I Eat; Therefore I Am: Constructing Identities Through Food

By

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Abstract

This autoethnography focuses on the role food played in my identity formation. In approaching this, the following thesis is divided into the three “meal times” where my personal narratives will function as entry points for a discussion on: how the ethnic food I ate created self-loathing problematizing a sense of belonging yet at the same time, was also capable of bonding a community, the beginnings of curiosity and an appetite for culinary adventure including an exploration of my food related practices, and finally how the gendered food identities of my father, mother, and grandmother contributed to my identity. By highlighting the impact of my food past on my sense of self, I provide insight into how it is sometimes the seemingly mundane, such as our food histories, which inform what we consume that largely define who we are, not only as individuals, but as a culture and society.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my family, most notably, my parents, Jim and Jade Lee, and grandmother, Chung Shun Chan, who taught me how to love food, and ultimately, how through food, we love. And most recently, to my husband Brent, who with endless nights of support, helped make this effort not only possible, but enjoyable.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Food permeates every aspect of our being. Naturally, we need it for sustenance, and yet at the same time, we are inundated with images of food on TV, in advertisements, media, not to mention its aromas, at once intoxicating and repulsive. In other words, our senses are saturated with all things food. And whether we choose to consciously think about it or not, it is inescapable. As sociologist Claude Fischler notes, “Food not only nourishes but also signifies” (Fischler, 1988, p.276). Literary theorist, Terry Eagleton adds, “[it] is never just food---it is endlessly interpretable---materialised emotion” (Eagleton, 1998, 204). And as such, food is strongly linked to our memories, our histories. So while food is ubiquitous, our past food experiences can shape our identities. However, as food critic John Lanchester states, there is a difference between the role food played in our identities in the past and now, for food culture has changed; “Once upon a time, food was about where you came from. Now, for many of us, it is about where we want to go---about who we want to be” (Lanchester, 2014, p.37). Social media as a tool for self-invention is unparalleled; with the advent of Yelp, the twitterverse, and the blogosphere, the construction of identity has been taken to all a new level as evidently everyone is an expert and has something to say. It seems we have gone from a society who eats to live, to one that lives to eat.

In altering the Cartesian thesis, the present study, “I Eat; Therefore I Am: Constructing Identities Through Food” focuses not only on where we want to go or the identity we desire to manufacture in the here and now, but it also emphasizes and explores the past, that is,
specifically, my past and how my food history played a significant part in shaping my identity today. This thesis will take the reader on a “culinary narrative journey” showing that eating and our food choices extend well beyond the pedestrian informing more than individual identity, that it is also a cultural and social signifier.

The upcoming chapters will contain stories, and narrative accounts of my food experiences beginning in childhood that have in large part impacted my food identity today. Here, the words story and narrative are interchangeable. Given the personal nature of this undertaking, the autoethnographic form will be used as a qualitative research method. The present chapter discusses the form of autoethnography, its rationale, and limitations. As well, an overview of the narratives and themes to be considered in each chapter will be outlined.

**Autoethnography: Form and Rationale**

Autoethnography is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adam & Bochner, 2011, p.1). Essentially, the researcher is the research and as a method, it is both “process and product” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.1). The value of using autoethnography is that through analysis, observations based on the personal can be extended to the cultural, promoting social understanding, that is, effectively universalizing the particular. The personal element of the story’s focus then, is to educate, and not only to be sensational or entertaining for entertainment’s sake.
Usually analytic or evocative, autoethnographies are epiphanic in nature, encompassing themes like trauma, turning points, or revelations. Through the telling of events such as these, the observations of the researcher may resonate with the reader and in this way, inspire change, first in oneself and then possibly at the social level. Certainly, there is strength in numbers but all change, no matter how slight or revolutionary, always begins in the heart of one individual. The power of using story is precisely for this contact and potential involvement;

The usefulness of these stories is their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of the readers, who enter from the perspective of their own lives. The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. Invited to take the story in and use it for themselves, readers become coperformers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

Using story as educational research, Connelly and Clandinin assert that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” and that “we live our lives through texts” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2). Their research paper on narrative inquiry has implications for teaching and learning; by writing and being written about, it suggests that collaborative learning between teachers and students happens through each other’s narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2); “[i]n understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.3). Ultimately then, what connects theory and praxis is the use of narrative in education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.3). And in taking the idea of collaborative learning one step further, it could be argued that insight and learning can also be applied outside the traditional classroom, to the relationship
between writer and reader, leading to reflection and change in this way, and thus, bringing us to the goal of this thesis: to prompt the reader to engage and reflect upon her/his own food identity.

Since autoethnography is reflexive, its forms are varied including the short story, letter writing, narratives, journal entries, field notes and reflections. Naturally, my research with its focus on food, uncovered the “culinary autobiography”. In her article, “If I Were A Voodoo Priestess”, Traci Kelly identifies three kinds of culinary autobiography: culinary memoir, autobiographical cookbook, and autoethnographic cookbook. Culinary memoirs “present a personal story interlaced with reminiscences about cooking, dining, and feasting. These are autobiographical gestures that have an emphasis on food, but they may or may not provide recipes...the main purpose is to set forth the personal memories of the author. Food is a recurring theme, but it is not the controlling mechanism” (Kelly, 2001, p.255-6). Autobiographical cookbooks, on the other hand, are primarily cookbooks where recipes provide contextual details and “the text can be read as autobiography alone, it can be used as a cooking reference alone, or it can be used for both simultaneously” (Kelly, 2001, p.258). One of the defining differences between this form and the memoir is that here, recipes are indexed, whereas (if they are contained at all) in the memoir, they are not. The third category, the autoethnographic cookbook, which Kelly asserts can also be termed the “culinary autobiography”, is “intended to educate an outside audience about private personal or group activities and values...[and] challenge or alter preconceived notions” (Kelly, 2001, p.259-260).

Kelly is careful to mention that her categories are crude; “I could have continued to subdivide each of the three categories, but my aim was more general. I merely wanted to begin seeing the
patterns and suggesting ways that we might start to think about them. And while I group them largely under the term ‘culinary autobiography’ each variant is distinct in purpose and presentation” (Kelly, 2001, p.252). This thesis does not fit neatly into her prescribed forms, as food is more than a recurring theme, and while my intent is to elucidate or illuminate the reader’s understanding, what I offer is decidedly not a cookbook, which lends credence to her claim that more categories under the form “culinary autobiography” are possible.

Limitations

It is because of this emphasis on the personal that autoethnography receives its main criticism, that as far as research, it simply does not possess the scientific rigour as quantitative studies. In quantitative studies, value is placed on controlled objectivity, precisely on the fact that participants are unknown. At the heart of this research, it is the numbers that matter: too much variability lacks credibility. Therefore, controlled conditions with minimal variance are tantamount to validity, and replication of the study, the gold standard. So if replication and objectivity are the guiding principles for valid research, autoethnography couldn’t be more different.

Autoethnographers have been criticized for being self-absorbed navel gazers (Marechal, 2010, p.45) failing to engage the audience, while placing too much emphasis on the individual over the social (Anderson, 2006, p. 386; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2). In order to engage a bigger audience then, it seems that a harnessing of disciplines would be useful: for to draw a reader in one must not just state a shopping list of facts, conditions, instruments of measurement, descriptions of controlled environments, and so on. Quite simply, one needs to be a good
storyteller. And this is where an interdisciplinary approach would create the best of both worlds, for as Cole and Knowles succinctly state, “[t]o embrace the potential of art to inform scholarship is to be open to the ways in which the literary, visual, or performing arts---and the inherent methods and processes of those various art forms---can inform processes of scholarly inquiry” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.103). By using the creative form of storytelling, this thesis hopes to inspire or cultivate observations on the nature of food, and how it occupies a vital place in all our lives, and not only individually, but culturally and socially.

While on the one hand, autoethnography’s element of the emotional and subjective garners the most criticism, it can also be argued that its strength is in precisely being everything it is not: objective and impersonal. Buoyed by the intersection of disciplines, the autoethnographic form is capable of going beyond where traditional research methods end; “the autoethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.5).

Issues of veracity are an obvious concern: How reliable is the information? My stories are fictionalized accounts of the truth, “my truth”. The photographs contained in Chapter Four aim to lend authenticity to the stories, much like how real recipes function in the same manner in an autobiographical cookbook. In this way, I’ve tried to engender the reader’s trust. But as the main point of autoethnography is to engage readers to social change (Ellis et al., 2011, p.5) is it possible the notion of truth here, is one that is not only relative but somewhat of secondary
relevance? That is, if the goal is to incite one to action, and in this case, reflect on one’s experience with food, then how important is it how one arrives? Perhaps, here, the destination and not the journey is important. In an example of her culinary memoir, *Tender at the Bone*, Ruth Reichl admits, “Everything here is true, but it may not be factual...I have occasionally embroidered” (Reichl, 1998, x). And I have too; I’ve framed real life events in order to fit a story format, embellishing some grounding details to better situate the reader in which to receive the stories, and in some cases, I’ve exercised creative license and manipulated some details according to my personal interpretation.

As the “study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2), in researching the autoethnographic form, I unearthed a kaleidoscopic array of subject matter: epiphanies and turning points such as recoveries from serious illness (Ellis, 1995), the death and dying of loved ones (Ellis, 1995), personal handicaps such as dealing with a speech impediment (Ellis, 1998), and a public beating (Shoepflin, 2009). Consequently, this research left me in a quandary; in contrast, my stories are a departure from what I uncovered in that they are not gut-wrenching accounts of near-death experiences, or recoveries from great illness or trauma. And yet, on a deeply felt intuitive level, I still believed, that growing up in a small Ontario town in the 80s as a very visible minority, a kid stuck somewhere between the traditional Chinese ways of my ghost-fearing bespectacled grandmother and my otherwise Westernized social environment, I had memorable, significant, even comical stories about food worth telling, that in their honesty and urgent desire to connect, mattered:

   each autoethnography is unique because each one is written with a specific purpose and with a particular degree of emotion. The point is not to compare tragedy or trauma. The point is that autoethnography is a genre that allows us to
tell the stories we want to tell, in the way we want to tell them (Schoepflin, 2009, p.366).

And in delving my food history to tell my story, perhaps the reader too, will be encouraged if not to tell, then at least to consider theirs.

Since upbringing and other factors such as socioeconomics inform our understandings of the world around us, our perceptions of reality are multiple. As such, using story is an appropriate epistemological framework knowing that “there is no protocol, no neatly defined way of proceeding, no template, no cookbook for sound, innovative life history research” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.71). And likewise, “[t]here are no formulae or recipes for life history analysis and writing” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p.99). And this is why an autoethnographical method is the most fitting; through an exploration of my past, I intend to take the reader on a “culinary narrative journey” to show how my childhood experiences with food impacted my identity and understanding of and appreciation for food today.

The Narratives

Growing up in an immigrant household left indelible marks on my memory. Racial prejudice was prevalent and most certainly an obstacle in the late 70s and 80s. But a more subtle covert signifier of identity was at work: a division more clear and distinct than the colour of my skin was the food I ate. My childhood experiences with food have often influenced my thoughts, ideas and actions: it has been featured in many stories I’ve written, sometimes a main character in its own right, other times making appearances in conversations, as jokes, or informing the choices I make, like which restaurants to go to, or what to buy when I shop for groceries.
The next chapters are divided into the three meal times, followed by the conclusion: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and Leftovers. In Chapter Two for “Breakfast”, the story titled “7 Days Cereal” explores notions of not belonging and self-loathing due to the food I ate. It is about a six year old girl who works around her lack of language to avoid describing the ethnic food she eats by negotiating the English she knows; this is her attempt at creating the identity of a good student by parroting back the words she was taught. It is in this way that she tries to belong. Being the only Asian in her class, she desperately tries to fit in, even if it means lying. Shame and self-loathing will be analyzed through Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic lens of the abjected self (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). Erving Goffman’s ideas on embarrassment and social organization (Goffman, 1956, 264-271), and Carolyn Ellis’ work on the stigmatizing effects of “minor bodily stigma” (Ellis, 1998, 517-537) will further elucidate the ostracizing effects of this incident. Conversely, the second story, “Church Potluck” looks at how food, instead of being the thing that separates, can also create a sense of belonging. In Tarrying with the Negative, Slavoj Žižek’s ideas on how it is through food that a community is able to experience enjoyment are referenced (Žižek, 1993, p.201).

In Chapter Three, for “Lunch” the two-part narrative, “Fish Heads & Tales” uses dining invitations to continue with the theme of not belonging, yet at the same time, marks the beginnings of curiosity and an appetite to experience the culinary Other. In approaching this, Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, and Peter Trifonas’ and Effie Balomenos’ Good Taste: How What You Choose Defines Who You Are, will serve to highlight the ideas of taste, its origins, and the acquisition of it. The story provides a context to
discuss my emerging food identity which will be explored through my consumption and production oriented food related practices including: eating, dining out, self-educating, cooking, and writing.

In Chapter Four, over “Dinner”, the narratives here showcase the gendered food identities of my father, mother, and grandmother in order to offer insight into their impact on mine. In particular, their respective roles of breadwinner, nurturer, and healer will be considered. The inclusion of photographs intends to augment and validate the storytelling details. Depending on context, the narratives aim to show that the gender roles change as it will be illustrated that each, while united as protectors of the family unit, had their own distinct domains. My father’s role of breadwinner will entail a discussion of the place food occupied in his professional life, and ultimately as a restauranteur. In “Melons! Mellens! Mellins!” my mother’s nurturing role will be demonstrated with living livings, while in “Of Bullfrogs and Magic”, my grandmother’s knowledge of food and our foodways is more concerned with the dead, that is, the spiritual. Even though men make the money, my grandmother was in many respects, the head of our household. Emphasis will be placed on the effect of the lived experiences in my childhood on my understanding of gendered differences exhibited for instance, in one’s knife skills: Grandma kills things, gutting whole animals, while my father, who at the restaurant, finely chops vegetables, filleting chickens that arrive headless and in sanitized parts. His work is more artistry, with multiple knives for various purposes, while hers (also a skill) was butchery, and she had only one knife: the cleaver, which no one dared touch.
The concluding chapter, “Leftovers” will serve as a review and summary of the three meals. By investigating my own personal food history through autobiographical accounts, deeper issues will slowly come into focus; questions regarding constructing identities through food, and identity in general, that emerged are considered in light of this discussion. Finally, it finishes with a comment on the status of food studies, particularly, how it is currently regarded, but also and more importantly, how it deserves to be regarded.

And as we are about to embark on a “culinary narrative journey” my hope, and the aim of this thesis is that you end up being more than the reader, or passive passenger, simply “going along for the ride”, but that my stories will resonate with yours, moving you to question your own food past, and consider how, if at all, it contributes to identity overall, particularly given our highly literate food culture.
Chapter Two

Breakfast

So in our pride we ordered for breakfast an omelet, toast and coffee and what has just arrived is a tomato salad with onions, a dish of pickles, a big slice of watermelon and two bottles of cream soda.

~ John Steinbeck

Food is an integral part of how we construct our identity, just as our clothing, customs, and religious beliefs do. Not only what we eat but when we eat, how it is prepared, how it is consumed, and why reveals so much about who we are as individuals, as a culture, and as a society. To know the way a culture nourishes its members is to have a blueprint of their collective identities.

If food builds our identities, what happens when you cannot have the food you want? Or the food you are served violates your sense of appropriacy? (How is that appropriacy determined?) Or you have no control over what you eat? In other words, how do our childhood memories of food influence who we are? What we ate as children is ingrained in our minds. Residues of the sensory memory can never be completely erased: this is likened to the accent we do not lose past the age of twelve: food, like language makes lasting impressions that continue to shape, inform, and negotiate who we think we are (Gabaccia, 1998, p.6). For who we think we are is a matter of perception. And perception while not necessarily an accurate representation of reality has the power to affect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It is as real as one believes it to be. Such perceptions run deep.
This chapter includes two food experiences from my childhood. The first one, “7 Days Cereal”, is a modified version of the short story “Seven Days Cereal”. In it, the notions of self-loathing and self-blame will be discussed through the psychoanalytic lens of Julia Kristeva’s theories on the self and its abjection (Kristeva, 1982, p.5) In addition, Erving Goffman’s concepts on stigma, embarrassment, and social organization (Goffman, 1956, 264-271) will lend support in drawing a connection between my food experience and the construction of my ethnic identity. It is in the interstices between who I think I am and who I want to be that my ethnic identity is formed.

The second story, “Church Potluck” continues the theme of belonging regarding questions of authenticity, but it also deepens the discussion by considering the relationship between food and words, and the role community plays in identity formation. In Tarrying with the Negative, Slavoj Žižek’s ideas on “enjoyment” will shed light on how a community’s ability to maintain and sustain itself depends in large part on its food and foodways (Žižek, 1993, p.201).

7 Days Cereal

As a first generation Asian, growing up in a small Ontario town in the late 1970s, I knew I was different. So I had two lives: there was my private life in Chinese at home, and my public life in English at school.

After learning about Canada’s Food Guide as part of Nutrition Week, my first grade teacher Mrs. Samuels asks us to document what we eat for one week for breakfast, lunch and dinner. My 6 year-old mind wonders, ‘What do I eat? What’s that black stuff called? Directly
translated it is a ‘wood ear’? And the flat disk of grey meat, which was called a ‘meat cookie’ just sounds wrong’. At once, a montage of dizzying images flashes through my mind: cow brains, bloodied and creviced, pig tails served up on a platter, cut in small bite sized pieces on the end of a toothpick, gizzards, in all their elastic iridescence, sliced thin like a cold cut, strips of lung and stomach, brown and rubbery in soup. Some of the food while not sour was not quite savoury either with pickled vegetables that aren’t green, nor brown, food like preserved vegetables, pickled duck eggs, black eggs, fermented black bean, dehydrated sea creatures and the like.

I look at Mrs. Samuels’ pictures of food around the room and I long to eat what is foreign to me. Thinking this way, my heart starts to pound faster until it almost feels like it’s in my throat, ‘What am I going to write?’ Guessing that Mrs. Samuels wants to know that what we eat satisfies all the food groups according to Canada’s Food Guide, I set out to do a bit of investigative work: What can I write that reflects I understood the lessons, and yet could be believable? I wonder, ‘what does everyone know? What does everyone (except me) eat? What’s on TV?’ I can think of only one thing: Cereal.

With much relief at believing I figured out this puzzling situation, I let out a huge sigh, and quickly grab a purple marker and large sheet of chart paper. Steadying my hand I carefully craft my weekly account: Monday breakfast: cereal, lunch: cereal and an apple, dinner: cereal and a banana. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Cereal! Cereal! Cereal! 7 Days Cereal! I finish the project and am ready to put it up when the recess bell rings.

In the school yard, my classmates scatter; the boys play with other boys that I don’t recognize and the girls group together in clusters. My best friend Lydia and I sit by the bicycle bars. I know that there are no other kids that look like me, and while inside I feel just like them, a
simple glance into a classroom window showing our reflections would let me know that I am different. Lydia is different too: she has bucked teeth. They rest on her bottom lip, front and centre, also present for class, like two more little friends.

Back in from recess, Mrs. Samuels calls me to her desk. What could this be about? On the way there, I start to panic with each step, what had I done? I had *never* made a mistake! What could this be about? It is clear something is wrong.

“Cammy, I have a question for you”

“Yes, Mrs. Samuels...”

Leaning in tilting her long face towards me, she is all eyes now, and asks, “Do you *really* eat cereal 3 times a day, 7 days a week?”

Eyes wide and unblinking, she is not smiling.

My face starts to burn and my eyes dart around looking for an answer: I made a mistake. How am I supposed to respond to make this situation go away? In my head, I go through a file of possibilities. All this thinking and not enough time to manufacture a response: she is waiting for an answer.

My voice breaks the silence, “Uh, sometimes...”

A pause follows that feels like an eternity, I squeeze the pencil I am holding, hard. With feet planted, I wait; it is now her turn to volley back.

She nods, and still looks serious, but says, “Ok” and once again, I can breathe. I feel like all eyes are on me as I walk back to my desk. I wonder, ‘what could I have said? We eat parts of animals that I don’t have names for? Nothing that I see in class or on TV resembles the food I eat, so then why can’t I just show that I want to be a part of this class and say what I’d *like* to be true?”
I don’t need a window reflection to show me I’m different, this isn’t like Lydia’s buck teeth, or even something I can pretend isn’t there, momentarily like the colour of my skin; this is a non-negotiable and I have no words for it. Before recess, I couldn’t wait to put my chart up, but now, I look down at the straight purple letters, which seem to be mocking me, and want to tear my work to shreds. No matter how perfectly the words were written, they simply aren’t good enough. How I resented the food I ate at home...

ANALYSIS

To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where.

