Wah expands the scope of the poem from a woman to the plural "women." This loss of control and rapid expansion of the experience to the social, emulates the free-flowing connections made by their bodies, a wild somatic explosion, which contrasts with the internal numbness "between the eye and the mouth." This loss of bodily control culminates with the a rhythmic repeated rhyme—"out of bound-up feet and torsoed *hips* made up yarns and foreign *scripts* unlucky colours zippered *lips*"—piling nouns onto each other to build a sensuous record of these women's body parts. This final sentence whips the passage into an assonance filled frenzy with "ess" sounds splattering across the page, creating a tongue-twisting pile-up that produces a series of hissing sounds that begs for the anchoring presence of a storyteller.

The literariness of this list is evident by the stylized third person voice, and like Kingston, Wah is attempting to use a complex literary form to incorporate those ‘lost’ contorted bodies in his history. In this case, these lost women’s histories can only be accessed by *writing* a linguistically deft fictional encounter since their voices are lost and locked away forever. Their histories were erased so thoroughly that there was no space or time when they could orally share these histories, and thus a form that parallels their entangled experiences is more faithful than a simple recitable one. This literary turn is also, in part, an attempt to build a history that redresses the guilt he feels about being on the privileged side of an unequal power relationship, as Wah’s father chose to bestow the fruits of his labor on his Canadian family, while Wah’s half-family, an ocean away, received nothing. Without the ability or ethical ground to conjure up his own biological lineage, he creeps towards sensual bodily cues and moves from the particular to the general to cultivate an inclusive history of Chinese Canadian experience. However, this redress (perhaps reflexively) falls short as his privilege extends to the process of history making, as his linguistic and institutional access, once again, renders the women mute. They are still the mere objects of his tale and their lived sensuality, despite his best efforts, is still dulled into a list. This conflict illuminates the lack of representational control one has over one’s own body, and the historical limit to the sensual regenerative potential held inside a living being. Thus there is the pressing need for something outside of oneself, a mediating force that can reactivate the sensuality, perhaps through “chaste compactness,” “psychological shading,” and repeatability, to bring the community to a more even equitable division of creation and representation.

Wah reckons with the peculiar transmission of Chineseness most directly through food, both on a representational and material level, as the profits and stability of the commercial restaurant marks the differences between him and his half-brothers and sisters overseas. The place of the restaurant frames the entirety of the book, and, hence, Wah's turn to sensuality brings the details of everyday life alive through an abundance of culinary imagery. This imagery documents both the transmission of cultural knowledge and his experiences of racial identification and dis-identification. For instance, his piece, "Dad doesn't cook much with Ginger but whenever," follows a specifically sensuous encounter with his father's cooking:

Dad doesn't cook much with

Ginger but whenever

I accidentally bite into a piece of ginger root in the beef and greens,

I make a face and put it aside. This makes him mad, not because he doesn't think ginger is bitter but because I've offended his pride in the food he prepares for us.

Ginger becomes the site of an implicit racial qualification.

The other dish in which we watch out for ginger is beef and tomatoes. It floats slivered and its brassy sheen in the red sauce makes it easy to pick out.

He keeps a few inches of ginger root in the fridge freezer and slices off just a little whenever he needs it. Sparingly. Gingerly.

Though it's always used with fish because it nicely neutralizes

Fishy odours, ginger's delicate pungency blends deliciously in a dish of parboiled Chinese broccoli and oyster sauce. Put a couple of very thin slivers into the oyster sauce while heating it up. Spoon over the drained spears of gai lan, and serve alongside a bowl of steamed rice.

This knurled suffix of graduated foreignicity, gyna gendered and warped up tighter than a Persian rug-knot, hardly explains how ginger's almost nicer than being born – but that's just taste. (Wah 1996 11)

Visual imagery runs through this poem, from the shimmering of the ginger in the sauce to the colors of the “red sauce” and the cooked “greens.” While this visuality is initially prominent, serving to introduce the scene, the contention and conflict in the poem revolves around the act of biting into and tasting the ginger. In this encounter the sensual taste produces an involuntary reaction, where Wah “makes a face” and pushes the ginger aside, and a conflict is produced between a visually transparent outside and the complex bodily reaction of his insides. As Constance Classen, Martin Jay, Anthony Synnott, and others note, smells and taste have traditionally been positioned as the base senses in both the Western philosophical and Christian tradition—from Aristotle, to Paul, through to Hegel—precisely because of their irreducible, private qualities. While sight is a public apparatus that can easily survey, consolidate, and categorize, smells, touch, and sensuous taste are held inside, suspiciously buried deep in the subject. In this poem this battle between the individual and social surveillance takes place at the table, where Wah cannot help but react violently to the ginger, which his father's watchful eye reads as a symbolic

gesture of his non-conformity to the Chinese tradition and as his son's racial [dis]qualification.<sup>5</sup>

However, Wah is not willing to renounce his racial qualifications easily and fights back in the latter half of the poem, as Wah demonstrates that he 'contains' cultural knowledge by cataloguing how and when to cook with ginger. For instance, he relates to the reader that he has observed his father's techniques of slicing and storing the ginger, and also extols the virtue of the root, noting that it nicely neutralizes "fishy odours." Furthermore, Wah claims he actually enjoys ginger when it is prepared with *gai lan* and oyster sauce, where it "blends deliciously." He further displays his cultural knowledge by spending a paragraph explaining, in a cookbook-esque fashion, how to prepare the *gai lan* dish and what to pair with it for the maximum dining experience. Illustrating that his problem was with his father's preparation not with its essence or the taste itself, suggests that he does belong in this Chinese Canadian tradition and should not be racially disqualified just because of this one bodily reaction. The happenstance of his birth he can do little about, but writing about his culinary education, the shaping of his body, mind, and tongue, is his struggle for a cultural rebirth.

In this passage Wah's moves notions of taste away from the preciousness of a solitary encounter with a food object, and posits taste as a marker of shared cultural traditions where regenerative qualities are imaginatively configured rather than decreed (Cho 130). Dripping with sexual imagery, his description of the ginger root itself maps out a different site of reproduction, where through its visual resemblance to the knotted gynecological figure as well as a phallic root, the ginger symbolically claims both reproductive organs at once. The hermaphrodite root, then, becomes the site for a new

kind of regenerative lineage that signals a turn towards the inner corporeal world that is “better than birth.” By literally swallowing the pungent Chineseness he can perform his ethnic affiliation, and his writing balances out, or complicates, the failure of his dining performance by exhibiting his knowledge of Chinese cooking to a broader readership—challenging his father’s hermeneutical reading of his body. In this case gesturing to the reader is not selling or guiding of the ethnic experience, as they are not told how to fit into a stable tradition. Furthermore, he does not untangle the “graduated knot of foreignicity,” nor are the readers particularly encouraged to join the journey to this table of contradiction. Readers can glean basic knowledge of how to prepare a dish, its visual and surface pleasures, but they are not told the secret of tasting that will allow them to ‘pass’ as Chinese. In this instance, then, the presentation of the culinary object works to keep the audience on the outside, as meaning is generated by him and for him. His needs the readers only to perform as a captive audience—a tool that will allow him to repeat and rewrite the estranging event—involving them as mere spectators in his process of “establishing realities.”

Interestingly, this segment is a re-writing or re-presentation of one of his earlier poems. This poem is more transparent about the regenerative potentialities of this kind of culinary experience, the scope of his audience, and indeed, the stakes involved in writing about it:

my father hurt-  
 ing at the table  
 sitting hurting

at suppertime  
deep inside very  
far down inside  
because I can't stand the ginger  
in the beef and greens  
he cooked for us tonight  
and years later tonight  
that look on his face  
appears now on mine  
my children  
my food  
their food  
my father  
their father  
me mine  
*thefather*  
very far  
very very far  
inside. (Wah 1985 7)

The first section of the poem is similar in its narrative arc—namely, recalling the event where his father is disappointed in his reaction to the ginger. In this instance, however, his father is actually “hurting” while sitting at the table, silently internalizing the event,

instead of the more outward projection of anger. With this iteration Wah draws the father to the table “at suppertime” where they share a time and a place. Despite this seemingly intimate encounter, the close spatial proximity actually serves to emphasize the great generational gulf that lay between them. Thus when Wah speaks of something being far away, it is not a transpacific distance, but rather place gets inverted and goes inward, where the particular pain is very far away, buried deep inside his father’s body. The corporeal body is the true sense of place in this instance, and his father is in pain because he fears that Wah has not received the somatic culinary message correctly.

The poem turns on “tonight” where the word’s repetition changes the temporal field of the poem to Wah’s present, when he is sitting, once again, at a table, but this time with children of his own. While the time changes the place does not as he is still involved in what could be called the trans-historical table of tradition—a repeatable setting that shapes the passing down of customs through performances fraught with contradictions. Here another bodily reaction, the mimicking of his father’s facial gesture, marks Wah as being interpellated into the Chinese Canadian tradition. Wah does not indicate that as he matured he suddenly ‘got’ the taste of the ginger, nor is the poem explicit that he is feeding his children anything that is yoked to ‘Chinese taste.’ Yet this gesture suggests that some message or part of the tradition did pass to Wah from his father, and also, that this lineage is not dependent on properly receiving the “taste” per se, but is something received “at the table” through the social discipline of dining. By reproducing the gesture, Wah marks himself as involuntarily entering the tradition, which differs from the later iteration that stresses a conscious decision to learn. Conscious or not, the making of tradition obviously suits the subject position of Wah well, as his ‘mixed-blood’ heritage

would preclude him from completely participating in or being part of a stable authentic tradition. A cultural tradition that is built through a dynamic social process is less vulnerable to the passage of time, as no matter how much more ‘diluted’ the blood becomes (through intermarriage, children, grandchildren, etc.) the table can remain the same.

However, the poem does not end on this optimistic note of a fluidly passed-down tradition. Rather, it concludes with the burying of the pain “very very far inside” and a folding inward of the role of “father.” Once again, the flow of tradition remains incomplete and propelled forward in his children’s melancholic search for “*thefather*.” This demand is articulated through his rhetoric confusion of ownership of “my father/their father/me/ mine” where implicitly Wah is *writing* the children into the tradition—communicating, to them perhaps, that this gesture that they may read as idiosyncratically his, is much more familiar than they realize. By ending in this fashion, a culinary tradition is in not cheerily perpetuated by precious gestures, but rather by a wound that cyclically reappears in the diasporic Chinese culture.

It has been nearly twenty years since Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong initiated the discussion about food and Asian North American writing, and tracking how this form regenerates through tropes of both joy and sadness is integral to understanding the durability of culinary writing. In their session, the “Eat, Pray, Puke” plenary panel demonstrated that when passed from generation-to-generation, and medium-to-medium, culinary affiliations require care and attention, as they are in danger of being instrumentalized by the ravenous appetite of a market that consumes ethnic differences. However, Wah’s *Diamond Grill* is not a guidebook, selling-out, or exoticization of

Chineseness, but rather a shape-shifting document, which conveys historical, linguistic, and material reasons why the place of the Chinese table and restaurant is a crucial site for an inclusive the Chinese North American community. Wah's tenuous racial and ethnic ties leads to a careful investigation of the Chinese North American culinary tradition as he struggles to stake out his position in the community. It provides him with a unique place for trans-historical sensual contacts, passed mouth to mouth, that serve as his cultural foothold. This need for accessible cultural footholds will become even more pronounced as each ensuing generation loses the linguistic skills necessary to engage the intimate histories of their forbearers. In this light, cuisine in Chinese North American literature can be read as a record of the disappearance of sensual experiences, gestured towards when other methods of cultural transmission begin to fail.

Commercial and cultural pressures demand that Wah represent Chineseness so that it is legible and meaningful to himself and his children. Culinary experience provides an out-of-body forum for this kind of somatic knowledge, which alone cannot communicate the politics of a particular group or generational conflict, but when contextualized in a literary form draws together subject positions to build cross-generational affiliations. In the editor's introduction of the April 2011 issue of *MELUS* Martha Cutter suggests that we have reached a point of ethnic storytelling fatigue, and that the 'salvation' promised by linguistic innovations in the late 70's has not, in fact, come to fruition (Cutter 5). Yet during this same time-period the themes of food and storytelling have persisted so virulently in Chinese North American literature. This suggests that this culinary form of storytelling continues to satisfy a pressing need, perhaps not in the lofty providence of providing salvation, but for the more humble goal

of cultural transmission. Bates and Wah to turn to the table to make explicit their own writerly struggles in expressing Chineseness, but in a way that mirrors and describes the variegated stops and starts of Chinese North American life. Their attention to the process of cultural construction suggests that a static, debasing Orientalist aesthetic has not been internalized by a commerce-hungry community of cultural dupes, even if some are unable to leave stereotypical representations of Chinese North Americans behind. Instead, each author uses a literary long-form in an attempt to capture vital ‘Chinese’ gestures, psychologies and networks, expressing complex elongated modes of transference by bringing to life the details that information seeks to deaden. With sensual culinary narratives, each repetition produces varying degrees of sameness and difference—true not only for storytelling but for cooking as well—a repetition that transmits the clinks, smacks, and grunts involved in the actual lived experience of eating and surviving. By reflexively writing this cultural knowledge, speaking to the sensuality of those left behind, Chinese North American authors bring the past in to the present, in a relentless attempt to revive the tradition, mouth-to-mouth.

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous examples of Chinese North American authors who set their writing in restaurants and/or make extensive use of culinary imagery, such as: Judy Fong Bates, Lan Samantha Chang, Frank Chin, Louis Chu, Gus Lee, David Wong Louie, and Anne Mah, to name only a few.

<sup>2</sup> This common Chinese greeting should not always be interpreted as a literal invitation to eat; yet in this instance it functions an expression of maternal care that keeps the topic of food on the front burner, so to speak.

<sup>3</sup> While the examples of self-orientalization are not as plentiful or overt as they are in, say, Frank Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon*, Su-Jen’s family is still clearly capitalizing on their separation from mainstream

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white culture to market their business. Bates does not need to recount numerous examples of self-orientalism or racism, *ad nauseum*, as it is a structural reality that preconditions this form of existence—a relationship that is clear from the few examples that Bates does provide. Her delicacy here is missed by reviews of this work that claim the racism in the novel is not “blatant,” or is an aside to a family drama. I strongly disagree with this reading, as racist institutions and structures push them into the restaurant space, which in turn, produces the family drama.

<sup>4</sup> 1965 is the closing of this period with the enacting of the ‘liberal’ Immigration and Nationality Act

<sup>5</sup> Note here that Wah turns to a “racial” disqualification rather than ethnicity. That it appears with the face that he makes, rather than skin color, alludes to a performative form of race—an intimate construction rather than a transparent sign.

### Chapter 3

#### Gastrodiplomacy:

#### Culinary Nationalism, Empire, and the Event of Eating

The gentle art of gastronomy is a friendly one. It hurdles the language barrier, makes friends among civilized people, and warms the heart.

- Samuel Chamberlain

Samuel Chamberlain's famous passage travels easily; it can be found as an epigraph for cookbooks, a point of departure for serious academic work, and framed as wall art in middle-class domestic kitchens. Removed from its wartime context, the quote suggests that gastronomy promises universal hospitality, evading barriers of linguistic untranslatability by appealing to both the vital organs and sentiment of sociality that underwrite human experience. By dubbing gastronomy an art this perfectly palatable phrase's versatility also sets the realm of cooking and eating apart from the cruel drives and desires of the market. Yet in positioning gastronomy as an exceptional artistic practice, seemingly far away from the grand forces of statecraft, Chamberlain's gesture towards the category of "civilized people" should serve as a cause for pause. For who counts as "civilized" enough to receive this friendly culinary signal, and who does not? Instead of gastronomy being a "civilizing process" itself—to borrow Norbert Elias' phrase—in this setting those who can appreciate this "gentle art" are preformed and predetermined before even entering the gustatory space. Indeed, when this phrase is taken off the wall and considered in light of Chamberlain's participation in the US imperial

invasion of Mexico, the national and racial prejudices that could saturate this dictum rise to the surface.

The limitations of Chamberlain's horizontal comradeship provide a sharp example of what I am calling "culinary nationalism," where gastronomy functions as both a technology to develop a communal ethos and a diplomatic tool. Methodologically, in this chapter I am appealing to Benedict Anderson's call in *Imagined Communities* for scholars to carefully examine and historicize how nationalisms change over time, and, particularly, to trace how they maintain their "profound emotional legitimacy" (1). By studying how notions of cuisine and nationalism became intertwined ideas, I show how gastronomy has functioned as a national modular form that is remarkably flexible in acquiring an emotional legitimacy across diverse eras, bodies, and lands—at times in far less "gentle" ways than Chamberlain projects. By examining how various iterations of globalized eating sit in relation to imperial attempts to use cuisine to transport ideas across borders, I demonstrate that food has become impossible to encounter during the modern era without considering the imposition of national interests and tastes.<sup>1</sup>

Culinary nationalism is what makes gastrodiploacy possible. Take for instance a contemporary movement that is proliferating among Asian governments, where policy-makers are making aggressive investments in the worldwide promotion of their national cuisines. Korea, in particular, has pledged 40 billion USD to grow its exports of food products and restaurants over the next decade (Rockaway), justifying this expense by identifying the market share of the global food industry as being substantially larger than that of information technology, automobiles, or steel (Hansik). These governmental programs are not mercenary for-profit grabs that hedge on and promote whichever food

product is popular at any given moment, but rather, they pursue an educational agenda that introduces non-natives to cultural and historical qualities of their national cuisine in the hopes of cultivating a ravenous market. What differentiates these endeavors from most heritage programs is that these governments actively brand and market their national cuisines in foreign countries, using food as a tool that will cultivate an overseas interest in their culinary culture that, it is hoped, will eventually lure tourists into visiting the mainland.