~ Erving Goffman

This childhood experience was chosen for its saliency in showing how the food I ate led to the distinction between “us” and “them”, contributing to my sense of ethnic identity. While not discrete elements in their role in forming my sense of self, the following will be considered: the food I ate, the stigma of feeling different, the “selves” that emerged as a result, in part but not limited to social roles, and finally the notion of blame, where it was placed, and where it was not.

The story clearly contrasts the food I ate at home and the food I was learning about in school; there were no pictures of my food on the classroom walls. Nor did I see my food on TV. Given that I had no words to describe what I ate, and as the translation sounded “wrong” my 6 year old self judged my food as wrong, and by extension, I was too. Instead of admitting to my teacher
that I did not have the vocabulary, I made the conscious choice to not find out and remain ignorant. Rather than saying “I don’t know” I “manufactured” a response: I lied. I wrote what I believed every occidental ate in order to create a sense of belonging. And while I made the
decision to reject myself, one could argue that given the context and situation, the decision was already made for me; “[t]o dedifferentiate oneself in the eyes of the mainstream culture, one is compelled to disavow one’s ethnic foodways, and such disavowal exacts a very high emotional price” (Xu, 2008, p.26). Under the circumstances then, my response was understandable and quite common.

The social and cultural climate established an order (Mrs. Samuels’ food pictures); her lessons revealed what the dominant culture ate. I saw what “good” and “right” food was and thus, mine was not. What did not fit into that order was labelled “bad” and “wrong”. In other words, our food and foodways create divisions. In Eating Identities Wenying Xu explains:

> Our assessment of other food practices operates from our sense of order --- edible versus inedible food, appropriate versus inappropriate place of cooking, clean versus dirty food, and so on. Our system of ordering culinary matters socializes our taste buds and metabolisms, which in turn stand in the front line of demarcating the border between them and us (Xu, 2008, p.6).

In the incident, an awareness of the unconventional foods I ate came to the surface “like a montage”: cow brains, pig tails, trotters, gizzards, and all manner of organs. Cuisine such as this, considered “soul food” for the African Americans also encompasses chitterlings (pig bowels pronounced chittlins) and neck bones which Xu identifies as “a cuisine born from poverty and necessity that transforms into nourishment parts of animals considered undesirable or filthy by the middle and upper classes” (Xu, 2008, p.7). This is a striking illustration of how the parts of the animal we eat further classifies and stratifies us---as though every part can be marked: lower,
middle, upper class. Looking at the classroom pictures of chicken drumsticks, slices of ham, and vegetables, the juxtaposition of the cuisines made the demarcation of clean versus dirty clear; there were no pictures of organs (at least not for consumption). I was the different one. Consequently, through the material means of school, TV, and other cultural artifacts, my growing understanding of who I was and who I wanted to be constructed a master narrative:

[O]ur food practices and taste buds render us acquiescent to divisions along the lines of culture, region, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class and sexuality --- a hegemony that is exercised via appetite and desire. This hegemony is probably more effectively inscribed in us than other ideological hegemonies (Xu, 2008, p.4).

The incident highlights my decision to deny, or reject my own cultural food identity in hopes of becoming another, which is evidenced in the repeated use of the word “cereal”. This is further emphasized in the desperate need to figure out what I am “supposed” to say, and who I am “supposed” to be.

Contributing to such demarcations are the racist stereotypes regarding the “Asian” diet. Social media, websites, and television programs document Asians dining on monkey brains, dogs, insects, cats, rats, and so on. Although shows like “Have Fork, Will Travel” aim to get a sense of a people and their culture through their food, in other programs like “Bizarre Foods” food is chosen purely for their shock value. And it is this shock value that draws up lines of distinction, perpetuating prejudiced beliefs. What is important to recognize here is that though “there is a certain degree of truth in some of these accusations, they are not made to simply offer facts about Asian foodways. Rather, these tales are told with the intention of defaming, of othering, and of abjecting Asians” (Xu, 2008, p.8). For it is human nature to revile and feel disgusted by what the cultural norm has come to identify as such. We show our group solidarity in our agreed upon
reactions towards food as either acceptable (good) or repugnant (bad). For what is repulsive to one culture is quite possibly a delicacy to another---it is but perspective and perception.

It is easy to see how moral judgements give way to racist attitudes, a sort of racism that I would call “overt” where the evidence is out there and not held secret. The other kind of racism, which Xu considers to be “the most detrimental form” (Xu, 2008, p.26) is self-loathing, and which I would call the “covert” kind. This type of internalized racism is arguably the most insidious and reminiscent in cases of oppression where after years of oppression, the oppressed becomes his/her own oppressor. “Self-Loathing...expresses itself not only in one’s hatred of one’s own being but also in one’s revulsion of the significant markers of one’s ethnic community. The consequent self-sabotage resulting from such hatred and revulsion manifests itself fully in the drive for assimilation at the cost of self-erasure” (Xu, 2008, p.26-27). It is one thing to be discriminated against, but quite another when the hate becomes internalized and we become our own bigots: there is no escape, no reprieve. The emotional impact of overt and covert racism therefore, is significant and thus, ethnic identity construction here should be more aptly understood as deconstruction.

Goffman’s *Stigma* identifies 3 major categories of stigma: “physical deformities...blemishes of individual character...and the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion” (Goffman, 1963, p.4). In growing up when and where I did, I was acutely aware that I was already stigmatized, as the story illustrates. But what made my interaction with Mrs. Samuels a defining moment that stayed with me for years was the fact that attention was drawn to me like a public announcement.
On the stigma of feeling different, Todd Schoepflin references Goffman: “I became someone who possessed an attribute that made me different from the others with whom I shared a public space...I now possessed a stigma, an ‘undesired differentness’. It is this type of stigma that Goffman refers to as a blemish of individual character. On display I was separated from a place in the legitimate order, I was placed outside and made strange” (Schoepflin, 2009, p.368). I posit here that my stigma was not only racial but also a blemish of character, for even though my classmates did not know what I ate “in private”, I felt like I was transparent as “all eyes were on me”. It was illogical to feel exposed yet emotions often are, for I now became “Cammy: organ eater, chitterlings chomper, gizzard guzzler”. Following this experience changed the way I saw myself because others’ perception of me had changed, or so I believed:

A change in self-concept might be the result of a humiliating incident. This can happen if a person is denounced and takes seriously the view of his denouncer. A person might think of himself differently long after the denouncement takes place (Schoepflin, 2009, 369).

I am quite sure that Mrs. Samuels has long forgotten about that incident but it had created an impression, more like a crevasse, eventually leading to the writing of “Seven Days Cereal”.

Schoepflin’s notion of boundaries and being “placed outside” has roots in psychoanalysis, particularly pertaining to the self and “Other”. The semiotic is described as the psychosocial space where senses reign and no demarcations between “I” and “other” exist. It is the ultimate pleasurable space of unbroken connection which Slavoj Žižek calls the “semantic void” (Žižek, 1993, p.202) and Julia Kristeva jouissance (Kristeva, 1982, p.9). In other words, it is the mother-child symbiosis. The developmental years between 6-12 months marks the beginning of the separation between mother and child. And although my experience happened at the age of 6,
I believe that the explanations given here on the dynamics of the separation can still lend support in creating a richer interpretation of how the ethnic food I ate created a severing of self which contributed to my identity formation.

When the mother-child connection breaks, it is a painful process signaling a movement out of the semiotic to the symbolic; “[i]f language, like culture, sets up a separation...it does so precisely by repressing maternal authority” (Kristeva, 1982, p.72). Language is what disrupts the metonymic relationship of the maternal and semiotic; Kristeva theorizes the cleaving; “[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order...The abject confronts us...with our earliest attempt to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4,13). What I ate frustrated the order of what I was learning at school which was deemed acceptable, edible, and right. As a bid to fit in, I disconnected myself from my ethnic identity and opted for one that was “cleaner” more sanitized and resembled “Canadian” culture.

In Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* it is self-abjection that causes the split; “Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...”(Kristeva, 1982, p.4). Abjection, defined here is like a betrayal of self of the highest order, and powerfully demonstrated in the story when the neatly penned letters are now described as “mocking” and the intent is to “tear my work to shreds”. Here, the identity I tried to create, the one I thought would help me fit in, failed to convince others I belonged and is patently destroyed. Not only did I reject my ethnic self to create a new identity, but I also reject the
newly created self. The futility and resigned tone at the realization that it did not matter how hard I tried to mask my diet as it would never be “good enough” to fit in, are evident at the ending.

Desire, Kristeva expounds, is at the heart of self-abjection; “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). In the story I devise a plan through the trope of cereal to belong. Cereal was the perfect quotidian breakfast food I could think of; it was the ideal foil to my food, and therefore created the greatest distance between what I ate and what I wanted people to think I ate. The desire to be just like my classmates created a yearning so great that I turned my back on who I was so I could try and become someone I thought I needed to be to be accepted.

“Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). On the destructive nature of self-abjection, Kristeva contends that it is a self-inflicted, internalized process where the abject, “casting within himself the scalpel [that] carries out his separations” (Kristeva, 1982, p.8). This is a striking image dramatically demonstrating that it is me who willingly cuts off my ethnic self. Such drastic measures as Kristeva emphasizes are like a suicide; “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death” (Kristeva, 1982, p.3).

The story plainly describes the different selves or identities I had; “there was my private life in Chinese at home, and public life in English at school”, and as Goffman asserts it is when these
two worlds clash that embarrassment ensues: “embarrassment arise[s] when the self projected is somehow confronted with another self which, though valid in other contexts cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first” (Goffman, 1956, p.269). Up to this point I was able to keep my lives separate. But this incident brought my two worlds, or identities, together and my young mind was incapable of negotiating what this meant. Who was I then? I had interpreted Mrs. Samuels’ enquiries to mean that my “projected self”, the one I assumed at school was wrong. And if that was wrong, what was right?

Reinforcing the theme of splintered selves is Xu’s analysis of the Asian American experience where the self participates (maybe even instigates) in its own dissection as a “hegemonic process of ‘othering’ that produces a schizophrenic self---a self torn between body (yellow and foreign) and mind (white and American)” (Xu, 2008, p.41). It is mentioned in the story that “inside I felt just like them” but “a simple glance into a classroom window showing our reflections would let me know that I am different”. So even though I was fluent in English and had no trace of Chinese accent, my skin colour would always trump any authority I might have. Sau-ling Wong’s observations in her study on Chinese American men in the 1990s support this; “[f]luency in the hegemonic culture...is no guarantee of authority. When assumed by someone with the ‘wrong’ skin and hair color, it is mere impersonation, mimicry, occupation of a subject position that is not yours, or can be yours only through acts of fakery” (Wong, 1995, p.185).

The notions of how skin colour eliminates a sense of mystery or anonymity and negates the process of becoming are further examined in Monique Truong’s novel *The Book of Salt* (2003). In it, two foreigners living in Paris are juxtaposed: the Vietnamese cook Binh on the one hand
and his friend/partner Lattimore on the other. The possibilities for Lattimore’s self-actualization are limitless as his skin colour is described as a “blank sheet of paper” (Truong, 2003, p.151); that is, he can “write” his own history---he has the power to not only act in, but he can be the author, director, and producer of his own life. Contrarily, Binh says “mine marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin”(Truong, 2003, p.152). In this way, his skin colour is like a fixed meaning eliminating the possibility of self-actualization for, “when a man is robbed of mystery and unpredictability, he is no longer a man...it is the fantasy of becoming that nourishes the subject and underwrites humanness” (Xu, 2008, p.134). For the possibility of becoming is equated with being human, and those who are denied this opportunity are “colonized”: “[r]educed to an arrested history and humanity, the colonized become ossified in their inferiority” (Xu, 2008, p.142). In the novel, Binh is a cutter. The idea of self-mutilation resonates with the physical manifestation of self-abjection in Kristeva’s description of the abjected self who “stabs you” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4).

The different identities of being a Canadian, Chinese, and a consumer of unconventional food concatenate and compound the social roles evident in the story that contribute to my identity formation. At school our social roles were clear: Mrs. Samuels was the teacher and I was the student, and my six year-old self knew that in this exchange, there was a definite right and wrong answer. As a child in the weaker position standing before my teacher in the stronger position, I wanted to give the right answer, only I was unaware of what that was. I never considered her being at fault for anything, which is why I internalized the blame.
According to Goffman, the social organization of school can explain why I lied about eating cereal every day; “the physical structure of an encounter itself is usually accorded certain symbolic implications, sometimes leading a participant against his will to project claims about himself that are false and embarrassing” (Goffman, 1956, p.269). When my teacher asked me to justify my diet, the last thing I wanted was to introduce food that was not only absent from her lesson plan, but food that I did not even have the vocabulary for. That would have opened up an entire topic of conversation drawing even greater attention to me: it was embarrassing enough.

A word must be said about the model of education in the late 1970s as it in part explains why I responded the way I did. The transmissive method of teaching was common and engendered specific roles: she was the giver of information and I was the receiver. Information travelled but one way. This is reminiscent of Paulo Freire’s explanation of the banking concept of education where students are described as empty “containers” who are expected to “meekly” accept being “filled” with information given by the teacher who speaks at the students (Freire, 1993, p.1). Given the personal nature of the subject matter, speaking up was not something I was comfortable with.

Clearly the fact that I was a minority also played a role in my behaviour, for even though I was native, born in Canada, and in the same city as my school, I was still visibly different. Although Xu writes about the adult Asian immigrant experience of assimilation in the United States and the tension it entailed, parallels can be drawn between that phenomenon and my experience for both emphasize the way such a tension gets played out:
Most ethnic minorities in the United States desire to assert the constitutional ‘we’, a political identity that entitles them to rights and privileges granted to all American citizens. This constitutional ‘we’ has often competed with the ethnic ‘we’ in American history, with the former always wielding greater political and cultural power than the latter. The devastation to individuals caused by such competition often finds expression in rudimentary matters like one’s preference for or loathing of the foods, rituals, and family relationships specific to one’s ethnic community (Xu 2008, p.18).

This conflict or competition of identities, cultures, and cuisines is arguably part and parcel of being a foreigner in a foreign land. So faced with the conflict of what I ate and what I believed my classmates ate, I aligned myself with the dominant culture.

Related to the differing identities in the story, is the idea of blame: where it is placed and where it is not. Near the end, when I am asked to account for my overuse of the word cereal, the self-blame is evident: “what did I do wrong? What am I supposed to say?” The emphasis was clearly put on me not knowing the words and struggling how to express myself, believing that somehow, the answer was not contained within but without: I was going through a “file of possibilities” in my head. In other words, it is my fault that I do not know how to describe the food I eat, which explains why I lie. Emphasis however, was not on the idea that my teacher could have handled it differently. In fact, because of the social roles, it never crossed my mind that she could have even ameliorated the situation. Goffman suggests another way to respond and why;

The fully and visibly stigmatized, in turn, must suffer the special indignity of knowing that they wear their situation on their sleeve, that almost anyone will be able to see into the heart of their predicament. It is implied, then, that it is not to the different that one should look for understanding our differentness, but to the ordinary (Goffman, 1963, p.127).

Too comfortable playing the “minority” role, I was only too eager to cast blame on myself.
Self-loathing relinquishes all responsibility of the Other, while self-blame dominates the understanding of the incident. Carrying the burden of blame finds parallels in the Asian American experience as well. The misplacement of blame echoes Xu’s analysis of John Okada’s *No-No-Boy*, about the fallout of the Japanese internment in the States and how it affected relationships and identity. In reference to the central character, she writes: “Ichiro is aware of, but incapable of confronting, the role that the U.S. government has played in his suffering. His rage at the government is displaced not only by his hatred of his mother but also by self-blame” (Xu, 2008, p.22). Placing full responsibility on myself overshadowed and obscured my experience. Instead of repeatedly wondering, “What have I done?” Perhaps a more enlightening question would have been “Why did I do it?” Not searching for the cause, I was overly focused on treating the symptom, or in a mode of “damage control”.

In reality, the interaction ended most unsanctimoniously in silence. My young self appreciated that it was over, never to be broached again. But it was like a bomb had dropped and no one claimed responsibility for it, nor offered to help in the wake of its devastation. It is conceivable that my teacher was concerned I was not being properly fed. With the advantage of hindsight, there were several ways Mrs. Samuels could have approached this. She could have used this uncomfortable interaction as an entry point for a discussion on international food. In her nutrition lessons, no pictures representing other ethnic cuisines were apparent, and none were elicited. And though I saw myself as the only one who could not identify with her food pictures, this might not have been the case. Just because I was a visible minority did not mean that others were not different either.
As an educator myself, I see the value of using this experience as a “teachable moment”. Eisner’s Personal Relevance Orientation to curriculum supports this idea. In this approach, a great deal of responsibility is placed on the teacher (Eisner, 1985, p.60). To know who the students are is key. Eisner asserts that the teacher is analogous to a gardener “who cannot change the basic endowment children possess but who can provide the kind of environment that can nurture whatever aptitudes they bring with them (Eisner, 1985, p.58). According to Eisner, the students are one of, if not the greatest resource for curriculum design, and it is the role of the teacher to maximize this; “[o]nce having discovered such interests, the teacher is to foster them...(so) those interests can deepen and expand” (Eisner, 1985, p.58).

Learning does not need to be a one-way transmission of knowledge: it can be bi-directional which is why in the published version “Seven Days Cereal”, I re-write history by changing the ending. Unlike me, in the idealized re-telling, the protagonist Alison describes what she eats to her teacher, and as a result, she announces a new class assignment: International Food Fair (Lee, 2008, p.55). Here, the experience starts a dialogue on international cuisines leading to a potluck where the teacher learns about the foods her students eat. And as a result, many other ethnicities are revealed. Recognizing a student’s uniqueness and using it indirectly, as in the class activity of a potluck, embraces all ethnicities without singling any one out, and thus, promotes awareness and respect.
The story clearly maps out the links between food and ethnic identity formation. Food has also been connected to enjoyment and the continuance and maintenance of community. In fact, Slavoj Žižek locates cultural identity in the way a community expresses its enjoyment:

The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated...If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of the Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called ‘our way of life’. All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment (Žižek, 1993, p.201).

The following story introduces a different angle on ethnic identity and underscores the sense of enjoyment as it involves food, words (to an extent), and community.

**Church Potluck**

It came once a year.

It was better than Halloween.

Or Christmas:

It was the church potluck.

The annual church potluck, organized by a small yet proud Chinese Association, was a feast for all the senses. Though it took place in a church, it was not connected to any religious holiday. This was the place where I’d see the most Chinese people in one area, gathered to celebrate, socialize, and eat. At this event there was not only Chinese food, but all kinds, and desserts and other delicacies, which we never ate at home. Announcements would be made about upcoming social events in the community, results of draws, winning numbers, and so on.
It was also the place where awards were given out for competitions, like a children’s essay writing contest. This was one such potluck.

As a child my siblings and I were made to go to Chinese school. Being exposed to Chinese characters my whole life, on calendars, newspapers, and vinyl records, it was not a big leap to be learning it in school. What was strange however, was my teacher, Mrs. Chan, whose Cantonese I struggled to understand as I spoke Toisanese. Still, I was a good copier, had a steady hand and genuinely enjoyed writing the characters. I learned all the basics first: people, mouth, numbers, sky, earth, day, month, and so on. For the essay, we had to write about ourselves: Who was I? Who was my family? What did I like? Dislike? First I wrote in English and Mrs. Chan translated it to Chinese which I simply copied.

I understood this activity to be an exercise in copying and soon put it out of my mind. I had forgotten about it until the church potluck. Sitting with my mother amidst the bustle of Chinese people, all I could think about was the food that we were about to eat. I didn’t usually pay attention to announcements and like most ten year olds, was easily distracted. So it was with shock when my mother nudged me and beaming, said “You won first prize!” I approached the speaker, Mrs. Woo, with equal parts surprise and ambivalence---the kind one feels when they feel like a fraud, an imposter, undeserving. It was odd, like they had made a mistake. All I did was copy my teacher’s characters. But I had never won anything before so I gladly, albeit it confusedly, accepted my prize and took my seat again.

After the announcements was the main event: eating. There were other kids and even though I didn’t know them all, they seemed familiar. Instead of playing I was more interested in the noises by the tables where dish upon dish was being laid down organized by appetizers, mains, meats, proteins, vegetables, noodles, rice, and desserts. The aromas wafting from the
kitchen were all I could think about. It was the only time that I got to experience eating outside our home. And even though it was put on by the Chinese Association, some of these ladies were doing things I had never tasted before: things like pasta salads, and desserts laden with billowy clouds of whipped cream. In other words, it was the only chance I got to eat non-Chinese food. And I intended to taste it all. But there is one dish that stands out in my memory: classic cherry cheesecake. It looked like it was plucked from an ad for cream cheese; or better yet, copied from a Kraft commercial teaching us how to make it via extreme close-up with a random disconnected hand stirring...It was perfect.