Gastrodiplomacy, as a term, mainly appears in trade journals and blogs that locate Thailand's 2002 strategic cultural efforts as the epoch of this modern mixing of national branding and guided culinary contact. Understood as a new branch of public diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy reconfigures the conventional international relations paradigm of sending small representative envoys to other countries by instead appealing to a foreign public's mind, and in this case stomach, through the careful global distribution of broad popular images or objects. World exhibitions, fairs, and overseas commerce bureaus are similar ventures where governments take an active role in promoting national goods, but gastrodiplomacy is unique in its specificity insofar as it conceives of food as the gateway of national culture. Educating the foreign public about domestic food provides an opportunity for both understanding and commerce that will propagate beyond the immediate business gains, as the situation of eating also introduces many other cultural rituals and commodities.

In addition to seeking tangible market gains the gastrodiplomatic mission provides nations an opportunity to rewrite history and favorably position a country's cultural achievements. By examining why cuisine has come to be considered both a

cultural border and a gateway, I contend that the *idea* of food is not an interchangeable commodity. Instead food has acquired a semantic density that makes it impossible to encounter during the modern era without an accompanying need for interpretation, as the “event of eating” is considered rich with signifiers of social hierarchy and national interest. Through a discussion of the theoretical foundations of French cuisine, its imperial branding, and the modern cosmopolitan conceits of Slow Food, in this chapter I demonstrate that culinary nationalism is an intersubjective epistemological regime that defines and delineates the internal coordinates of the body social. Through this discussion I locate the roots of gastrodplomacy well beyond its 2002 discursive genesis, suggesting the very idea of national cuisine is underwritten by a belief in hierarchical physical difference, the event of eating, the need for an interpreter, and a competitive global culinary market.

### Culinary Nationalism and the Event of Eating

Nationalism and cuisine often become close companions during historical moments when the nation-state needs to reassert its presence into the everyday lives of its subjects. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while there were divergences in the eating of particular regional foods, differences in cuisines were primarily found between upper and lower classes. The idea of a “national cuisine” emerged as a way to codify social divisions, requiring a massive discursive operation to cut across deep valleys of accessibility, regions, and subject positions. The codification of national cuisine began in France following the French revolution, particularly during the time of the Restoration, when an accessible code for national subjects was needed—with the conservative regime

searching for ways to manage its populace along traditional hierarchical lines without resorting to violent discipline. The concept of culinary nationalism became an ideal cultural technology during this era, particularly during France's overseas endeavors when the nationally marked practices of eating, dining, and cooking served as an effective way to maintain an imagined community that stretched from the homeland to the far reaches of the globe.

The roots of this gastrodipomatic imagination can be located in Roland Barthes' early collection *Mythologies*, which catalogues ways everyday practices are inscribed into a national French narrative, and demonstrates how quotidian forms of "mythmaking" often align with the interests of the ruling class. How national mythmaking is practiced is neatly detailed in the segments where Barthes examines cuisine: "Wine and Milk" and "Steak and Chips." In these two pieces Barthes describes the ways these particular foods become part of an accessible national lexicon where French subjects can engage common practices of a collective identity. In the former piece he begins by proposing that a proper relationship to wine signifies authentic French character because of the "gesture" of leisurely drinking, more so than the inherent qualities held in the wine itself, noting: "an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practising wine drinker: knowing *how* to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchmen, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability" (59). During this ostensibly intimate and singular act of drinking wine, then, the individual strains to connect with the social body by repeatedly performing and perfecting this ritual. Barthes' reading implies that while the Frenchman is drinking, he is doing so while imagining that someone is always watching this increasingly controlled performance.

Contorting the body publically hails the nation, asking for attention to confirm membership in the community. Performing this ritual with wine, though, is not a matter of free individual expression but, rather, is a socially compulsory act that is inescapable in French society, as Barthes continues:

A Frenchman who kept this myth at arm's length would expose himself to minor but definite problems of integration ... The universality principle fully applies here inasmuch as society calls anyone who does not believe in wine by *names* such as sick, disabled or deprived. It does not *comprehend* him (in both senses, intellectual and spatial, of the word). (59)

This passage names the ritual of drinking wine as so essential to French society that if one fails to perform the proper gesture then the subject no longer signifies in a recognizable way—falling off the map. While good behavior is rewarded, the aberrant is punished through social exile leading Barthes to conclude that for a Frenchman, “to believe in wine is a collective coercive act” (59). Because it belongs to a national signifying system wine is not a frivolous luxury for Barthes, but has material use-value as an examination site to see if one can conform to French life. This testing ground is an important element of both the moral and physical environment of the community, serving as an easily transportable field that examines all regardless of their social standing and class. Flexible and portable, wine draws together various times and places, “not only because it provides a basis for a morality but also an environment: it is an ornament in the slightest ceremonials of French daily life, from the snack ... to the feast, from the

conversation at the café to a speech at a formal dinner” (59). By reading wine as an environmental marker, then, drinking becomes a trans-spatial event that signals and facilitates moments of French behavior.

In his later work “Towards a Psychosociology of Food Consumption” Barthes revisits and expands upon ways the event of eating circulates throughout national life, arguing that in the modern era food itself has become a sign—as it is increasingly read as something other than itself. Previously food only signaled meaningfully (positively or negatively) during festive occasions, however Barthes notes that a “polysemia” of food characterizes modernity, where “activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, celebration—every one of these situations is expressed through food” (Towards 25). With this semiotic expansion food comes to signify across multiple times and places, and the event of eating becomes a place where a diversity of social traits converge through a common practice. This culinary polysemia enables national expression when the event of eating becomes folded into what Barthes calls “commemorative eating,” where one can “partake each day of the national past,” as food is thought of as “a repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors” (24). What he identifies as “traditional eating,” then, allows one to envision a direct identification with the collective experience and wisdom of societal groupings that precede the modern eater. Here one infers a common bond or taste by participating in the same rituals practiced by those in the past and eating equivalent types of food. Of course, the groups who are imagined to have presaged the present-day event of eating are carefully selected along national lines. Barthes suggests the French culinary past is imagined through the two seemingly divergent themes of an aristocratic tradition and an idealized idyllic rural history. While these esoteric images

paper over mundane particularity (as neither refer to the everyday drudgery of manually ingesting calories) when combined they produce a very broad conception of the nation that many can envision themselves as being a part of—a resonance that becomes particularly alluring when traveling outside of the geographic borders of the state.

Barthes' famous rumination on the place of steak and chips in French society demonstrates how culinary taste became an expression of state power during the colonial era. The affective reach of steak mirrors that of wine, as he suggests that dining on steak is an act that works across various class strata as “part of all the rhythms, that of the comfortable bourgeois meal and that of the bachelor's bohemian snack” (*Mythologies* 63). The inclusion of the word “rhythm” suggests that dining mediates the contradictions found in spaces and in gestures, so that national belonging emerges through a shared stylized relationship to time. The food product itself functions like a metronome, structuring the rhythm and marshalling the pace, and in its absence the Frenchman longs for the beat; for Barthes relates: “there is no alimentary constraint which does not make the Frenchman dream of steak. Hardly abroad, the Frenchman feels nostalgia for it.” Barthes decision to turn to the theme of travel to express this culinary ethos speaks to the geopolitics underwriting the event of eating, and how culinary nationalism supports these projects by keeping its subjects loyal and longing for home.

Articulating and representing how culinary cultural ties circulate can index the ways coercive cultural influence is used to delineate national boundaries and racial hierarchies. For instance, Barthes' relates the story of General de Castries sitting down for his first meal in Indochina, where the General's demand for *steak-frites* reinforces the transnational cultural strength that France is exerting during the colonial period. This

simple but symbolically potent meal of meat and potatoes signifies the imposition of a “muscular” no-nonsense French rule, where no matter where the Frenchman goes he is entitled to take ‘his’ meal. As Keya Ganguly argues, this anecdote illustrates the particular way French food had come to embody the state’s political power, noting “[w]hereas the commonplace about food is that one eats to live, it appears the Frenchman eats to rule” (126-127). As the piece was written shortly after de Castries’ capture by the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu—a defeat that signaled the end of the French imperial endeavors in Indochina—Barthes is slyly casting a critical eye towards this particular brand of patriotic zeal. Yet as I argue in chapter four, the structure of this culinary signifying system was more successful in maintaining its currency over the Vietnamese imagination than de Castries and his confreres were. For despite the defeat of the French empire, the potency of both eating and announcing one’s dining practice lives on in the former colonies and throughout the world.

### The Role of the Interpreter

In the modern era culinary nationalism is conceptualized as an ethical mission oriented towards a global enlightenment of taste and the prestige of a nation’s cuisine is a sign of its place in this culinary modernity. But reaching and maintaining these lofty heights is a difficult task requiring translation and mediation by trained interpreters. Barthes’ studies map how everyday culinary practices signify in his modern France, yet it is beyond his structuralist scope to conceptualize the process through which these epistemological regimes developed, and indeed, locate the techniques used so that France gained its gastronomical self-assurance. Through the next two sections I explain how

France gained its place at the head of the global table of taste through the construction of the interpreter figure and the production of gastronomic literature. I consider Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (1979) as the watershed text that articulates how the intersection of bodily performance, physiological qualities, and eating practices are posited as a form of statecraft in post-revolutionary times.

While not initially a bestseller *The Physiology of Taste* was an important book insofar as it provided an accessible programmatic structure that linked national ideology with voluntary everyday performance, shaping the habits and imagination of the newly minted French subject. Furthermore, Brillat-Savarin's "gourmandism," with its reflective attitude towards food and desire for an aesthetic consensus, provides a model for the discussion of difference and identity that was political durable throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century—situating him within an important tradition of enlightenment writers who, existing at the threshold of the invention of the human sciences, sought to categorize and organize subjects and bodies (Gigante 160). Although he is well known for discursively creating a new caste of effete communal members (proto-foodies) who seek to become gourmands, it has been overlooked how his claims of universal transcendence cloak a distinctly national program that provides the imaginative sustenance for an imperial French subject to perform at home or abroad.

*The Physiology of Taste*, at first glance, could not seem farther from a heavy treatise on nationhood. It is an ambitious and quite humorous attempt to uncover man's relationship to food, reading as both a culinary reference and a how-to-guide for one interested in fully appreciating food as what he terms as a "gourmand." When reading the

book closely it is clear what Brillat-Savarin provides is not merely run of the mill snobbery. On the contrary, I propose that he provides the reader with the necessary surveillance techniques to uphold the physiological “science” of gastronomy. For instance, the how-to techniques describe the steps to becoming a gourmand, yet as part of this procedure, he also provides guidelines for spotting who does and who does not qualify to be a gourmand. These surveillance techniques are not couched in a difficult or complicated language, but rather, a friendly conversational tone—inviting the amateur to become the learned policeman. While Brillat-Savarin may not have foreseen its reach, the manual provides an outline for a self-surveilling populace to produce and reproduce norms of the newly burgeoning French nation-state. In a time of great political and social upheaval, this culinary manual was an important step in creating an accessible national aesthetic that many could participate in, or at least imagine interacting with at the level of a surveiller.

Born in 1755, and dying in 1826, a year after the publication of this work, Brillat-Savarin has a remarkable vantage-point on the development of the French nation as his lifetime straddles the *Ancien Régime*, Revolutionary France, The Napoleonic Era, and Restoration Europe. How Brillat-Savarin survived the revolution is a sordid tale of alliances and intrigue, yet his attraction to fine dining and culinary writing is rather straightforward. Brillat-Savarin was a bachelor who traveled (or was exiled) as far as New England, and had ample opportunities to eat in both rural and Parisian restaurants on a regular basis. As such, *The Physiology of Taste* carries with it the cachet of a professional observer, who obviously takes great delight in the social situations of which he writes. The book itself begins with the famous aphorisms, a satirical dialogue, a brief

biography of a doctor friend, and a rather self-deprecating author's preface, before moving on to the "Meditations" which provide the bulk of the book. Finally, the last section "Varieties" are one or two page biographical stories that contain instruction on how to make and savor simple dishes, demonstrating the strong connections between preparation and pleasure. The thirty meditations with subject headings such as "On the Senses," "On the Treatment of Obesity," and "Thinness," consist of a number of 'truths' largely based on his travels and personal anecdotes. It is in this central section that it becomes apparent that Brillat-Savarin, despite his breezy air, is quite serious in attempting to write a physiology, and that these meditations are indeed meant to be read as a body of sociological facts that are collected together to lay the groundwork for what he calls a "Science of Gastronomy."

The prescriptive tone of the tome is not accidental, as Brillat-Savarin freely admits in the preface that he is "above all a lover of doctors" (20). While he dined with numerous physicians and scientists, it was, to say the least, ambitious to conduct such a sweeping physiological survey considering his limited qualifications. Accordingly since Brillat-Savarin was unpracticed in writing precise academic language the book's methodology drifts between an armchair sociology and a philosophy of morals, yet he is clear that he endeavors to address man's connection to food in a concrete manner, and assert that it is a subject worthy of empirical study. He who proclaims himself a "doctor, chemist, physiologist, and even something of a scholar" (20), may be stylistically informal in his writing but the underlying pretence of the book is to elevate food, cooking, and cuisine, so that they are considered worthy of rigorous scientific study.

“Meditation 11: On Gourmandism” and “Meditation 12: On Gourmands” are pivotal chapters in conceptualizing the gastronomic ritual as a particularly *social* experience, as he outlines the qualities and practices most in harmony with a gourmand lifestyle. Criticizing existing dictionary entries on gourmandism he complains that:

They have completely, utterly forgotten that social Gourmandism unites an Attic elegance with Roman luxury and French subtlety, the kind which chooses wisely, asks for an exacting and knowing preparation, savours with vigour, and sums up the whole with profundity: it is a rare quality, which might easily be named a virtue, and which is at least one of our surest sources of pure pleasure. (147)

Here Brillat-Savarin presents the qualities of a refined subject by drawing a straight line from Greek and Roman civilizations to his present-day France, where through the application of these “ancient” principles, and mixing in a touch of modern French nuance, one can transcend the mundane everyday drudgery of ingestion into a realm of “pure pleasure.” Pleasure is a sign of knowledge, but even here there are stark limits, for he states that gourmandism is, “the enemy of overindulgence; any man who eats too much or grown drunk risks being expelled from its army of disciples” (147). The theme of limit setting is apparent both on the level of the eater and surveiller, where carefully selecting at the same time involves rejecting; and those who possess the qualities to produce the entirety of this performance are considered “rare.” Thus while gourmandism exists as an individual pursuit and discipline, eating must also fall in accordance with a higher order of natural *social* laws and expulsion from this “army of disciples” is the

penalty if one does not follow the rules and regulations. As with the modern French culinary signifying structure outlined by Barthes, gourmandism is something that can be lost and must be repeatedly performed to keep up with the social order. However, instead of being satisfied with aristocratic and idyllic French traditions, Brillat-Savarin's gourmand can imagine himself accessing the deep historical ties of ancient imperial civilizations.

If exhibiting qualities can lead to expulsion then the test of eating becomes merit-based exam. This testing suggests that an outsider could learn the rituals and then join the community, yet Brillat-Savarin quickly dismisses this as a possibility, for he posits the existence of a naturally selected society who is inherently capable of being a gourmand, stating:

No man is a Gourmand simply because he wishes to be one. There are certain people to whom Nature has denied either an organic delicacy or a power of concentration, without which the most delicious dishes can pass them by unnoticed. Physiology has already... show[n] us that the tongues of such wretches are so sparsely provided with the sensitive taste buds meant to absorb and appreciate flavours that they can awaken but vague sensations: indeed, such people are as blind to taste as true blind men are to light. (147)

It is not only social irregularities, like poor manners, that distance the eater from becoming a gourmand, but there are also irreversible physical disabilities hardwired into the palate. Like a blind man who cannot see, they cannot taste. This implies that

accessing the transcendent pleasures of the table requires possessing a pre-figured physiology. To be a Gourmand one has to study, enact, and practice a rigorous discipline of manners, as well as be “pre-destined” to inclusion, and Brillat-Savarin provides both the social *and* physiological guidelines. Thus this community is biologically ordained and socially achieved, as one must use physical gifts and then regulate themselves, as well as their society—lest they be expelled.