But at the end of the church potluck that year, sitting beside my sisters, fully sated with big belly, winning that contest was surely the cherry on top.

That was a good day.

ANALYSIS

_The pinched expressions of the cynical, world-weary, throat-cutting, miserable bastards we’ve all had to become disappears, when we’re confronted with something as simple as a plate of food._

~ Anthony Bourdain

The story’s relevance lies in the similar theme of the need to belong from “7 Days Cereal”, but more importantly, it marks a shift in ethnic identity and food, and its intersection with words and community. While the analysis for the previous story considered lying as a way to belong, here the discussion expands including: the notion of authenticity versus copying, and the relationship between food and words as ingested cultural products. The second part looks at the concept of community as an expression of and instrument in maintaining ethnic identity. Through the
church potluck, an occasion where a sense of enjoyment and bonding is expressed, I emphasize that it is the food and foodways that can help secure and define the collective ethnic group.

As the community was small, all events associated with the group were discussed here. It was the place, perhaps the only place where contest results were mentioned. That the knowledge of winning first prize incited feelings of ambivalence rather than joy problematizes a typically happy moment, and conveys the deeper issue of authenticity. This experience is significant for it raised existential questions: Who was I? Could I ever be my authentic self rather than a copy? Who is my authentic self? Would I forever be copying to be Caucasian or copying to be Chinese?

Rather than feeling proud, I was suspicious; I did not see how copying in this context was acceptable, and rewarded while copying what I thought my classmates ate in the previous story was not. My first response was disbelief. The task was neither difficult nor challenging; I dismissed it as elementary and not worthy of attention nor reward. But the value and skill of accurately copying text was not explained; since writing the characters was completely foreign to me, it was in fact, a considerable accomplishment. It is curious that I had forgotten that I did write the original in English after all, which required creativity, proper grammar, sentence structure, appropriate diction, and organization. Perhaps in the forgetting, the perception that something is worthwhile only if it is arduous to achieve, rings true here. Is struggle indicative of effort and praise while ease is undeserving of recognition? Clearly my young self believed this.
Being a first generation Canadian born Chinese, I occupied a unique space earning me the label that the Chinese like to use: *juk-sen*. This term refers to the middle part of a bamboo reed. Not a term of endearment, it means that I was in between: not a definitive Canadian on the one end, and not a definitive Chinese on the other. I therefore held no strong allegiances to either side; in effect, I belonged to no one. I was in a “no-man’s land”. Or, as Okada says in *No-No Boy*, “a diluted mixture of all” (Okada, 1976, p.116).

The relationship between the opposing identities of Canadian and Chinese resonates with the relationship between words and food. The co-existence of both identities renders them neither “pure” nor “authentic”. One’s sense of self hangs in the balance, or possibly even, one cancels the other out. However, the relationship between food and words is not so much one or the other as much as one replaces the other; “[i]f food is the primitive or natural territory of the mouth, tongue, and teeth, words then can be said to invade and colonize this territory (deterritorialize)” (Xu, 2008, p.168). It is explained here that if food is “primitive”, then it belongs to the maternal, that is, the semiotic. And so, language, belonging to the symbolic order disrupts the semiotic, creating the division between mother and child, or in this case, speaking (words) takes the place of eating (food).

Language…regulates our eating and controls our enjoyment. The body parts that are biologically designed for processing food now must be heavily involved in uttering patterns of sounds that are institutionalized as our means of communication and our paths to identities (Xu, 2008, p.168).

But it is the act of writing, more so than speaking, that creates an even greater distance from the semiotic/maternal/food: “writing further alienates us from food, because writing transforms words into norms…rules…laws…and codes…all of which suffocate appetite, vilify pleasure, suppress desire and displace gratification” (Xu, 2008, p.168).
In addition to discussing the dynamic interplay of different identities, and words and food, this story looks at ethnic identity formation and how food is vital to the sanctity of community. Food and food practices are instrumental to an ethnic community’s sense of identity for it “exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices” (Žižek, 1993, p.202).

“Church Potluck’s” overall jovial tone is a decided departure from “7 Days Cereal”. At the potluck, I could eat all kinds of good food, speak Chinese, and write it (to a greater or lesser degree). And in this way, I was connected, grounded: it was a part of a foundation or a framework from which to construct my own ethnic identity. It is mentioned that the church potluck was the only place I would see the most Chinese people gathered, and many different kinds of food. It was here that I could get a sense of community that extended beyond my large family. Although I was a juk-sen, there were many more of us and so we were connected, if only in our “diluted” or “deluded” sort of way. We were all Chinese Canadians. And this was the place where through food we bonded. It was an occasion to enjoy and according to Žižek; “the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification” but includes “a shared relationship”...with members toward “[e]njoyment incarnated” (Žižek, 1993, p.201). For “sharing food plays a central role in the formation of social groupings” (Xu, 2008, p.3). Once a year without fail the Association would put on the potluck, and it was here that friends, old and new could meet, update each other on their lives, share friendship, good food, laughter and most importantly, through a sense of place and belonging: love.
The Church Potluck was an occasion to showcase one’s culinary skills and economic advantages. It was also the place where I realized that the way I ate, was not representative of Chinese cuisine, at least not completely. What we ate at home, and like many others, was limited to time, economics, and ability. In fact most members at the potluck probably did not eat that way at home either. This was an event that celebrated cultural pride reinforced by the cohesiveness of community with food as the main attraction:

Such keen connection between food and national or ethnic identification clearly indicates the truth that cuisine and table narrative occupy a significant place in the training grounds of a community and its civilization, and thus, eating, cooking, and talking about one’s cuisine are vital to a community’s wholeness and continuation (Xu, 2008, p.19).

Since a community’s food and foodways are central to its maintenance, the community is an apt metonymy for connection, wholeness, and enjoyment. And as such, it could be argued that it is a move back to the maternal.

CONCLUSION

“7 Days Cereal” demonstrated how the food I ate as a visible minority impacted my ethnic identity. Food served to divide; self-loathing and self-abjection led to the splitting of selves (one at home and one at school). Kristeva’s theory of self and abjection strengthened the interpretation of my inner conflict; the abjected self—a friend to no one—is its own surgeon dissecting the self. The stigma of race, my food, my different selves, and the notion of blame, reinforced the effects of the demarcation of “us” and “them” and thus, led not to the construction of identity but rather of its deconstruction.
And while “Church Potluck” continued the similar theme of belonging and emulation, it also showed another side to my ethnic identity: that of the Chinese community. Unlike “7 Days Cereal”, food here served to connect: “[a] healthy secure community does not agonize over its cuisine and rituals. On the contrary, by celebrating them a community fortifies its unity and identification” (Xu, 2008, p.18). Although eating was the main reason to go the church potluck, once there, it meant so much more: there was a sense of belonging and comraderie. Food plays a powerful role in bringing people together; it is not simply about showing off one’s culinary skills: it reminds us who we are, where we are from, and what we believe. And just like that, with one glance, a smell, a whiff, an aroma, one is transported…and we get it.

My childhood experiences illustrate that food is a “visible way to mark ethnicity and difference” (Mannur, 2004, 210). At that time, the divisions between ethnicities and cuisines were distinct. But in Canada’s current culturally diverse milieu, where in 2011 there were over 200 ethnicities comprising 20% of the populationii, “fusion” cuisine is neither innovative nor exotic, but simply a reflection of the co-mingling of ethnicities “diluting” the cuisines, and perhaps, creating the best of both worlds, or palates.

The experiences I presented informed my sense of ethnic identity; the self-loathing in “7 Days Cereal” now gives way to a budding curiosity about what culinary delights lie beyond, as evidenced in the cherry cheesecake in “Church Potluck”. But this is not a fixed entity: it is nebulous, and in a constant state of flux, just as the world around us is. For Stuart Hall suggests, “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices
then represent, we should think, instead of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside” (Hall, 1994, p.392).

So with this in mind, the following chapter continues on from breakfast to lunch, starting with the teen years and looks at the next stages in the development of my concept of self. Highlighting the discussion in particular is the transformation from abjection to acceptance via curiosity, and how this preoccupation with food and eating shapes the way we understand and are understood by ourselves and others.
Chapter 3

Lunch

A man may be a pessimistic determinist before lunch and an optimistic believer in the will’s freedom after it.

~ Aldous Huxley

Food can heal grievances, change our minds, will, and sense of freedom. And especially after a satisfying meal, food has the transformative power to reach emotions making most problems less daunting, more solvable, and approachable. As a material object then, food is highly charged and yet at the same time, without it we die: our survival, if not physiological, then emotional, and possibly even psychical depends on it.

The previous chapter focused on the way my ethnicity and ethnic foodways informed and contributed to my self-image as a child, albeit, negatively. This chapter however, is based on the next evolving stage of my identity, that is, the teen years. The shame and embarrassment in Chapter Two now give way to curiosity, appetite, and desire which help connect me to others and are used to fuel my food journey as well as playing significant roles in my making of self. I will examine how it is through food that I create a ‘personality’ or ‘persona’ and aim to break down this phenomenon into bite-sized pieces.

“Fish Heads & Tales”, a two-part narrative, provides the entry point for a discussion and continues on from Chapter Two with the similar themes of the social bifurcation that occurs through the kind of food I eat, and also touches once again on the idea of food as catalyst for social bonding and the ethnic community. More importantly, however, is the second part of the
narrative which marks a shift in my understanding of using food as a tool to carve out my identity. The analysis following the narrative will use my food practices as a heuristic device to show the value of how they help shape who I am.

Curiosity, desire, appetite and taste, as cultural signifiers create distinctions, set up hierarchies, classifying us by what we consume. Through the cultural lenses of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and Peter Trifonas and Effie Balomenos’ *Good Taste: How What You Choose Defines Who You Are*, I will introduce the notion of taste, its origins, meaning, and the process of acquiring it. In the quest for creating identities, the acquisition of taste, that is, adopting the new or adapting to the old is paramount.

And paragons of taste, that is, *connoisseurs*, specifically for food, are everywhere in the form of *foodies*. Today, any on-line search reveals that food blogs and Instagram pages congest the Internet highway; being a “foodie” and/or having something to say on the topic is not only not new, but the ubiquity questions the validity and authenticity of these so-called “experts”. This chapter looks at what a foodie is, why it is no surprise that in today’s post-industrial society the rise of the foodie phenomenon is understandable, if not inevitable, and whether or not the label foodie applies to me. And finally, the last section examines how my food-related consumptive practices (eating, dining, educating myself) and productive practices (cooking and writing), while presented separately, are not discrete elements but work in tandem to create and maintain my food identity.

**Fish Heads & Tales**
Part I

It was grade eleven, and by this time, the hair, the clothes and what my tenth grade English teacher Mr. Lloyd called, my “furled lip attitude”, had already secured my place in the high school landscape. I was known to be aloof, intelligent, creative, and different enough that I could be left alone, and just edgy enough to inspire equal parts fear and awe (or so I thought) that really, there wasn’t anything I could do that was wrong (or so I believed).

So when my brother’s much older friend June, went back to school to get her diploma, I felt like being somewhat of a tour guide, counsellor, advisor of sorts. After giving her a rundown of what you could get away with and with whom, what to eat in the “caf” and when, I made the bold decision to invite her home for lunch. I lived a 5-10 minute walk away. On the way out, we bumped into my friend Jean who I think secretly had a crush on me, so I invited him too. A high school dropout and a guy who was hot for me, this was an easy crowd, surely. I didn’t give it a second’s thought as to how this might turn out anything other than stellar for me, and my “coolness”.

Having five other siblings meant our house was usually lively with friends staying over; and with extra mouths to feed at meal times, calling ahead was unnecessary. It was the 80s, difference was being embraced all around: culture, music, ethnicities, languages. But I was soon to realize that it was only a certain kind of difference that was embraced; it had to be one that was approved of or established as ok, in other words, it had to be the right kind and the right amount of wrong, so to speak.
We arrive at home, and my grandmother, whose knowledge of English was limited to the profanities she learned by eavesdropping on my brothers, and awareness of teen culture included the malodorous or fragrant fumes of marijuana, was preparing lunch. She sees me at the door with two new friends in tow, and screams:

“*Heck fun ya!*” (Let’s Eat!)

“Hey Gram --- I’ve two friends today!” I scream back in Chinese.

“No problem! Grab two more plates! We’re having the fish that your brothers caught! But you better leave those eyeballs and cheeks alone!! You know how your mother *loves* those!”

“Gross Gram! You can have it all!”

I don’t realize, in this familiar banter with my grandma, that my two “new friends” were quietly seated at the kitchen table, the backdrop of many a loud and boisterous conversation, more like screaming matches with arms waving about and fingers pointing than conversation. They looked at each other in silence. Finally, Jean asks me, his voice barely a whisper:

“Why is your grandmother *mad* at you?”

“What? No no no....she *isn’t* mad; this is how we *talk*”

And just like that, my little bubble of cool starts to rupture. My grandmother breaks the awkwardness and says:

“Here’s the best part!!” And she puts oil into the hot pan followed by chopped garlic and once it hits the pan she screams “Jahh!!!!!!” mimicking the sound before pouring it sizzling hot over the steamed whole fish.

She laughs, “Hahahahahah!!!!!! Your friends are in for a treat!!! They came on the right day!! Jump in! *Heck ya!* Well eat then!”

Silence.
My friends survey the rest of the fixings: stir-fried mustard greens in a fermented shrimp paste that actually tastes a lot better than it sounds, long grain white rice (not Uncle Ben’s), and bitter melon with black bean...

“What’s that?” June asks, pointing at the whole bass: head and tail (How could this be less excruciating?)

“Um...fish”

“I usually eat fish sticks”

“Oh...”

“Well, there’s rice...” I say trying to salvage the mood.

“Is there any sauce?” asks Jean.

“No.”

With her chopsticks my grandmother starts in on the fish, scraping off the skin, beginning with the tail, the best part. It is that quiet that I think we can actually hear her scraping. She takes a piece of white flesh and puts it on my hot bowl of rice, with ginger and green onion. I look at her but don’t acknowledge it. I swallow so loud I think my friends can hear but I know my grandmother can’t over her munching and the clicking of chopsticks as she shovels the rice in her mouth. She is loving the fish, lost in her own thoughts as she often got while eating, leaving the kids to their own discourses. But today, there wasn’t much discoursing going on.

I ask June, “So how do you like your new classes?”

“Oh they’re Ok”

“You’ll get the hang of it....”
And though I didn’t know it when I invited them over for lunch, that would be the last time I invited anyone over for lunch, that is, until I moved away, made my own money, bought my condo, and could make my own food choices.

Part II

But this is not to say that I was never invited. My friend, Rebecca, grew up in a very nice neighbourhood: her father a professor and her mother a teacher. To me, her family was perfect: one boy one girl, both honour students, both good-looking.

So to be invited over for dinner would be a snap shot, a window into what I had always considered “normal”...completely not what I believed I came from. Arriving there, my friend unlocks the front door. With six kids and their friends always visiting and running around, we never locked our doors.

Once inside, a scent I have come to associate with non-Asians greets me; it is reminiscent of my neighbours, the Munby’s, whose kids I used to babysit, and there too, they had one boy one girl, and interestingly enough, he too was a professor. The house smelled of well-oiled weathered wooden furniture, shelves holding books with yellowed pages, shelves lined with volumes of texts, oriental rugs and remnants of pipe smoke still lingering in the fabric of the curtains, the upholstery and the carpet. I like this scent though it is nothing at all what I am used to. The whole place smelled of scholarship. It eventually strikes me why I notice all the scents and
sights; I can slowly take in sensory details precisely because it is something my house never is: quiet.

“Let me take your coat, Cammy”

“Oh thank you Mr. Brown”

Smiling, “We will be eating shortly”

I take a quick peak into the dining room and see place settings for five, just like I’ve seen on TV and in model dining rooms at Woolco. My heart beats in anticipation; I meant to ask someone about table settings, and which fork is used for what food and when...basically, I meant to find the protocol on how to eat.

We go to Rebecca’s room and hang out for a while, and though I’d been there countless times, today it seems different. She tells me about the new album she got and I am distracted by thoughts about dinner, and what we’ll be eating soon. Having dinner with her folks, in their home, at the formal dining room table made me wonder, was I dressed properly?

We get called for dinner and start down the stairs. I think it a bit odd that I don’t really smell anything. There is, of course, the heat warming the room from the elements and oven, but no overwhelming fumes of onions or garlic. But I am still hopeful.

We sit down and on our plates; we each have a broccoli floret the size of a cup. Where’s the stalk? Our meal for five has to be about three bunches of broccoli just so everyone has their own floret. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking that one bunch stir fried with the stalks would be one dish of a few and enough to feed my whole family...of nine. While it was a little exciting to have
the whole floret to myself, it seemed at the same time to be too much of one thing. A small baked potato and in the middle, a round piece of meat with a bit of gravy. I loved gravy. I was excited. I watched Mr. Brown take his dinner fork and knife and cut into the meat; I followed suit. Once I began chewing, it started to seem like, well, a bit of work; the subtle taste of the gravy I soon discovered was more decorative than flavourful, and yet, it was the only sauce on the plate.

More than the food, was that I could hear myself and everyone else, chewing. In my house, hands would be reaching over the table, the phone would be ringing, people would be laughing, and there would be about as many conversations going on as there were people. I could follow any talk, jump from discourse to diatribe and back again. And that was the thing about meal time in my house: sitting down to it was the best part, with the food being a distant second.

But in the Browns’ formal dining room, it was all about the food, and not much else. I became conscious of my chewing and if I could have finished my plate without munching I would have: chewing seemed like such a chore, and loud!

It wasn’t so much that I left the Brown’s home missing my mother’s cooking as much as being left with the same feeling that I arrived with: that unsatisfied longing for a flavour, a taste for the exquisite, of something that would sing in my mouth, which I knew in my bones, that even though I had just eaten a “normal” dinner in a “normal” home, it was still out there, that elusive “Other”...and I was going to find it.
ANALYSIS

*Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.*

~ Pierre Bourdieu

The first part of the narrative juxtaposes with the second, and shows a clear movement away from some of the ethnic identity issues already touched on in Chapter Two, which included feeling embarrassed due to the food I ate, the urgent need to belong, and also the sense of community and social marker that food is. More importantly, the present discussion will focus on the second part which underscores the initial stirrings of curiosity leading to the beginning of desire and appetite. To introduce the idea of taste, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* will serve to reiterate how food and tastes “function as markers of ‘class’“(Bourdieu, 1984, p.2). In addition to function, the origins of taste, and the process of acquiring it will be highlighted. This naturally leads to the phenomenon of the foodie and foodie-ism, and in approaching this, whether my own food experiences qualify me as a foodie. The final section will explore my food related practices with the consumption and production of material food culture, and its place in the forming of my identity.

**Taste and Distinction**

The beginning of desire and my appetite through a curiosity about food marked a departure from, but not a rejection of, my ethnic background. I was a teen in the 80s and being exposed to TV, music, and the media, was a product of Canadian culture. That is, the Western way of life was my idea of the life I wanted, even if my household and the child-rearing practices I was familiar
with were decidedly Asian: regardless of my ethnicity, I still grew up in and of this culture and time. So I was aware of what I didn’t know, and therefore what I wanted to experience. I was craving something different; I desired to learn more, see more, experience more, taste more. There were a handful of restaurants in my small town, and to me, I associated them with class, and it was evident, that they didn’t belong to mine: they seemed like beacons of good taste.

Taste, what we like, what we don’t like is what aligns us with some and separates us from others, and so, it is the thing that defines who we are. It is the choices we make which shape our identity (de Solier, 2013, p.1). Our ‘unique’ sense of taste and style is conveyed in “all the things we say, own and do [which] necessarily classify us for all the world to see” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.6). For, we are what we consume; in fact, no more is this succinctly stated than in Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s oft-quoted phrase, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are”.

However, what, apart from having it, is the point of good taste? As food is a cultural signifier that can create a strong sense of community, so too is the common denominator that taste is, for it “involves classifying yourself and others so that you can try to find a common ground on which to be accepted for the choices you make, and, in the process, working out where you want to belong and with whom you have a collective bond. It is a kind of social initiation that marks everyone as someone to engage with or not” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.2). To share the same taste then, is to belong, as if to have a safe and secure “home base”:

But it is also the sense of belonging to a more polished, more polite, better policed world, a world which is justified in existing by its perfection, its harmony and beauty, a world which has produced Beethoven and Mozart and continues to produce people capable of playing and appreciating them. And finally it is an
immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and
distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than
declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class (Bourdieu, 1984, p.77).

In *Distinction* Pierre Bourdieu says, it is the “habitus” that such defining tastes are instilled in us,
which he further explicates; “through the economic and social conditions...the different ways of
relating to realities and fictions...are closely linked to the different possible positions in social
space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the
different classes and class fractions” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.5-6).

Having taste would mean that we possess what Bourdieu terms a “code” or “cipher” with which
to appreciate the finer things; “[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who
possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu, 1984,
p.2). The code then, is like a key, allowing entry into a private club, of sorts in which members
understand art and aesthetics. Such knowledge is learned primarily from the family and then, the
educational system; “all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and
preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by
qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.1). In
this respect, cultural practices also include eating habits (Bourdieu, 1984, p.6). So if family and
formal schooling are the origins of taste, it is not innate but learned.

In *Good Taste: How What You Choose Defines Who You Are*, Peter Trifonas and Effie
Balomenos, describe taste as a “contest”, or a “game” whereby knowing the “rules” and the
“rituals” make for successful navigation and display:
Taste is like a stylistic contest between the ‘good’, the ‘not so good’ and the downright ‘bad’, where a practice wins out at the expense of another being rejected. There are always winners and losers, but the challenge is constant and dynamic, with the intervention of new players re-orienting the possibilities of where the game can lead. Good taste involves an awareness of the rules as they are played... [t]he top players of any class and culture understand the rituals of the game (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.4).

If taste is learned, then, one can ascend to other classes. For Bourdieu, if the sources of family and education are lacking, ascension while not impossible, may be difficult (Bourdieu, 1984, p.175), as he puts little stock into the media as a source of knowledge, referring to magazines as “semi-legitimate legitimizing agencies such as women’s weeklies” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.77).

While in both Good Taste and Distinction taste extends well beyond food, in this thesis, food and my relationship to it, does not. For me, magazines have been a source of learning about food and food trends, which will be taken up later in my food-related practices.

Written in 60s France certainly contextualizes Distinction, still considered to be the authoritative text on taste (de Solier, 2013), but in today’s technological world, where information travels at the speed of light, it makes the notion of a democratic education possible. In the information age, we have more agency, if we choose to exercise it; taste is no longer relegated to those of a certain pedigree: the Internet does not discriminate in its availability. As an information gathering tool, I’ve used the Internet to advance my food knowledge, searching everything from definitions to demonstrations.

In Good Taste, for those wishing to acquire it, perseverance is needed; “[t]hose who want to attain the ideals of good taste just have to keep on trying to get it right. Using imagination and creativity to push the rules to the limit (once you have learnt them) gives birth to excellence that
is always being reinforced or challenged by new ideas” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.5).

Learning the rules, in order to push limits is crucial, as with most skills and particularly creative works of art for body or mind; for instance, having a strong balletic background creates the foundation needed for modern dance, likewise, knowing the classics in literature allows one to manipulate, draw or deviate from prior works, adding another level of artistry and layers of meaning; knowing the basics or the “rules” allows one to break them and can serve to contextualize one’s own work within a larger canon. And others who know the same knowledge notice; when praise is given it is done so with the full recognition of what’s been accomplished:

Gaining competence or mastery of knowledge or skills accesses this level, which facilitates social ascent into a group or community. When a person becomes very good at grasping the principles of a discipline or practice, they can then demonstrate this understanding to receive praise from anyone who is interested in noticing (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.96-7).

However, as styles and tastes for that matter are constantly evolving, sometimes, revolving, they are unpredictable (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.127) and change with the times, but the creativity involved in developing a new taste, as with most things new, will go through growing pains, so determination is key:

Creativity---the source for discovering or manufacturing new options for public and private tastes---does not always produce inventions that are predictable or welcome...We have to live for a while with the uncertainty of creativity and suffer through the pain of understanding different values, challenging ideas and provocative behaviours before taste actually transform and are accepted as something fresh and exciting (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.129).

It isn’t too difficult to relate this idea about changing trends and perhaps the resistance to such change to food: consider certain “fad diets” like the gluten-free one. I went gluten-free in 2007 as an experiment due to abdominal issues and supermarket options ranged from over-processed yet palatable at best, to simply inedible at worst. But to compare the choices then to the array of
products available now is utterly staggering. And to document such shifts in awareness of food and food trends, most probably, will be the foodie.

**Foodies**

In *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, Baumann and Johnston describe the foodie as, “the food expert that is not a simple French-food snob, but a figure that continues to operate within a taste hierarchy” (Baumann & Johnston, 2010). Food knowledge and documenting food experience has become a way of classifying oneself, that is, of belonging to one community at the rejection of another.

An element of being a foodie, as defined by Myers, who cites Baumann and Johnston is the preoccupation with the exoticization of food; “exotic foods that can be had only overseas, beyond the reach of FDA inspectors conservationists and animal-rights activists” (Myers, 2011) are commodified. Eaters of exotic food are seen as more “cosmopolitan” (Idov, 2012), connoisseurs of good taste, so to speak. The competitive quest for food experimentation is not solely concerned with the bizarre nor rare. The exotic food playing field is far from level: “some foods have more social capital than others. ‘Sophisticated’ upper-class tastes hunt out indulgences simply for the pleasure of finding masterworks to pamper the palate with” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.120). Take for instance, black truffles from France valued at $1,200/pound (Jolly, 2012). Indulgences, indeed. Opening up one’s palate to new levels of gastronomic delight is worn and advertised like a badge of honour, documented in great detail with photo and text on Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and the like.
Whether we use it or not, social media gives us, regardless of who we are, and how much money we have, a platform to showcase and showboat what we eat, where we eat, and what we think about what we eat. In this modern age, many would like to believe that they have become “gastronomes” or food critics with discerning tastes. Thanks to social media and the Food Network, we can learn the vocabulary and literacy to either gush about or dismiss a dish, with seeming culinary kudos. For instance, consider the way food is talked about today: locally sourced ingredients are “artisanal”, fried onions are “caramelized”, and a dish that is sloppily plated passes for “deconstruction”.

In *Food and the Self*, Isabelle de Solier reiterates the arterial role media plays in the formation of selves; “Food media are central to foodies’ relationships with food and to their self-making through it” (de Solier, 2013, p.3). Media is not only used as a source for gathering information, that is, for consuming facts, but also for posting comments or reviews, that is, producing, and uploading on such social media as blogs or other popular websites (de Solier, 2013, p.3). At the same time, de Solier’s definition of the foodie and how this phenomenon shapes identity is quite distinct from other definitions:

> I argue that the foodie’s self-formation through food cannot be reduced to the superficial pursuit of cultural capital and status. Rather it involves a more substantial process of negotiating moralities of both the consumption *and* production of material culture in post-industrial self-formation in which distinction is just one (problematic) part...For it is not so much *what* foodies consume but *how* they consume it---their serious and productive approach to consumption---that differentiates them from other members of the middle class (de Solier, 2013, p.75).

She explains that it is the combination of consumption and production that makes the foodie moral; and it is this morality that sets the foodie apart from being simply interested in the vain
pursuit of exotic food and a self-indulgent pastime (de Solier, 2013, p.13-14). In this way, de Solier rejects the commonly held definitions of the foodie as a decadent, narcissistic individual.

There is good reason why leisure activities strike a balance between consumption and production. de Solier explains that in the past, self-identity was linked to work, and work with producing, but in today’s post-industrial age where production is either greatly reduced or non-existent, its absence leaves a gap (de Solier, 2013, p.1). In citing Gelber, she contends that it is through leisure that such a void is filled:

> For as production has lost meaning at work, it has found meaning in leisure: it is in our free time that production finds its expression in self-making for many today in forms of ‘productive leisure’ (Gelber 1999). This may involve actually producing things---such as a dish, dress, or blog (de Solier, 2013, p.1).

And producing things has a moral component in identity creation, for it is “not just through consumption of material culture that we make the self in late modernity but also through its production, which carries a higher moral value” (de Solier, 2013, p.5). It would seem then, that if hobbies or pastimes have come to manifest themselves as “productive leisure”, then it is the foodies, who with their inherent consumption and production are the perfect embodiment of this.

In her research on foodies, de Solier found a common thread that foodies all professed to be, if not in actuality were (de Solier, 2013, p.65) and that is of being an omnivore:

> The foodie self as an omnivore is considered a moral self because their love of food purportedly extends to all types of food and is not elitist. For these food enthusiasts, the highest priority they express in their taste is not politics...but flavor” (de Solier, 2013, p.58)...To be a ‘perfect omnivore’ in the domain of food does not come down to simply eating a variety of ethnic cuisines. Rather, it involves the taste for, and knowledge of, foods with a range of cultural values (de Solier, 2013, p.61).
In the last year, due to intestinal issues as a result of a surgery, I have had to eliminate meat from my diet, much to my chagrin. Fish and seafood, for some reason are not irritants so I am currently a “pescetarian”. If omnivores eat everything and don’t discriminate against culture nor economics but let flavour be their guide, de Solier noticed some discrepancies, for instance, the foodies in her study did not eat fast food from the likes of McDonald’s or KFC for reasons she suspected were because they were “low brow” white food (de Solier, 2013, p.61). They did however, enjoy “peasant cuisine” which de Solier explains is not in the same class as white fast food:

[T]hey will eat the food of the ethnic poor but not the white poor...Many ethnic restaurants serve ‘peasant’ cuisines, that is, cuisines that are, or have historically been, considered lowbrow in their place of origin, the food of peasants and the working class...Yet cultural value is socially and historically specific, and when placed within the scales of value in contemporary...society---such foods take on middle-brow distinctions, as they are appropriated into middle-class taste cultures and systems of social distinction (de Solier, 2013, p.63).

Although they do profess a “non-elitist” approach to food, there are some inconsistencies;

“[w]hile foodies profess a taste for gustatory diversity and an appreciation of all types of food and flavors, this is tempered by the aesthetic judgement of quality” (de Solier, 2013, p.61). They are not, in other words, perfect omnivores. I, on the other hand, will and do dine at the fast food establishments rejected by these foodies, and many others, in fact. But I don’t eat meat. I’m not a perfect omnivore either.

Foodies, in their search for good food and culinary adventure, can acquire good taste through media, and least likely through the traditional channels of family and education which make up Bourdieu’s *habitus*; “I found that foodies do learn and put into practice the ‘good taste’ promoted by material lifestyle media. It was through food media rather than the family or the education
system that most of my informants acquired their sophisticated taste in food” (de Solier, 2013, p.70). I too, resonate with these foodies as a significant part of my own food education has been through “material lifestyle media”, which will be considered in greater detail in the next section.

So while I do share some common ideas with the foodies in de Solier’s study, there are some definite differences, and one that I believe problematizes the label for me: I don’t eat meat. To remove a significant protein from an array of food means that my approach to eating/dining and then writing is greatly stilted if not lop-sided. I think on this basis alone, I cannot call myself a full fledged foodie, at least for the time being. So I opt for the term “modified foodie”, and this is largely because my food-related practices of consumption and production work synergistically to help define who I am: that is, my activities of eating, dining out, educating myself, cooking, and writing, while not discrete elements, paint a portrait of the self I’ve created through food.

**My Consumption-Related Food Practices**

*I frequently look back at my life, searching for that fork in the road, trying to figure out where, exactly, I went bad and became a thrill-seeking, pleasure-hungry sensualist, always looking to shock, amuse, terrify and manipulate, seeking to fill that empty spot in my soul with something new.*

~ Anthony Bourdain

**Eating**

As I came from a large ethnic family, I had eaten many non-Western foods and seldom dined-on parts of animals, like offal, as explained in the previous chapter. This exposure at an early age comes in handy today, as it seems “whole animal” or “head to hoof” dining is *de riguer*. While I have no desire to eat such “delicacies” now, I have had the experience, if not dubious pleasure,
and can talk about it, write about it. These experiences however, contribute to why as I grew older, my desire to experience different or new food only grew. This first meant trying what I considered “exotic” which was quite traditional Canadian fare: turkey dinner.

Festive meals at my home were authentically ethnic. While my mother followed the cultural tradition of having turkey at Thanksgiving, she would interpret it through the lens of her culinary past; it was not basted in butter, and stuffed with bread, sage and root vegetables. There were no potatoes, and definitely no gravy. Our turkey came with a red sauce, lumpy in consistency, and not exactly hoisin nor cranberry but sweet and savoury at once. Salted chickens were steamed with ginger and green onion. While we never had roast beef or ham, what we did have was roasted duck with Chinese 5-spice. In other words, what might today be considered exotic was our everyday. The seasonings, herbs and preparation were completely different from the Canadian flavour profile, so even though we had turkey, it was not the turkey that my Caucasian friends had, nor the ones depicted in Butterball commercials, which, really, was what I privately longed for.

In “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” bell hooks writes, “[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks, 1998, p.181). A simple reversal of the words “ethnicity” and “white culture” describes my predicament exactly. While hooks is writing about white college males wanting to have sex with non-white females, as a sort of “rite of passage”, a parallel between this and my desire to eat what I considered exotic food and experience exotic culture can be easily drawn. She calls this, “[g]etting a bit of the Other...[which] was considered a ritual of transcendence, a

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movement out into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage” 

For hooks, this desire for the Other is white wanting to experience black, but she also broadens the scope, for desire regardless of what it desires, is still desire: “that longing for the pleasure that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the ‘primitive’ and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh” (hooks, 1998, p.187), or in my case: food.

This longing for the Other, however is more complex than simply wanting that which is different, for as hooks goes on to explain, it involves pleasure and death, and ultimately power and privilege; she says that this dynamic is no more clearly demonstrated than in the 1989 film, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, Her Lover:* “the cook tells her that black foods are desired because they remind those who eat them of death, and that this is why they cost so much...when they are eaten...the cook...tells us that it is a way to flirt with death, to flaunt one’s power. He says that to eat black food is a way to say ‘death, I am eating you’ and thereby conquering fear and acknowledging power....It is by eating the Other (in this case, death) that one asserts power and privilege” (hooks, 1998, p.197).

So later on in my adult life, I have had my share of “traditional” turkey dinners with all the fixings. And yet even today (until recently becoming a pescetarian), when I went to an Asian buffet restaurant, I’d without fail head to the roast turkey or prime rib table first, if there was
one. My palate like most, wants the unfamiliar, for to me, this has become my idea of comfort food.

It was therefore not without shock when I heard my mother’s reply to my question: How was the turkey dinner this year? And she said, “Oh well, y’know, it’s nothing special, everyone’s had it before”. My siblings and I covet the annual Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner, made by my French Chef brother, who roasts a perfect bird, with traditional stuffing, all the conventional sides and my all-time favourite: the gravy. It seems I am not the only one who wants to compensate for not growing up with traditional Canadian food. Yet when belonging to a chosen social group is not the goal, as in my mother’s case, to do things that perhaps feign privilege or status become irrelevant and unremarkable. My mother immigrated as a Chinese woman who knew her roots: her identity was formed and not up for debate. I, on the other hand, was born in Canada, and yet seemingly, my home life resembled (and tasted like) everything Chinese. As I lived my Chinese reality in private at home, but saw the Canadian one in public in society and on TV, I understood this to mean that my identity was negotiable: I could choose. I wanted something different---and to me, turkey dinner is different.

But while I came from a large family, where eating at the kitchen table was a social act of bonding, as much as it was for sustenance, leaving home and heading to the big city of Toronto meant that how and what I ate would drastically change: it meant that I often ate alone. And as such, it also meant that, it quickly revealed how much or little, or how well or poorly I took care of myself.
As Mary Lukanski writes in “A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness”, I too fell prey to the habits of most solo eaters; “[s]tudies focusing on eating behaviors have demonstrated that when we eat alone we eat differently. We take less time to eat. Obese subjects will eat more when eating alone; the non-obese will eat less. Older men and women living alone prepare fewer meals at home. A survey of college students revealed that women were more likely to skip a meal if confronted with having to eat alone” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.115).

There is a correlation between eating and self-care, because to go hungry is not to take care, quite clearly. Michel Foucault’s treatment of care of the self as an on-going effort to learn and challenge oneself in the goal of self-improvement involves doing things: “the work of oneself on oneself” (Foucault, 1986, p.51):

It takes time...This time is not empty; it is filled with exercises, practical tasks, various activities. Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs. There are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one has heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one’s own life (Foucault, 1986, p.50-51).

Care of the self for me, at this time was much more basic and encompassed the day-to-day self-maintenance that was non-existent when I was having difficulty. Being alone and furthermore, eating alone, seems to be the “scourge” of humanity, as those who do are viewed with fear or suspicion and described as “predators” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.116). Lukanski likens the socially charged and culturally signifying act of eating alone to masturbation; “who wants to admit they’re having it, food or sex, alone?” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.115). And thus, to be alone is not to be fully human, therefore, shameful; “[e]ating alone is stigmatized behavior because it defies the expectations we have of eating. It will probably continue to be thought of as an unfortunate
activity of the social outcast. Solo eaters will continue to feel uncomfortable and many will go hungry rather than be thought of as friendless” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.11).

Think of the character played by Kristen Wiig in the 2011 film Bridesmaids: after taking the time and care to craft one cupcake, with fondant icing and painstakingly carved flower petals and stamen, she assesses her creation, then she devours it, most ungraciously taking one big messy bite out of it, rather with the kind of resigned futility that her recently rejected current single status deserves....and not with the careful savouring as one might expect when relishing something as delicate and decadent as the cupcake, which is as if to say: if you are eating alone, what is the point of eating anything special? Or anything at all for that matter, for it is all a colossal waste. Lukanuski explains that “He who eats alone, dies alone: an Italian proverb but understandable in almost any culture. Those participating in an activity that should be shared are obviously unwanted and unconnected. The solitary diner is either a social misfit or the victim of some tragedy” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.116).

My own experience of eating alone and self-care (or lack thereof) resonates with a time when I was a university undergrad: after a serious breakup with my boyfriend, I lost my appetite for everything fun, healthy and good for me. One of those things was that I stopped eating: I just wasn’t hungry and didn’t feed myself. Underlying all this lack of self-care was that I felt, on a fundamental level, I wasn’t worth the effort to take care of, to prepare a meal for. I also stopped other habits like cleanliness. In a word, I was a mess. And then one day (I don’t know what clicked), I made a deal with myself: I had to do just three things every day, and if I could do these three things, I would be, and everything else would be ok. These three things were how I
got through that dark period. This was my “dark night of the soul”. Not completely unlike the three things in the well-known Elizabeth Gilbert bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) about love, loss and redemption in Italy, India, and Indonesia, my three things were: Eat, Bathe, Sleep (and pre-dated her novel, by the way). If I could do these three things, all would be ok...and miraculously, it was.

Interestingly, the kind of food I ate was important too; it had to be cooked by me and consisted of salted pork, rice, and green beans. I ate this every day for months, for that was how long it would take to mend my broken heart. By slowly showing myself that I was worth it, I experienced healing through my palate. Of course, the obsessive nature of eating the same meal daily indicates perhaps other latent issues at work, but the overriding point of this sidebar story is that cooking for myself (even if it was the same everyday) was at least the beginning of self-care. And when activities are foreign to us, they take some premeditation and are a bit rough in execution until they can become stronger with the familiarity practice brings.

This act of self-care led to watching episodes of “*Emeril Live*” on the Food Network, which inspired me to make dishes I had never made before, and made just for me. Lagasse’s signature expressive flourish at the end of every prepared dish, “Bam!” was a wake-up call to my deeper, inner self who understood that this life was an adventure, if only I would venture, out that is. I went from self-neglect to the point of punishing to treating myself on a daily basis to something if not new, then made with some degree of attention, as if to ask myself, “What awesome meal are *we* (meaning me, myself and I) having tonight?” Was this a lateral move from self-negligent to self-indulgent behaviour? I’m not sure, but I do know that eating is better than not eating, and
if I was coming back to life and learning a valuable skill at the same time (like making schnitzel), then to me it was positive, and part of my journey towards self-discovery and recovery through food. Perhaps there is an aspect of all growth that may involve an element of or a time for excess in order to see its place in the larger landscape and then moderate it, to find that middle ground (William Blake; Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha).

It is a sign of emotional maturity to be alone, and for that matter, to dine alone for “[t]he adult who is able to be alone forgoes the actual presence of the care giver: the comfort and support the care giver is offered in those first moments of being alone is internalized” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.119). So while emotionally mature or not, the foodie gets around this conundrum of solitariness for they are not just dining solo: they have a job to do, pictures to take, food to review and write about. In this way, foodies have found a way out, for they have located a crack to slip through avoiding the usual judgement that comes with the stigma of solo dining.

Self-Education

My food knowledge and food literacy apart from what I learned from my family was largely through TV, specifically The Food Network, cookbooks, magazines, newspapers, restaurant guides, and finally to a lesser degree, the Internet. The current discussion will include knowledge gained outside my family, as it was this education that I sought on my own purely for my own interests and not out of a necessity or obligation.