Instead of dwelling on the enviable physiological traits, rhetorically Brillat-Savarin is overly concerned with providing the reader with observable social traits that mark those who do not belong to the community, namely, “The second class of unfortunates . . . made up of the inattentive, the flighty, the overly ambitious and all those who try to do two things at once, and eat only to fill their bellies” (147). Because an underdeveloped palate is difficult to immediately discern, Brillat-Savarin must turn to these public social traits to compile the damning evidence against the non-gourmands, where their outward appearance is a sign of the inward deficiency. His observations, then, not only serve as a set of guidelines for one attempting to become a gourmand, but also explain how to spot who is and who is not a gourmand.

The reach of this code extends well beyond the insular community, and follows a coercive model where there is no opting out practically or ethically. Despite the nonchalant tenor of the treatise, there are grand undercurrents, both divine and material, where transcendental laws resonate:

Morally, it is an implicit obedience of the rules of the Creator, who, having ordered us to eat in order to live, invites us to do so with appetite, encourages us

with flavour, and rewards us with pleasure ... Physically it is the result as well as the proof of the perfect state of health of our digestive organs. (148)

Despite the increasing secularization of society following the revolution, appetites and the pursuit of pleasures still remain under the jurisprudence of divine accord. Replacing the reverential belief in the divine right of kings the performance of pleasurable eating becomes the cosmic sign of societal health, as it guides erratic human behaviour by providing ubiquitously present and accessible natural laws. The 'scientific' proof that the Creator is at hand lies within the singular eater, where as long as the organs are maintained and function as to their intended purpose a holy image is left behind.<sup>1</sup>

This divine and societal bridge would be enough of a philosophical and sociological grounding to understand, or at least forecast, why eating has become such a privileged experience in the French imagination, but Brillat-Savarin continues in order to detail how the divine right of eating functions in the national and world economy. Here the subject him/herself becomes a practical everyday link to maintaining the health of the nation, and hence, the rituals of food ingestion are turned into an issue of homeland security:

Gourmandism, considered as a part of political economy, is a common tie which binds nations together by the reciprocal exchange of objects which are part of their daily food ... In the social state to which we have come today, it is hard to imagine a nation which would live solely on bread and vegetables. This nation, if it existed, would inevitably be conquered by a meat-eating enemy, as with the

Hindus, who have fallen time after time before any armies that wished to attack them; or on the other hand it would be subjugated by the cooking of its neighbours, like the Boeotians of long ago, who became Gourmands after the battle of Leuctra. (149)

Writing during the brief period when France did not have any imperial holdings, he seems eager for his country to get back in the game. The ideological groundwork for the *mission civilisatrice* of the second empire, where it was the European duty to bring enlightenment to underprivileged lands, is apparent here. Considering the copious amount of physiological mapping it is clear that this gastronomic project is not designed to raise up the wretched of the earth, instead he turns to the “Hindus” as a defeated civilization whose failings fall at the feet of their inadequate diets. What is so persuasive about this paradigm of uneven culinary development is that it offers a regimen and opportunity for the citizen who may feel hamstrung by the larger military objectives and uncertainty of the time a way to participate politically through their daily food. If the citizen eater does not participate in this ritual the national culture itself is at risk of being swept-under by a foreign cooking practice—the humiliating result of a colonial zero-sum endgame. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic War, when the country was also stripped of its colonial holdings, this psychological presence of an encroaching cultural other looms large in the national imagination, and Brillat-Savarin is gesturing towards this anxiety.

Brillat-Savarin’s famous phrase “tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you what you are,” then, can be read as coercing a confession, where the subject is compelled to estrange himself to fall back into the arms of the doctor, judge, and nation. It is no

mistake that Brillat-Savarin assumes the guise of the doctor in order to bring about this admission, as a medical discourse allows him to write sociability and social traits into a divine natural order. This was a compelling rubric for the neophyte nation, as after the French revolution traditional markers of identification had fallen by the wayside and the way bodies were thrown into question. While Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu have written extensively about how table manners become important means of distinction within communities, Brillat-Savarin envisions a global hierarchy of tastes and manners that demand the citizen eater participate in a diplomatic mission that will both spot, educate, and ward off others to maintain the health of the nation.

#### *Terroir* and The Politics of Culinary Literature

Gastronomic literature defines how to appreciate culinary objects and locates who has the inherent ability to translate this appreciation into pleasure, creating a physiological and social hierarchy. With this perspective we can surmise the abundance of culinary writing that flourished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not just about the French obsession with food, but rather, is a political act that constitutes national subjects by distinguishing them from subjects from other nations. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson argues that the act of writing helps to perpetuate unequal relationships and aesthetic hierarchies, as French culinary practices became a dominant global force during the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the massive amount of time and energy the French spent thinking and writing about their food in comparison to other cultures (11). It is undeniable that gastronomy's mix of reflective worth and national reach facilitated discussion of French identity and difference, but what is missing from Ferguson's detailed account of the triumph of

French cuisine is a discussion of geopolitics and epistemological outlook that underwrote the emergence of culinary literature, especially during the second stage of France's imperial mission. For the intellectual model of gastronomy was a transportable structure that cultivated solidarity amongst disparate individuals, particularly those abroad, by suggesting that they were representatives of a nation with a unified and superior aesthetic taste. While newspapers and the novel are usually cited as the literary technologies that drove the national imaginary, culinary literature also played a critical role in mapping out everyday routines to consolidate citizens, redirecting their concerns from domestic conflicts by creating a body of criteria that could be used to measure themselves against others around the globe.<sup>1</sup>

The principles that drove the French revolution maintained that a diverse set of people with multiple economic and social interests nonetheless were part of a common culture. This common culture, though, always held within it the tension of competing regional and class influences. The table, in particular, was never a neutral site for Frenchmen, as high dining and luxurious ingredients were privileges enjoyed conspicuously by the noble class. While there is a long history of regional foods and preparations throughout Europe, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century the most pronounced difference in eating was between high and low cuisines. With regard to eating practices, during this period there was a strong horizontally similarity amongst the noble classes across Europe, as court cuisines were characterized by imported spices and elaborate feasts. Likewise, commoners throughout the European continent generally shared comparable diets that consisted of grains and porridges, supplemented with whatever small amounts of local game they could afford or trap, and vegetables that they were able to grow.

It was only after the class structure was altered in Europe that distinctly French ways of eating emerged. Most notably, the culinary landscape literally changed when the events of the French Revolution produced the material conditions for the restaurant to emerge as an important and unique dining site. With the rise of the restaurant eating habits changed, and in Paris, at least, the act of culinary ingestion was lured outside of the home, and a discerning culinary customer appears. This customer was interested in engaging food as a source of individual pleasure and as a *public* expression of taste. This suggests that the restaurant was the precondition for the possibility of a common culinary consciousness, as eating rituals could become shared outside of the palace walls. However, by no means did this produce egalitarian eating, for restaurants initially catered to the *nouveau riche* who now performed increasingly complicated dining rituals to distinguish themselves from the masses. Rebellious leaders were well aware of this division as tropes of “the fat” and “the thin” were key in mobilizing the underclass during various reforms, and restaurants was seen as a symbol of greed that did not quite live up to the lofty ideals of the revolution (Spang 143).

Accordingly there was the need, then, for language, writing, and a way of thinking about food that could bridge the gap between conspicuous disparities in food consumption and a common horizontal culinary ethos. Stephen Mennell, in his essential *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, coins the term gastronomic literature to describe culinary works that provide the reader with both biological instructions and guidelines for the proper regulation of food consumption. Mennell outlines the criteria of the genre under four tenets. First there is a manual-like concern with what is the “correct practice” in terms of the composition

of menus, the order of the courses, and the techniques of service, serving to consolidate and standardize the manners of eating. The second is a “dietetic” component that provides instruction for which cooking practices are seen as best for one in accordance to the prevailing medical wisdom of the time. Thirdly, there must be “a brew of history, myth, and history serving as myth,” which should entail a narrative containing biographical and social experiences. The fourth and final tenet sits closely to the third, where these biographical details must then produce “the nostalgic evocation of memorable meals” (Mennell 270-271). The effortless merging of casual biographical detail and physiological truth is what makes gastronomic literature both accessible and dangerous; for as I explained above in regards to *The Physiology of Taste*, supposedly impartial scientific wisdom about the correct combination of foods often ends up extending well beyond its disciplinary purview when faced with the task of delineating an eating public.

Mennell identifies Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reyneire as the forefather of this new genre by playing a key role in developing the local gastronomic landscape. Grimod’s lively *Almanach des Gourmands* was produced every year from 1803-12, rating the restaurants, butchers, grocers, florists, and merchants who could provide the elements for a satisfying meal in Paris. Limited to Paris, these guides helped open up the cityscape to locals so that non-nobles could literally follow in Grimod’s footsteps in his eating adventures. However Grimod’s works remained elitist in tone, for, in addition to giving birth to the genre of the restaurant review, the almanacs also included small sardonic pieces parodying rural restaurants, English cuisine, and diners themselves. Although Grimod was a well-known character in the aristocratic social

circles, his almanacs did not have a wide distribution base or broad appeal; and while he may have affected the tastes or practices of his already insular limited readership, his work did not transcend class boundaries. Yet his playful almanacs helped to distinguish a distinctly French taste and provided a vision of the city as a pleasurable organ that could be enjoyed if one employed the proper routines and rituals, and imagined a legion of others doing the same.

This new performance of culinary consumption demanded new terminology. Mennell explains that the term “gastronomy” (literally, the legislation of the stomach) came to denote in English and French, “the art and science of delicate eating” (267). The stomach was posited as a ‘magical’ organ that held the key to one’s spirit or soul, in a similar manner that the “nerves” or “heart” can be used to denote character in the present-day context. If one could find the ideal inner balance in this particular organ, then the outward body would also be naturally aligned. New models of physiology solidified a literal connection between food and character as it taught that perceptions and intellect were functions of bodily organs. Because diet gave the body essential nutrients, food was seen as having a directly effect on intellectual and emotional life, creating the scientific basis for the practiced amateur to believe that they had the capabilities to control all aspects of their wellbeing (Spang 40). With a greater understanding that food provided the very material of life, it was then up to the individual expert to scrutinize and regulate what was entering the body. Being more aware of the potency of food to moderate one’s own wellbeing brought much more attention to the source of foods themselves. And while Grimod could provide recommendations of various vendors around Paris, he had little insight about the quality of the food that came from outside the city walls.

I propose that the concept of *terroir* was developed, in part, to bridge the gap between the country and the city and assert a tangible basis to evaluate foods from other parts of France and around the world. Untranslatable into English the term *terroir* refers to the entire environmental determinants of a culinary product, including soil, climate, topography and “soul” of the producer him/herself (Guy 36). Most famously introduced during the wars over champagne and often attached to other forms of viticultural products, recently the concept has served as the legal bulwark for protecting and promoting the unique qualities of a specific region. That said, contextualizing its origins *vis a vis* France’s imperial endeavors and the history of French cuisine, shows that the idea served to commodify the domestic landscape, delineating it from its colonial others, in order to secure France’s superior position within global culinary marketplace.

Developing in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when France was reentering the colonial competition, *terroir* allows the consumer to imagine him/herself tasting a particular part of the world, literally ingesting a region into oneself. This ideational advance certainly could have provided the basis for a material cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility, where the culinary product could be the entryway into understanding a great deal about the world and cultures they were increasingly becoming entangled with. However, despite having little cultural insight about their numerous overseas holdings France chose to only project *terroir* in one direction, inward, so that only its own goods could be considered developed in this nuanced fashion, leaving products from its colonies little claim to this unique form of regional branding. The motivation behind numerous overseas expeditions, and arguably an original catalyst behind colonialism itself, was the capture of spices and exotic goods to bring back to the domestic marketplace. Yet, during the mid 19th century

the means by which they were acquired was deliberately obscured, or at least not promoted, in order to make the goods more palatable to the consumer residing in the metropole. For imagining regional differences would require considering that part of the world too closely, revealing the ugly contradictions produced by the so-called civilizing mission, and approaching the other in a way that went far beyond the simplistic utilitarian images that were created for these foreign lands.

Despite being French holdings colonial lands were never accorded this cultural *terra firma* of *terroir*, and remained distinct enterprises filled with populations that were considered largely unassimilable and out of time. This led the agricultural economies of the colonized countries to be brutally reconfigured so that they could produce cash crops that would instrumentally support French economic needs at the expense of the colonized country's domestic social development. Military and culinary dogmas converged as the French began to think of their own rituals and ideas about nutrition as timeless and part of a transcendent behavioral science, which would allow their subjects to overwhelm others with their superiorly functioning bodies. Conversely, destroying the agricultural base of these foreign lands helped to reinforce French cuisine's uniqueness by eliminating the possibility for another cuisine to compete on the world stage.

### Colonial Culinary Orders

A market driven vision of Indochina drove the French imagination of the region. Through an analysis of trademarks and colonial exhibitions French imperial historian Dana S. Hale shows how Indochinese were consistently presented as subservient and hardworking during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to lure French investors into viewing

the region as rich with a pliable and low-maintenance workforce. Competing with other colonies for the dollars of French businessmen colonial exhibits did not market any particular native good, but rather advertised the ability for the colonized people to produce a large amount of existing product with relative ease. This image trickled down into the everyday commodities sold in France as figures of hardworking Indochinese people came to be found on a variety of domestic goods, serving as an ethereal symbol of quality. This transportable, interchangeable, Asian body became the dominant representation of Indochina rather than the jagged and more difficult physical topography of the place itself, and as such, Asian landscapes were noticeably absent in the commercialized images available in France. In part because of the enduring image of the hardworking Indochinese laborer the French did not see this region as in particular need of its *mission civilisatrice*, and relative to their colonies in Africa, France did not pour a large amount of resources into Indochina to educate and supervise the population. The spendthrift colonization of Indochina was seen by thinkers as a means to expand France's markets and make up for the mistakes of losing previously profitable colonies in North America.

A side effect of this colonial vision was that Indochina was positioned as merely a raw resource, not a unique place filled with creative people and inventive cuisine. Therefore we can see, in contradistinction to current rituals of culinary tourism, ingesting or eating the other was of little concern during the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> This relationship provides a useful counterpoint to Paroma Roy's recent foray into culinary criticism, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial*, where she claims that appetites, hungers and aversions in colonial and postcolonial South Asia unsettled

relations between the colony and the metropole. Whereas Roy argues that the act of eating complicated a simple boundary between the two colonial zones as they become intertwined through the act of incorporation, France's arms-length colonization of Indochina maintained a critical distance that suggested very little cultural anxiety. Indeed, to maintain the fecundity of this market order sharp political, moral, and cultural distinctions were made between French and Vietnamese subjects, discouraging informal interaction between the two cultures, and at best promoting a paternalistic attitude towards its colonial people and culinary products (Peters 21).<sup>3</sup> Their attitude towards their overseas holdings is encapsulated in this 1909 letter to the French Minister of the Colonies from Marie Poirer-Camus, who while inspecting Vietnamese girls' schools noted:

In every country, education can be defined as "the improvement of the race" ... The Vietnamese, caught like a child by the ease of living in that climate, has reduced his nourishment too far, he lives each day on a little fish and much rice ... But experience shows that if the Vietnamese receives with his rice a sufficient amount of meat, of vegetables, of noodles cooked in fat, he takes on muscles and energy, and can provide as much labor as the Chinese ... That is why we must praise the local schools who have started an apprenticeship of sensible cooking ["cuisine raisonnable"], Vietnamese cooking reinforced with essential French dishes. This will rid the native of his habit of eating little and badly at meals, and snacking all day long on any raw plants he finds. (Peters 2010)

The notion expressed here is that the Vietnamese had relatively sophisticated performing bodies, which suggested that they did not require transformation but rather a small recalibration of their diets in order to maximize and develop their already existing assets for the global economy. In part because their social traits were seen as so immutably entrenched, we can also say that the Vietnamese were seen as *too* rooted in their traditions for their food or cultural products to be fully incorporated into the French social body.

During their occupation of Indochina, the French culinary performance initially led to Vietnamese elites “modernizing” their own tastes through the consumption of colonial goods, yet what was thoroughly internalized was not Frenchness *tout court*, but the power that these rituals held. By recognizing the power displayed in the eating of French foods, Vietnamese people, intermittently, sought to reimagine their own foods along similar lines. However, while the French ideal of cuisine looked to an ancient tradition, the embrace of certain foods by the Vietnamese was much more conjectural and responsive to contemporary pressures—a strategic ethos that has been thoroughly embraced by diasporic Vietnamese who are attempting to articulate and delineate their own communities when faced with hostile linguistic pressures from so-called hosts and homogenizing images circulating in popular culture. With the French invasion the idea of a stable Vietnamese tradition was disrupted, and thus a more strategic and instrumental view of culture took hold. For the Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1920’s and 30’s, like Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chu Trinh and Ho Chi Minh, it was perceived that France’s intrusion into the region called for a modernization of these old ideas, suggesting (initially, at least) reformation rather than a revolution. While it would be overstating the

case to argue that food was a lynchpin of colonial Vietnamese thought, its outward apolitical-ness proved to be a productive avenue for writers to occasionally gesture to in order to mobilize collective dissent, producing allegories that could identify material channels of corruption amongst officials, while crafting symbols of everyday Vietnamese identity.

Some seventy-five years before the French invasion of Indochina culinary literature created a global hierarchy of manners, where economic matters were mapped on to aesthetic regularities. While the idea of unified taste does sit nicely alongside revolutionary ideals of fraternity and equality, built into this order were very clear distinctions even among the enlightened. A geographic hierarchy was apparent even in France itself where the most important culinary goods culled from the countryside went to Paris, where the majority of Gourmands resided, which provided a constant supply of fresh raw materials to consolidate their rituals. Grimod himself recognized this flow of goods and the importance of his locale by noting:

Although Paris by itself produces nothing ... everything finally ends up here from all the corners of the earth, because it is the place where the respective qualities of everything useful to human nourishment are best appreciated, and where they know best how to make the most of these for the benefit of our senses. (qtd. in Pitte 2002: 82)

Sitting at the table with a knife and fork in hand, the gourmand's specially trained senses naturally drew in the food from around the world by virtue of his very knowledgeable

palate. Of course the colorful language, reeking of ostentation, was part of the literary persona of Grimod—a guise his limited readership surely appreciated, and, one would think, understood as theatrical hyperbole. However when these kinds of sentiments were imitated and repeated throughout the century, while France’s economic influence expanded, the stakes of this repartee grew higher. For certainly during a period of global imperial conquest, the 1846 decree of Eugene Briffault would ring a little more profoundly:

When Paris sits down to the table, the entire earth stirs: from every part of the known universe, the things created, the products of every kingdom, those the planet sees growing on its surface, those it clasps to its bosom, those the sea contains and nurtures, those that populate the air: all rush, hurry, and make haste in order to obtain the favour of a look, a touch, a bite. (qtd. in Pitte 84)

Now the man at the table who gives “the favour of a look, a touch, a bite,” not only draws in the material but he shakes the entire earth to do so. The language of Grimod’s passage rests on a coolly rational deduction, where if the best taste buds in the world reside in Paris, then it is only prudent that the best food make it there as well. By contrast, when Briffault’s Paris sits at the table each and every consumable thing should come to rapt attention, and hurl itself across the globe for the chance that the gourmand’s privileged gaze will rest upon them.

While it is certainly true in this period the French chefs were becoming known emissaries of haute cuisine to restaurants in England, the US, and other countries of

economic means, fixating on this one narrative of French cuisine takes attention away from the ways raw materials found their way to the Parisian table. Because of this colonial backdrop it is important to reconsider this widely circulated literature not merely as a delightful oddity, but as an expression of French nationalism and empire. Gastrically defining a proper French subject, and giving this subject the tools to spot similar subjects, allows the homeland to be consolidated from the inside out, yet to do so France must at the same time consume fruits of colonial labor. The cultural ethos naturalizes the consumption of these worldly goods and implicitly provides justification for France's military endeavors, which is reinforced by the aesthetically centripetal force of *terroir*. It is clear then that this national imagination is consolidated at the colonial other's expense; for, as Arjun Appadurai wryly notes, "One man's imagined community... is another man's political prison" (1998 10).

### Slow Food and the Cultivation of Global Taste

In the last century, an increase in food production has expanded the culinary choices available to the middle- and working- classes and has all but eliminated the threat of famine in the western world. In the last century alone, staple foods, gustatory codes, and dining practices have all been subject to frequent examinations of worth, which—when assessed diachronically—have effected dietetic change at an unprecedented rate. In this section I propose to show how Slow Food's negotiation of nationhood, pleasure, and culture attempts to create a global cuisine that can sustain itself against the degenerative forces of industrial food. This movement emerged as a grassroots critique of large market systems that seemingly exceed the confines of the nation and signalled a paradigm of

global production and distribution. This expansion of food manufacturing is perceived as increasingly disconnecting citizens from important cultural reference-points, serving to disorient the modern subject's sense of history, time, and place, as well as negatively impact the individual's relationship to reflective pleasure.

To remedy this disjuncture, Slow Food seeks to reclaim the individual's pre-globalized relationships, in part by re-orienting everyday consumption practices and promoting local food production. Specifically, they leverage a reflective approach towards the pleasures of the table, the construction of juries, and a concern for balancing the overall well-being of the body beyond the scientific confines of nutrition—structurally, at least, echoing the ethos of the Gourmands. The one crucial difference however, is that an innate physiological predisposition is not needed to participate in this “new” type of eating behaviour, as instead Slow Food's models of production and consumption were meant to be applicable to all, regardless of origin or location. Yet somewhat paradoxically in their quest to break the habits of uniform food practices, Slow Food repeats the cultural conceits of French taste by choosing to reach back towards the pastoral rhetoric of traditional tastes and methods, while proposing simpler and more rudimentary technologies of cultivation. These movements are similar insofar as they suggest traditional methods of production are more adaptable to the continual processing of land, while modes of consumption are reoriented to align with larger more ‘natural’ global system. As such, these food wars become a debate over both a material history of authentic foods and tenable ecological futures, which, when combined, serve as an active sensual critique of the existing systems of culinary production and consumption.

The notions that drove French culinary nationalism also underwrite the Slow Food movement, as both regimes of taste are characterized by the ability of interpreters to travel with a set of refined aesthetic criteria in order to cultivate tastes across the globe. Through the conscious tailoring of memory, rhythm, and time, the Slow Food approach seeks to (re)claim eating as an occasion for pleasurable encounters, instead of merely ingesting fuel for work. Engaging the culinary in this manner is seen as a political intervention, whereby one personally reconstructs and challenges a modern temporal order that has neglected and exceeded the rhythms of the body and locality. This fiercely local, yet international community—one that is at home in the world—sees food as a sustainable gateway to accessing and regulating both the individual body and the body politic. Indeed this form of gastrodiploacy seeks to use the local to engage the world, measuring cuisines by their potential to impact global taste.

In 1986 Carlo Petrini and a group of fellow protesters stood on top of the Spanish Steps in Rome, cradling bowls of penne, in symbolic defiance of the erection of a McDonalds on the historic site. Petrini is the originator, or the godfather, of the Slow Food movement. His book *Slow Food: The Case for Taste* is a neat summary of the over 15 year existence of this program, spanning from its inception in the working-class Italian town of Bra to the multi-national enterprise that consists of chapters in over 80 countries today. As Carl Honoré neatly summarizes, “The movement stands for ... fresh, local, seasonal produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; leisurely dining with family and friends; ... and also eco-gastronomy—the notion that eating well can, and should go hand in hand with protecting the environment” (59). Importantly, a Slow Food approach seeks to make clear the

connections of where and how food was conceived, cultivated, harvested and finally brought to the table—the very connections that Fast Food seeks to obscure. Instead of hiding much of the labor required to produce a food product behind talking clowns, playgrounds, and assembly-line teenagers, the Slow Food movement gains its capital momentum by marketing and promoting the very uniqueness and craftsmanship inherent in culinary processes and *terroir*. Slow Food seeks to remind us that “natural resources are limited” and that we must resist the ethic of “disposability that exists in our culture” (x). What is considered to be at the heart of this disposable culture is an obsession with speed, something that Honoré repeatedly admonishes as ‘speed-sickness.’ This is not a matter of being outside of time, but rather an everyday illusion that there is never enough time, that time is constantly slipping away. As a response to this sickness, Honoré suggests that one’s pace of eating be slowed down in order to leave time for reflection, to smell, to taste, and to savor. Instead of the quick hit of take out, slowing down and participating in the process of cooking stirs the imagination, extends pleasure, and can be an everyday practice of “educating our senses” (x). Rituals, smells, and sounds are passed down through generations, making it possible to create and maintain localized links and traditions.

Nadia Seremetakis’ engaging *The Senses Still* offers a material political analysis of food’s relationship to the culinary senses, as her work provides a lucid account of how market and governmental forces can threaten the existence of minor foodstuffs. It is her fear that dominant market demands for the familiar standardized mass-produced varieties of foods (McDonald’s insistence on using only Russet potatoes, for example) squeezes out the smaller farms that produce specifically regional foods. This is particularly

disturbing for her, as she conceives of food contacts as not only pleasant adventures in acquiring “new” powers or tastes, but crucial moments in engaging a “historical and self-reflexivity” in both an individual and cultural context. In the book, Serematakis bemoans the loss of a particular species of peach that used to be grown in her homeland of Greece. With the extinction of this food, then, the memories—the times, the places, and sensual registers—that were usually produced when engaging with the food have become lost as well. In essence, a crucial link—a connection to her homeland carried in and through the body—a part of her, has been lost with the extermination. Food has therefore become to Seremetakis a contentious political ground where power is acting on knowledge, through a new aesthetic hierarchy of culinary prioritization. For her, reducing food varieties in turn curtails the opportunity for sensorial contact, which then limits the possible contacts one can experience to generate crucial mnemonic cultural contact. What is at stake is a systematic manufacturing of desire, one could even say subjecthood, by a law of diminishing sensorial returns.

Even though the Slow Food movement had its public birth when Petrini, and other members of the organization, protested against the encroachment of a McDonalds, the main thrust of the movement is not anti-McDonalds, nor even necessarily anti- any of the Fast Food enterprises, per se. In fact, the Slow Food movement has gone out of its way to distance themselves from French farm activist Jose Bové, a respected “no-global” leader, who famously bulldozed a half-built McDonalds in his hometown of Millau (De Grazia 471). It is misguided to think of Slow Food as the mere “opposite” of Fast Food, for the movement was born, “not to defeat, subordinate or obstruct, but as an instrument of knowledge” (471). The Slow Food movement prefers to consider itself a response to the

aestheticization of speed, as the constituents of the movement conceive of themselves as conservationists of “quiet material pleasure,” which functions as the only way to “oppose the universal folly of Fast Life” (Honoré 159).

The playfully named “Ark of Taste” is an important creation by the Slow Food disciples to save certain varieties of food from this temporal extinction. After a careful round of nominations based upon five strict principles, the judging consists of both scientific and historical research in order to find commercially viable foods that are “superior in flavor.” The panel then helps the producer create “new channels of production and supply” by awarding grants and providing the producer with expert market planning, so as to capitalize on the food’s potential. In addition to slow and reflective eating, re-educating the senses is the other key precept for the Slow Food movement. In part a response to the incessant marketing to children by the Fast Food industry, the Slow Food movement seeks to introduce culinary education to children, not in the sterile classrooms of nutrition and health curriculums, but in tactile learning environments that can communicate the smells, sounds, and feels of food and cooking. “The Edible Schoolyard” at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, serves as an idyllic example of their vision. Consisting of a one-acre organic farm and an accompanying kitchen classroom, the program allows for the child to experience relations of cultivation, production, consumption, and disposal of the foodstuff all in one lived environment (or as their slogan reads: “from the seed to the table”). While this remarkable and rather costly model is simply not viable for most schools, even the creation and cultivation of tiny strips of land for schoolyard gardens is seen as an important start to teaching children that food does not originate in the

supermarket. For a blackboard simply cannot convey the unique bodily pleasures that food contacts can enact— pleasures that could shape the desires of what children want to eat, instead of retroactively trying to discipline their palates. Introducing a variety of food experiences at an early age and cultivating their tastes can be seen as a viable material avenue to pursue in the fight against childhood obesity.

For adults, the organization holds the *Salon del Gusto*, a festival of food stands and tasting workshops manned personally by the producers of the particular foods. Offering courses and meetings, those attending the Salon leave not only with regional products, but the knowledge of how to cook the product, as well as the history of the food. Thus the commodity sold is not a reified object, but rather as an opportunity for a lived negotiation into a chain of a culinary tradition. Furthermore in 2003 the University of Gastronomic Sciences was opened, seeking to “renew farming methods, protect biodiversity and maintain an organic relationship between gastronomy and agricultural science” ([www.unisg.it/eng/chisiamo.php](http://www.unisg.it/eng/chisiamo.php)). Offering students the chance to become a new kind of professional, the “Gastronomist,” with a 3-year undergraduate degree, the students also have the option of proceeding with a 2-year post-graduate specialization in “Food Communication and Food Management.” The “Food Communication” stream hopes to produce students capable of promoting and developing food and gastronomies, whereas the “Food Management” program seeks to allow students to manage commercial enterprises and companies. This step makes legible an important part of Petrini’s plan—the creation of culinary agents to infiltrate existing models of agriculture and marketing.

Its embrace of capitalism and globalization distinguishes Slow Food from other countercultural culinary enterprises. Instead of bulldozing a McDonalds, Slow Food

looks to use similar means of consumer access in an attempt to reorder both desires and market organization. They avoid direct confrontation, preferring instead a rigorous model of organized subversion and manipulation. Therefore the most important resource for Slow Food, the fuel that makes it go, is precisely that which Fast Food traditionally does not acknowledge: namely, the already-existing diverse cultural wealth of small regional communities. They recognize that food has persisted as an important form of informal communication within a community, and that the passing down of culinary traditions and customs is not dependent on an excess of monetary capital, or even official recognition; thus at this local level food can exist as a cultural link that is not dependent on an outside moderator. The problem that emerges for these communities, however, is that successive generations lose interest in the 'old' culture in exchange for the dazzling customs and commodities offered by the 'new' culture. Yet if Slow Food can succeed in raising market awareness about the innovative and creative food practices enacted by specific communities, valuable cultural capital can accrue. With this cultural capital in hand Petrini hopes that the promotion of these diverse cuisines can help construct self-sustaining enterprises, not only financially, but ones with enough prestige to draw younger generations to continue to produce their craft. If diverse homegrown recipes are brought to the fore, he hopes that solutions for healthier lifestyle choices will become available to the market, which could challenge the existing mono-cuisine of the Fast Food enterprises. In short, a large part of the plan to counter contemporary problems is to find modern solutions in these lost pasts.

So what exactly puts Slow Food above other fashionable food fads? Could this be just another elitist and effete program? For starters, Slow Food did not suddenly arise out

of a hedonistic old-boys dining club, but rather is a calculated offspring of the ARCI (*Associazione Recreativo Culturale Italiana*), a 700,000 member strong contingent that emerged out of left-wing labour unions and organizations, which sought to “pa[y] attention to [the] material culture and thought about people’s working lives and everyday routines” (Petrini 7-8). Hence, this is not an insular extravagance, but rather a developed project that provides a workable theoretical model through the analysis of peoples and actions. Victoria de Grazia succinctly illustrates the political stakes of the movement when she explains that,

[T]he Slow Food movement posed new questions for the first world of consumption, challenging the false binaries that had previously organised resistance to the Market Empire. Turning away from the alternative between free markets and state protectionism, it affirmed a “virtuous” vision of globalisation, one that would end regulations that discriminate against small consumers and use the internet to connect them to informed consumers. It thought a third way between the superficial sociability promoted by brand recognition and the defensive solidarity favoured by the closed communities of traditional protest movements ... [It] embraced capitalist commerce ... [and] presented its vision as universal and not anti-American. (459)

In addition, the movement has succeeded in using a discourse of pleasure and globalization without having it serve as a cloak for naked American ambition. Yet there is the gamble that exists within Petrini’s project: namely, what is at stake in

commodifying these local processes and foodstuffs. What are the effects of exposing them? Will commercial popularity overextend these small enterprises? Will the influx of capital irrevocably change the means of production, and tempt fraud and mutations? Or how does one stay “authentically slow” when creating a product for the excitable rhythms of the culture industry? For these questions Petrini admittedly sees no easy answer except to try to be rigorous in keeping each system of relations as simple as possible. Perhaps the universities’ birthing of culinary experts, the gastronomic agents, can educate and infiltrate businesses and communities to an extent that they can procure some sort of controlled growth for the localised industry. But even still, what if he is wrong? They are gambling that fresh locally produced foods will appeal to the mass-consumer more so than the fast-food hamburger. The venture is that a critical mass will prefer reflective approach to food, and that they will be able to cultivate a unitary, albeit flexible, palate. Thus we must ask, does this dogmatic appeal to biodiversity leave one vulnerable to a strategic disease? For buried deep within the tenets of this movement is the assumption that culture is a renewable resource. Again, what if he is wrong? Then not only are the regional products and producers subsumed under a Fast Food dialectic, but so are the unique growing conditions for intergenerational renewal. What is at stake, what he is willing to wager, are the very cultures that are his most precious resource. It is a capitalist all-in bet, raised against the systematic bleeding away of culture currently promoted by the Fast Food industry.

Slow Food is an admirable ideal, for who would argue against the environmentally sustainable tasty foods. But what needs to be questioned is how these ideals gain access to communities. Does this address culinary issues of malnourishment,

hunger, and access, or are the schools and universities mere factories to cultivate new cosmopolitans? While the movement that offers or guarantees a universal right to pleasure, an organization that boasts “over 100,000” members worldwide is woefully missing the mark. And while this may seem like a low-blow it is important to understand that despite their appearance as a worldwide movement, they do not represent global eating; they are a select few cosmopolitans. There is no need to glorify the local, but there is a troubling lack of engagement with economic divisions, as Jeffery Pilcher grumbles: “the international proletariat is now politically suspect for its consumerist tendencies, and the peasantry has become the progressive motor of history ... [Slow Food] will never represent a genuine revolution until it confronts the dilemmas of class that have been complicated but not obviated by increasing globalisation” (2006 69). In some ways Slow Food seems difficult to take altogether seriously—an aesthetic dalliance akin to Futurists’ cookbook. However unlike the Futurists this is a large organization that invests a great amount of time, energy, and effort to build schools, universities and other institutions. Therefore, they should be taken seriously as they could do more. They have extended the logic of national cuisine to create a practical endeavour where people can participate in an imagined global community.