With the advent of the Food Network in 1993 my understanding of food and its preparation reached another level---it took me beyond what Bourdieu would call my “habitus” and this is
very possible, “[a]s can be seen whenever a change in social position puts the habitus into new conditions, so that its specific efficacy can be isolated, it is taste---the taste of necessity or the taste of luxury---and not high or low income which commands the practices objectively adjusted to these resources” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.175). However, my resources here were more of the information variety, and not the economic. My food literacy and food vocabulary grew exponentially, introducing me to ganache, ghost chilies, goji berries, and techniques like sweating onions, gastrique, chiffonade, a bouquet garni, just to name a few. It is not to say that I had never done these things before, as I grew up in a restaurant, but I simply did not have the words with which to describe or express what I was eating or doing.

From popular programs like “Chef at Home”, “Pioneer Woman”, “Week in a Day”, “Food Factory”, “Chopped”, “Parts Unknown”, and others, I learned everything from using every day ingredients, to techniques, useful cooking utensils, food trends, meal planning, how popular foods are made, what trained chefs do with bizarre ingredients like calf eyeballs and tongues, and food, usually uncommon to the North American palate, that people around the globe eat. This self-education eventually led to modest attempts at cooking in my tiny bachelor apartment. Though small, this significant act is what Foucault would consider, care of the self, for “educating oneself and taking care of oneself are interconnected activities” (Foucault, 1986, p.55).

With the proliferation of The Food Network and Food TV, came the cult of the chef. And it is to them that we look to for ideas of how to cook as well as how to shop, and prepare food with environmental awareness (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998) for now there is a concern for:
seasonal ingredients, often especially grown for the chef, and light ‘natural’ preparation. Steamed fish and vegetables take precedence over meat roasts or stews, while light natural juices, extending to ‘bouillons’ and ‘infusions’, supplant heavy, starch-thickened gravies and sauces. The purity of products and stress on freshness reflect not only a changed relations between cuisine and nature, but also a shift in the status of the chef” (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998, p.94). The new chef has ‘ethics’ as well as technique and ‘respects’ the ingredients...To the extent that economic recession has given financial and psychological impetus to a return to the simpler cooking strategies (Ferguson & Zukin, 1998, p.95).

Likewise, to foodies this ethical dimension demonstrated by chef TV personalities serves to inspire and lead by example, as well as answers to their “serious commitment to food... [which] play[s] a central role not just in forming a moral self through material culture, but also in contributing to their sense of personal wellbeing and happiness...[not only] for purposes of social distinction or cache, but for their overall physical and psychological wellbeing” (de Solier, 2013, p.25). Following such trends is what de Solier calls “the new moralities of self-making that have emerged in the late modern era” (de Solier, 2013, p.5).

My TV viewing habits which promoted my knowledge of food and food literacy has been augmented by cookbooks, newspapers, magazines, and restaurant guides. Bourdieu stated that we primarily learn from first the family, and then from the educational system (Bourdieu, 1984, p.1). He put little value in media as a source of knowledge for the development of taste (Bourdieu, 1984, p.77). However, I have found that it was from referencing certain cookbooks or recipes found in magazines or newspapers that have helped alter my diet to what is known as a “clean eating” lifestyle. My use of cookbooks is utilitarian, not really for entertaining but with an emphasis on what I call “the cheap and cheerful” brand of cuisine. In this way, I differ somewhat from de Solier’s foodies in that cooking for others and that “moral” dimension of the foodie persona is not a defining feature of my food practices. But it could be argued that certain
conditions, such as not having the physical space within which to entertain may be responsible for this current situation.

One of my favourite things to read in newspapers and magazines alike are the restaurant reviews, not because I add them to a list of places I intend to visit (because I rarely do), but so I learn instead how the critics write about food and the dining experience. I resonate with some critics who are able to identify the flavours as they blend/marry/melt on the palate. In this way, I learn how to craft my own writing. I also enjoy reading the Toronto Star’s “The Dish”, where upon readers’ requests, the nutritional content of a popular dish is revealed and accordingly judged as either healthy or too high in sodium or fat.

The restaurant guides I use include Now Magazine, or the annual Toronto Life Restaurant Guide issue. Although, admittedly, I tend to favour shows like “Million Dollar Critic”, “You Gotta Eat Here”, or “Diners Drive-Ins and Dives” instead. Finally, I may go online, but usually, I only check here when I already know where I want to go and just need details. I tend not to read food blogs or Yelp reviews too much, but prefer to read food critics like Amy Pataki (The Toronto Star), or Giles Coren (Million Dollar Critic). I find I usually learn something if not about preparation and presentation, then how and what flavours work or don’t.

**Dining Out**

The narrative “Fish Heads & Tales” ends with the suggestion that being invited to eat at the Browns’ and the ensuing disappointment, served only to increase my appetite to explore and sample all that was available to me. So, as a high school senior, when most of my friends saved
up for clothes or cosmetics, I saved up so I could dine out. I went to Greek, Italian, Indian, French restaurants, British-style pubs, Viennese cafes, and more. To me, dining out was not only about eating, it was an event, a leisure activity, and a luxurious one at that, and one that I groomed myself for, accordingly; “[d]ining out is not synonymous with eating: it is not simply a biological or even an economic process. Dining out becomes an event that brings the individual--figuratively and literally---into the public arena and exposes him or her to the scrutinizing eye of the other. It is an everyday event that expresses views on human nature and the ethics of social relations” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.214).

In “Dining Out: The Hyperreality of Appetite”, Joanne Finkelstein says it is “a performance---to see and be seen as both performer and audience” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.206). And as such, she equates restaurants to the entertainment industry; “the restaurant is a forerunner of the contemporary entertainment industry. Like other entertainment industries, dining out is much concerned with the marketing of certain states of mind, emotions, desires, and moods” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.203). Finkelstein relates that dining as a form of entertainment had its beginnings in the late 19th century:

Cesar Ritz, who opened the opulent dining room at the Savoy Hotel, London, in 1889, understood his bourgeois patrons to be most interested in the theatricality of the restaurant, especially the opportunities it offered as a three-dimensional advertisement, a diorama displaying cultural products and practices where the service of others could be commanded, where one was free to look at others, and display oneself, where one imbibed the ambience of the extravagant decor, occupying it as if it were one’s own. Popular restaurants ever since have continued to provide these pleasures in artifice (Finkelstein, 1998, p.202).

Such artifice speaks to our need for fantasies, which the restaurant more than caters to (Finkelstein 1998, p.205). It is like vicarious travel; in Empire of the Signs (1982) Roland
Barthes analyzes how one can experience the “exoticism” of Asia by simply patronizing a restaurant in his or her own city; one can feel that one has an experience, if not completely authentic nor real. For many, this is enough, for to go to Asia and suffer through the time change, climate change, not to mention the culture shock, would just be too taxing. “Going out for Japanese” on the other hand, is so much easier. Here again, is the element of fantasy, that of believing oneself as cultured by simply eating in ethnic restaurants.

But as an entertainment industry as Finkelstein states, dining out “construct[s] the practices and expressions through which individuals are encouraged to interpret their personal longings” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.203-204). We must eat what the restaurant chooses it’ll serve; “[t]he restaurant, as a site for the satisfaction of these private pleasures, plays a part in defining, regulating, and structuring the individual’s experience” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.206).

We have the freedom to select from a set list determined not by one’s own taste, but by the chef’s, a list driven by economics, availability, and who knows whatever else. We therefore only exercise our freedom from a limited number of choices, of what we are told is “tasteful” or “classy” or “trendy”, as “with dining out, or with other forms of public entertainments, we are purchasing the ingredients for a desired state of being and are spared much of the care of thinking about how these desires can best be developed and satisfied” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.204).

As Finkelstein argues, it is as if we relinquish our thinking faculties and like baby birds, are fed by some outside agency, which is a key idea she develops; “[t]hus, to claim that...dining out is pleasurable largely because it reflects or expresses private and idiosyncratic tastes is to overlook
the existence and invasive effectiveness of the culture and entertainment industries” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.211). In citing Umberto Eco’s *Faith in Fakes* (1986), she explains the notion of the “hyperreal” asserting that, “[w]hen simulations have replaced actualities...we have entered the world of Eco’s hyperreality....dining out, which is dominated by fashionability and public images which in turn provide readily imitated formulaic social routines, is itself a practice that constructs the hyperreal” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.210).

We therefore, become out of touch with reality, where the idea is more real than the concrete and “[a]s a consequence, our everyday world comes to be lived at the surface in a dimension Eco (1986) has called the hyperreal, where the images of products and practices have gained the ascendancy over the even supplanted the actual” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.207). So not only are we told what is tasteful, but knowing this and believing it creates an even further remove from the reality of who we really are:

> If we come to know luxury, extravagance, convenience, pleasure, relaxation, and romance through the restaurant, or some other popular and public entertainment, and we employ these representations to experience our own desires, then it means our sensibilities and feelings are being shaped by the regulatory codes of convention (Finkelstein, 1998, p.213).

And such conventions, as Bourdieu shows, are clearly evident in the act of eating. Dining for Bourdieu is not simply for nourishment; rather it is like a training ground, a site for learning, a demonstration of class, that is, of who, what, how, when, and where:

> The manner of presenting and consuming the food, the organization of the meal and setting of places, strictly differentiated according to the sequence of the dishes and arranged to please the eye, the presentation of the dishes, considered as much in terms of shape and color (like works of art) as of their consumerable substance, the etiquette governing posture and gesture, ways of serving oneself and others, of using the different utensils, the seating plan, strictly but discreetly hierarchical, the censorship of bodily manifestations of the act or pleasure of eating (such as noise or haste), the very refinement of the things consumed, with
quality more important than quantity---this whole commitment to stylisation tends to shift the emphasis from substance and function to form and manner, and so to deny the crudely material reality of the act of eating (Bourdieu, 1984, p.196).

As a leisure activity, going to restaurants has been a self-indulgent pastime for me, one which creates a level of excitement and mystery, especially if it is new. For instance, it was fun to eat french fries with truffle oil and parmigiano-reggiano, simply because it sounded interesting and delicious (and it was). Or, a $50 hamburger at Bynark just because I could (not worth the money). Relishing this luxurious aspect of dining sets me apart from the foodies in de Solier’s study who emphasize a “moral asceticism” to dining out (de Solier, 2013, p.17); “[s]ome members of the middle class pursue food knowledge and taste instrumentally as a form of culinary capital to gain social distinction...for such individuals, I would argue, food knowledge is accumulated solely as a form of cultural capital; it functions as a form of conspicuous knowledge---its primary purpose is display” (de Solier, 2013, p.74). To be so preoccupied with the “look” of a place, or the uniqueness of flavour, I could very well run the risk of being a victim of the hyperreal:

[T]he fashionability of an event or practice can mask much of its character. This is precisely Eco’s argument---that life lived in hyperreality can be a negation of civility because individuals cannot separate the publicized views of an event from their reactions to it. The individual’s inability to resist the appeal of habit and routines means that imagining and leading an examined life has been retarded (Finkelstein, 1998, p.212).

To be sure, eating at exclusive expensive restaurants is not the only part of dining that is enjoyable to me; it is also the tasting of something new to my palate, which could happen anywhere. But the reason the “diorama” of luxury restaurants is actually exceedingly delightful for me, is precisely because I have the opportunity to weigh what the conventional popular opinion is against my own experience. And let’s face it, to be able to experience that which was
once out of one’s reach, is quite frankly, exhilarating in and of itself. So for me, dining out is my chance to reflect, and to think, which runs counter to the idea that my thinking abilities have been “retarded”. In fact, when I dine out, I learn many things: “the restaurant can function as a site for gathering food knowledge; the diner can collect gastronomic experiences, follow trends in cuisine, become an epicure” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.202). In this way then, I am similar to the foodies in de Solier’s book that write or talk about their food experiences and who in doing so, problematize the view that:

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\text{[d]ining out conventionally and fashionably means that the individual is not provoked to reflection. Indeed, the opposite seems true---dining out is a formulaic practice that promotes the avoidance of reflection...Through obedience to the patterns of conduct required by the form, one is absorbed into routines and habits...[and] amplifies the postmodern ethical confusion or incivility of the contemporary, unexamined life (Finkelstein, 1998, p.209, 205).}
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For as much as I may be enamoured by the allure of dining out, my food experiences are not confined to pure consumption; as a modified foodie, I am more than a consumer who consumes, I also reflect, and with that reflection, produce.

**My Production-Related Food Practices**

**Cooking**

For the foodie, cooking has social implications which gives it a moral aspect; cooking for others creates a bond, and this social connection is vital to the practice; “[i]n addition to consuming food together, or commensality, producing food for others was an important form of sociability...and...central to their moral approach to food in self-formation” (de Solier, 2013, p.27). Here, cooking is not a selfish act, done purely for oneself, which can be problematic given that many people are alone; “[t]he solitary eater is contending with a huge cultural signifier:
preparing a meal at home is a cultural touchstone. The solitary eater, however, receives little encouragement to do so” (Lukanuski, 1998, p.117).

A meal which is lovingly prepared and cooked is a sign of deep love and affection. I have often said that a meal cooked for me is already three quarters delicious. As a result of watching cooking shows, I began using all sorts of utensils that I had learned about, such as: a lemon zester, microplane, and while I don’t own one I now know what a mandoline is (professional slicer), and a salamander (not reptile but broiling oven meant to finish off a dish most often used for melting cheese). I cooked dishes for the first time, like chicken fried steak, meat loaf, various pastas, casseroles, coq au vin, stroganoff, and so on.

I do not completely identify with the foodies in de Solier’s study who pay for exclusive, rare ingredients, and perhaps spend all day braising, brining, or stewing a meat. And for all my preference for French cuisine, I do not own, nor have the desire to own the world-renown book by Julia Child et al. which presumably cracks the code of intimidating French cuisine making it less daunting and more approachable: *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. But I do believe cooking can be a creative outlet, and one that can be done from start to finish in 20 minutes. For to produce, as de Solier explains, is to be filling a void in modern society, and it is the oftentimes banal practice of cooking that when done with the approach of a professional or the zeal of glutton elevates its status from ordinary to work of art: “practices such as cooking hold significant appeal for people not only because they provide an opportunity to produce things but also because they provide an outlet for creative expression, both of which are felt by many to be missing in post-industrial work” (de Solier, 2013, p.18).
A quick glance at my cookbooks: *The Eat Clean Diet, The Eat Clean Cookbook, Real Simple Easy Delicious Meals* just to name a few seems to suggest that the kind of cooking I subscribe to belongs to the “Cheap and Cheerful” variety of cuisine. And while I do enjoy cooking, and find chopping vegetables tremendously meditative and soothing, given my repertoire of dishes, which I listed earlier, the food I cook is neither complicated nor unusual, in fact, it is more ordinary than exotic (unless it’s Chinese). The strength of my productive leisure then, quite clearly, is not in the form of cooking: it lies in writing.

**Writing**

I write a food column for my condominium’s monthly newsletter, which I title, “Good Eats, Cheap Eats, Sweet Spots”. In it, I feature a restaurant that is outstanding in one if not all of the criteria in its namesake. I approach this task as a job: adhering to deadlines, uploading photos, checking my facts regarding locations, pricing, and environment. Mind you, this is surely a labour of love. Although to be paid would not only affirm that my knowledge is sound, but that it is valid and useful, and ultimately raises my status from diner/blogger to bona fide restaurant critic. It would be the ultimate affirmation of distinction and taste, to me at least.

But for some foodies, to get paid for their productive leisure practices would be to spoil it, possibly taking some basic joy from it as now it is no longer a “labour of love” but just “labour”; “there was a pervasive fear that pursuing their interest in a professional manner would make it ‘too serious’ and take the pleasure out of it...Thus, being a foodie is about developing a moral approach to material culture in self-formation through work-like leisure, rather than work” (de Solier, 2013, p.24). But not me. In this I wonder if it means that for work to be “moral” it is
implicitly unpaid. As I would argue for the possibility of “leisure-like work” where one can do a moral job, and love it, and get paid for doing it.

Writing about what I eat also allows me to express what I’ve come to consider as my special skill: that of being able to break down the flavours in any particular dish. My heightened sense of taste, while not exactly like this, makes me think of the protagonist in Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume* (1986) who can identify lingering scents down to their chronology, that is, the scents before the scent. For it is often in a room full of family members, that it is me who can identify all the spices in my chef brother’s dishes.

I’ve been writing this column for close to two years now, and only at this past Christmas dinner were many residents finally able to put a face to my name, and since then, I’ve received a considerable amount of positive feedback from those who like what I do. It is this reflexive quality in the writing that I express my food self. So while I do enjoy the chopping, and preparation of making a meal, I love eating, thinking, and then writing about it more. That it is appreciated gives the “work” I do a dimension of the ethical for my column serves a function; my neighbour Dan, recently told me in the gym, “I don’t like to go to restaurants myself, but when people come to visit, now I know where to take them”.

CONCLUSION

By using my narrative “Fish Heads & Tales” as an entry point to start a discussion on how I have constructed or at least tried to construct an identity for myself through food and its varied practices, I have shown that being dissatisfied led to a curiosity that contributed to my growing
sense of appetite and taste to experience new food; “[b]y being denied, a door opened...food had its secrets” (Bourdain, 2000, p.12). The thrill of uncovering “secrets” aptly describes what punctuated my food adventure. Feeling confined to my ethnic identity in Chapter Two, where who I was was fixed, like the colour of my skin, morphed into my appetite which could take me places I had never imagined that would help shape and create a sense of who I was, far away from the prison of my body: for now, I could use my mind, my words to form, tweak, and manipulate who I wanted to be. And on social media, where personalities are “virtual”, my ethnic background is not only unknown, it is irrelevant, and in this, liberating.

From feeling I had no agency as a child to being confronted with a seemingly fluid concept of who I could be as a young adult, not only took some adjusting to, but sometimes I still have to remind myself that I am not looking through the eyes of a six year old child, strange as that may sound (although, this may not be that uncommon). This is a good example of the impact of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, that is, what we learn from our families and school especially in the early years, and how it lingers. To ascend to higher levels of taste takes some getting used to, as well as perseverance, but as ascending the ladder of taste can be learned, it comes down to knowing the “rules” and “rituals” of a game (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.4).

So while taste as Bourdieu claims in *Distinction* comes from the *habitus*, and is therefore classed, today it can be argued that we gain knowledge through various forms of media that were not available at the writing of his book, based in France in the 60s. Today we have information at our fingertips. With the click of a finger, we can learn about trends first hand, shop from home, know what styles and markers of taste are being displayed in any part of the world, at any
time. Which also raises the issue of the hyperreal. Simply mirroring conventional styles, copying trendy behaviours, and being slaves to fashion mean we run another risk: that of becoming mindless slavish dupes who lead unexamined lives (Baudrillard, 1998, p.28; Sontag, 1966, p.6). A quick look around the Toronto winter streetscape and one can easily count up to the double digits the number of Canada Goose coats one sees:

The fashionability of an event predefines its meaning. Being in fashion means that the object or practice has already been valued, and this is itself an attraction. The individual does not have to examine cultural practice to ascertain their status: when they are fashionable, their meaning and value are perfectly clear (Finkelstein, 1998, p.212).

But among the legion of infamous ski parkas with fox fur trim clogging the public transit system, and streets, how does one stand out? “The trick is in making what everyone else is buying your own good taste” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2003, p.130). This might not be impossible but perhaps one might consider the way something is worn, or choose to accessorize in order to put one’s own individual stamp on it, however, slight.

This relates to the difference between fashion and style; I think fashion is what is seen on the runways, and style is what happens when that fashion trickles down to street level and gets interpreted by the individual. It is here that anything can happen, of course: one’s style is comprised of so many factors such as unique pairings, blendings of textures, shapes, colours, decades, proportions, and possibly influenced by emotions we feel before getting dressed, what we ate for breakfast, and so on. The end result of all this is one’s personal style, purely subjective, and we can all agree that some people have it, while others don’t.
One can also argue that for many, a sense of fashion style is not even a concern (understandable especially in -25 degree temperatures) for as Finkelstein suggests in citing Sontag, the main problem with modernity is; “we are too ready to elide the appearance with the substance, the manner of appearing as the manner of being. And when this happens, en masse, when our public conduct follows the patterns of advertised trends, we have entered hyperreality” (Finkelstein, 1998, p.214).

Do we simply mirror what we take to be style by its ubiquity? Well, may be. But how does this relate to food? Could there be some agency somewhere? Perhaps in the way something “conventional” is tasted? Meaning, might not the way I taste, that is, my taste buds, which are mine, after all, might not the sensuality of eating which belongs to the semiotic, pre-separation from mother, pre-symbolic, and for that matter, pre-convention and pre-determination....might not there be something that is primal, individual and uniquely me here? It is in eating that our basic instincts are awakened, for it is, “in tastes in food that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.79). I would argue that while what I may eat is predetermined by set conventions and dining trends, and therefore not of my own actual choosing and not original, the way, that is, how, I process these conventions which are uniquely me is. And it is precisely here that I can carve out my own individuality. In other words, my taste buds are my agency.