### Conclusion:

The gastrodipomatic appeal to the hearts and stomachs of others is an attractive convergence of diplomacy and finance, however the very idea of national cuisine developed out of a modern desire to assert the superiority of some bodies over others. While presently the majority of food scholarship considers how communities build

themselves through culinary identification, what is missing from this discourse is how cuisine came to be thought of as a globally competitive enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Historically this was not always the case, nor was it inevitability. This is to suggest that French cuisine, the first national cuisine, was consolidated by thinkers who translated esoteric *Ancien Régime* rituals of eating into a modern regiment of individualized taste via the gastronomic program, which convinced the general public that the hierarchical distinctions embedded in courtly manners and tastes were still valuable and desirable in distinguishing character—particularly during the republican era where social distinctions were less clear. When these rituals moved from an insular class to a popular movement, these became a means to imagine a superior way of life that implicitly justified France's invasions of other countries. To these ends, Alexander Nützenadel and Frank Trentmann are correct in identifying the period between 1850-1913 as a new phase in globalization that not only transformed market prices but also reshaped the moral geography of food (6). The present-day Asian iteration of gastrodiploacy follows the structural model of building national cuisines, where an elite select and promote regional foods and rituals to stand as emblems of the country as a whole. This provides an opportunity to write the country into a civilizational tradition; however, like most responses to cultural imperialism it is hindered by a constantly shifting aesthetic standard that is defined against the other.

While recent scholarship has emphasized that food is vital in the production of community, eating is as much about division as it is commensality. For despite agribusinesses' attempts to create a culinary *lingua franca*, ideas of cooking and cuisine remain doggedly entrenched within national categories, and local foods prized because of

their connection to traditions and land that promise a deeply situated experience that extends beyond mere momentary sustenance. Expressing these nationally-specific ideals about cuisine requires meditation and dissemination, which historically has been shaped through a top-down operation where the elite select certain regional or peasant foods and codify them to then reintroduce to the population as distinctly national.

In this chapter I push on the ideological underpinning of the gastrodipomatic enterprise to consider how cuisine became a way to imagine the world. Culinary nationalism functions as a remarkably public enterprise, where one ingests an “edible plebiscite” to act out their nationality in plain view, using these ubiquitous symbols of everyday life to perform cultural fluency. The display of these markers of civilization often veils an underlying xenophobia—as the rituals are often chosen and constructed in opposition to perceived foreign encroachment—and when taken abroad are material demonstrations of taste, privilege, and power. These markers serve as a portable index of progress, where social groups who do not exhibit these qualities are left behind. A deficiency in culinary taste can become the alibi for the intervention of an outside presence to bring “minor cuisines” up to a standard, rather than completely rewriting them. This uneven development of national cuisines, and the accompanying grammar of taste, reinforces a vision of the world with borders that can be tasted but never fully crossed.

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<sup>1</sup> Inaugurated by works like Arjun Appadurai's seminal article, "How to Make a National Cuisine," and consolidated in Warren Belasco and Phillip Scranton's collection *Food Nations* there is now a voluminous amount of work completed on the consolidation of national cuisine. In this chapter, I am adding to this work by teasing out fundamental processes that structure many of the myths regarding culinary nationalism.

<sup>2</sup> This historicizes Lisa Heldke's philosophical argument that when western actors become in culinary tourists they position the other as a raw resource for tourists to test their own tastes and limits. In both the modern and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial contexts the thick materiality of the other land is denied in service of instrumental interests.

<sup>3</sup> This social division was clearly evident in the cooking practices of both parties. As colonial culinary historian David Burton notes: "A small number of colonial dishes, about twenty in all, were true French-Vietnamese fusions ... Yet on the whole, the Vietnamese kept to their style, and the French to theirs" (142).

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough account of how Mexican national cuisine was defined, in part, by becoming an attractive global commodity see Jeffrey Pilcher's *Planet Taco*.

Chapter 4

## Postcolonial Promises:

## The Global Politics of Vietnamese American Fiction

We first meet Binh, the protagonist in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003), at Paris' Gare du Nord, awash in a sea of photographers as his illustrious employers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas travel back to their native USA. With the economic depression of the thirties in full force, Stein, Toklas, and other American artists are being forced to leave their comfortable overseas lives. This leaves their cook Binh, "a man unused to choices," in a rather novel position: either he embarks on another transoceanic journey to the US, returns to Vietnam, or stays in Paris—the latter choice, in essence, confirming the colonial metropole as his home (Truong 9). Only near the end of the book do we learn that Binh ends up staying, left behind by Stein and Toklas, and unwilling to return to the stultifying life back in Vietnam, for as he puts it, "Paris held in it a promise" (258). With this declaration the reader is left asking what exactly Paris can promise Binh. For the narrative makes clear that the material conditions and racial prejudices of the city have left him marginalized in a hierarchical environment that mirrors, and indeed, provides the cultural infrastructure underwriting his position in the colony. Therefore, in many ways, whether in the metropole or in Viet Nam, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Yet for him, this "same choice" feels different, as it promises something to his subjective state, even if his objective condition remains similar.

In this chapter I contend that by compiling the affective resonances and transnational paths of her lead character Truong, as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American artist, remaps Vietnamese American history and challenges the conventions most often associated with Vietnamese American literary form. For *The Book of Salt*, as a work of imaginative historical fiction guided by a strongly subjective narrative voice, provides an opportunity to reconsider the multiple promises held within the Vietnamese diasporic past in a way that brings into question a singular construction of the Vietnamese American present. She extends Vietnamese and Vietnamese American history by tapping into forgotten and/or unrecorded energies held within social actors from the past, while cataloguing the everyday inequalities produced by the capitalist imperial regimes, complicating the unidirectional flow—from East to West—of Vietnamese American history, study, and artistic production. I suggest that this “worldliness” of Truong’s book illustrates how relations of race and class develop through an international interplay that is structured in dominance, but travels multiple routes.

Truong’s book challenges existing distinctions between Asian American and postcolonial fiction. Reading and marketing works through this disciplinary national and international division ends up limiting how both the books written by persons of color and their racialized bodies are read. As the discipline of Asian American studies ages it must resist the temptation to posit the US as an end-point of history if it is to engage its emerging populations. Keeping the discipline current requires digging through the histories that produced immigrant subjects, art, and capital itself, and producing readings that tease out the aesthetic strategies that accompany these divergent pressures. These delicate and attentive readings are especially needed when dealing with newer refugee

populations that are compelled to articulate a transnational past that will be congruent with a viable future. Here we must avoid what Oscar V. Campomanes, describes as “contributionism” whereby studies of Asian American populations transforms and domesticates difference into diversity through nationalist history making that “leav[es] untouched...imperialist moorings” (529). The challenge, then, for Asian American artistic practices and criticism is to be nimble and globally aware in its form, while at the same time servicing the representational needs of a minority domestic population. I argue that Truong’s book takes on this task by foregrounding Bình’s subjective experience, which garners Truong the flexibility to materially map socio-economic structures, while addressing the limited possibilities offered to a variety of subjugated agents in the world system.

To these ends, I locate the turn to food as a recent strategic response to the pressures of empire and globalization. I argue that the decision of an overwhelming number of Vietnamese diasporic authors to posit selfhood through tropes of food and food systems indicates that this literary technique exceeds a simple nativist appeal to authenticity and is instead an agile creative social practice formed in response to multiple cultural, intellectual, and geographical displacements. Divorced from institutional power and constrained by familial ties, Vietnamese American authors leverage a worldly interest in food to produce sensual literary histories, both for themselves and others, that attempt to change the terrain of their social and linguistic interrelationships.

A postcolonial perspective indexes and historicizes how capitalism and empire created the everyday imbalanced divisions of class, race, sexuality, and gender that Bình faces in his everyday life. I contend that the particulars of his position are of a different

era, but the structures of his marginalization should remain recognizable in the Asian American present. Early instantiations of Asian American criticism sought to disentangle Asian American literature from its Orientalist expectations by forcefully asserting its American presence; however, some 30-40 years later, the ethnic landscape of the genre has drastically changed. With a number of Vietnamese American authors attempting to enter the Asian American canon it is essential to consider the global determinants of this population's artistry by examining the threads that pre-existed the Vietnamese presence in the United States. Highlighting the continuity between colonial and postcolonial Vietnamese experience necessitates ridding disciplines in the American academy of an amnesia regarding Viet Nam, where cultural practices begin and end with the "Vietnam War." Disavowing the colonial process is a particularly American trait, where stories are presented as isolated or representational tragedies suspended in the rarefied air of a particular historical event, rather than acknowledging the *longue durée* of the decolonizing process. Therefore, by careful attention to the logic and power that colonialism asserted on that part of the world before 1975, we can tease out the web that has been woven for Vietnamese American subjects in the present, in a manner that does not only assert difference, but also addresses the continuing structural inequality (Lazarus 7).

#### Aesthetic Practice:

Truong's *The Book of Salt* is certainly the most famous Vietnamese American novel and is inching towards canonical status within Asian American literature. What makes it immediately stand out in the field is that instead of writing a *bildungsroman*

about a Vietnamese refugee growing up in the US (a common and important form within Vietnamese American literature), Truong invents a character that predates not only the period of refuge to the US but Vietnamese independence itself. This choice leaves Truong's protagonist, Binh, in a world that, for him, seems limited by the colonial relationship, yet the present-day reader is cognizant of the possibilities that await him and the Vietnamese people. Thus, the reader and the central character are immediately set apart by their historical horizons, and an economy of mutual recognition is subverted. Moreover, Truong's style is much more esoteric and linguistically challenging than the conventional Vietnamese American memoir, as she peppers the reader with modernist allusions that introduces another ironic buffer between the character and the reader. Rather than subsuming the thrust of the narrative in the development of one character, like with the *bildungsroman*, Binh is a wanderer in his profession, passions, and in his prose, and the narrative constantly shifts and swirls around his past, present, and future. Therefore, due to the differing historical horizons, Truong's literariness, and a disjointed narrative temporality, the reader never gets a clear sense of Binh; and hence, Truong resists the collapse of distinct subjective perspectives by creating this recalcitrant internal focalization.

In the story Binh's characteristic evasiveness is not presented as a deficiency, but rather his most consistent tactic to maintain material and psychological sufficiency. Rather than being a hopelessly out-of-step rube, Binh is a queer overseas laborer who has mastered the pleasures of Paris's city-streets and cuisine, and who despite this cultural knowledge remains race- and class-bound from Stein and Toklas, his modernist polyglot employers. Their aesthetic dominance is challenged in the fictional document by Binh's

mastery of cooking—which is brought to life through Truong’s elegant and sophisticated prose. In the story-world itself, though, Binh remains tongue-tied, stumbling over both the English and French language, struggling with his own image and identity, as he relates:

No longer able to trust the sound of my own voice, I carry a small speckled mirror that shows me my face, my hands, and assures me that I am still here ... Every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender. In their heat and steam I allow myself to believe that it is the sheer speed of my hands, the flawless measurement of my eyes, the science of my tongue, that is rewarded. During those restorative intervals, I am no longer the mute who begs at this city’s steps. Three times a day I orchestrate, and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced. Mouths preoccupied with the taste of foods familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of plates detects redolent notes of something that they have no words to describe. They are, by the end, overwhelmed by an emotion that they have never felt, a nostalgia for places that they have never been. (Truong 19)

Hence, his linguistic alienation pushes him to a more physical understanding of himself and the world around him. While his corporeal reflection affords him the reminder that he exists, cooking, then, is imagined by Binh to realign and activate his bodily identity, putting it to use through this particular form of labor. Instead of writing back he is cooking back; turning the tables and disabling bodies of those who usually render him

mute and insignificant, leaving them speechless with “slackened jaws.” The customary descriptions used by the diners to catalogue a man like Binh fail here, as he shifts their embedded aesthetic standards towards the seemingly universal registers of “speed,” “measurement,” and “science”—performing his craft alone in the discrete space of the kitchen, where he can “orchestrate” the meal with his highly-tuned body. The result of this spectacle for the diner/audience is an emotional “nostalgia for places they have never been,” reorienting the imperialists’ desires, which they are now uniquely dependent on him to fulfill through his culinary mediation. Appealing to the seductions of cuisine, then, provides a plausible starting point for the racialized Binh to gain a foothold in the rarefied household of Stein and Toklas, and Truong can posit a theory of aesthetics whereby Binh’s knowledge of cooking is the equal to high literary taste. Far from dismantling western aesthetic or political hierarchy, here cooking becomes a sensual intervention into the existing symbolic order when blocked from more conventional means of articulating power.

Yet while important—and in this case delectable, where sensational descriptions of dishes also serve to lure in the reader—an aesthetic intervention alone is clearly insufficient, as it continually chafes against his historical position in the global economy. Binh is constantly reminded that this is not a fair fight and that despite his best efforts he is playing a losing hand; it is not as if he is capable of conjuring an enchanted soufflé that allows him to accrue enough qualitative worth to join them at the table. Instead his body is securely positioned in the kitchen as the laborer, as this is the only practice for which he is really prized. Indeed, by the end of the book, with the shifting of global alliances, even this position is ultimately deemed a luxury and he is summarily dismissed. In the

above passage, despite his flourishes and *élan*, he tips his hand to the reader that he knows the scintillating spectacle is his own personal fiction, with his qualification, “I allow myself to believe” (19). Quite simply, despite traveling within the highest artistic circles he could not dream of having even Truong’s audience, never mind Stein’s. Truong’s position, at least, allows her a choice about how to present, locate, and orient her work, whereas Binh, while granted some artistic license, is far more constricted in his possible political interventions.

His only recourse is to *value*, as he hopes that his artistic presence is enough to make him a worthwhile specimen, transforming his labor into an aesthetic product that can stand-in for himself. Rather than relating object to object, he aspires to a more romantic notion of worth by making his work an art, generating deep emotional impressions that then become physically vital, stating, “Value, I have heard, is how it all begins. From there, it can deepen into worth, flow into affection, and artery its way towards the muscles of the heart” (150). As a material laborer he recognizes himself as a commodity, but he yearns for more social worth. Yet yoking value to a sensibility is an unstable calculus, as the emotional and aesthetic register that allows him entry can be fickle—and predictably, Binh is betrayed in the story at virtually every turn. His worth in the metropole is tied to the desires of others, rather than his own, and as such he ends up being valued in ways he did not seek.

In the book, sexuality and sensuality are what keep Binh on the move, and indeed, they are the currency, or the salt, which keeps him alive. Initially it is his family’s rejection of Binh’s queerness that exiles him from the domestic space of the ancestral home. The voice of his now-dead father traverses over time and space in the narrative,

admonishing him for his homosexuality, and is the burden that relentlessly haunts him on his journey. Following him across the ocean, Binh hears his father's voice reproaching, "It sickens me to think about what you do, shaming my name," and stating outright, "I've always only had three [sons]. You are your mother's" (Truong 193; 164). Therefore it is this initial expulsion from the home, paternal lineage, and family life that forces Binh into the world and into the arms of the colonials. In this world Binh becomes the object of desire for a litany of men, who quite literally are the push and pull—the agents who tug on his heartstrings and his body.

The first affair he has is with a French man in Viet Nam, a colonizer who becomes installed as the head chef at the Governor General's kitchen where Binh works. A vibrantly captivating sexual man, his encounters with Binh afford the junior chef enormous physical pleasure yet has devastating effects on his ordered existence. For this affair between colonizer and colonized, between the powerful and the subservient, may be allowed to exist informally for a period of time, but cannot be publically acknowledged in the colonial order. Indeed, once rumors of the tryst leak out it is Binh who is silently forced out of the kitchen and on to the street, his own dismissal off the books. Disavowed from his family and unemployed he takes to the sea to find employment and a new home. Therefore, if sexuality is what affords him movement and organizes his desires, it is the colonial situation that rewrites them. Or at the very least colonialism determines the direction he must move, yet without keeping a record of why he does so.

It is in a new home, as a kitchen servant in the domicile of Stein and Toklas, that he meets his American mixed-raced lover Marcus Lattimore. Known to the readers as his

“Sweet Sunday Man” we are thrown into sumptuous scenes of secret sanctuaries, swirling tongues staggering through the stiltedness of stratified sentences, finding common ground only through the press of their bodies—with touch, taste, and tactility. While this lover, who is an acolyte of Stein, affords Binh glimpses at a heady intellectual world, the young men’s intimacy can only be performed in a room off the premises—once again off the books—tucked away from the powerful household; a private pleasure that is not to be seen, although perhaps heard. Despite their linguistic and scholarly differences what brings their conditions together is that they are both exotic cultural curiosities within the Stein household. White enough to pass, but Black enough to provide interest, Lattimore is valued as a translator of double-consciousness and is consistently examined and studied by Stein. Perhaps due to this symbolic violence, Lattimore strikes back at Stein through a literal heist of the written word, sending Binh to steal one of her manuscripts. But after the crime is committed Lattimore takes the book and flees the scene, leaving Binh both sensually and symbolically impoverished—with only a note left behind in a language that Binh cannot decipher.