I emphasize that the charge that we run the risk of mistaking the idea of the thing for the thing itself gets challenged in the reflexive quality I engage in during the deeply personal act of eating. Just think: everyone has their own idea of where the best fish and chips in Toronto are. Our
palates are uniquely ours. What we eat, can be determined and is determined to an extent by factors most often beyond our control, just like the sudden proliferation of Thai restaurants in Toronto in the early millennia for example. But what I choose within a set list, how I eat it, how I savour it, what I detect from it, and what I think about it, this is not a mirroring back. And this reflexive quality that enables me to describe what I eat and how I feel eating it, is the skill I use in the writing of a food review. In this way then, by writing my monthly food column, I escape, and many other foodies surely, this belief that being a foodie is a mindless act of mimicry.

The discussion of the role food played in my life in the making of my identity began in earnest in my childhood in Chapter Two and continued on into the teen years through to adulthood in Chapter Three, informing my food-related practices. What lies ahead is a look at how the gendered relationships around food in my home and family helped evolve my sense of self and what this meant to my growing understanding of or a deepening of my identity through food.
Chapter Four

Dinner

_How often have the greatest thoughts and ideas come to light during conversations with the family over the evening dinner?_

~ E.A. Bucchianeri

Dinner, as the last of the three main meals, is the most important one in the day to many. In recent times, we’ve come to know the health benefits of eating a full breakfast and slowly decreasing caloric intake as the day wears on, yet it is still dinner that is the meal that carries considerable weight. One will have a sandwich or salad for lunch, for example, but not for dinner, which seems to call for a bit more thought, something requiring time and care: a roast perhaps, or heavy like pasta. Apart from being physically substantial, dinner can also be socially substantial; “going out for dinner” is an event that carries with it more cultural and social innuendo than “going out for lunch” (though there are “ladies who lunch”). Apart from it being a physiological need, dinner can also be rife with social implication open to countless interpretations: dinner and a movie, or dinner and drinks, dinner and dancing, dinner and who knows what, followed by an even bigger space for what may come after such combinations...

Chapter Two began with “Breakfast”, and examined my emerging food identity through a narrative based on my childhood as a starting point. The impact of an ethnic upbringing was considered in light of issues of belonging and self-loathing. The previous chapter, titled “Lunch” continued into the teen years and young adulthood. Through an exploration of my consumption
and production related food practices of eating, educating myself, dining out, cooking, and writing, my evolving sense of self was discussed. In broadening the conversation on food identity it seems, it would be remiss if it did not include a discussion on the significant role gender plays in food and foodways (Moore, 1988; Xu, 2013). As often the heaviest meal of the day, it is consequently fitting then, that the salient topic of gender be reserved for this chapter, the “Dinner” portion of this thesis.

There is an enormous body of research on the place gender occupies in food and identity like the connection between food, gender and power (for example, Lappe & Collins, 1986; Kahn, 1986; Arnold, 1988; Counihan, 1988; Adams, C., 1993; Inness, 2001), or gendered eating habits and patterns (Bennet, 1943; Bourdieu, 1984; Mintz, 1985; Fitchen, 1988; Weismantel, 1988; Turner et al., 2013), or food, gender and class (Garb, Garb & Stunkard, 1975; Stunkard, 1977; Beller, 1977; Massara and Stunkard, 1979; Massara, 1989; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). This chapter underscores the question of how gender roles in one’s family affect the individual by examining how they were negotiated and understood in my personal food experience, what I learned from this, and how it shaped me.

The relationships we form in our families are arguably among the most significant as they potentially inform others that follow: they make lasting impressions teaching us unconsciously what it means to be a social being, the protocol of relating to one another, the way to show love, caring, and respect, or not. Since I come from a large family with five siblings, each relationship has had an effect on me. I will however, limit the current discussion to three people: my father, mother, and grandmother. Through narrative excerpts, anecdotes, and narrative details I seek to
explore the place food occupied in their lives, including but not limited to how gender affected the way food was handled, prepared, and cooked, and how this contributed, if at all, to their roles of: breadwinner, nurturer, and healer. For who they are, and what I learned from each impacted me and my relationship to food.

Historically, cooking as unpaid domestic labour has been associated with the feminine, and paid professional labour with the masculine (de Solier, 2013, p.129). For the chef has always been an occupation dominated by men (Fine, 1996; Ferguson & Zukin, 1998; Bourdain, 2000; de Solier, 2013). But as the discussion unfolds, it will be clear that such binaries, while applicable to a degree, do not capture the full contribution that my parents and grandmother made to my identity; in other words, I assert that the labels to be used in reference to them (breadwinner, nurturer, and healer) are inadequate and are employed merely for the sake of brevity.

As recollections and conversations comprise much of the research in the autobiographical nature of this chapter, a reminder of the caveats in using them seems important; “Memories are not fixed and ready to be accessed when needed, but are relived each time in different ways and with different emotional attachments. In fact, the embodied and emotional experiences connected with them (pleasure, pain, fear) influence their storage and retrieval. This is particularly evident in the case of food-related recollections” (Parasecoli, 2014, p.418). So with this in mind, we proceed with “conversations over dinner” to explore my food identity through the lens of my father’s, mother’s, and grandmother’s.

My Father - Gin Kan Lee aka “Jim Lee”
My father came to Canada in the late 1950s as a young man in his 20’s, and began working in the kitchens of Chinese owned restaurants in Kingston, Ontario.

![Image of Jim Lee](image.png)

**Fig. 4.1.** My father, Jim Lee. (1964). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

The fact that most of his male friends were connected to the restaurant business was no coincidence; these were jobs, as explained by Wenying Xu that were not so much chosen as much as they were the only choice. And while she writes of the Asian Americans, one can easily see how this could also apply to Asian Canadians:

Regardless of their numbers and lengths of history, Asian Americans have been invariably involved in food service and production. There is nothing natural or culturally predetermined about Asian Americans’ vital relationship with food. Harsh circumstances made such work one of the few options available to them. To survive in this country and to be able to send money to loved ones left behind and barred from immigration, they did what others wouldn’t, and did it with pride and dignity (Xu, 2008, p.12).

In this way, through “obedient” struggle, the Chinese were considered the “model minority”, seen and not heard:
To mainstream Americans, Asians are a model minority, a reputation historically produced partially by and productive of social obedience. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, Chinese Americans have ‘become a model of self-respect and achievement,’ and they ‘are getting ahead on their own with no help from anyone else’ (Wu 158)....what the report refers to as ‘achievement’ and ‘success’ are no more than racialized occupations such as hand laundry and restaurants, which pose little economic threat to white America...the Chinese Americans were engaged in a subsistence economy without any government assistance and without instigating social unrest. It is precisely because of the rarity of organized class struggle in Chinese American history that the report names the Chinese Americans a model minority (Xu, 2008, p.64).

As the “model minority”, we contributed without taking anything away. So regardless of any special talents one possessed, skills learned overseas or aptitudes, they had no place in this new Western landscape. And while this phenomenon rang true for most of the men my father’s age, his exposure to food and cooking actually began in Hong Kong. Contrary to his fellow expatriates, when he arrived in Canada, cooking had been his only formal work experience. The reason for this is indirectly traced to his childhood.

My father was adopted as a dying wish and condition in my grandfather’s will. My grandfather lived in New York and had set aside money for education and a “paper identity” for his intended “son”. And when this “son” would become an adult, he could immigrate to America, for the betterment of his entire family. The “paper identity” indicated that “his son” was seven years old and that was why, upon being widowed, my grandmother in China came to adopt my father.

When he became a teen, conflicts arose in New York so instead of sending the passport from America, it was sold, and the money sent in its place. Not all was lost as now it was agreed that this money was reserved to purchase another identity, once the opportunity came. The goal remained the same, the process merely changed.
In the meantime, as a young adult, my father lived on his own, and worked as a cook in a cafeteria for a number of years, honing his skills in the kitchen. During this time, he befriended an older gentleman whom he would see on his way to work every day. A friendship began over the years, as the man took on a sort of mentoring role. It seemed that he had a son in Canada, and because he held an extra passport for another “son”, he was looking for a worthy candidate. It was after he came to know my father that he felt he had met such a person, so he offered to sell the passport to my father. This way, his “two sons” could support each other in a foreign land. Excitedly, my father agreed to buy it, remembering there was money for this purpose. But when he explained this to his mother, he realized a decision had already been made: the money was gone, used to buy a property for her and her daughters.

This created a chasm in their relationship that would last for years, as my mother tells the story. In a bold act to sever connection with his adoptive family, my father shaved his head. Cutting one’s hair is symbolic of a shift in one’s identity, like a rite of passage (Ellen, 2012); perhaps my father was making a statement that regardless of his past, he was going to create his own future. He decided that somehow he would find a way to Canada, which many overseas Chinese at the time nicknamed *Gim Sun*, or “Gold Mountain”, for the potential riches to be had (Choy, 2004, p.1).

He related his predicament to the gentleman, and much to his shock, his friend agreed to give him the passport, under the condition that my father pay him back. So with his shaven head and
new identity, he had his passport photograph (Fig. 4.2) taken and set off to find his “brother” in Canada. Indirectly it was his job as a cook that was my father’s way out.

Fig. 4.2. Passport photo of my father, Gin Kan Lee. (1950). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

After working for a few years, my father did what most Chinese men at the time did: went home to get married.

Fig. 4.3. Wedding photo of my mother, my father, and grandmother, seated. (1958). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee
Later in Canada, with six children and a wife, my father was the sole income earner. And though cooking was his professional job, he never cooked at home. The only thing I saw him do in our kitchen was eat. So it was not until we had our own restaurant, the “Silver Wok”, in the early 1980s that I had the chance to see the way my father cooks and how he interacts with food.

Fig. 4.4. The Silver Wok Restaurant. (1983). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

In the restaurant kitchen beside the chopping table was an assortment of professional knives: a chef’s knife, fillet, serrated, boning, fish, sabre, and three kinds of cleavers, one for a different purpose and he handled each with precision and care. What defines his cooking style to me is the speed, precision, and exactitude with which he cooked. While his contemporaries cooked out of necessity, I knew that my father was skilled, and because of that sensed that he got satisfaction even enjoyment from it; for when his son, a trained French chef began to work with him to learn Asian cuisine, they would have competitions like who could fillet a chicken leg faster. I would be the one judging and without question, my father won every time.

In our strictly take-out restaurant, portions had to fit perfectly in order to be packaged, there was no room to disguise if one cooked too much or not enough food; amounts needed to be exact. His uncanny ability to do this was so unique that in 1992, a journalist from the local paper and
regular patron wrote an article (Fig. 4.5) on my father comparing the pre-measured cooking method that the Ho-Lee Chow franchise used, and my father’s free-flowing ad-lib style: “Jim Lee does virtually all the cooking by feel...The friendly chef’s computer is mostly in his head...Jim knows without measuring exactly how much it’ll take to fill up a container. Nothing is left lying around because each dish is cooked to order” (Burliuk, 1992, p.21).

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Fig. 4.5. Jim Lee at the Silver Wok. (1992). *The Whig Standard Magazine.* September 26.

My father took pride in what he cooked, taking the time to make the popular “Chinese-Canadian” standby: Sweet and Sour Chicken Balls. Dredging morsels of chicken breast in seasoned corn starch before dropping them in batter, he would then pick them out gingerly and
gently squeeze perfect little globes through his thumb and index finger in a loose fist. They are not machine perfect, but each one is perfectly hand-made, every time.

To my father, cooking and the restaurant was his business; it was how he took care of his family, not only feeding us in the food he made, but feeding in terms of money for education, clothing, shelter, and so on. He was generous, letting me eat anything I wanted off the menu, even if it was the most expensive, like shrimps and lobster sauce. At the restaurant he was the boss: the man, and the kitchen was his domain.

But the kitchen at home was off-limits, which supports Isabelle de Solier’s assertion that paid professional labour in the kitchen has been associated with the male gender, and unpaid domestic with the female. The food and the way that it is cooked in the different contexts is also seemingly gendered: what my father cooks is for the business, handled in measured portions, like a science, and therefore masculinized, whereas what the women cook is not executed for making money, but for the family, more flexible, and certainly not exact, and therefore feminized. At work, he wielded the spatula over flaming hot woks, yet at home, he ate what my mother or grandmother cooked, using ingredients seldom seen on restaurant menus in Kingston such as: salted dehydrated fish and ginger, canned dace with black bean, steamed ground pork with pickled duck eggs, fermented bean curd in hot chilli sauce, shrimp paste on tofu with scallions, congee (rice porridge) with black eggs and pickled pearl onions, and so on. Basically, he ate at home the food he never cooked at the restaurant. This was the “authentic” Chinese food that you couldn’t get take-out for.
From my father, I came to see food as not only a way to make a living, but through what he cooked, I came to understand what Canadians liked to eat, and to them, what Chinese food was. I was able to experience this only when we had our own restaurant. By eating everything on the menu, I consumed much more than food; I had another perspective from which to view my “ethnic” cuisine. Through my father, I understood how we, as a people, could belong:

When migrants find themselves in unfamiliar sensory and cultural environments, eating is an inevitable component of daily life that forces them to interact physically, emotionally, and cognitively with the surrounding Otherness...Through these interactions, migrants transform anonymous and threatening spaces into significant and culturally meaningful places that blur the apparent dichotomy between the global and the local (Parasecoli, 2014, p.418).

That is, we can change our cuisine, adjust our palate to the “Other” as a means of belonging. For probably as a result of working in some diners in the early years, my father’s favourite meal was actually a T-Bone steak with fried onions and steak sauce, followed by coconut cream pie; perhaps he too was lured by the new cuisine that he found himself immersed in and wanted to experience and savour it (as I did as a child in Chapter Two). Through his extensive restaurant experience, my father knew what Canadians wanted to eat, what would sell, he knew what he wanted to eat, and he also knew what one needed to eat to belong. To the contrary, my mother being on the home-front was grounded in her traditional Chinese roots and because of this, she was not exposed to Canadians and the Canadian palate as my father was.

My Mother - Choi-Yuk Lee aka “Jade Lee”

My mother joined my father in Canada in 1959 with virtually no English skills. In rather quick succession, six children followed, one a year except for a considerable gap between the first four
and the last two. With a full house, my mother’s job was clear and also not unusual for the time. Even decades later however, while men are cooking more, the responsibility is still overwhelmingly on the female (de Solier, 2013, p.129).

As my mother describes it, one’s ability to love and be loved is tragically affected by growing up motherless as she had. Her mother died of tuberculosis and immediately upon giving birth to my mother they were separated for fear of infection (my mother would not even know what her own mother looked like until she was in her late 20’s). Like in fairy tales, her childhood had its share of abusive step-relatives, but unfortunately, that’s where the fairy tale ends. She was obedient because she knew she had no support and had to be. That meant that when her uncle had aspirations to immigrate to America, by becoming a chef as his specialized skill, my mother became his assistant. Rather than occupy his daughters’ leisure time, his niece’s time was apparently fair game.

From her uncle, my mother learned how to make *Dim Sum*, small dishes, *tapas*-style served with tea: *har gow* (shrimp dumplings), *siu mai* (pork dumplings), barbecue pork buns, and others. She also learned the complex and lengthy process of how to make the much politically maligned delicacy, “Shark’s Fin Soup”. This involved soaking the dehydrated fins for a week, replacing the water daily with freshly boiled water to gently re-hydrate the fins without breaking them. Then it would take about a whole day to separate each fibre in the fin by hand, and then prepare the combination of reduced chicken and pork soup stocks, thinly sliced chicken breast, and slowly add lightly beaten egg whites to the boiling soup creating long ribbons of egg white mimicking the ribbons of shark’s fin.
Her time was taken up with learning and not the freedom to do as she pleased. And while one can detect residual resentment when she reminisces, her tone quickly focuses on the valuable skills she acquired from this experience. Such skills would prove to be useful and come to define who she became: a nurturer characterized by generosity, first with her family but also her friends and community.

Clearly, providing nourishment is a nurturing act, characteristic of the feminine; feeding six children, is an enormous responsibility, and not one that many would consider a “leisure activity”. For leisure activities or hobbies in this case, are divorced from the responsibility of cooking every day (de Solier, 2013, p.30). However, it is argued that one’s attitude toward obligation and leisure depends on one’s understanding of it (Stebbins, 1992, p.4). For according to Robert Stebbins, there are “disagreeable” and “agreeable” obligations: the former being associated with work and the latter with fond memories and enthusiasm (Stebbins, 2007, p.72-73). With one glance at the pictures displayed throughout her home, and the sheer volume of photo albums she has, it becomes evident that my mother was determined to create memories for our family. And she still goes about such a task with enthusiasm.

An apt description of the place food and cooking occupies in my mother’s life is Luce Giard’s definition of cooking as an “agreeable obligation” and “a place of happiness, pleasure, and discovery” (Giard, 1998, p.151). For when my mother makes brown sugar cake, she explains that due to the beating of the ingredients, the temperature of the steam and length of cooking time, it is not easy for each cake, the size of a muffin, to have the signature 4-way split across the
top. So it is with visible joy that each time when she removes the lid to reveal the perfect cakes inside, she exclaims, “Here comes the bride!” It has been long clear to me that to my mother, cooking and food are strongly connected to happiness, pleasure, discovery, and the foundation of family bonding.

Perennially concerned with my food intake, it seems, my mother’s first words whenever she sees me is, “Did you eat?” or “Are you hungry?” At the kitchen table was where my large family bonded, no matter what our age or occasion. In fact, with six kids and now their kids, it seems there is always an occasion. One gets the distinct feeling when coming to my family’s get-togethers that it is the connecting that is the point with food as the backdrop. The fact that our photo albums are littered with pictures of family and food is testament to her deep understanding of the power and place of food, for it is ever-present almost like a character itself. She would throw dinner parties so large that tables were set up in the living room, hallway, and backroom. It is shown in Fig. 4.6 and Fig. 4.7 that with tables brimming over with plates of food, her hospitality is indisputable.

Fig. 4.6. (Left) Dinner party at our house, my father at the left with dinner guests. (1976). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

Fig. 4.7. (Right) Dinner party at our house, from left, dinner guest, my grandmother, her daughter (1976). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.
Yet, to my mother, it is not only the cooking of food that has importance, but also its cultivation which is similarly demonstrated in her garden. Colin Campbell considers gardening as well as cooking to be what he terms, “craft consumption” where the product that one creates is then ingested by the creator (Campbell, 2005, p.33-34). To grow things or to cook satisfies the innate drive to create (de Solier, 2013, p.143). de Solier succinctly states the reason for this:

>[P]eople have a strong desire...an essential human need...to be---a *producer of* material objects not just a consumer. This is considered more substantial because it involves injecting the self into the material object through the production process---developing a new relationship to the object (de Solier, 2013, p.144).

Through her garden, my mother has another outlet for her generosity, because every year whatever she grows: bitter melon, winter melon, bok choy, gai lun, snow peas, squash, green beans, Asian pears, apples, tomatoes, and so on, she shares. For to reap a large harvest is no small feat, garnering the respect and envy of her peers. Her garden and gardening made such an impression on me as a child that how big and how many winter melons she grew inspired me to write a children’s story: Melons! Mellens! Mellins! Which was submitted to the 2007 Writer’s Union of Canada contest for Children’s Literature. The following (with fictional names in tact) is revised.

Melons! Mellens! Mellins! *[Revised]*

Karen Li’s mom grew the biggest melons in Kingston. The melons were of all shapes and sizes. Some were short and round like a pear, others were long and wide like a big hot dog. Sometimes the melons were almost as big as Karen. Her mom would lay her down beside these big melons and take her picture. Then, Karen’s mom would hold her belly and laugh and laugh.
The melons were everywhere in the backyard! Their leaves were so big they were larger than Karen’s face. The melons would grow out and spread over the grass. If you lifted a leaf, you could see a big melon almost saying, “Peek-a-Boo!”

Karen had fun with her mom trying to find all the hidden melons: some would hang, others would lie on top of the fence. But where ever they were, the melons seemed to slowly take over. The backyard was getting smaller and smaller until it became a jungle of melons. Karen grew tired of the melons --- there were too many to count, and the leaves were prickly making her say, “ouch!” when they brushed her leg.