Hence, Binh becomes the causality of Lattimore writing back, or, rather, taking the writing back. Here an ethnic or racial alliance is not in the cards, nor is the body or sexuality the great leveler. For despite both Lattimore and Binh being positioned as “other” different hierarchies bind them; as even overseas the American still has the possibility or promise of integration, whereas the more trenchant “other” is a mere a colonial subject no matter what the country or space. This prejudice extends to the “progressive” Americans Stein and Toklas, who are not directly involved in the colonizing mission, but still share underlying structures of worth. Truong could have

fictionalized the normative queer household of Stein and Toklas as a miracle of time and place, but true to the historical record they do not rise above colonial mores and cannot resolve Binh's contradictions. Ultimately the divergence of the two sets of lovers' histories leaves them singular, set against each other, as Binh becomes caught in the crosshairs of this complicated matrix of friendly fire. Identity alone, then, is not a strong enough pull to bring together such disparate people with conflicting interests.

To help compensate for this fate, Truong endows Binh with an elegant, at times murky, stylistic voice, and the novel is told as a series of Binh's recollections in a non-linear fashion. Binh bobs and weaves through various temporalities, places, and people, which provides the reader with a partial, limited, yet very intimate psychological portrait of this émigré. As the reader is forced to put the threads of the book together only as quickly, or as slowly, as he allows them to, Binh is afforded his own time and rhythm that the reader is subject to—and thus must constantly trying to catch up to his story and his dominant narrative style. Binh's history is similarly opaque as we only learn his name midway through the book, and even then we find out late in the narrative that the name "Binh" is a pseudonym. In one way this recalls that he is an everyman, that he could have any name, yet for the reader he has no stable name at all. His tale is an unwritten history, he is a gap in the recorded knowledge, and hence, we are never quite sure how to situate him. His voice as a narrator is compelling, but instead of being wide-open and trustworthy, Binh is selective, discreet, and a little unreliable. Emotionally distant, he does not invite the reader to co-conspire, or empathize with him, but rather reports his life with the chill of an anonymous informant. As a fictional tale, Truong could have made her protagonist encounter anything that she wanted: he could have, say, met and have

been groomed by important government officials while employed by Stein, or perhaps, he could have met fellow expats and begun to form an anti-colonial movement. Yet true to form, Truong shows restraint, and Bình remains invisible to official power.

However, Bình certainly does not find this power invisible and provides a worldly and weary perspective that is well positioned to see the unevenness that is created by the colonial system. When Bình wryly remarks that for his employers, “Ocean travel changed everything,” for Toklas and Stein this means the fussing, fretting, and fidgeting involved in packing up their paintings, books, and other luxury goods for this voyage, while for Bình each transoceanic journey holds nothing less than the potential to radically propel himself into an alternative and uncertain subjectivity (Truong 4). Bình, thus, understands, more than most, Marx’s dictum: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please”; for choices are never solely his own, but always, in part, a product of his historical condition, and he is certainly under no delusion about the gap between objective and subjective promises (Marx 595). As a man without a formal name who lurks in the gaps of records and official documents Bình is a character, then, that could only make a mark in the pages of fiction.

#### Postcolonial Politics:

Truong does leverage the possibilities of the fictive form to allow this lowly figure brief contact with Nguyễn Ái Quốc, one of the pseudonyms taken on by the anti-colonial leader later to be known as Ho Chi Minh. Meeting on a bridge the two men have a flirtatious exchange, playing a game, where they let slip small details of their past while slyly attempting to figure out each other’s current situation and station in Paris. Truong’s

Nguyễn is also worldly and not fully formed, mirroring Bình insofar as he drifts from job to job and place to place. Truong has the two men bond over dinner where she taps into Nguyễn's real-life experiences working menial jobs overseas (which includes serving a cook for the legendary chef Auguste Escoffier) to provide them with practical bonds that extend well beyond their native soil.<sup>1</sup> In this conversation Truong demonstrates how these material global experiences help to form symbolic connections, as living and working abroad concretely shape both men's imaginations. As perpetual visitors they gain the critical distance necessary to see the proximate links between multiple positions and places, helping them recast the racist binary that is presented to them by the colonial ideology. This broad empathetic persona leads Nguyễn to be dubbed the "scholar-prince" by Bình, and Nguyễn is presented as down-to-earth, slightly out of fashion, and charming; a sympathetic portrayal very much in accord with his later everyman persona. Nguyễn functions here as an agent of reconciliation, waxing poetically about his love of bridges stating:

Bridges belong to no one ... A bridge belongs to no one because it has to belong to two parties, one on either side. There has to be an agreement, a mutual consent, otherwise it is a useless piece of wood, a wasted expanse of cement. Every bridge is, in this way... a monument to an accord. (Truong 92)

Considering the narrative arc of the book, the bridge certainly could be read as a metaphor for the immigrant himself, and his soliloquy a call to value this in-between figure. However what is most noteworthy, considering Truong's position as a Vietnamese

American author, is that any whiff of statecraft is limited to an accord and presented through a malleable symbol. Hence, instead of being a rebellious insurgent, Truong chooses to represent this potentially controversial political practitioner as a philosopher, one who strives to bring two sides together through a gentle change in perspective.

However, brushing against this liberal placid reading are tantalizing crumbs Truong leaves the reader to follow. For instance, Bình describes his first meeting with Nguyễn thusly:

I met him, the man on the bridge, in 1927. I have no recollection of the month. It could have been sometime in the late spring, or, maybe, in the first days of autumn. What I am certain of, though, is that we met on a day when this city had the foregone appearance of a memory, as if the present had refused to go to work that day and said that the past will have to do. (Truong 85)

It is conspicuous that Bình meets Nguyễn sometime in 1927, yet without being able to remember the month, or even the season. Historical records indicate Nguyễn was far from the moderate presence that Truong presents him as at this point in his biographical development. The days of being a lowly cook were far behind him, and he was heavily involved in the underground French political scene as early as 1919. He had studied in the Soviet Union, was politically making the turn from an expressly nationalist politics to a communist one, and some believe he was involved in the recent arrest of his older nationalist competitor Phan Bội Châu. In fact, in 1927, while his biographical detail is sketchy (allowing Truong the historical opening to have him wander back to Paris), a

nationalist front in the form of the Viet Nam Nationalist Party (*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*) was being consolidated, for the moment out-maneuvering Nguyễn and his Marxist-leaning colleagues. Hence, one could speculate that Nguyễn, in this moment, had to regroup, and re-strategize how he was going to negotiate this iteration of the world order. Truong, then, writes him into a day where both the present and the future are unclear, and hence, a turn towards the past is necessary. Therefore, this poetic introduction allows for the contemplation of his earlier nationalist days—to foreground his practical motivations—and indeed, Bình provides the material example to ground him. This scene also serves as a gentle prod to the present-day reader to think more broadly, not only across space but also across time, in order to orient present political and ethnic affiliations in the global moment.

Instead of fortifying the biographical detail Truong takes great pains to describe the day they met, layering images to create a mood so that their meeting seems dreamlike—a flight of fancy that produces emotional resonances, not unlike the fictional process itself. She situates Nguyễn’s material development by including the date, yet does not consider his political activities, and instead elaborates on his imaginative horizons at this juncture. While stripping him of his revolutionary moniker Hồ Chí Minh, she does bestow him with the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc. Nguyễn is the most common Vietnamese family name (implying a common background with all), and the words Ái and Quốc translate directly as “love” and “country” respectfully, but in combination mean “patriot.” So despite Nguyễn’s world traveling, the perspective he gains is not rootless mercenary knowledge, but rather, it is one still firmly oriented towards “home,” or, at the very least, those still in his homeland. Truong is uncharacteristically didactic

here, not leaving it to the reader to put these threads together themselves, but actually has Bình narrate “out loud” the meaning of Nguyễn’s name (Truong 247). Despite these hints regarding his more militant persona, the practical flexing of political might is something that Truong fastidiously avoids and leaves unmentioned, as it would necessarily traverse a potential powder keg of emotions and memories for the present American and Vietnamese American readership. However, far from being something as simple as a move from affairs of the state to the affairs of the heart, the characters vigorously inhabit and long for concrete places, whereby Truong removes the politics “on record” and instead leaves us with the affective resonances that geopolitics create, constructing her own bridge between the material and psychological state.

Therefore, she uses the meeting to capture the differentiated structures of feeling for these colonial subjects; for what is flushed-out, is the banality of Nguyễn’s life, revolving around his job, where he lives, what he eats and so forth. When considering the plot, the most important role Nguyễn plays is that for the first time in the book, Bình feels as if he has met a man “like him.” The details Truong uses to describe him relate to his profession—his day-to-day existence—and here Truong is at her most deft by identifying this as the grounds where colonialism is most lived out, even in the metropole. How despite their eventually divergent life paths, at this moment Bình and the soon-to-be Hồ Chí Minh are leveled, on an equal playing field due to the limitations imposed by the colonial order. This mundane order is encapsulated in one of Bình’s imaginary diatribes to his father, speaking of his decision to leave the stable employment that he held in Viet Nam. The meat of the passage has to do with the glass ceiling that his brother, Anh Minh, faces working at the Governor General’s mansion,

Yes Old Man, I gambled. I gambled away my position as a *garde-manger*, a pitiful lifetime tenure that, contrary to what you thought, I was not lucky to have. I gambled away the long white apron, the coveted position as Sous Chef Someday, under the reign of Minh Finally the Chef de Cuisine. I gambled away a future—"better," I know, was presumed—that Anh Minh believed in like a benevolent god. Merit will be promoted. Service will be rewarded. Loyalty will beget loyalty. (Truong 195)

The "future" that Binh gambles away is simply that of being a part of the comprador class. The future for Binh is materially determined as a promise of a promotion to *sous-chef* that surely will never come. Without a change in the whole societal system the top job will always be held by the White French colonial, which, trickling down, limits the possibilities throughout all the different jobs in the kitchen. It is clear to Binh that this is no meritocracy. The structure is inert. Hence, we can see that while Truong engages the colonial experience through the labor of an individual, the trails of this one man illuminates the problematic organization. Instead of a detailed impassioned critique of colonialism, we get the stultifying everyday and the limited horizons that he must make due with. And thus, she demonstrates how this powerful system shuts down possibilities for growth and leaves the colonized subject trapped.<sup>1</sup>

As is well established in the field of postcolonial studies, postcolonial experience does not refer only to that which temporally follows empire, but rather refers to a continual working through of the traces of empire. A postcolonial approach, then,

requires demonstrating how colonialism ordered and continues to reorder the world, while considering the persistence of the colonial forces that establish the conditions for contemporary cultural production. The historical investigation of structures of subjugation is a difficult one, of course, as global capital has deliberately obscured the source of these inequities, and as such, critiques often have to diagnose symptoms from imaginative cultural products. To do this one must engage in dogged transnational studies that traverse diverse lands, people, and thought, to fully tease out the complexity of postcolonial history and, in the words of Robert JC Young, make “the invisible visible” (23). Hence, although postcolonial critique ostensibly focuses on people and structures located in previously colonized countries, increasingly the scope of analysis includes those who have left the home country, due to exile, refuge, or economic opportunity, and live an interstitial psychological existence of both here and there.

This transnational move, then, shifts the object of study away from a geographically and temporally determined area of study towards a methodology that is more invested in the subjectivities and movement of the postcolonials themselves. Vietnamese Americans, then, would seem ripe for postcolonial analysis as their history neatly traverses the transfer from a traditional European colonial endeavor to the modern form of US imperialism. However, despite this seemingly tidy fit neither Asian American Studies nor Postcolonial Studies have been easy to sell to the Vietnamese American community.<sup>1</sup> Sucheng Chan in her essential study, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* (2006), richly describes how when trying to teach this newly landed community Asian American Studies in the late 1970’s she was met with a great amount of resistance and even disdain. After all, the rhetoric of a liberatory Marxist-inflected

politics chafed with the real world experiences of many of these exiles that were recently marginalized, hunted down, and expelled by those who were claiming to be left-wing liberators. For the first generation of these Americans, at least, a progress narrative was undeniable, and conservative stability valued.

Furthermore, emerging as an academic discipline that was closely twinned with poststructuralism, postcolonialism moved to destabilize representation, as discourse analysis came to dominate the discussion with names like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak contributing complex writing about hybridity, mimicry, and subalternity. These dense works productively show that culture is an anxiety-ridden construction constantly working to normalize origins and power imbalances, and yet, they seemed out of touch with the immediate needs of a materially poor and marginalized refugee population. While many of these poststructuralist ideas hinge on a pleasurable artistic disruption of hierarchies, these advances can cast faint light for many when compared to the pain and suffering caused by dislocation (Radhakrishnan 753). Moreover, Benita Parry argues that focusing on discourse is politically limiting; as its relentless search for differences, newness, and multiplicities ends up, ironically, smoothing out particularities on to a horizontal plane of Otherness. This flattening out, she argues, diffuses power, ahistorically obscuring relations of colonial and economic domination, while overvaluing the realms of subjectivity and aesthetic representation, which undermines the underlying conflict (Parry 55-74). Hence, instead of leaving postcolonial experience as a fractured, partial reality, or reveling in irresolvable individual tensions, the materialist postcolonial approach, advanced by scholars like Parry and Neil Lazarus, seek to examine material objects and practices (including literature) for their immanent logic and demonstrate how

these objects function politically on a world-historical stage. While Jane Hiddleston argues that the coming together of poststructuralism and postcoloniality “was never about practical political strategy,” and that the postcolonial poststructuralist critiques “would never claim that their work could *replace* any concrete project for the dismantling of colonialism; their analysis functions on another higher level,” it is also undeniable that these “higher levels” of analysis, which are concerned with language and philosophy, themselves get pulled into concrete political projects to construct ethnic histories and traditions in the decolonizing process (Hiddleston 3).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is precisely when these heady philosophical and linguistic theories are translated into workable programs, aesthetic creations, or even comprehensible feelings that, for many, questions and pratfalls arise.

Hence, the question for a new generation of Vietnamese American social actors is exactly *how* to introduce a complex postcolonial approach that seeks to reassess and restructure foundational knowledge. Within the Vietnamese American community, en masse, there is a reticence to directly revisit pasts and politics that have been “left behind” or “overcome,” and the crossing of this boundary can, at times, trigger the violent assertion of a singular history.<sup>1</sup> The painful life experience, suffering, and sacrifice of the elders during the period of refuge, encourages a forgetting or repression of the complex rubric of thoughts, alliances, and national affiliations, that existed before the traumatic passage. Considering the opportunities forfeited by this previous generation, the 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> cohorts, understandably, are in a precarious position to challenge this relative quiet. Yet as witnesses to their parent’s desire for stability in the first generation immigrant life, and then, often, the withering away of their utopian dream

of America, these subsequent generations of Vietnamese American writers are unsatisfied with the status quo, and seek to represent the conflicts and contradictions that occur in the diasporic space. What they find in fiction, then, is not a direct critical-utopian view of the future per se, but the more humble means to present repressed positions—opening debate regarding contingencies and desires in the past that were held and forgotten—without directly contradicting their elders' dominant world-view.

Overseas Aftertastes:

An attention to form begs the accompanying question: why do Vietnamese American authors often choose to construct their protagonists through tropes of food and food systems? There has been an explosion in Vietnamese American writing in the past 15-20 years, as the 1.5 generation has gained significant linguistic, cultural, and publishing access, and authors such as Monique Truong, Andrew Lam, Mong-Lan, Bich Minh Nguyen, Andrew X. Pham, Bao Phi, among others, all at some point turn to food. For many of these authors food becomes attractive, in part, because it can meet the demands of both discourse analysis and a material postcolonial methodology by foregrounding the seemingly unrationalized aesthetic practices of eating and cooking, which counters enlightenment knowledge hierarchies that exclude non-western people. Hence, productive artistic practices are put on the table, without opening the Vietnamese body politic for easy consumption or incorporation. While this more symbolic turn towards the body could be read as adhering to an Asian American style pioneered by Chinese and Japanese American writers, the appearance of comestibles in Vietnamese American cultural production, I argue, concretely organizes the continuing tensions of the

current global condition. For instance, the restaurant still exists as a place that hides ethnicities as much as it promotes them, as Young relates: “In Beirut, when you go to a restaurant, the waiters who serve you will generally be local people, of one sort or another. But hidden below, and only visible when you go downstairs and glance in the kitchens, you see that those cooking and washing up are Bangladeshi” (26). Food and its accompanying institutions, then, provide durable structures that easily translate across the past two centuries and provide a remarkably consistent index of power. When encountering a culinary literary history from below, the reader must make these worldly connections, and hence, this form also gestures to migrant, class, and ethnic experiences that exist beyond the example at hand.

Vietnamese American authors turn to the culinary to demonstrate how the particularity of their experiences has worked historically in a dialectical relationship with the general global structure, with food often becoming the tactile everyday encounter between the individual and the world. For instance, while Binh displays a stunning array of culinary knowledge his relationship to food is not some free-floating ideal, or genius, but rather a profession, at best a highly refined craft, that is marked by his colonial relationship and his raced existence in Paris. Geopolitically, while, as the title suggests, salt plays an important role in the book, the use of the culinary is very material, not merely symbolic. This is not a tale where he longs for an essentialized past of *chả giò* or other delicacies from the land left behind; instead, foods encountered are like words in a continuing sentence of life, rather than existing as a static symbol. His fluency with food is not a rupture or radical subjectivity that causes particular anxiety for the colonial order, but rather his basic means for survival and the way that he accumulates value. Indeed,

even for Truong, the centrality of salt does not announce Binh's ethnicity to others—this is not *The Book of Nuoc Mam*—but a sign that catalogues his place quite precisely as “kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea” (Truong 5). Hence with these markers of body, geography, and labor, salt is not innate to his experience as someone from the East, nor even as a émigré, but rather as a material component of a common human history that both the colonizer and the colonized have had to endure. Thus it is not the innateness of food or cooking itself that provides us with a postcolonial perspective, but rather the contextualizing of food, cooking and, the cooks, through a literary performance that actively produces postcolonial reference.

While Binh is a creation of Truong's, he is not a complete fabrication, as there were actually a few “Indochinese” men who cooked for Stein and Toklas when the couple lived in Paris. The status of these men in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* is described in an interview with Truong as “a footnote,” but Truong is certainly being coy, as the chapter “Servants in Paris” reveals much about the attitudes of Stein and Toklas towards their colonial employees. Their favorite cook, Trac, is lingered over for a few paragraphs, however his presence blurs into a long list of the cooks that were employed in their house. Reading them narrowly as servants Toklas is only interested in the time these men spent preparing food, relating a few cooking-related stories, even a joke that Trac made, but rarely straying far from the controlled central node of the kitchen. Comprised as a litany of adjectives, the only record of these men's subjectivities are simple descriptions like, “morose,” “a gambler,” or “childish.” Yet despite her one-dimensional reductions, something about Trac remained intractable as she relates:

Of course there was no way of knowing how Trac prepared his delicious food. He was not secretive, but he was a master in his kitchen. Much later, when he had left us and returned to us twice, then his wife told me the ingredients he used in some of the dishes he cooked for us, but even she never knew the measurements. Trac didn't measure. (Toklas 187)

The above passage demonstrates that it is Trac's incalculability that attracts Toklas, and subsequently, forces his name into the historical record—albeit as an incomprehensible mystery that marks an absence in western knowledge. Toklas actively seeks out his ingredients and techniques, and becomes flummoxed when she ultimately is unable to rationalize his food. Like Bìn, Trac is able to hide his cuisine in the mystery of his body, yet her interest in him is limited to his profession and the culinary creations that he produces. For even with this special “child” of theirs, Toklas is content to interpret his leaving as a general “restless[ness] and want[ing] a change,” rather than probing his motivations and desires more deeply (187). Hence, in a situation similar to Bìn's inability to “cook back,” Trac is unable to hold his audience's attention beyond the food placed before them. Making the connection from the object back to the subject that produced it is too much for those blinded by colonial prejudices.

But this raises the question, why does Truong change his name? If the goal was simply to resurrect Trac, to fill in this lost story to make the invisible visible, even imaginatively, then why does she fictionalize him so blatantly? I would contend that Bìn becomes, then, an amalgamation of all of these men who passed through their kitchen, whereby the absent narrative becomes that of a social group or class, rather than an

individual iteration of difference. The politics involved in this move is the creation of an alternative and more substantial way for the present reader to conceive of a Vietnamese diasporic community, as well as the class status of migrant kitchen workers themselves, rather than the work merely standing-in for the exploits an exceptional individual.

Hence, Truong leverages the fictive form to make a political intervention in community building rather than a direct rewriting of history. As Jacques Rancière suggests, politics is not the struggle over power, nor the writing of laws, but the “configuration of a specific form of community.” He continues: “Politics is the construction of a specific sphere of experience in which certain objects are posited and shared and certain subjects are regarded as capable of designating these objects for discussion” (Rancière 3). Therefore, the transformative power of fiction is the ability to put non-present objects and practices into “discussion”; and indeed, with the institutional, linguistic and educational gains that this generation of Vietnamese Americans has acquired there is now the power to choose what is to be included in the community formation. Thus we can isolate Truong’s political literary gesture as putting the psychic and material life of these past Vietnamese diasporic subjects—their wants, their desires, their goals and needs—into the discussion, which is precisely what Toklas and her ilk have ignored.

Truong contextualizes the subjective voice of the amalgamated individual—the embodiment of absent narratives—through a form of social realism that maps the social and ideological *structures* of the time, without being completely yoked to the banality (and impossibility) of realistic detail. Literary critic Catherine Fung suggests that by fabricating characters and details Truong resists referential legibility of both herself as a

“Vietnamese” author and the characters that appear in the book. In her conclusion Fung suggests:

In answer to the question of what a Vietnamese American writer’s life story has to do with the several expatriates in the novel...It makes sense that an author who feels marked by a history from which she feels alienated would write a novel about the unseen, about recognizing a lack of action having historical consequences, and about letting silences speak for themselves. (108)

Her compelling reading of the book identifies absences as an important presence within Vietnamese American history and experience, but in doing so downplays Truong’s authorial act. For if it is true that silences speak for themselves then we must ask why and how Truong represents these silences. While often cloaked in Truong’s stirring prose, the book provides the reader with an enormous amount of prosaic detail—specifically concerning labor. I would suggest that when these material markers are paired with Binh’s psychological portrait, the reader is then guided through identifiable continuities between the past and present, as well as Vietnamese and Vietnamese American experiences.

The recent flurry of scholarship regarding *The Book of Salt* has been particularly concerned with the placing and/or deferral of history. For instance, Southeast Asian American studies scholar Y-Dang Troeung reads the book as an intervention in postcolonial “collaborative autobiography.” Here she argues, “The gift, then, is the story of Binh’s intimacies, secrets, and memories that he gives not to Stein and Toklas, but

rather to his imagined community of the underclass, the long line of servants, migrants, and queer exiles who have preceded him through the master's door and who have laid claim to this gift in the past" (130). While certainly agreeing with the bulk of her argument about collaborative autobiography and postcolonialism, I would depart from her conclusion in two ways. First, the gift in question is from Truong, not Binh, and secondly, her "gift" is not, then, oriented towards the past, but rather, the book is, one could say, a "present" for the present. In Truong's imaginative reconstruction, the stylistic decision to make her central character unreliable, evasive, and inscrutable, speaks past this older imagined community, engaging modern readers to consider the place of incompleteness and the new. David Eng argues that the queer temporality of the protagonist upsets a crude historicist reading, and tells the story of "lost and forgotten desires" (59). This point is instructive in directing us towards an analysis of "becoming" whereby we can understand the Vietnamese American community as a dynamic multifarious entity with a plurality of motivations and goals, instead of a singularly rooted minority population. However, to fully activate these readings I suggest that we must, in words of Edward Said, "world" this text to understand how this text materially circulates. For it is important to recognize that she is not telling the story *of* these lost and forgotten desires (for they are, of course, lost and forgotten), but is interjecting an imaginative recontextualizing of desires held in the present-day.

Catherine Gallagher, in her examination of the historical development of fiction, argues that the novel, as a generic form, makes a double move where it at once makes explicit the non-truth of the project, while at the same time the smoothness of the narrative form lures the reader into a kind of plausibility (Gallagher 338). This

doubleness works so that “fiction somehow suspends, de-flects, or otherwise disables normal referential truth claims about the world of ordinary experience,” which, in *The Book of Salt*, provides a convenient end-run for Truong around the fraught landscape of current communal Vietnamese American presumptions (338). In other words, by turning to fiction Truong is mentioning the past without mentioning it at all—introducing an alternative mode of thought without denigrating the real world life experiences of the first generation.

Yet from this fictional base, the sensual subjective nature of Truong’s central character activates the readerly imagination and steers the reader towards reconstruction. Binh’s incompleteness and lack of psychological development is valuable, for his experiences bring into question the singularity of the present. However Truong does not merely revel in his difference, rather, to quote again from Gallagher:

The fictional character’s incompleteness can ... not only create a sense of the reader’s material “reality” as ontologically plentiful by helping us re-envision our embodied immanence through the condition of its possible absence, but also allows us to experience an uncanny desire to be that which we already are. (361)

Building from Gallagher’s description of this “uncanny desire” that is aroused during the reading process, I suggest that the incompleteness of Binh ultimately forces the reader to reflect upon their own condition and deficiencies, rather than “losing themselves” in the narrative. Truong’s fiction does not provide something “new” or insert a transnational sensibility, but rather, she reminds the reader what is already laying dormant in the

heterogeneous realm of ordinary experience. Or to put it another way, she reinvigorates ordinary experience with the multiplicities or social possibilities contained within the historically contextualized individual.

Conclusion:

Despite their commonality as Vietnamese diasporic subjects, the contrasts between Binh and Truong loom large—as their artistic objects, audiences, and classes are unequal. But attending to the interplay between these two, the author and her character, produces a compelling re-imagining of what Vietnamese diasporic subjectivity was and can be. While appealing to qualitiveness and sensuality, here, Truong does not create a world of perpetual difference where all Vietnamese people are imbued with a qualitatively different sensorium, nor does she turn to a simple subject-to-subject discourse. Instead, Truong uses food and sensuality to foreground the dynamism between subject and object, the place of Binh and his environment, by illustrating the dialectical role that each play in transforming each other and the historical place that they generate. She asks that we be attuned to the libratory pleasurable effects of subjective experience, but also its limitations, by challenging the reader to consider how historical agents, past and present, are allowed to imagine the world system.

With this in mind, I would like to conclude by considering Binh's final words to the reader:

‘What keeps you here?’ I hear a voice asking. Your question, just your desire to know, keeps me, is my response. In the dark I see you smile. I look up

instinctually as if someone called my name. (Truong 261)

Here, at the end of the book, Binh can take pleasure in the dynamic interaction created between himself and his audience, whereby he finally becomes a subject that produces questions—a possibility. This is what Paris promises him. In this setting the combination of structural inequality and proximity incites audiences to at least investigate his condition, an operation that will propel history forward. Toklas, even when relatively uninterested in Trac's departure, was still bothered by the mystery of his cooking and tried to track down the ingredients. This might not be authority, but at least it is the pull that the cook has to lure others in alternative and unexpected directions, which is a tease that Binh clearly enjoys. In the colony, a Vietnamese cook is not even an exotic that gains even token recognition, rather, he is, at best, a functional colonial subject—a smooth invisible cog in the global economy. However, in Paris, he can leverage this interest in his food and its inscrutability to leave a lingering presence or taste, even if he remains only a footnote in the writing of two luminary modernists.

Truong makes painfully clear that Binh needs to search for a reliable alliance, as an unhinged singularity leaves him vulnerable, exploited by two sides of the political economy—used first by a colonialist then by an intellectual capitalist. The retreat into the body is simply not a viable strategy for Binh either; it may keep him alive, but he must recognize his place in the world order and the politics that surround him if he is to prosper beyond his proscribed standing. With the appearance of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, who is different but in many ways the same, he finds Paris's other promise and its gift. An advantageous pairing of dynamism and history, this tandem embodies the crossroads of

subjectivity and state. This meeting provides Binh with the proper combination of material structure and sensual desire to exceed his historical horizons, giving him the substance necessary to imagine a possible future.

Truong, then, picks up the scent of the left-behind cooks, capitalizes on the interest in ethnic literature and food during the present conjuncture, and broadens the scope and possibilities of Vietnamese American identity by immanently producing a “new” iteration of postcolonial subjectivity. Whereas Binh uses food to put his audience into a paradox of desiring something that they cannot have experienced—“a nostalgia for a place they have never been”—Truong leverages fiction to a similar effect, where she posits a desirable character just beyond the horizon of any reader’s immediate reference. Writing in the present-day it is inconceivable a reader could identify with Binh’s circumstances directly; so instead one is left to contemplate Binh’s absence in order to understand their own material construction, while considering the emotional politics of the “invisible” migrant classes existing in the current global order. When fashioning her artistic intervention Truong steers clear of dominant refugee narratives, and thus is not limited by the experiences of the first Vietnamese American generation. Instead, by creating this plausible literary account she is subtly rewiring how Vietnamese American communal memory is formed. In doing so she reintroduces perhaps the most politically divisive figure in diasporic Vietnamese history, Ho Chi Minh, as a philosopher, worker, and lover, to imaginatively reorient a past distinguished by its absences so the reader can discern the promises and problems held within a dynamic worldly present.

## Conclusion

### Re-Placing the Accent:

#### Towards a Theory of Refugee Aesthetics

The study of refugees has, up until now, been overwhelmingly dominated by those in the social sciences because of the commonplace assumption that the refugee is a political category rather than a subjectivity. This intellectual separation has not been challenged by those in the humanities, for even fields that have a strong interest in transnational aesthetic formations, like Comparative Literature and Asian American Studies, have all but ignored refugee literature as a coherent body of work. The neglect of the refugee figure in these fields is striking, for if these disciplines are committed to intervening in the power imbalances created by the world system, and in the process, bringing out the voices of the disenfranchised, ignoring one of the world's most consistently vulnerable populations is certainly peculiar.

On one hand this critical neglect is in large part due to the fact that individual authors rarely announce in their work that they are writing from a refugee position. For the refugee is often considered a temporary identity and due to the unsavory prejudices that surround the term refugee in everyday life communities are usually quick to leave the image of the refugee behind. Particularly during the first wave of migration and settlement, authors are more likely to look for ways to publically announce their successful arrival in the new land, rather than dwell on the refugee position. However, in this conclusion I argue that the refugee figure has also been disregarded in large part due

to a critical approach that seeks to mimic a scholarly orientation found in the work of Edward Said—as academics in many fields have followed Said’s intellectual fascination with the solitary figure of the exile at the expense of the refugee. Harkening to the intellectual perspective embodied by émigré Theodor W. Adorno, Said’s exile cannot and will not make the adjustment to the new environment, preferring to remain outside the mainstream culture—unaccommodating, unco-opted, and resistant. This bold and courageous persona is needed, for in the work of Said the exile comes to speak for the refugee when they cannot. Indeed, with populations that remain peripheral—in terms of their linguistic fluency, literacy, and/or political clout—turning to a few prominent well-educated exilic intellectuals to voice the concerns of the group becomes a material necessity when trying to make wide-ranging political inroads in the new land.

The present-day diasporic Vietnamese community works in a different paradigm, however, as they have made significant material and institutional gains in multiple countries—the fruits of which have come to particular prominence over the past decade. The heroically disoriented exile is no longer needed as urgently as he or she was immediately after the period of refuge, with Vietnamese politicians, professionals, artists, and business people from working- and middle-classes now earning a place in the public sphere in a number of countries. This movement has created a new generation of artists and scholars who are seeking out a set of aesthetics that will properly articulate a possible future for the Vietnamese international community, while rewriting and revisiting the colonial and imperial histories that produced the crisis of forced dislocation. The first wave of diasporic Vietnamese literature, which spanned the late 1970’s and 1980’s consisted of two main bodies of work (Jeanette 17). One body consisted of an abundance

of memoirs written in English (or in the tongue of the new land: French, German, and so forth) which were narratives of invitation that sought to educate the reader about Vietnameseness and the Vietnamese journey—gesturing towards reconciliation and a mutual understanding. However, as scholar Qui Phiet Tran has shown, the other body of diasporic Vietnamese writing produced during this period was written in Vietnamese, where wrath and anger towards both the old and new lands tore through the literature—a disquiet much more attuned to the exilic literature imagined by Said (18).

I propose that the current body of literature created by Vietnamese American artists speaks to both streams of first-wave diasporic Vietnamese literature, by elongating the temporality of the refugee condition so that the past is not simply left behind when the political designation has been removed. This “refugee aesthetic” consists of four main characteristics, where their projects: 1) respond to the demand to explain one’s presence; 2) disorient the viewer/reader’s perspective; 3) gesture towards social identities; and 4) articulate a future for the community that includes the refugee experience. With this in mind I show that Vietnamese American writers are beginning to embrace the figure of the refugee and are documenting the lingering contradictions that this position entails. Instead of moving past this political category, these authors extend the event of the refugee experience so that the material pressures experienced of the first wave are revisited, interpreted, and recontextualized through this new aesthetic form.