Finally, the day came when Karen’s mom cut all the melons: Snip! Snip! Snip! They all came down so quickly. Karen’s mom laid them out on newspaper and said, “You know, I do have the most and the biggest melons in all Kingston! I want to show; I mean, share them with everyone!” So Karen and her mom got in the car with a big box of melons and gave them to friends. Her mom waited in the car as Karen delivered to Mrs. Woo, The Chans, Mr. and Mrs. Lau, and the Luis. Everyone was so pleased when they received the melons and exclaimed, “My goodness! Your mom sure has the biggest melons!”

But when Karen went home, she realized now the melons were everywhere inside the house. She always played in the basement; that was her special playground. But now, the melons were there too. First they invaded her outside space, now they invaded her inside space. Karen didn’t like it, but she shared her space with the melons, just the same. She shared right through the autumn, and into the winter.

And then one winter day, it snowed and snowed and snowed. It snowed so much Karen couldn’t see their car. It snowed so much the buses stopped and the schools closed. It snowed
so much all the grocery stores closed. Karen’s mom couldn’t do the shopping that day, so at supper time, Karen asked, “What’s for dinner?” Karen’s mom replied, “You’ll see, it’s the Snow Day Surprise!” Karen wondered, ‘Could it be hot dogs? Or vegetable soup? Or fish sticks?’

Moments later, Karen’s mom said, “Dinner’s ready!” And Karen went to the kitchen and saw Melons! Mellens! Mellins! Karen’s mom made a melon soup, then some little melon pancakes, and the best of all, was sweet mashed melon. And of course, there was also rice.

That night, Karen ate and ate and ate. Those prickly melons that took over all her inside and outside space, those melons that were almost as big as her, were sure yummy that cold winter night.

ANALYSIS

Based on my childhood, the story locates the significance of the winter melons to my mother’s sense of identity as nurturer and provider. And also as the story suggests, what she cultivated was so much more than mere vegetables: they were like her children too, vying for space as we did. And as the season wore on, it seemed clear who was requiring more attention.

My mother included us in her gardening, in its nurturing, as one would younger siblings, protecting and minding them. This emphasis led to unconventional methods including salting slugs after dark to ensure the leaves of her vegetables remained pristine, which was a two-part process: first she’d salt them while they were on the leaf, then after a few moments, return with tweezers to remove them. She would also keep a pail beside all the toilets with a pot in it, so whenever we’d go to the bathroom, we would scoop out our urine into the pail, to which she
would add regular plant food. This combination held more nutrients than any product that one could get at a garden centre. At least this was what she believed. Yet bizarre as her techniques were, undoubtedly, she’d have the largest if not one of the largest harvests in the city.

The story illustrates that as a child I remember the fall meant not only the beginning of a new school year, but that it also signalled the delivering of vegetables to what seemed like the entire Chinese community in Kingston. It was as if we were carrying out an annual service, one that was always greeted with appreciation, especially by the elderly Chinese folk. And of course, there were always photos. Fig. 4.8 supports what I had always believed: that when my mother photographed her harvest, the people in the shots were there simply to offer scale to her vegetables, the obvious stars here.

![Image of harvest](image-url)

Fig. 4.8. In the basement, my mother at the back, holding a winter melon. (1977). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.
And though it is made evident in the story that her garden was (and is) her pride and joy, it has always been her children that are at the forefront of everything she did; my mother repeatedly said that her goal was to have one property per child, much to my father’s chagrin, for it meant too many late nights at the restaurant, often taking orders long past closing time. My parents bonded, if not locked horns in their commitment to the family.

Before we had the restaurant, feeding our large family was challenging (with organ meat as a staple, as discussed in Chapter Two). But as soon as she was able, it seemed my mother couldn’t cook enough. My father used to tease her about her inaccurate portions; when cooking the more authentic dishes on the Chinese menu, there were always leftovers. Conversely, when he cooked, nothing was left. And I’d agree with him, thinking that she wasn’t as experienced, didn’t have it down to a science like he had, and with the “computer” in his head measuring out exactly what he needed per dish as the journalist from the Kingston newspaper wrote (Burliuk, 1992, p.21). But now I have a different understanding; the food that remained was routinely offered to us. One could argue that my mother’s approach to cooking focused on nourishment, and was consequently feminized; for when she cooked, my mother had her children in mind, whereas my father’s approach was masculinized as he had the bottom line in mind. Each took care of the family but in different ways. And as if to compensate for not having better cuts of meat when we were younger, once the opportunity arose to eat the “specialty” Chinese dishes, my mother always made extra, so we could savour what we couldn’t as children. In other words, she got her portions exactly right, just like my father.
While one cooked the more “authentic” Chinese dishes at the restaurant and the other the more “Canadianized” ones, another difference between my parents becomes evident. Fabio Parasecoli writes about the immigrant experience in terms of food as a vehicle for cultural assimilation or separation:

As a consequence, they can assume a variety of positions in a spectrum that goes from the staunchest defense of what they perceive as traditions to the enthusiastic embrace of culinary elements from the host community, which in turn entails further negotiations with other family members who may assume different approaches (Parasecoli, 2014, p.420).

Through my mother, I came to see that food can be like an anchor, grounding us to our past, or as a link, a gateway if you will, to our heritage. And I’ve come to realize that knowing one’s roots rather than trying so hard to reject it, is vital to one’s sense of self. The quote captures the binary attitudes of my mother’s position as “staunchest defense” of her culture, and my father’s stance of receiving Canada in an “enthusiastic embrace”. In this unique way, I had the privilege to see the power of food from both perspectives: as a means of protecting traditions on the one hand, and being open to creating new ones on the other. And with the introduction of my grandmother into our family in the late 1960s, it would herald another perspective on the power of food.

My Grandmother - Chung Shun Chan

At the age of thirty-two, my grandmother was widowed. Her and my grandfather had already been apart for a few years as he was trying to make his fortune in New York. It was a common practice in the 1920s to send money overseas to one’s family back in China. But when he died leaving her with two small girls and strict instructions to adopt a seven year old boy, it is easy to
see how her relationship with my father was fraught with conflict, resentment and bitterness from the start.

She had met my mother first in China, which developed into a friendship, and in many ways, was like the mother-daughter relationship my mother never had. As her affection for my mother grew, my grandmother thought of her son, who was single and in Canada, by now. Orchestrated by my grandmother, a pen-pal relationship between my parents began. Due to the seemingly maternal bond between my mother and grandmother, a few years after my mother’s arrival in Canada, she initiated the process of her mother-in-law’s immigration.

While my father handled the majority of the food at the restaurant, at home it was the women in the family who ruled the kitchen. In fact, in many other ways, my grandmother became the head of the household, especially if you consider the fact that she was respected as much as feared as a gauge of this.

The following story, “Of Bullfrogs and Magic” is based on a childhood experience involving a bullfrog, my grandmother, and her “special skills”, which highlight her position in the family. In the excerpt, names remain fictionalized, though the format has been slightly modified. The narrative illustrates not only her area of expertise, but also her beliefs about this life, the afterlife, and how sometimes they overlap. In the analysis afterward, the knowledge she brought with her from China will be discussed in order to emphasize what I came to understand as her relationship with food, the role it played in her life, and ultimately how it impacted mine.
Of Bullfrogs and Magic [Revised Excerpt]

Sam’s grandmother held the cleaver in her right hand while holding a stone block in her left. She wet the stone, and dragged the knife back and forth along it in precise movements, unhurried and with just the right amount of pressure that only came with experience, much like a barber sharpening the razor before a shave. It was a knife you couldn’t find in any store. Made of stainless steel, the handle had chevron shaped grooves for gripping, and the blade from handle to tip was slightly curved. She watched her grandmother’s hands, mesmerized by the hissing sound of knife against stone.

Her brothers burst through the door.

“Hey Gram, look what we got!”

“A bullfrog? No fish, snake or eel?” Her eyes shifted from frog to boys then back again.

“What am I going to do with a bullfrog?”

“You’ll think of something.”

And they left.

Sam heard rumours about pigeons, raccoons, and possibly even squirrels. Each of these commonplace animals when cooked, brined, boiled or braised with her special herbs could be transformed into healing potions that cured everything from giddiness to nausea. Her grandmother, Ah-Ngyin knew all kinds of secrets.

Such secrets and magical potions usually involved the basement. Held together by two boards and hinges was a makeshift room in the corner. But Sam wasn’t allowed to go there by herself. One light bulb hung from the middle of the ceiling dangling from a cord. On the shelves, row upon row were jars of herbs, odd looking roots, sticks, and shavings of some sort.
While Sam was fascinated observing her grandmother doing the necessary preparations, she couldn’t watch the actual slaughter. It was always her Ah-Ngyin who took care of such tasks; that and taking care of the “beings”. Guardian spirits, ancestors, and gods of various domains, like the kitchen god, who had a long fu-manchu-like moustache, or others with furrowed brows, sometimes wielding sabres, floated on clouds or sat on lotus bases were placed strategically around the house by her grandmother. Laid before such beings in the form of figurines, statues, or on a poster, she would arrange “offerings”: oranges, a red light, and often sticks of burning incense so she could pray to them as if to say, “Protect us and eat this fruit”.

By the back porch at the bottom of the steps, Sam’s grandmother spread newspapers around her. As she worked, she sang Chinese hymns that rhymed in a sing song cadence. And when she was ready, she sat down on a stool in the middle. The bullfrog was about the size of a medium head of cabbage. Its skin was shiny but rough and its colour was like that of the murky water it came from. Her sharpened cleaver glistened in the late afternoon sun. She placed the creature on the chopping block.

Seconds later, she came tearing into the living room. Her hair, which was always oiled down and held in place by flat bobby pins, was disheveled; wisps of white hair were out of place and pins askew. Her face was red and as she talked, barely able to keep up with the thoughts in her head, she had the eyes of a mad woman.

“I raised my knife and as it saw the blade coming down, its eyes watered and it screamed a scream that was human!”

What actually happened was she thought she heard her old neighbour in China, the one that taught her the practice, but she couldn’t say it. To say it out loud would surely be more damning or evil. She kept it to herself.
Everyone stood in disbelief, unaccustomed to the grandmother not being in control of the catch. No slaughtering was to happen. No one knew what to do with the herbs in the room downstairs either. So they waited. Until Sam’s brother asked:

“Where’s the bullfrog?”

“Well obviously, I had to let it go!”

There would be no bullfrog soup, or bullfrog bones to suck on because on that day, the grandmother who had a soup for every ailment, had been bullied by a bullfrog.

ANALYSIS

The story showcases the cleaver as almost a character in itself; it was the only knife my grandmother used, which contrasts markedly with my father’s arsenal of blades. This would suggest one of two things: either his knowledge was so vast that he had an understanding of different blades for different purposes, as is the case with professional chefs, or it could be that my grandmother was that competent with her knife that one blade was all she needed to perform any task. But both may be true---my dad’s truth in the restaurant, and my grandmother’s truth in the home.

My grandmother was illiterate and compounded with being a widow and single mother, this put her at a gross disadvantage, especially at that time in China. Gayatri Spivak’s definition of the Subaltern seems fitting here; “The word ‘subaltern’, first of all, has both political and intellectual connotations. Its implied opposite is of course, ‘dominant’ or ‘elite’, that is, groups in power” (Guha & Spivak, 1988, v). For to give voice to the voiceless struck a chord with me and is the basis of Subaltern Studies; “the work of the Subaltern scholars can be seen as...attempts in the
West...to articulate the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups---women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups, refugees, exiles, etc..” (Guha & Spivak, 1988, vi).

That she was unable to write her own history resonated with me on a deep level from an early age. In my way, I’ve tried to express and share her story, her life, with others, articulating what she could not in words. Her struggles, which I had often heard about usually over the making of some kind of food, were etched into my memory. Because of this, she often appeared in my writing, if not a peripheral character then the main character (Through My Eyes, 2006; Lily Liu Was Only Two, 2007; My Grandmother Ah-Ngyin, 2007; Not Rice Again!, 2007; Seven Days Cereal, 2008; Of Bullfrogs and Magic, 2010). So a few months after she passed away in 2006, I decided to write a novel. Through My Eyes is about her life, who she was, that is, through all the fragments of who we thought she was, which may or may not be who she really was. As if assembling pieces of a scattered puzzle with broken bits, I tried to create a portrait of her in honour of her memory.

And yet while she had her struggles, the narrative suggests that in my family, she was also the only one in possession of a certain knowledge---of herbs---and their medicinal properties---which made her mysterious, enigmatic, and that combined with being illiterate, it is not too difficult to see that she could be viewed as a somewhat “suspicious” character. While I am not making any claims the following label fits my grandmother, I do concede that the parallels exist; “Unfortunately, the witch herself --- poor and illiterate --- did not leave us her story. It was recorded, like all history, by the educated elite, so that today we know the witch only through the eyes of her persecutors” (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, p.25).
However, to me, my grandmother was not so much scary as a healer; her version of “magic” was used for health and wellness. When it came to cooking, she did not have a huge repertoire; the brunt of her knowledge was not for cooking food but using food as medicine. From her I learned that every fruit and vegetable cooked or raw has a property: hot, cold, or neutral. Depending on its preparation and cooking method, a food could be altered. One’s condition determines the kind of preparation needed to get one’s body back to a state of equilibrium. My grandmother’s knowledge of the healing power of herbs was ingrained: since she couldn’t read or write what she knew she knew because it was passed down orally.

Whenever any one of us was sick, it could be assumed that by the end of the day if not sooner, there would be some Chinese soup to drink. Like most children, I dreaded medicine regardless of where it came from. But now I realize how rare it was to have a healer in the home, someone who knew just the right thing to make for any given ailment. She would disappear in her room of herbs, and emerge with ingredients for an elixir. Nowadays I schedule costly appointments to see a naturopathic doctor for “remedies”. For now, decades later, there is some credence to, and at least a growing number of people in the West who believe in the merits and validity of, Eastern medicine.

While my mother’s food identity was largely connected with nurturing and focused on the cultivating of that food in the form of her garden with living things, my grandmother’s area of expertise seemed to be concerned with that of the dead, that is, the afterlife, which is briefly touched on in the narrative. From China, she brought with her many practices that revered,
placated, and worshipped ancestors; this was a gendered practice that was often assigned to women, which Penny Van Esterik in her study on Thai Buddhism explains:

Laymen who have once been monks should know more than men who have never been ordained. Most Thai men acquire knowledge of Buddhism through participation in ritual requiring recitation of Pali texts; fewer women have this opportunity, and consequently fewer women can recite from these texts” (Van Esterik, 1998, p.87)...The links between givers and receivers of food are symbolic, and the manipulation of these symbols is in the hands and heads of women...By defining categories of beings, and cycles of time, food interactions reinforce the total cosmology of Thai Buddhism and place women as key social actors at the center of Buddhist action (Van Esterik, 1998, p.100).

Evident here is the dichotomy and hierarchy that ideas and thoughts belong to men, and actions to women. One way to interpret this is that, women are seemingly subservient to the men who “own” the knowledge, and yet as it is the women who perform the rituals, they are the ones who ultimately possess authority, at least to a degree, since “feeding someone gives you power over them” (Van Esterik, 1998, p.100). And if the ritual isn’t actually performed, it has no effect, no merit. Without the women then, there is no practice.

This ceremonial offering of food to spirits is passed down from mothers to daughters, which is why, it was not my mother (who grew up mother-less) but my grandmother who had such knowledge. A woman’s role is central in carrying out such ritualistic practices as Van Esterik clarifies:

Food transactions define social relationships among humans and between humans and other classes of beings. Women process, prepare, and usually present these food offerings, and the knowledge of appropriate foods and recipes is passed on orally from mothers to daughters” (Van Esterik, 1998, p.89)...Women also prepare food for deceased ancestors in order to control the ‘connectedness’ of the living and dead. On occasions of household rituals, ancestors are given small trays to sample all the food dishes prepared...By feeding the ancestors these particular foods, women are treating them as deceased humans who reside in one of the Buddhist hells or as free-floating spirits between rebirth states. These
ghosts...are placated by food offerings...not worshipped. They are treated as potentially disruptive guests at family celebrations (Van Esterik, 1998, p.90).

But why is food used in such offerings? Given that similar practices are common not only in Asian cultures warrants further inquiry. Food is significant for very specific reasons:

[F]ood is an ideal medium for expressing the ambiguity the contradiction implicit in the practice of religion. As an antecedent object, food is easily available, is infinitely varied in its transformations, and accumulates layers of associated meanings...Why are offerings to guardian spirits necessary in a world ordered by the laws of Karma?...Food is the basis for interaction with the whole range of sentient beings who populate the Buddhist cosmos---the layers of hells, the realms of animals, guardian spirits, other humans, and deities (Van Esterik, 1998, p.100).

As in the narrative, the offering is made for protection; “Protect us and eat this fruit”. Pictured below in Fig. 4.9, my family and I are in Guangdong province in China; we are gathered to pray before the burial mound of an ancestor. The offerings of half a roasted pig, chicken, goose and alcohol are displayed in the foreground. Inside the mound is a porcelain urn containing the carefully arranged bones of the deceased.

Fig. 4.9. Standing before burial mound from left to right: my sister Donna, my mother, my father, me, my sister Elaine. (1987). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.
Such ritual offerings are done as meritorious acts yet also carry social capital, for merit-making is both a public and private act, selfishly intended for one’s own future gains yet socially beneficial at the same time:

Without doubt, generous public giving is meritorious...householders who give food offerings will be rewarded in their future lives, those who do not will suffer...charity should be selfless and performed with right intention. Such an act should logically be unpublicized, unrecognized, and not done for personal aggrandizement. But in Thai communities meritorious giving is always done publicly and loudly, with the amount or quality of the gift announced over a loudspeaker or recorded with a flourish (Van Ésterik, 1998, p.97).

Apart from worshipping at a burial site, one can also pray at home; “spirit houses” (Van Esterick, 1998, p.94) are part of the cultural fabric in China, often built into the very construction of a home, conveying its unequivocal place and necessity in one’s daily life. In Fig. 4.10 and Fig. 4.11, the spirit house in my mother’s childhood home occupies one entire wall, being the home’s focal point. The wall must be on the northeast side (Van Esterik, 1998, p.93) with the offerings and incense placed before it. In the photograph my mother is seen doing the ritual offerings.

Fig. 4.10. (Left) My mother in her childhood home accompanied by neighbour. (1987). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

Fig. 4.11. (Right) My mother making the offerings. (1987). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.
Growing up in Kingston, of course, meant my exposure to such practices was minimized. In our kitchen, my grandmother would pray to our ancestors, various deities, and guardian spirits to protect us, bringing health, happiness, luck, and good fortune. She would stand before the assembled offerings at a north-facing window, and with hands clasped, participate in ancestral worship. And we would follow suit; my grandmother stood behind me, her hands over mine, raising my arms up and down in ritualistic prayer. In this way, she was the spiritual protector of the whole Lee clan. Today, my mother has assumed this role.

Fig. 4.12. Our spirit house on the wall above the offerings. (2006). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

To my grandmother, food had multiple purposes: used to heal, show ancestral respect, and as a way to practice her religiosity. Food is also capable of creating bonds, regardless of what being that bond may be with, or even in what realm for that matter. From her, I understood that food is used not only to satisfy the palate, but can nourish the body and soul, medicinally. As a young woman, I contracted “walking pneumonia” and it went undetected for months. Seeing no
improvement after countless prescriptions for antibiotics, I visited a Chinese doctor in Toronto’s Chinatown; it was a basement establishment and instantly brought back memories of my grandmother’s room of herbs lined with jars of dried unidentifiable material. The herbs measured out with an old-fashioned scale were placed on plain paper and wrapped. With strict instructions from the doctor’s son on how to go about making the remedy, I left with a sense that I had connected with my grandmother. I was not cured in one treatment; the pneumonia took a while to leave my system with a lingering cough, and it is hard to say whether it was the cause of my recovery. But I can say with confidence that it didn’t worsen my condition. As I was taking the medicine, I believed that I was getting in touch with my heritage, tuning into the wisdom of my culture, and may be even to a minute degree, my grandmother’s specialized knowledge: a powerful antidote in itself.

CONCLUSION

In the discussion “over dinner”, this chapter approached the issue of how the gendered roles in my family around food contributed to my overall developing sense of self, reiterating the assertion that upbringing shapes one’s identity. Specifically, I explored the three following relationships with: my father, mother, and grandmother. In examining this, not only my relationships with them, but how their relationships with each other affected who they are was considered. Their respective food identities, that of: breadwinner, nurturer, and healer, concomitantly informed mine.

Through my father I learned that being fed and feeding a culture is a way to create a sense of belonging. When one cooks for a culture, a sense of that very culture is presumably conveyed,
possibly leading to a “co-opting” of it, for as bell hooks writes: “[t]he overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate---that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (hooks, 1998, p.200). With “Canadianized” food like “Chicken Chow Mein” (the variety made with copious amounts of bean sprouts sprinkled with dried fried noodles, and of which I hadn’t eaten until we had our own restaurant), it is easy to see to what hooks refers. But for us, as the purveyors of such “culture” I came to see how our cuisine was viewed by the Other. Being skilled at cooking food the way the Canadians wanted it, my father carved our place in the cultural landscape through the Canadian palate that was curious and open to trying new flavours.