The demand to explain one’s presence began when Vietnamese bodies were carefully documented in a series of refugee camps, an examination that continued as these migrants settled in foreign lands. Because of the political valence of the Vietnam War, and the suspicion that followed those who were the physical reminder of this

western imperial failure, Vietnamese refugees continually had to explain why their bodies had entered these new spaces, creating the persistent “interviewer/respondent relationship.” During this period it was important for many Vietnamese migrants to assert their material and communal success to both American and Vietnamese populations alike through public stories of abundance and assimilation (Vo 200-01). However, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes, narratives that focus solely on the successes of Vietnamese refugees can be deployed as “part of a powerful national revisionist effort in America to forget and forgive itself in order to justify the occupation of other countries through military, economic, and cultural means” (21).

Bao Phi, a Vietnamese American poet/activist who was born in Saigon and raised in South Minneapolis, is sensitive to these various narrative quandaries, belonging to a generation of refugees that have lived in the United States from a young age—equipped with the language skills and cultural capital to tell stories of Vietnamese immigration in a manner that earlier generations could not. Phi’s lyric poem “You Bring out the Vietnamese in Me” directly addresses the task of articulating a Vietnamese present to a broad readership without serving the community up for easy consumption, beginning with a direct address to the reader:

Tôi là một người Vietnamese / Bilingual / Poetry / MC

you want to thank me / không có chi

let me take you for a ride / of my refugeography

if your mama could cook you know she’d make a batch of me

nasty catastrophes / ời trời ời! / Fatality / See / Bao Phi

là một người bất lịch sự / Well excuse me  
 I say one for Asian / Two for American / And three for love  
 You may say hot like whoa / but I say hot like phở.  
 Phở real. Phở life. Phở-king Phở-nomenal.

Because you bring out the Vietnamese in me.

The opening stanza mimics and pays homage to the demands of the interviewer/respondent relationship, but colors it with a playfulness of rhyme, rhythm, and language. The first half of the first line “Tôi là một người Vietnamese” is simply stating, “I am a Vietnamese person,” before shifting to English to add more identities to this initial categorical distinction. This seemingly benign move, however, is a linguistic reversal of the experience faced by the earlier Vietnamese refugee generation whose examination was most often conducted in an unfamiliar language. With Phi’s opening salvo the monolingual English reader feels disoriented, estranged, and the easy power dynamic usually established between the interviewer and respondent, subject and inquisitor, is disrupted. The forcefulness of this gesture is solidified through various direct addresses to the reader, in this case not waiting to be asked a question, but asserting his multiple identities to his addressee. Mixing colloquial language with directness, the subversiveness of his move is acknowledged later in the stanza, when he states, “Bao Phi / là một người bất lịch sự [is a rude person/flippant].” He responds to this charge of impoliteness with, “well excuse me,” which could be considered a less than sincere apology. Here he is less concerned with speaking truth to power, but is speaking in a

disruptive manner that will restage the encounter with a consuming audience.

Phi knows that his ethnic identity is desirable to an audience interested in consuming a multicultural product, and he is savvy in how he seeks to route this consuming desire. For despite his standoffish tone he carefully leaves cultural touchstones and trails for the non-bilingual audience to pursue. Again, referring back to the first line, the word “Vietnamese” is not, of course, a Vietnamese language word at all, but rather “Việt” is used to designate the ethnic group. In other words, one would say “Tôi là một người *Việt*” to identify themselves, rather than “Tôi là một người *Vietnamese*.” Adding “Vietnamese” as opposed to “Việt,” allows the English speaker to infer that Phi is offering up his ethnic heritage, allowing them to follow along for the ride. Throughout the piece he litters the poem with culinary references, in this case riffing on the most recognizable Vietnamese dish, pho. Yet even when approaching this familiar object he estranges the food from the reader by re-adjusting the accent and in the process disrupting the internal rhyme of his line, as he notes, “You say hot like whoa / I say hot like phở” nodding to the common English-language mispronunciation of the dish as “phoa,” pointing out the diacritical differences produced at this node of cultural convergence.

These differences do not make Phi turn away from dialogue as he remains committed to actively courting the reader with the invitation fully extended in the third line, where he offers to take “you for a ride / of my refugeography.” Phi is certainly unique in his embrace the term and persona of the refugee, and when he reads the poem aloud it is clear the root word here is the figure of the “refugee” rather than “refuge.” The combining form “ography” provides a productive ambiguity, as “ography” denotes both a

style of writing but also a descriptive science or study, implying a double perspective where he is studying the refugee experience more broadly, surveying others, as he writes his own tale. For Phi, the refugee experience is social, and identity is formed through a dialectical process. Throughout the poem Phi repeats the phrase “you bring out the Vietnamese in me,” leveraging breaks and enjambment to highlight “you.” He concludes with this final appeal:

I was the one who survived to love you.

Even if you save me, I won't thank you.

I love to save myself from myself,

I love so these things become me without ruling me,

I love you

because you bring out the Vietnamese in me,

You

Yes, you

Yes, you.

Here, at the end of the poem, Phi is no longer hailing, and is, instead, naming. He is charting a path of love for others who seek to embrace the contradictions brought on by

the refugee condition. But he is clear that this embrace of the refugee subjectivity is a project that cannot do without others, even if those others have caused harm. Therefore, if the community is willing to articulate the refugee aesthetic they must acknowledge the influence of others, but need not express gratitude.

In 2006 sociologist Yen Le Espiritu sounded the call for a critical refugee study, which would consider “how and why the term ‘refugee’—not as a legal classification, but as an idea—continues to circumscribe American understanding of the Vietnamese, even when Vietnamese in the United States now constitute multiple migrant categories” (410-11). Espiritu is spurred to this critical approach by conventional studies of the Vietnamese refugee in the US academy that seek to remedy what is considered to be a “problem” in the body and psyche of the refugee subject, rather than critiquing the imperial military interventions and global economic forces that led to widespread Vietnamese displacement. This former approach, she argues, dovetails with official narratives of “rescue and liberation,” where the rehabilitation of the refugee is needed in order to justify *post hoc* American policy and turn a military defeat into a “good war” (421). This revisionist approach of “we-win-even-when-we-lose,” is an important world outlook for the state to propagate, as the “happy ending” to this story provides the justification for subsequent military interventions throughout the world.

Vietnamese Americans play an important role in this revisionist American narrative, positioned as passive subjects who must rely on the benevolence of the United States to pull them out of their stateless circumstances or the degraded status accorded to them in the old country. This, of course, requires a convenient forgetting of the United States’ complicity in making them stateless people to begin with, in turn disregarding

complicated and messy narrative that this kind of account should tell. To tell the more complex version of the story, then, Espiritu concludes that the critical task at hand requires orienting studies of the refugee figure towards political and social critiques that call into question war, race, and violence, as opposed to relying on other more modish sites of scholarly investigation like immigration, American exceptionalism, and transnationalism (426).

Yet since it is narrative structures that underwrite subsequent American military interventions, in order to effectively disrupt these stories of benevolence I would add that critical refugee studies must work to refashion the *image* of the refugee, so that the refugee her/himself can be read as a dynamic agent filled with desires, routines, and goals. Giorgio Agamben famously notes that the existence of the stateless refugee brings into question the fiction of the modern sovereignty built on the ground of rooted citizens, and draws attention to the struggle for recognition and inclusion that occurs within the nation-state. Because their very appearance brings about a disturbance, the state must ideologically externalize the refugee, situating them as aberrations and treating them with suspicion and surveillance (2000 16). Vietnamese American artists like Phi draw from the disruptive energy described by Agamben by refusing to be externalized, and in the process critiquing the ethics behind the state's claim to multicultural ground. Embracing the refugee position involves tracking the aggressive suspicion that follows and marginalizes the refugee subject in their own country. Initially conceived as a spoken word piece "You Bring out the Vietnamese in Me" is performed by Phi with aggressive intensity and a reflective pace, transforming the image of the refugee from a passive subject to an active agent, approaching the psyche of the refugee with a dynamism that is

not content to settle on a complaint or a problem. Remaining dynamic serves to remind the reader of the dynamism that has been a formative component of the refugee's history and is an important move to place the refugee artist (and critic) as a figure that orchestrates the encounter the state, community, art object, and audience.

The sticky relationship between the Asian American native informant and Asian American critique has been well theorized by Vietnamese American studies scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, particularly in his attention to the institutionalization of the discipline of Asian American studies and the competing practice of social justice. In his *Race and Resistance* Nguyen documents the bind that the Asian American studies scholar faces where his/her authority to speak within the institutional space exists only insofar as the Asian American population is marginalized and requires a spokesperson. This formation requires representing and speaking on behalf of a needy population, which risks perpetuating the racial and ethnic management that is imposed under the guise of diversity. This disconnect between the political efficacy of the academic act becomes particularly problematic when considering the diversity of the community that the scholar seeks to represent. For instance, as Nguyen is found of reminding the reader, political and social leaders of the Vietnamese American population are quite often war veterans and entrepreneurs who have no interest in a left leaning project of emancipation or liberation. Here there is a contradiction if Asian American studies desires to serve the Asian American population through social justice, as the "justice" served may endanger the members of the community who have competing goals and desires. In a later essay on Southeast Asian American critique, Nguyen shows how the Vietnamese refugee faces a similar dilemma of speaking for multiple positions, as the transnational nature of the

refugee requires thinking back and representing the country of ethnic origin in addition to other global refugees. Moreover, those artists and scholars working in the English and French speaking diaspora have a disproportional representational force behind them when compared to those working in Vietnamese, and these refugee actors must then be cognizant of their role in deciding what Vietnamese voices are heard on the world stage.

I would suggest, though, that the engagement with this problem in refugee literature often takes the form of a dogged rootedness rather than a stateless hybrid form. The textual weight of this literature seems to contradict Nguyen when he suggests that the study of Southeast Asians and refugees can unearth the utopian potential of a country without a nation-state, going as far to claim that “If [discourse about refugees] critiques nation-states, it must be unsentimental in critiquing refugee aspirations to national belonging, even when those refugees are far from elite” (931). I am apprehensive of this move for this twinning of the notion of critique and the refusal of belonging denies the very situatedness that allows for the coherent and detailed assessment of the state, which can only occur from the inside position. Because they are especially cognizant of the material perils of existing between states the refugee perspective tends to be wary of claiming indeterminate subjective states like “interstitiality” or “in-betweenness.” As the work of Phi and Bich Minh Nguyen amply demonstrate, the use of the American insider’s voice allows the Vietnamese American author to intimately detail the everyday life and social marginalization that refugees and their descendents continue to face, while maintaining the cultural fluency so that they can strategically appeal to a broad American audience. 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation refugee literature draws upon the dual outlook of having a worldly perspective transmitted to them through the stories of their family’s forced

relocation, while also being firmly situated within, and produced by, American state practices. From this position a sense of belonging is generated that can traverse the relationship between the experience of being a refugee and the political category of the refugee. Indeed acknowledging this dual sense of belonging is essential to the “refugeography” offered in Phi’s poem, revealing the “refugee framework” that Nguyen calls for at the end of his piece where we can “read such experiences and the times and spaces that produce such experiences” (934).

Aestheticizing this “refugee framework” is particularly useful in producing interpretive acts that transmit refugee experiences beyond their bounded communities. Yet, when someone in a minority position creates an art object the object is vulnerable to, and may invite, an act of judgment by the dominant group. This judgment, even when produced in good faith, can end up homogenizing differences so that the particularities of the art object are legible only insofar as they accord with what is posited as a “universal” perspective. Of course, over the past thirty years the notion of aesthetic worth has come under attack, as transcendent notions of beauty have been criticized as inventions of, and often the bulwark of power for, the white male European subject. As this dissertation has argued, this taste making operation is especially virulent when it comes to food, where there is often an assumption that the entirety of a culture can be reduced to a mark on the privileged consumer’s palate. Persistently arguing for the aesthetic worth of a peripheral literary or culinary object can be an assimilative project, hoping for inclusion and integration into an already existing artistic canon. In this light, ethnic or multicultural literature can be considered a window on the world that solidifies the position of the

dominant culture by reducing the minoritarian other to a few recognizable poetic elements.

This does not mean, however, that refugee populations should, and do, turn their back on aesthetic projects. On the contrary, Vietnamese American aesthetics uses the strategic interplay of ethnic cuisine and literature to thicken the act of reading, mutually contextualizing each cultural production so that they are not so easily reducible to a singular cultural essence. This move is evident later in Phi's poem where he confronts the reader with a list of Vietnamese foods that are not as easily recognizable as pho to an outsider in the two lines that follow: "the nước mắm, cà phê sữa đá, mangoes and mang cut/mít and coconut, sugar dried strawberries in Đà Lạt." He could have easily translated the foods as "fish sauce" "Vietnamese iced coffee" and so forth, but instead he keeps them "foreign" in name; again, teasing the English reader by slyly including the English words "coconut" and "sugar dried strawberries" to lead the reader on, tantalizing them, while informing them of the delectable things that they are *not* able to consume in the poem. In this example the reader may desire both the pleasures of food and literature, but they are only accorded a partial view, allowing them to indulge in one aesthetic realm at a time—in this case that of literature—disrupting the sense that they are capable of engaging an entire culture.

This act transforms the cross-cultural encounter from one predicated on the wholeness offered by aesthetic judgment to the more splintered engagement of aesthetic experience. In addition to this multi-contextual field produced by the interplay of food and literature, I contend that the value of the aesthetic turn can be found in Phi's initial invitation to the reader. This opening summons is a particularly social gesture, yet his

textured language stages the encounter in such a way that it can only be read as a meeting between the art object and viewer/reader, not as a transparent window into the entirety of a foreign world. The philosopher Agnes Heller considers this kind of aesthetic encounter a useful ethical practice, as she surmises that one approaches an art-object with a contemplative but friendly attitude (19). This serves to slow down the encounter and bring attention to the particular context through which the cross-cultural interaction occurs. In sum, by not allowing the reader to directly empathize with the persona presented, Phi redirects the reader to an aesthetic experience that forestalls the act of aesthetic judgment. This culminates in the end of the poem where instead of offering a consumable object or subjectivity, Phi articulates his personal practice of how to negotiate his Vietnameseness, relying on love, which can be recognized by the outside reader but not easily used by, or instrumentally assimilated into, the reader's subject position.

Focusing on the refugee instead of the exile reveals a different perspective for Asian American and comparative work, and it is on this perspective that I focus on in this conclusion. There is no question that the field of comparative literature, as we know it in the present, was built on the work of European émigrés and exiles like Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach—thinkers who expressed a lively air of *individual* inquiry, invigorated by the challenge of working in a foreign culture. As Emily Apter notes, there are many homologies between the position of early European exiles of comparative literature and the postcolonialists like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said—strangers in a strange land, who turn their energies towards texts to provide emotional and intellectual moorings (79). What Said found invigorating in his turn to Adorno was a “representation of the

intellectual as a permanent exile, dodging both the old and new with equal dexterity”; yet Adorno, in his typical unyielding manner, drops his famous hammer in *Minima Moralia*, stating that “a wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” arguing that, in the words of Said, “the state of inbetweenness can itself can become a rigid ideological position” (2006 120).

Yet for Said the condition of exile is seen as a preferable position to bring attention to the perils of forced migration, rather than the refugee figure, in part, because the word refugee has already been encoded as “suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent political assistance” (1993 181). During the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, sadly, refugeeism has no longer can be considered an exception but has become a regular feature of our present condition—visible across most continents and nations at all times (Trinh 150). What produces this troubling lack of differentiation is that any individual refugee group can only be glimpsed before moving on, absorbed into less locatable stratospheres of the nation-state—at best dissolving their past into the fleeting present, without a sustainable future. Perhaps more than ever, then, there should be a demand to reshape this designation by recognizing the forward-leaning impulses that refugee figures do hold. Despite the contradictions inherent when working through a mass formation Phi embraces a socially oriented identity, which is familiar to him as the refugee-as-political-category designation has been imposed on him from a young age. Extending the lifespan of the refugee process requires Phi to shake off this portrayal of belonging to an undifferentiated bovine-like herd of innocent and bewildered people, and seriously considering the conditions of those who are situated in the nation-state—who have to stay.

I propose, then, that it is a grave mistake to read refugee literature as a literature of unsettling mobile hybridity, but rather we must consider this body of work as coming from a physically fixed position. The root of Phi's forceful tone can be found in his attempt to aggressively situate the contexts and places. Conceiving of the act of writing as collaboration, Phi continually returns to "you" to highlight material determinants and demands that bring out his Vietnameseness, as well as his writerly persona—with the direct address implicating the reader in the process. Indeed, it is on this point that a thinker like Adorno can be helpful in interpreting refugee literature, as it is on this aesthetic level that these Vietnameseness refugee authors remain unyielding and recalcitrant in expressing the contradictions faced in their everyday lives. The objective condition of Vietnamese refugee experience is not under review in this body of work, but how the tale of this marginalization will be told is. This desire to stage the encounter between audience and artist, is captured well captured in through the title of Truong Tran's poem "This is All I Choose to Tell," where the act of telling, the coercive offering up the Vietnamese experience to an aggressive interlocutor is called into question, and the act of negotiating the release of information is emphasized as a critical practice that the refugee subject consistently faces. Responding to the commodifying impulses of western multiculturalism and the global desire for manageable ethnic difference these authors provide cultural touchstones that make social positions intelligible without being completely translatable in a quest to reset the terms of cross-cultural contact.

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