From him I also learned cooking techniques through the amount of time and care he would put into a common appetizer, like the eggroll. I saw how the sprouts, ground pork and seasonings were carefully blended through yet not overcooked, before he would scoop an entire wok-ful of it onto a strainer for a full day. At the next stage, and this is where I would sometimes come in, a fistful of the mixture was squeezed, by hand to form lady-finger length parcels of filling. These would be carefully placed in a large pan and chilled for another day. The following step involved the wrapping of it; the filling would be put onto eggroll skin and with an egg-wash brushed on the sides, they would be sealed and then flash fried to be ready for a second frying upon ordering. Doing it the way that he did, meant that there was enough filling to reach the flattened ends of the eggroll, that when bitten into not all the filling comes out, which is something most eggrolls I’ve eaten since tend to do. Three days of work for an item that he charged less than a dollar for. In fact, I have yet to have an eggroll like the ones my father made. But the search goes on…
While his cooking and foodways at the restaurant informed my skills as a home cook, I learned the importance of growing one’s own food and gardening methods from my mother. From the plentiful annual harvest in my mother’s garden, her emphasis on eating what you grow has become a popular pastime if not valuable skill for the future, especially in light of the current trend of eating organic and pesticide-free foods. The first thing my mother did when she bought a property like the restaurant or her current home was prepare the soil for gardening. Her new hardwood floors were barely in, and yet a trellis for her future harvest already was.

Food and being fed has consistently been an essential part of our relationship, even after she passed off the restaurant to her first-born son. She continues to make spare ribs in the authentic Chinese style with Chinese 5-spice, soup stocks with pork and chicken, and medicinal soups which my grandmother taught her. Culinary heritage and homage mean everything to her. With her past firmly rooted in tradition, my mother has not adopted the Canadian palate. When her and my father retired from the restaurant, I introduced the idea of getting fast-food breakfast. My father, naturally, appreciated the speed of such service, while my mother enjoyed it if for only one reason: that it was a novel idea, but not something she craves nor prefers.

Taking the time and care to cook for someone, even if it is only for oneself is a form of self-care, and something my mother taught me. I didn’t fully realize the importance of this until I experienced a very low period in my young adult years while in university (discussed in Chapter Three). Thankfully I eventually tapped into the love that she used in her cooking for me, and directed it to nurture myself. After years of wanting distance from my ethnic roots, eating out,
and experiencing the food of the culinary “Other”, it was the food of my childhood that brought me back to life. My mother’s focus was and is clearly on the connection between life and the living through food.

Like my mother, my grandmother also emphasized health and healing. Stories of her basement room of herbs are the stuff of fairy tales, if not horror movies, and never fail to interest and delight the ears of friends and family alike. With almost the same exactitude my father used in his restaurant cooking, my grandmother showed amounts by using the lines on her fingers as units of measurement pointing at her open palm: his approach was masculine, scientific, while her approach was feminine, and flexible. Hers is truly a lost art.

And while my grandmother, whose knowledge of herbs and Chinese medicine would to many, most certainly qualify her as a Chinese doctor today, her focus contrasted with my mother’s. Because of my grandmother we grew up with a reverence for and an awareness of spirits, that any conversation with friends or non-family members on the topic of ghosts was never a case of “do they exist” as much as “where they exist”. From her ritualistic ceremonies to daily incantations to our guardian spirits, my grandmother instilled in us the acknowledgement that our world was not the only world one could make error in: one had one’s dues to pay, with food being the conduit.

My father, mother and grandmother played the role of protector albeit in discrete ways with each in charge of different domains respectively: our home and livelihood through the business, our sense of tradition through nurturing and the cultivation of living things, and lastly, our fates in
this life, the afterlife, and beyond through religious practices. Together they took care of us from as many angles as possible: presumably, between the three of them, our past, present, and future lifetimes are taken care of.

While all three directed their efforts to the safety, security and well-being of the family, I can be quite sure that working together wasn’t always easy, with conflicts that carried over continents and crossed decades, some in fact that unfortunately rest unresolved. Exacerbating this is having a family of six children looking back, witnesses to their struggles. This must have been difficult, most probably in varying degrees of resentment to motivation: resentment because the family kept them chained to their sense of duty and obligation, and motivation to stay focused on working towards a better life. My parents and grandmother ultimately wanted their children to have the kind of future that they never had: to have an education, to dare to dream, and most importantly to have come from enough security and love that one has the confidence to realize that dream....

Smiling, my mother often says to me, that it was “all always for the kids”.

Fig. 4.13. (Left) Clockwise from the left: my father, my grandmother, my mother, brother Donnie, sister Kathy, sister Donna, me, brother Keith, sister Elaine. (1972). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.

Fig. 4.14. (Right) Clockwise from the left: brother Keith, sister Kathy, brother Donnie, sister Donna, my father, me, nephew Noah, niece Jada, my mother, sister Elaine. (2006). Photograph courtesy of Jade Lee.
The next and final chapter of this project is aptly named “Leftovers”; a summary of all previous chapters will serve as a reminder and review of the discussion in its entirety but also raise some further questions regarding identity and food, constructing identities through food, and identity in general, in other words, questions that warrant further study and inquiry.
Chapter Five

Leftovers

*Leftovers in their less visible form are called memories. Stored in the refrigerator of the mind and the cupboard of the heart.*

~ Thomas Fuller (1608-1661)

There are times when I purposely cook more than I need to so I can have leftovers for the rest of the week. At other times, leftovers are, quite simply, left over. Not all flavours and foods lend themselves well to subsequent eatings, as food becomes soggy, colours lose their vitality, and sauce consistencies change. And yet, there are other kinds of food that taste even better the next day, like pasta or curry sauces; dried spices require time to cure, to meld and marry so they can reach their full flavour potential. These are the foods that were meant for leftovers. In a similar way, there are ideas that evolve, take time to settle, percolate, in order to come into focus. And as this thesis, “I Eat; Therefore I Am” comes to a close, I’ve fittingly reserved ideas such as these for this chapter.

Given the personal nature of the narratives, the autoethnographic form as a qualitative research method was a logical choice. As an approach, however, autoethnography has been described as a genre that is “in progress” (Schoepflin, 2009, p.371), but is it? Or is it that things that don’t conform to a particular paradigm and can’t be nailed down because of their organic holistic nature (as it is based on human reflection) are always considered “in progress”, new and innovative? For the kind of scholar who doesn’t want to be hemmed in by strict formulae where
scientific rigour is tantamount to validity, this type of research would appeal to them, and it seems it is gaining in popularity, which, in itself is noteworthy (Schoepflin, 2009, p.371).

In academic and mainstream society, autoethnographers face challenges as regards the validity of the work; “it will be difficult to wean scholars and the American public from a view that measuring, comparison, and outcomes are all that matter” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.761). Although, regardless of the approach, it is important to remember that the goal is the same: to produce knowledge to enhance our understanding of the world we inhabit (Schoepflin, 2009, p.371). And the goal here was, through my personal narratives, to inspire reflection on the impact of our food and foodways on identity.

In trying to rationalize and legitimize my experiences, filling a gap in my own understanding, I have shown how food while providing us sustenance can also be a social signifier leaving impressions long after these incidents, having a trickle effect informing behaviour and actions. Whether such experiences are a matter of life and death, the impressions they leave however, can be transformative. Thus, in so analyzing, I aimed to provide a forum or create an entry point from which to begin a discussion on not just the major tragedies and traumas that have shaped us, but also the smaller ones, like our food experiences that, because are seemingly “mundane”, get overlooked as irrelevant, or worse, self-pitying when in fact, they have their own brand of power that leaves long lasting marks much like scars in their own right.

As Thomas Fuller’s opening quote suggests, if “intangible” leftovers are memories, then what memories are we left with? In the course of this thesis, with research based on food recollections
and conversations drawn from narratives I’ve written, a question emerged. A question that most probably would have remained hidden if we hadn’t embarked on this “culinary narrative journey”.

Over “Breakfast” the concepts of self-loathing and a yearning to belong were highlighted using the story, “7 Days Cereal” as a starting point. The issue of self-loathing was explored through the psychoanalytic lens of Julia Kristeva’s theories on the abjected self (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). On the notion of the tribal stigma of race, Erving Goffman’s work lent support to show how embarrassment at feeling different (Goffman, 1956, 264-271) created what Carolyn Ellis describes as a “subjective double bind of feeling not only shame for having the stigma but metashame as well---feeling ashamed for feeling ashamed” (Ellis, 1998, p.526). This chapter also dealt with the idea that food can be used as a social stabilizer to bond a community, as illustrated in the second story, “Church Potluck”. In the annual celebration put on by the Chinese Association, I’d not only see an assortment of dishes and cuisines, but I could also see other Chinese Canadian children who were just like me; with one foot in each culture and not fully belonging to either, we somehow, in our little group, found a sense of belonging---to each other. For as Slavoj Žižek explains, it is in the celebrations, of which food is a main component that community is restored and maintained (Žižek, 1993, p.202).

In Chapter Two’s “Lunch” with its two-part narrative, “Fish Heads & Tales”, the theme of belonging continued into the teen years and adulthood. The story also located the initial stirrings of curiosity marking the beginning of appetite and its alimentary pleasures. In referencing Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction and Peter Trifonas’ and Effie Balomenos’ Good Taste, a discussion of
taste, its origins, and how it can be acquired was included, rounded out by a closer examination of my food-related practices that are both consumption and production oriented: activities such as eating, being a “modified foodie”, dining out, educating myself, cooking, and writing my monthly food column that together, continue to influence and maintain my sense of self.

With “Conversations Over Dinner”, Chapter Four looked at the gendered food identities in my family, specifically my father’s, mother’s and grandmother’s, and how theirs impacted mine. Together, the narrative details of my father’s food history, the story based on my mother’s gardening in “Melons! Mellens! Mellins!”, and “Of Bullfrogs and Magic” showing my grandmother’s place in the family, underscored their respective roles of breadwinner, nurturer, and healer. With their combined focus of being protectors of the family unit, they all worked synergistically to affect my identity formation.

Flanked between the childhood memories in Breakfast and Dinner, Lunch is perhaps the place where my own identity came through clearly, as it is here that the things I do that help define who I am on a day to day basis were explored: I have an appreciation and respect for food. This chapter illustrated that through the main practices of watching food programming, dining, and then writing about what I eat, I am consumed with consuming. In fact, I have often gone way out of my way to satisfy a craving. Evidently, indulging physiological (taste buds) or social (dining out) needs, is something I’ve been given to do.

Yet, as I was writing and researching, and particularly, during “Dinner”, a question emerged. Out of investigating my father’s relationship to food, the nebulosity of identity and its
seeming fragility became clear; if identities are paper thin, and can be bought, sold, and exchanged, how meaningful and relevant are they anyway? This made me wonder about our human need for labels and distinctions so we can categorize people and things, including ourselves because if we can’t, how would we approach each other then? All would be chaos. And perhaps maybe this is the purpose of labels: to make us feel a sense, albeit, artificial, of order. Problems arise however, when we forget this and take identity too seriously, like when who we are is so attached to the jobs we have, or the things we do, or the way we look. Because when these things are lost, so are we. Who are we then, we might ask? When so much of who we’ve created a “master narrative” around disappears, it can feel like we too, are disappearing.

The notion of identity, its construction and deconstruction, resonates with me on a profound level. In Chapters Two and Three, it was apparent that not knowing “who I am” preoccupied much of my thinking as a youth; the urgent need and desperate attempts to belong, captured the melodrama if not anxiety in my world of which stigma around the food I ate and discrimination were a big part.

It was with relief then, that as I grew up, and became an educator, I could finally put what I considered a positive label on myself and say: “I am a teacher” who also “loves and lives to eat”. At the same time, I was in the big city where multiculturalism was being embraced, so I was ethnic, educated, athletic, and a young woman, with long hair, who loved food and dining out. All these facets, physical, mental and emotional created who I was. The culmination of my life experiences, both good and bad, up to this point carefully constructed my identity, and I was very protective, if not proud of who I’d become. But it was not until job loss and the fallout of a
life-threatening surgery which took many of these facets away that I felt the ground beneath me give way: too much change too quickly meant that I couldn’t recognize myself. At this low point, I realized just how attached I’d become to who I thought I was. In fact, one of the most distressing moments following surgery was when I lost my ability to taste, and with it, my enjoyment of eating, making my weight fall well below one hundred pounds (thankfully, it was short-lived, but the surgery explains why to this day, I don’t eat meat).

I found myself scrambling if not on the outside then surely on the inside, to put the pieces of my life back together: to find bits of who I was, harness them, and if impossible then replace them, hang onto them. I was lost either in my fond yet romanticized memories of the past, or furiously prioritizing to get to the finish line of some idealized redemptive future. Fact is, what I realized is that there is no finish line, because once I’d get there, I’d quickly find another one out of reach, just to keep the striving and stressing going.

But what is slowly coming into focus, much like the maturing of spices in leftover pasta sauce, is that perhaps this elusive or groundless quality of identity, which some may bemoan as the negative, is also at the same time, the positive. Breaking is not always bad. In the 15th century, Thai Buddhist monks covered up a gold Buddha with mud as they knew pillaging, robbery and destruction were imminent with Burmese invaders. They disguised their most prized possession to look like it was worthless, that when the thieves arrived, they passed it by, leaving the gold Buddha. Only the monks didn’t remove the mud, and the gold Buddha stayed covered up like that for centuries, long forgotten as priceless, until one day, it cracked. A piece of it broke and revealed the gold beneath. If not for being broken, the gold would never have been discovered.
In Eastern thought, creation and destruction are understood not as opposites but two realities that co-exist. Hindu iconography shows Brahma, the creator, on one side and the destroyer Shiva, on the other: 2 faces that comprise the whole. One incomplete without the other: that is, one is inherent in the other. Seemingly disconnected, this story relates to my food experience; while I can’t quite articulate the depth of how I long for the taste of meat (most pointedly when I smell the smokiness of bacon frying), eliminating it from my diet couldn’t have happened at a better time; vegetarian options for dining and in the marketplace have exploded, making my food column perhaps even more relevant than ever, as a reflection of the zeitgeist.

Which is why for me, having gone through, and continuing to go through my evolving relationship with food, the idea of identity is better left fluid; and the striving to create it, be something or someone needn’t be so driven. Impermanence, not only regarding who we think we are, but in general, does not have to be distressing, for not only does it mean that all good things end (like a meal of truffled mushroom ravioli), it also means that all bad things end too (my days of offal eating). Stuart Hall reminds us, that the nature of identity is its constant state of being incomplete (Hall, 1994, p.392). Or rather, in all its incompleteness, it is complete. My sense of self, including what I’ve come to understand as my food identity is perhaps best summed up with the words of Jon Kabbat-Zinn: “It is okay to just be, that we don’t have to run around all the time doing or striving or competing in order to feel that we have an identity---that we are fundamentally whole as we are” (Kabbat-Zinn, 2013, p.593).

In “I Eat; Therefore I Am”, food, and our food experiences then, go so much further beyond individual identity. In Chapter Two, food was what grounded the community, giving it roots.
This notion of having solid footing resonates in Chapter Four with the dinner parties my mother threw; our house was transformed into a place of feasting and festivity. And while I can’t recall what we ate, specifically (although I can try by looking at the photos), what lingers is the energy and buzz that people gathered together to rejoice brings. People sitting, eating, and laughing in places where I’d normally watch TV or do my homework---it was exciting for that reason, and that alone. While I saw how it brought a people together on the one hand, food that caused embarrassment, as in the story “Fish Heads & Tales”, also led to the desire to be the Other by consuming it. My appetite was insatiable, for I was consuming so much more than food: I was “ingesting” ideas, values, conventions, and beliefs, as if they were the currency for a supper club’s membership fees. And it seemed, given my dining out practices, there was no price too high.

But to develop this new identity further, my mounting knowledge and exposure to food needed an outlet: I couldn’t contain it to a private guilty pleasure. I had to reach out, and I did so in the form of my food column. In this way, I attempt to connect my love of food and the dining experience with others. By going beyond the self, I try to branch out to the greater culture and society. And I am clearly not unique in doing so.

Food, and the study of it: what it means, emotionally, culturally, economically, politically, its far-reaching implications of who gets it and who doesn’t, our choices, foodways, the preparing, the cooking, and the eating of it, has been historically associated with the feminine and therefore academically viewed as somewhat subpar (Mintz, 1996; Kelly, 2001; Xu, 2008):

While abstract ideas such as race, class, gender, and sexuality have become axiomatic in reading literature, food, in its materiality and dailiness, persists in
being associated with the mundane and feminine, and thus is often regarded as undeserving of scholarly attention (Xu, 2008, p.162).

In fact, Sidney Mintz notes that because of its feminine association, food was not worth investigating unless it involved ritual, ceremony, or was shocking in some way:

What was written about food and eating by anthropologists more than a century ago dealt mostly with feast and sacrifice—people’s food relationships with their gods; with food taboos and injunctions, usually religious in nature; with the role of foods in how people were ranked socially; with cannibalism, and why people engaged in it (Mintz, 1996, p.3).

And yet, while food has been feminized, Wenying Xu reminds us of food’s fundamental place in our lives and therefore, how it can be considered:

[We] have forgotten the cultural and political gravity of food, we have forgotten that wars have been fought because of food, and we choose to forget that starvation is a daily experience of billions. If literary studies are to investigate the human condition and to enlighten us with the human spirit, we cannot ignore food practices as a window into human consciousness and actions (Xu, 2008, p.163).

Furthermore, Mintz identifies that food is the site where staunch anthropological inquiry can happen. For it is also, and may be even more relevant to look at the way a culture lives out its daily existence rather than to understand it based on its stylized holiday rituals:

Women in such societies commonly did much of the labor to collect or grow food, as well as nearly all of the cooking. Most anthropologists were men, and didn’t find such matters especially interesting. Hence it would probably be accurate to say that food and eating got much less attention in their own right as anthropological subjects than they really deserved. They were more interesting if they offended the observer, baffled him, or were ceremonialized (Mintz, 1996, p.3).

And on this point, we can all agree that the way one eats during holiday feast times is not a reflection of the food one normally eats. It is in the banality of the everyday that is abundant with information revealing who a people and culture are. In this way, food and food studies reaches beyond the individual and the personal to include the social and global. Even in my personal reflections and stories where the food or what we ate was a key figure in the action, the
analyses weren’t limited to just my experience, but inevitably commented on the greater surrounding environment, whether it was my family, the school system in the 70s and 80s, or Kingston, Ontario, Canada, and so on.

Because food is rich in meaning, Traci Kelly says it is no surprise that culinary autobiographies are coming to the fore, creating a genre and an alimentary form for that genre, with women at the helm:

If, as ethnographers and sociologists assert, women are the keepers of traditional or ritual foods for a family or group, it only makes sense that the culinary autobiography would eventually come about (Kelly, 2001, p. 266)...Using recipes as a framework for a discourse of the self allows the author to construct milieu for others as she sees fit. It allows her to present her heritage as she knows it (whether that be a rewriting of generally known history or a challenge to cultural practices), and it gives a place to articulate alternative voices and viewpoints (Kelly, 2001, p. 267).

By mining the personal, the narratives in “I Eat; Therefore I Am” sought to spark a dialogue on the implications of such experiences, not only on the individual but also the cultural and social levels. Embarking on this “culinary narrative journey” was a way to navigate towards the goal of this thesis: to encourage the reader to consider their own food histories and food identities as well. Such questioning seemingly conveys that food’s place is central to our understanding of ourselves and humanity; it encompasses so much of who and what we are, that food studies should be a field, valued like gender, race, and sexuality studies, and thus, deserving of equal scholarship and academic inquiry. While changing attitudes takes time, and food studies remains to be feminized, rather than being maligned or apologetic for this then, I argue that it is precisely for its feminine aspect that food and food studies ought to be embraced and celebrated.
References


Endnotes

i Online publications document that the Chinese people eat monkey brains, dogs, cats, and rats, and can be found at the following links:
http://www.ibtimes.com/china-cracks-down-monkey-brain-other-wild-animal-delicacies-916161
As well, in episode 7 of Season 2’s “Bizarre Foods” program on the Travel Channel in 2008, host Andrew Zimmern features the Chinese delicacy of dining on insects, scorpions, turtles, and a worm omelet in Guangzhou, China. This episode can be viewed at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFQ5mCblRgs

ii Retrieved from the Statistics Canada website at the following link: