

Diasporic Tastescares: Intersections of
Food and Identity in Asian American
Literature

Os sabores da diáspora: comida e
identidade na literatura asiático-americana

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A meus pais, por crer en min. Por acompañarme
e darme forzas neste longo camiño.

O meu agradecemento á miña titora, Begoña Simal González,
pola súa inspiración e valiosos consellos.

Abstract

Diasporic Tastes: Intersections of Food and Identity in Asian American Literature

This dissertation seeks to explore the culinary metaphors present in a selection of Asian American narratives written by authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, May-lee Chai, Shoba Narayan, Leslie Li, Bich Minh Nguyen, Linda Furiya, Mei Ng, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Patricia Chao, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Anita Desai, Sara Chin and Andrew X. Pham. It is my contention that the intricate web of culinary motifs featured in these texts offers a fertile ground for the study of the real and imaginary [hi]stories of the Asian American community, an ethnic minority that has been persistently racialized through its eating habits. Thus, I will examine those literary contexts in which the presence of food images becomes especially meaningful as an indicator of the nostalgia of the immigrant, the sense of community of the diasporic family, the clash between generations, or the shocks of arrival and return. My approach to the culinary component will combine previous theorizations on the subject, such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's or Anita Mannur's, at the same time that I provide new points of departure from which to look into the trope of food against the backdrop of globalization and transnationalism. I argue that reading Asian American "edible metaphors" from these perspectives will prove particularly revealing in relation to the notions of "home," "identity," and "belonging"; all of them mainstays of the diasporic consciousness.

Resumen

Los sabores de la diáspora: comida e identidad en la literatura asiático-americana

Esta tesis doctoral se propone explorar las metáforas culinarias presentes en una selección de narrativas asiático-americanas escritas por autores como Jhumpa Lahiri, May-lee Chai, Shoba Narayan, Leslie Li, Bich Minh Nguyen, Linda Furiya, Mei Ng, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Patricia Chao, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Anita Desai, Sara Chin y Andrew X. Pham. Como pondrá de manifiesto este trabajo de investigación, la intrincada red de motivos culinarios que aderezan estos textos ofrece un marco incomparable para el estudio de las historias reales e imaginarias de la comunidad asiático-americana, una minoría étnica a menudo racializada a través de sus hábitos alimenticios. Así pues, examinaré aquellos contextos literarios en los que la presencia del tropo de la comida adquiere matices simbólicos en relación con la nostalgia del inmigrante, el sentimiento de comunidad en la diáspora, los conflictos entre generaciones o el choque cultural de llegada y retorno. Mi aproximación al componente culinario combinará teorizaciones previas sobre el tema, tales como las de Sau-ling Cynthia Wong o Anita Mannur, a la vez que ofrecerá nuevos puntos de partida para interpretar el tropo de la comida en el contexto de la globalización y el transnacionalismo. Considero que el análisis de estas “metáforas comestibles” desde estos puntos de vista resultará especialmente revelador a la hora de ahondar en los conceptos de “hogar,” “identidad” y “pertenencia”; todos ellos pilares de la conciencia diaspórica.

Resumo

Os sabores da diáspora: comida e identidade na literatura asiático-americana

Esta tese de doutoramento propónse explorar as metáforas culinarias presentes nunha selección de narrativas asiático-americanas escritas por autores como Jhumpa Lahiri, May-lee Chai, Shoba Narayan, Leslie Li, Bich Minh Nguyen, Linda Furiya, Mei Ng, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Patricia Chao, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Anita Desai, Sara Chin e Andrew X. Pham. Como porá de manifesto este traballo de investigación, a ensarillada rede de motivos culinarios que aderezan estes textos ofrece un marco incomparable para o estudo das historias reais e imaxinarias da comunidade asiático-americana, unha minoría étnica a miúdo racializada a través dos seus hábitos alimenticios. Así pois, examinarei aqueles contextos literarios nos que a presenza do tropo da comida adquire matices simbólicos en relación coa morriña do inmigrante, o sentimento de comunidade na diáspora, os conflitos entre xeracións ou o choque cultural de chegada e retorno. A miña aproximación ao compoñente culinario combinará teorizacións previas sobre o tema, tales como as de Sau-ling Cynthia Wong ou Anita Mannur, ao tempo que ofrecerá novos puntos de partida para interpretar o tropo da comida no contexto da globalización e o transnacionalismo. Considero que a análise destas “metáforas comestibles” desde estes puntos de vista resultará especialmente reveladora á hora de afondar nos conceptos de “fogar,” “identidade” e “pertenenza”; todos eles piares da conciencia diaspórica.

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Introduction

“Literary language can be mouth-filling or subtly flavoured, meaty or hard-boiled, spicy or indigestible. Words can nourish or poison, and somewhere beneath this figurative equation lurks [...] a sign which is also a meal.”

Terry Eagleton, “Edible écriture”

Food. Beyond its strictly material sense, this four-letter word contains as many meanings and symbolic connotations as we can imagine. In fact, food is never just about physical nourishment, and we should not let ourselves be misled by its quotidian nature into thinking about eating as an unimportant and trivial activity. Borrowing Terry Eagleton’s words, food constitutes and “endlessly interpretable” object of “materialised emotion” (204). Everything that has to do with food needs to be read in between the lines, and it is often difficult to interpret its implicit meanings, as they pertain to the most intimate and impenetrable wells of human (ir)rationality. Not only do we eat because we are hungry, but also because we are anxious; we not always stop eating in the name of satiety, but because we are somehow emotionally starved. Similarly, while food often constitutes a—more or less conscious—tool for benign and voluntary self-definition and/or affiliation with a certain community, it can also work as part of the processes of stereotyping and oppression. As will be shown in the first chapter of this dissertation, food studies have mostly fed from anthropological and sociological theories. However, when we readers and literary researchers reflect on food in a more exhaustive

way, the presence of culinary images in literature does not go unnoticed; on the contrary, they stand out as kaleidoscopic lenses that allow us to make inquiries into the different stories behind acts of consumption or starvation in certain socio-historical contexts.

Stemming from such an awareness of and fascination with the symbolic power of food in literature, this dissertation seeks to explore the rich texture of the “edible metaphors” present in a selection of Asian American literary works. I argue that this immigrant community’s inextricable link with food, which—as will be dealt with in the following chapter—has complex historical and sociological origins, makes it urgent and necessary not to overlook the figurative use of food in this community’s literary manifestations. In fact, as Anita Mannur argues, for a community who has been historically racialized through their eating habits, food is much more than mere physical sustenance, as “it also feeds into the literary rendering of [the group’s] subjectivity,” providing “a language through which to imagine Asian alterity in the American imagination” (*Culinary Fictions* 13). I believe that the prevailing presence of culinary images in Asian American literature is not anecdotal, much less accidental. In fact, food tropes and motifs work in Asian American literature as indicators of the ontological and material experience of this heterogeneous and multiethnic diasporic community in the United States. Thus, this dissertation will explore and interpret the “edible écriture” (Eagleton 203) of a selection of Asian American narratives in order to unearth matters of memory, identity, ethnicity, and race.

This piece of research comes to join a very recent discussion on the potential and versatility of the culinary as a discursive space where cultural, psychological, ethnic, racial, or emotional aspects can be subtly encoded. Despite

the growing interest in food studies since the 1980s, there is, Mannur contends, “a relative dearth of critical analysis of film and literature about food” (*Culinary Fictions* 10). Among the few attempts to explore the possibilities and limits of food-oriented literary analysis three works stand out. On the one hand, *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth- and Twentieth Century Women’s Writing* (2003)—edited by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran—, or Alice L. McLean’s *Aesthetic Pleasure in Twentieth Century Women’s Food Writing* (2012) take a feminist stance in order to look into the ways in which food is used to represent the female body in an eclectic selection of works.¹ On the other, Annette Magid’s collection *You Are What You Eat: Literary Probes into the Palate* (2008) presents a much broader scope in terms of both the theoretical approaches it combines and the variety of texts it analyses.² However, despite the fact that these three works include some isolated chapters on works written by “ethnic” authors, were it not for the research done by critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong,³ Wenying Xu, or the aforementioned Mannur, among others, the presence of the culinary component in ethnic minority literatures, such as the Asian American tradition, would have remained utterly underrepresented.

¹ The presence of ethnic minority literatures in these two collections is very limited, though the name of the Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong stands out as one of the authors studied in McLean’s volume.

² Magid’s volume spans a wider range of literary and artistic genres and disciplines across time and geographical or cultural origin. The presence of ethnic minority literatures is again very scarce, with only a brief article by Ya-Hui Irenna Chang on the metaphors of consumption in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984).

³ Even though MLA format for non-parenthetical references recommends to specify the author’s first name initials in cases of same surname co-occurrence, I have decided—for the sake of readability—to omit this extra information wherever the context clarifies which of the authors I am referring to. This is the case, for instance, of Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Morrison G. Wong, and Scott K. Wong, to whom I will refer in the text by their surname unless additional clarification is needed. Other cases in which I will consistently apply this rule are those of authors listed under the surnames Cohen, Chin, Narayan, Ng, or Nguyen, among others. I will follow MLA’s indications for surname co-occurrence in parenthetical references.

The seed for the still incipient study of food metaphors in Asian American literature was planted by Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993); a thematic analysis that, for the first time, devoted much deserved attention to the relationships between food, ethnicity, race, and culture in this flourishing literary tradition. As the title of this groundbreaking book indicates, Wong articulates her theorizations around the food-related paradigm of "Necessity versus Extravagance." Inspired by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), such a thematic binary refers to "two contrasting modes of existence": the "survival-driven" world of the immigrant generation, and the freedom-seeking nature of the American-born generation (S. Wong, *Reading* 13). Thus, Wong explores the—so often narrativized—different experiences and behavior of Asian- and American-borns by paying attention to the contrast between the usually frugal eating habits of first-generation immigrants and the more whimsical and pleasure-driven tastes of their descendants. Wong's paradigm ultimately serves as an illuminating guideline for a culinary-oriented reading of the ontological conditions of the characters portrayed, paving the way for the emergence of other works such as Jennifer Ann Ho's *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (2005) or Xu's *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (2008), which follow in Wong's footsteps and dwell on the complexities of identity formation as represented through food images. Ho's book makes an incursion into the "Asian American bildungsroman" so as to tease out how the variables of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality align with food matters, shaping "the adolescent's coming-of-age" in the context of a white-dominated United States (7). Similarly, though not restricted to the adolescent characters, Xu's subsequent research on the fraught

relationship between food and the “self,” broadened the scope of the field by freeing the trope of food from its previous binaries of first- vs. second-generation. This progressive development in the field of food in Asian American literature had significant consequences, for it propitiated the appearance of richer and multidisciplinary approaches to this issue both in prose and in poetry. According to Fred L. Gardaphe and Wenying Xu,

[f]ood tropes, metaphors, and images serve as figures of speech which depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism. In the United States, relationships between food and ethnicity bear historical, social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological significance. In other words, ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food production and services, culinary creativities, appetites, desires, hunger, and even vomit. (5)

The polyvalent and inexhaustible nature of culinary images also motivated Mannur’s research on food in Asian American cultures and literary texts. Entitled *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Cultures* (2010), Mannur’s study stands out as an epitome of the innovations in this field. Her book hit new ground by exploring the experience of the South Asian immigrant community in the United States through culinary lenses. The result is a landmark work that sheds new light on matters of cultural authenticity, heteropatriarchy, or the exoticization of the “other,” among other contemporary and pressing issues. In keeping with this innovative trend, Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Mannur herself recently published *Eating Asian America* (2013). This volume, though mostly focused on cultural studies and sociology, does not neglect the importance of food

in Asian American literature, devoting one section of the book to offering new interpretations of this matter from an ecocritical or queer perspective, among others.⁴

It is precisely within this recently-articulated framework of new approaches and unexplored horizons that my dissertation emerges as an attempt to revise and expand the interpretative possibilities that food offers in Asian American literature. Therefore, it is my aim not only to revisit “old” theorizations on the culinary signifier in order to ascertain their applicability in subsequently published literary works, but also to transcend traditional readings so as to make incursions into new fertile grounds of interpretation that connect the literary representation of food and culinary rituals with multidisciplinary matters of individual and collective memory, with the immigrant’s shock of arrival and/or return, or with mass consumerist culture and its anxieties. I work with the hypothesis that a thorough reading of the Asian American experience, as represented in its literary tradition, can be attained by looking into the variety of food-related topics that this dissertation will tackle. Aware of and respectful towards the heterogeneous nature of this ethnic—or we could even say “multiethnic”—minority,⁵ this dissertation will not solely focus on a particular national-origin group, but it will study a combination of fictional and

⁴ Apart from the aforementioned research on food in Asian American literature and/or cultural expressions, other articles have been published in journals and compilations. See Gunew, “Introduction,” and “Mouthwork”; Raussert; Arfaoui; Kurjatto-Renard; Williams; Ya-Hui I. Chang; Manalansan, “Prairiescapes,” “Immigrant,” “Empire,” and “Cooking”; Mannur, “Feeding,” “Food,” “Model,” “Peeking,” and “Asian”; or Phillips, “Questionable” and “Quieting,” just to name a few. In addition, it is worth mentioning Dalessio’s *Are We What We Eat? Food and Identity in Late Twentieth Century American Ethnic Literature* (2009), which devotes some attention to the trope of food in Asian American literature.

⁵ For the sake of consistency, I will mostly use the term “ethnic minority/group/community” in order to refer to Asian Americans. However, as will be explained in the following chapter, this should be understood as a mere organizational category devoid of any literal meaning, since it would be aberrant to conceive the Asian American community as made up of a single “ethnic group.” The lack of a better terminology forces me to refer to Asian Americans as an “ethnic minority” in the hope that readers remain aware of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, economic, and religious diversity behind this label.

autobiographical narratives written by authors of Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and Vietnamese ancestry. I will venture into this multiethnic and multicultural culinary-guided exploration under the influence of Wong's cautionary remarks about the "context-sensitive" nature of "culinary semiotics" (*Reading 19*). That is, Wong warns us about the risks of falling prey to "ahistoricity" and "decontextualization" when "grouping together texts that could be placed in narrower, [or] historically more familiar ethnic categories" (*Reading 17*). In order to avoid this, my analysis will remain vigilant of the fictional as well as socio-historical contexts and idiosyncrasies behind the culinary imagery used by each writer. It is only by approaching this topic from this diversity-conscious perspective that we will be able to get a glimpse of what I have called, inspired by David Sutton's term, the Asian American diasporic tastescapes (91).

My decision to focus on fictional and autobiographical narratives is motivated by an obvious need to reduce the scope of my study, as trying to cover other literary genres like poetry or drama would be too ambitious and it would result in too superficial and inconsistent an analysis. Besides, as Wong points out, fictional narratives—such as novels or short stories—together with the different subgenres of life writing—namely memoirs or auto/biographies—, are the ones that "exhibit more readily discernible linkages to the extratextual world" (*Reading 12*). I am aware of the precautions that need to be taken when one embarks in a thematic study like the one this dissertation offers, for, as Thomas Pavel puts it, literary critics should never "lo[se] sight of the gap between the topics they care about and the thematic material highlighted in the text" (133). That is, we should not mistake the aesthetic worlds of literature—be they fictional or autobiographical—for accurate historical, sociological, or ethnographical records.

While bearing this in mind, I argue that food functions in Asian American literature as a discursive zone where the literary world interacts with its extraliterary conditions. Thus, as Mannur rightly claims, culinary images can be read “as epistemological device[s] to navigate the imagined worlds of Asian America while simultaneously [...] opening a window onto the ethnic and racial lives of minoritized subjects” (*Culinary Fictions* 17). Still, I consider it necessary to clarify that this culinary-inspired dissertation does not mean to reduce the richness of Asian American literary expressions to the presence of food-related images and metaphors. Nor do I seek to present a simplistic picture of this community’s history and identity as a collection of embodied recipes. In fact, by centering this study on images of consumption, it is my intention not only to acknowledge the versatility of this motif in the Asian American diasporic imaginary, but also to repudiate exoticizing and essentialist renderings of this ethnic minority’s everyday encounters and relationship with food, whose conspicuous nature hides fictional and real stories of racism and resistance.

The multiple perspectives from which food can be studied—anthropology, psychology, sociology, or cultural and literary studies among others—, have determined the eclectic and multidisciplinary nature of the theoretical sources my dissertation will feed from. In Xu’s words, a sustained reading of Asian American literature from a culinary standpoint “wonderfully frustrates any attempt to keep one’s theoretical position singular” (*Eating* 17). In the same vein, Mannur affirms that literary food studies “cannot be bound by a set methodology, nor can [they] be firmly wedded to a single discipline” (*Culinary Fictions* 18). My approach to the discursive potential of alimentary images in Asian American literature will also denote this eclecticism. This will initially become apparent in the content of the first

chapter, which, as is customary, will provide an overview of the critical apparatus behind my analysis. For organizational purposes, this first chapter will be divided into three different though intimately interrelated sections. The first one, “Ethnicity and Race: The Asian American Case” (1.1), will offer a brief approach to the convoluted notions of ethnicity and race, in their most conceptual and theoretical sense. Within this first section I will also include a concise summary of the history of the Asian American community, tracing their trajectory to the present-time, exploring the ways in which they have been othered and racialized in the United States, and assessing how this has affected their intergenerational relationships. The following section, “Diaspora and Multiculturalism in the Transnational Context” (1.2), seeks to explore the concept of “diaspora” by examining its evolution and current intersections with the phenomenon of globalization. This will inevitably lead us to tackle the increasingly complex notions of “home” and “belonging” in a transnational context, as well as the conceptualizations of “difference” in multiculturalist agendas. The last section of this chapter, “The Icing on the Cake: Understanding Food” (1.3), will try to gather and explain some of the many different points of view from which foodways and eating have been studied. Starting with purely anthropological and sociological theorizations on food as a system of communication or as an extension of the “self,” I will progressively lead the discussion towards the multilayered significance of food in diasporic contexts, where it taps into the spheres of identity and memory. Finally, these preliminary theoretical considerations could not end without a close look at the phenomenon of “ethnic food” within the context of mass consumerism, a wave of food-related exoticism that has shaped the experience of people of Asian ancestry in the United States.

The second chapter of this dissertation, “Food and Memory in Displacement: Lahiri’s ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ and Chai’s *Hapa Girl*,” opens the literary analysis with a study on how food, along with the sensory stimuli it triggers, nurtures memory in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story (1999) and May-lee Chai’s memoir (2007). According to Martin F. Manalansan IV’s argument in “The Empire of Food,” the senses are “the building blocks of everyday experiences that eventually become routinized into manageable and domesticated forms like daily habits” (94). To judge from Lahiri’s and Chai’s texts, these sensory “building blocks” are often represented in Asian American literature as the foundations for the displaced individual’s reconstruction of his/her life in the diaspora. Thus, it is my intention to examine the ways in which food becomes a mirror for the nostalgia of the main characters, who seem to turn to gustatory experiences as paths towards a genuine self and a mythical conception of the homeland—India and China, respectively. As a result of such a utopian endeavor, both characters find themselves trapped in a fruitless search for an ever-elusive authenticity that escapes their conscious grasp and their stubborn taste buds. Flavors and smells, as the main characters will discover, may offer a temporary and ephemeral respite from the pain caused by displacement and estrangement; however, culinary activities, as well as the emotions they bring about, can also become a dangerous obsession when taken as the fountainhead of ethnic and cultural authenticity.

The motif of food as a cultural and emotional element that mobilizes ethnic community relations before and after displacement constitutes the central topic of the third chapter, entitled “Cooking up One’s Roots: Community, Commensality, and Commemoration.” The peculiarity of this chapter lies in the fact that it focuses exclusively on autobiographical texts: Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing*

Buddha's Dinner (2008) and Shoba Narayan's and Leslie Li's food memoirs: *Monsoon Diary* (2003) and *Daughter of Heaven* (2005), respectively. The comparative study of these three works will illustrate how food is imbued with a certain ritualistic aura when displayed in the "exilic conditions" (Kunow 157) portrayed in these three texts. Thus, on the one hand, I will explore how Narayan's food memoir expresses notions of collective identity and belonging through images of quotidian food habits. On the other, I will address the topos of the ritual in Nguyen's and Li's memoir by focusing on the representation of the Lunar New Year and the highly symbolic food practices associated with it as tools that raise transgenerational community awareness and/or resistance against trauma or cultural erasure in the diaspora.

The fourth chapter, "Food and the Generation Gap: 'Big Eaters' and Lunch Bags" will revisit S. Wong's paradigm of "Necessity and Extravagance" in order to assess its degree of applicability in a selection of narratives, both fictional and autobiographical, that portray the heterogeneous and often conflicting worlds of multigenerational Asian America. Thus, I will consider and compare the recurrent food images present in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996), Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1997), Li's *Daughter of Heaven*, Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, and Linda Furiya's *Bento Box in the Heartland* (2006). My study will mostly focus on the figure of the "big eater"—the foreign-born immigrant—as opposed to the "finicky palate" of the American-born. This approach will lead us to explore the contrast between the private and public spheres as described in these texts through images of consumption that reveal the American-born child's initial contact with mainstream U.S. society. These binaries, encompassed within the

aforementioned dichotomy of “Necessity and Extravagance,” constitute a recurrent theme in Asian American literature and the texts chosen for this chapter will illustrate the nuances hidden behind the culinary metaphors this paradigm articulates.

Finally, the fifth chapter of this dissertation will delve into the gastronomic portrait of the immigrant’s moments of transition. As its title—“Food Goes Full Circle: Shocks of Arrival and Return”—indicates, I intend to map the immigrant’s physical and emotional out- and inbound journeys across transnational spaces. Thus, I will begin by looking into the so-called “shock of arrival” in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* (1997) and Anita Desai’s novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) as partly caused by the characters’ sudden encounter with the hyperreality of mass consumerist culture and its food-related signs. In keeping with the circular structure anticipated in the title of the chapter, the second—and last section—will pay attention to the immigrant’s homeward journey as narrativized in Sara Chin’s short story “It’s Possible” (1997) and Andrew X. Pham’s memoir *Catfish and Mandala* (1999). I will argue that both texts choose to describe the bittersweet return, and the shock it entails, through images of disagreeable consumption.

As Francis Bacon observed, as early as 1625, “some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested” (qtd. in “Francis” 44). This dissertation’s crossings throughout the tastescapes of Asian American literature hope to demonstrate that the works explored here, and the network of culinary images they ultimately create, need to be carefully “chewed” and “digested” in order to contextualize and decipher the meanings behind their rich figurative flavors. Therefore, it is my intention here to whet the readers’

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appetite for new interpretive possibilities, and I hope reading this doctoral thesis may both leave an intense and pleasurable aftertaste and help us never to underestimate the symbolic power that food holds in the literary expressions of this ethnic minority.

1. An Eclectic Theoretical Framework: Ethnicity, Diaspora, and Food

1.1. Ethnicity and Race: The Asian American Case

Ethnicity has often been described as an indefinable concept, and those who have tried to theorize about it have found themselves entangled in questions of race and culture, only to realize that these three notions are difficult to separate in the context of the United States. This first section seeks to offer an overview of the diverse perspectives from which this human phenomenon has been explored. Remaining conscious of the multifarious approaches to the notion of ethnicity, I will focus on those aspects and implications that I consider most relevant to the topic of this dissertation.

In *Ethnicity: Key Concepts* (2003) Steve Fenton warns readers about the fact that “there cannot be a theory of ethnicity, nor can ethnicity be regarded as a theory” (179). Fenton stresses the impossibility of creating an all-encompassing and unique definition of the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic groups. In fact, he maintains that it is not ethnicity that needs to be observed and defined, but the different, multifold and multiform material, social, and cultural contexts, “under which it is ‘activated’” (*Ethnicity: Key 2*). This does not mean that ethnicity constitutes a unique phenomenon that develops in similar ways in different

contexts; rather, this statement hints at the idea that, since the social, economic, and political circumstances where it comes to the fore are so complex and varied, they give ethnicity an “entirely different sense, force and function” (Fenton, *Ethnicity: Key* 180) in each particular case. Therefore, Fenton understands ethnicity as a continuous and ever-changing “social process” that always needs to be contextualized in time and space (*Ethnicity: Racism* 10).

Many are the scholars who have approached the concept of ethnicity and they have done so from very different theoretical standpoints, trying to define it and grasp its idiosyncrasy. As Abner Cohen states in “Lesson of Ethnicity” (1974), “because of its ubiquity, variety of form, scope, and intensity, and of its involvement in psychic, social, and historical variables, ethnicity has been defined in a variety of ways, depending on the discipline, field experience, and interest of the investigators” (370). This ambiguity of the term continues to exist nowadays, and Ronald Cohen refers to this terminological issue as the “definitional problem” (385): almost any attempt to define the concept of ethnicity will be lacking in one way or another. In spite of this, the concept of ethnicity “is widely used as a significant structural phenomenon” connected to politics, culture, economics, migratory movements, and power relations (385). A. Cohen argues that, despite the manifold points of view from which ethnicity can be studied, there are certain basic features of the phenomenon that are common to all theoretical approaches. One of them, he maintains, is the fact that an ethnic group is considered a collective of people who “share some patterns of normative behavior and form a part of a larger population interacting with people from other collectivities within the framework of a social system” (370). However, I believe this definition is too broad and, thus, problematic, since it could be wrongly applied to any group of people

sharing religious and/or cultural beliefs, but who do not necessarily belong in the same ethnic group. This is the case of the Catholic or Muslim communities in the United States, who, though sharing certain religious and perhaps social values, are ultimately made up by people from a vast array of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

One of the most influential and, at the same time, controversial theories about the articulation and dynamics of ethnicity is that of the so-called “ethnic boundaries” formulated by the anthropologist Fredrik Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (1969).⁶ Barth conceives ethnicity as a superordinate identity, and he sees ethnic groups as categories of self-ascription and identification that function as social organizational devices in contexts of interaction between different groups of people. Contrary to what previous scholars had done, Barth shifts “the focus of investigation from internal constitution and history of separate groups to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance” (10). Nevertheless, these lines and divisions are not simply based on cultural differences; they are built upon relevant social behavior, and individual and collective recognition of membership (Fenton, *Ethnicity: Key* 106). Barth insists on the idea that ethnic categories can only exist when there is some kind of contact between groups (10): a context where the survival of ethnically defined communities is possible as long as there exists a “structuring of

⁶ Barth’s main postulates about ethnicity have always been the target of criticism and the source of debate. However, his vision of the “ethnic boundaries” has been used as the starting point of many other theories and it is present in the main handbooks on ethnicity: Anthony P. Cohen’s *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Werner Sollors’s *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1987) and *Theories of Ethnicity* (1996), Marcus Banks’s *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (1996), John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith’s *Ethnicity* (1996), Richard Jenkins’s *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (1997), or Steve Fenton’s *Ethnicity: Racism, Class and Culture* (1999) and *Ethnicity: Key Concepts* (2003), among many others.

interaction” (16), which is mainly brought about by the existence of these ethnic boundaries. Thus, he devotes most of his work to describing the social factors and markers that establish and define an ethnic group, distinguishing it from any other (15).⁷ The difficulties of Barth’s theory stem from the impossibility of establishing a set of general and stable ethnic markers. Distinctive features depend on the situation and circumstances of each group, and these characteristics may undergo modifications according to “ecologic variations,” and to the importance bestowed on them by the members of the community.

A few years after the publication of Barth’s theories, Ulf Hannerz’s study about ethnicity came to light. In “Some Comments on the Anthropology of Ethnicity in the United States” (1976), Hannerz offers a much more dynamic vision of ethnic groups, focusing, as Barth does, on those characteristics or “cultural forms [...] historically transmitted within the group” (420) which distinguish one ethnic community from another. According to Hannerz, ethnicity functions as a social-organizational phenomenon which establishes boundaries between groups in accordance to “a combination of criteria of ascription and diacritical cultural markers” (418). Along the same lines, Ronald Cohen structures his definition of ethnicity around the existence of interethnic relations and differentiations, powered by dichotomizations of inclusion and exclusion: “Ethnicity is, then, a set of descent-based cultural identifiers used to assign persons to groupings that expand and contract in inverse relation to the scale of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the membership” (387). Similarly, in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony P. Cohen agrees on the mostly relational and oppositional—rather than

⁷ Barth suggests that there are two different types of ethnic features that may at some point turn into boundary markers: “overt signals or signs” such as language, dress, housing, or food; and “basic value orientations” of morality and social behavior (14).

absolute—character of ethnic and community boundaries, and he highlights the significance of meaning over form or structure (70). Therefore, he infuses the concept of “boundary” and “community” with a symbolic character—subjective, ambiguous, imprecise, and ever-changing—whose meaningfulness and maintenance depends mainly on “the awareness and sensitivity” (50) of the bounded whole of its members, and the degree of significance and vitality accrued to their particular and unique socio-cultural characteristics (118). This is particularly visible in the case of diasporic or displaced communities, who may maintain and adapt the meaningfulness and oppositional qualities of their cultural and ethnic attachments, “rebuilding their boundaries on symbolic foundation” (76). Given the versatile symbolic character of ethnic and cultural artifacts, they are, according to A. P. Cohen, “highly responsive to change,” that is, capable of adapting to new contexts, acquiring new nuances and means of expression (*Symbolic* 91). In relation to this, A. P. Cohen emphasizes the fundamental role that ritualized practices play in the process of reconstituting the displaced community, heightening communal consciousness and affirming and reinforcing its boundaries and solidarities (50). In the same vein, in “Persistent Identity Systems” (1971), Edward Spicer argues that the significance of ethnicity and its persistence throughout time are the product of what he terms “conditions of opposition” (797). Following this principle, ethnic solidarities are articulated around a series of symbolic cultural artifacts, which are, in turn, infused with meaning and value by the members of the ethnic community. This does not mean that cultural and ethnic ties are static and their intensity invariable. Rather, the saliency and intensity with which ethnicity is felt and performed fluctuates over time, and it has to do, according to Spicer, with the “intense collective consciousness and [...] high

degree of internal solidarity” that inter-group oppositional forces bring about, reviving, if necessary, the “symbolic” import of the community’s identity system (Spicer 799).⁸

However, Barth’s, Hannerz’s, Ronald Cohen’s, Anthony P. Cohen’s, and Spicer’s approaches pose a problem that only some of them admit: their theories imply that all members and non-members of ethnic groups must agree on where their boundaries are drawn, and on which are the socio-cultural markers that characterize them as an unambiguous and stable ethnic group (Hannerz 419; Ronald Cohen 386; Anthony P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 74). This is often not the case of ethnic groups inhabiting the United States, for whom their ethnic identity is not always clear-cut (Hannerz 419), and whose boundaries are often blurred and unstable (Ronald Cohen 387). This is likely to be so because of the conflicting perspectives that ethnic groups have of themselves and the view that mainstream American society holds of them.⁹ It is all about a “different boundary conception” and the tendency of white America towards the simplification of ethnic groups and the crystallization of their boundaries according to superficial features such as skin color (Hannerz 419).

This said, I will now turn to some of the socio-political phenomena derived from the conceptualization of ethnicity within the context of the United States.

⁸ Spicer’s oppositional approach should not be mistaken with Barth’s theory of group boundaries. As George M. Scott Jr. puts it, while Barth argues that ethnic and cultural differences persist “despite” continued inter-group contact, Spicer affirms that ethnicity and cultural differences persist “because” of this oppositional contact (158). For other perspectives on the oppositional approach, see Scott or McKay.

⁹ Anthony P. Cohen argues that ethnic or community boundaries are two-faced: they have a private face—constructed from within—which is symbolically complex, and a public face, which is symbolically simple as outsiders simplify and reduce the intricate characteristics of other groups to mere “gross stereotypical features” (*Symbolic* 74). In the words of A. P. Cohen, “[i]n the public face, internal variety disappears or coalesces into a simple statement. In its private mode, differentiation, variety and complexity proliferate” (74).

Published in 1986, Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, soon turned into one of the pillars of the study of ethnicity and ethnic identity in this context. Sollors's theories emphasize the dynamic nature of the phenomenon of ethnicity in the U.S., as well as the ever-changing qualities of the ethnic communities. In order to do so, he articulates his research around the dichotomy of consent versus descent, with which he became one of the pioneers and main representatives of the so-called "Ethnicity School":

Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of substance (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of "law" or "marriage." Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and "architects of our fates" to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political system (Sollors 6).

According to Sollors, in twentieth century American society, ethnic distinctions are mainly based on descent, on blood; and ethnicity often goes hand in hand with otherness. However, what turned Sollors's theory into the focus of criticism is his persistent and inaccurate association of cultural difference and ethnicity, and his outright underplaying of the notion of race in U.S. society and politics (San Juan 68). In "Theorizing Cultural Difference: A Critique of the 'Ethnicity School'" (1987), Alan Wald claims that, though "[i]t is clear that Sollors has brilliantly challenged the category of ethnicity, demonstrating many of the confusing and contradictory roles it has played as cultural myth," his "method of theorizing cultural difference is predicated on the serious error of trying to relegate race to an aspect of certain ethnicities" (27-28). Wald affirms that, in doing so, Sollors is reinforcing the idea that white European immigrants do not "have" any

race whatsoever, thus turning them into the privileged “non-racial” and “homogeneous other” (24-25).

Another aspect of Sollors’s theories of consent and descent that has been highly contested is the fact that he conceives the dynamics of all ethnic groups in America as being equally driven by matters of migration, adaptation, and choice of assimilation (Wald 23; Omi and Winant 48), and he does not appear to take into account that those processes have quantitatively and qualitatively different paces and outcomes “when one is marked by skin color in a racist society” (Wald 28). Wald affirms that in order to understand the idiosyncrasy and dynamics of “difference” in the United States, it is fundamental not to subsume it under what he deems to be a “vague” theory of ethnicity.

[T]he evidence is strong that, to people of color, in their writings as well as their lives, race, not ethnicity, is by far the more central category in American culture; and by race is not meant genuine biological features, but the social construction of racial types centering on a mythology of color, and the concomitant attempt to diminish, trivialize, displace and distort the culture of those groups subsumed by those mythological categories through the hegemony of a select patriarchal European aesthetics purporting to be objective (Wald 28).

It cannot be disregarded that the motivations behind the migration or forced displacement of white and non-white people to the United States, together with the opportunities available for them, and the way they are viewed and treated upon arrival differ significantly. As a consequence, it is important to bear in mind the diverse and incomparable experiences that people of color and white Europeans have gone through in the U.S., for, to a large extent, these ethnic groups remain divided by the “color-lines” that crisscross the country’s social and political

landscape.¹⁰ In relation to this, I contend that one of the flaws behind Sollors's theory is revealed by his insistence on the "fusion of ethnicity and otherness." In his attempt to prove his assumption, he refers to the numerous derogatory terms often applied to assimilated racialized individuals. Apart from the common "chink," "jap," or "nigger," some other ethnic slurs have recently emerged, and they all share two common denominators: they are usually uttered in an intra-group context, and their metaphorical component is based on food. The targets of these slurs are often accused of acting against the "norms" of the ethnic community by showing some characteristics of assimilation into white mainstream. Thus, assimilated blacks are referred to as "Oreos; Asians as bananas; Indians as apples, and Chicanos as coconuts—all stemming from the structurally identical criticism 'they're white inside!'" (Sollors 28).¹¹ What makes these slurs particularly controversial for the Ethnicity School, which has always tried to privilege ethnicity over race in its discourse, is that all of them combine both categories—race and ethnicity—as if they were inseparable, using a metaphor that clearly alludes to skin color to refer to the behavior of assimilated members of certain ethnic communities.

¹⁰ The concept of the "color line" emerged as a way to refer to the racial segregation that prevailed in the United States after slavery was abolished. However, it was not until W.E.B. Du Bois's repeated use of the phrase in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that it became popular and widely used in academy. The black/white color line that has persistently divided the U.S. is now being challenged by the new waves of immigrants coming from all points of the globe, by the increasing rates of intermarriage, and by the consequent growth of a multiracial population (Lee and Bean 222). The combination of all these factors leads to an heterogeneous racial scenario that undercuts "the easiness with which white superiority and natural homogeneity could be assumed" in the first half of the twentieth century (Goldberg, *Racial* 177).

¹¹ Another ethnic slur of this kind, aimed at assimilated Chinese Americans is *juk sing* (Li 180; Louie 115), a Chinese word meaning bamboo. In this case, it does not follow the "white inside" pattern; in an even more radical way, this last metaphor hints at the idea that, if you deny your Chinese identity favoring white mainstream culture, you become "nothing," you are "empty," like bamboo: "No culture inside" (Li 180).

This kind of racial slurs constitutes an illustrative example of how America's everyday experience at the micro-social level is marked by the way people "notice race," both consciously and unconsciously. Color lines are not an illusion; they exist in our collective imaginary and people are fully aware of them: "Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure. [...] We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed we become disoriented when they do not" (Omi and Winant 59). On the one hand, these pervasive racial categories and assumptions reach the macro-social level, thereby constituting one of the main factors lying behind the "institutions and organizations through which we are imbedded in social structure" (Omi and Winant 60). On the other, and probably due to the previous arguments, racial conflict in the United States seems to be "ubiquitous" (Omi and Winant 85), though varying in intensity, visibility, and focus. In fact, racial categories, far from being something essential and fixed, should be understood as unstable social frameworks around which the notions of identity and difference are articulated in the United States. These constructs are constantly being challenged and reformulated by socio-political conflicts and transformations that permeate all aspects of life (Omi and Winant 54-55; San Juan 7).

If a discussion about ethnicity in the U.S. proves to be lacking without the notion of race, any theory about racial categories in the same social context would be incomplete without considering the concept of "whiteness," since, as Fenton contends, the idiosyncrasy of race in the United States is still based on the idea of the white "dominant" or "mainstream" society (*Ethnicity: Key* 39).¹² The broad

¹² According to the demographic data provided by the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, 72.4% of the national population is or consider themselves "white."

category of “white” or “mainstream” is an overgeneralization based on superficial and irrelevant physical traits, and mainly articulated in contrast with black people and “peoples of other color” (Hollinger 30). This simplification creates a “dehistoricized and culturally vacant” (Hollinger 30) illusion of a dominant and homogeneous white population, which is, actually, very heterogeneous in all aspects: language, country of origin, culture, religion, or class position. In spite of this, whiteness is self-represented as unproblematic and racially unmarked, whereas race and ethnicity are frozen into a monolithic category of “alterity” and “difference” (Radhakrishnan, “Culture” 12). This pernicious dichotomy, labeled by Hannerz as “ethnocentric nonsense” (417), ultimately allows the white majority to maintain its position of power and keep the “deviant” ethnically- and racially-marked other under permanent scrutiny.¹³ Thus, as David Theo Goldberg argues in *The Racial State* (2002), racial heterogeneity and multiraciality are hidden under a symbolic and artificially orchestrated homogeneity; the result of a refashioning of who is considered, or not, white. According to Goldberg, heterogeneity and hybridity continue to be considered scandalous in virtue of the threat they pose to whiteness and racial homogeneity; accordingly, the main project of the modern racial state is that of “turning the heterogeneous into manageable homogeneity” (34). Thus, racial discourse paves the way for the oversimplification and discrimination of those declared “non-white,” whose ethnic and cultural diversity is ostracized under vague racial—and “subtly racist”—categories such as Hispanic or African American (Omi and Winant 22). According to Joseph E. Trimble and Ryan A. Dickson, this simplistic reduction of ethnocultural distinctions, known as “ethnic

¹³ In *Racial Theories* (1998) Michael Banton proposes the term “minus one ethnicity” to refer to the way whiteness is purposefully self-represented as devoid of any sort of ethnic traits, failing thus to “perceive their [own] ethnic distinctiveness and count[ing] only minorities as possessing [it]” (158).

gloss,” aims at the creation of false homogeneities that facilitate the pigeonholing of people on the basis of superficial features such as skin color (413). The use of these “catch-all” categories is especially persistent in governmental policies, census data, law, education, bureaucracy, economy, and labor markets, which are, in Goldberg’s opinion, all routinely permeated by racial prejudice and inclined, more or less consciously, towards patriarchal whiteness.

Racial rule by definition serves the interests of those conceived as white. “Whiteness” then is not some natural condition, phenotypically indicative of blood or generic or intellectual superiority, but the manufactured outcome of cultural and legal definition and political and economic identification with rulership and privilege. (*Racial* 113)

The artificiality of the racial labels and categories that govern the United States has contributed to shaping the Asian American experience in ways that have left an indelible mark in the community’s sense of identity throughout time. Their physical traits and their phenotypical diversity have always rendered Asian immigrants and their descendants somehow “unclassifiable”: neither black, nor white (Zia 26). In an attempt to control a population that has always shown signs of significant growth and spread, mainstream political and social discourses soon started to racialize the identity of these groups, obscuring their ethnocultural richness and idiosyncrasies and paving the way for the emergence of stereotypes and the fossilization of discriminatory attitudes.

Asian Americans: Fighting Against Stereotypes

If there is a community with an extremely complex history and experience of immigration and an incredibly diverse ethnic and cultural background, that one is, for sure, the Asian American community. However, this heterogeneity has always been obscured and silenced for the sake of white domination. As S. Wong points out, “the peoples previously known as Orientals and now designated as Asian Americans have almost all, at one time or another, been excluded from U.S. citizenship” (*Reading 5*). Therefore, it is not unwise to say that, if there is something that people of Asian ancestry in America have in common, beyond their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, that shared element is the shadow of racism and discrimination that they have all encountered in the United States. According to Sucheng Chan, such racist experience is made up of seven categories: “prejudice, economic discrimination, political disenfranchisement, physical violence, immigration exclusion, social segregation, and incarceration” (“Hostility” 48). In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of this community’s history, focusing on the discrimination that its members have had to endure, as well as on the ways they have articulated their resistance and sense of collectivity in the United States.

The presence of a sizable Asian community in the United States can be dated as far back as the decade of 1840s, when the California Gold Rush, the flourishing plantations and farms, and the demand for cheap labor force generated by the mining industry and the construction plans of the Transcontinental Railroad attracted the first wave of immigrants from Asia (Takaki 24). Originating mostly

from China, but also from the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and South Asia,¹⁴ the arrival of these—predominantly male—Asian immigrants on American soil was marked by exploitation, segregation, and exclusion.¹⁵ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred the entrance of Chinese immigrants into the United States, was merely the first in a series of more than 600 xenophobic and ethnocentric pieces of anti-Asian legislation passed in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. These laws contributed to severely curtailing the entry of Asian immigrants into the country, and they limited the already narrow access to housing, education, employment, or ownership for those who were already in the United States (Koshy 470; Takaki 101).

These restrictive laws were merely one of the tangible consequences of the prevailing racist hostility against Asians, who were viewed as intruders in the job market and negatively perceived as clannish, backward, and unassimilable aliens. The distorted and stereotyped images applied to “Orientals”—as people of Asian descent were derogatorily labeled during the exclusionary era—were openly Eurocentric, and they pictured this immigrant community as the “yellow peril”: the

¹⁴ The term “South Asia” is generally employed to refer to the regions that extend southward from the “Roof of the World,” that is, the mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram, and the Himalayas. Nowadays, this area comprises the contemporary countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. Some scholars also include Burma and Tibet (Leonard 1).

¹⁵ According to Chan, during the second half of the nineteenth century, almost a million people from Asian countries such as China, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and India emigrated to the United States and Hawai’i, which was not yet “the fiftieth American state” (*Asian*, 3). The first Asian immigrants to arrive in the U.S. were the Chinese, attracted by the discovery of gold in California (M. Wong 203) and by the labor force demand in sugar plantations and farms (Takaki 24). The Transcontinental Railroad also had a crucial role in the history of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. “Chinamen” began to be hired and exploited as railroad workers around the year 1865, and “within two years, 12,000 Chinese were employed by the Central Pacific Railroad, representing 90 percent of the entire work force” (Takaki 85). As a consequence, as Ronald Takaki claims, the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad line should be considered a “Chinese achievement” (85). Next to come were the Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos, recruited in their own countries by Hawaiian plantation owners to work in the archipelago’s sugar industry. The last to arrive were the South Asians, mostly Sikh farmers and laborers from Punjab.

impersonation of evil, feminized, and mysterious (Zhou and Lee 10; cf. Said, *Orientalism*). In fact, these racial tensions did not take too long to erupt and turn into violence. As Helen Zia recounts, as early as the late 1870s, riots and lynchings began to target the Chinese immigrant community. Only a few decades later the violence would have extended to the population of other national origins (Zia 27, 30). Excluded from citizenship, dispossessed of any political rights, and completely unprotected by law, Asian immigrant communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries endured racial discrimination and violence while their voices were progressively silenced, making it difficult for them to denounce their situation. In spite of the unfavorable circumstances, ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns, Koreantowns, or Japantowns started to emerge in cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York around people of the same national origin; this would pave the way for the growth and development of the Asian American community over time (Koshy 471).

The status and image of Asian immigrants in the United States has always been very unstable as it is highly dependent on the allegiances and international relations between the United States and the Asian home governments. This became especially poignant during World War II, and even more so after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The military attack constituted a turning point in the history of Asian Americans: while all people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast—many of them American-born—were demonized and put into internment camps, their lives destroyed and their dignity dented, the lives of Chinese, Korean, Filipinos, and South Asians experienced significant improvements owing to their home countries' alliance with the United States (Espiritu, "Changing" 141; Koshy 471; Zia 39-40). The restrictive

immigration laws affecting those ethnic communities were gradually lifted, while the antagonism of Japanese Americans was aired on the media, turning them into "enemy aliens."¹⁶ This new socio-political map "fragmented Asian America more clearly than in the past along class lines" (Espiritu, "Changing" 142), as if somehow anticipating the changes that the community would undergo in the coming decades.

Another decisive moment in the history of the Asian American community would be triggered by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. According to Zia, "as the movement for racial equality swept the nation [...], Asian Americans were inspired to civic consciousness and involvement, after having been so long forbidden to exercise the privilege of citizenship in a democracy" (45). Thus, the Asian American struggles of the 1960s, which originated in several University campuses in California, sought to denounce a history of constant exclusion, discrimination, internment, and oppression by confronting the historical forces of racism, war, poverty, and exploitation (Omatsu 164). It is impossible to overstate the effects that the movement had for the Asian American community, as it deeply touched its collective consciousness, promoting new ways of thinking about race and ethnicity, and challenging mainstream structures of power. The movement reawakened and "recovered buried cultural traditions and produced a new generation of writers, poets, and artists" (Omatsu 165). But, more importantly, these struggles fought to dismantle the exoticizing and Western-imposed "Oriental" label, together with the harmful stereotypes that surrounded this notion (Zhou and Lee 11). It was in this climate of racial, ethnic, and cultural negotiations

¹⁶ The laws that excluded Chinese from immigrating and from "naturalizing" were fully repealed in 1943. Those that barred Filipinos and Indians from U.S. citizenship were overturned three years later, but the legislative restrictions that affected Koreans and Japanese would remain in place until 1952 (Zia 40).

that the term “Asian American” was coined by the historian and activist Yuji Ichioka at the University of California at Berkeley in 1968, during the longest student strike in U.S. history (Zia 47; Zhou and Lee 11).¹⁷ Aware of the diversity intrinsic to the community and of the impossibility of speaking about an “essential Asian American experience,” this new—self-consciously adopted—pan-Asian and “strategic identity” (R. Chang 364) was expected to constitute an instrumental social and political statement:

regardless of individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification, Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted. If Asian American subgroups are too small to effect changes in isolation, together they can create a louder voice and greater political leverage vis-à-vis the dominant group. (S. Wong, *Reading 6*)

At a time when Asian Americans were becoming more visible, confronting racist stereotypes and fighting for the socioeconomic improvement of certain groups (Chan, *Asian* 167), a new and equally biased image of this community began to spread: the “model minority myth.” This label emerged from a cruel comparison: people of Asian descent were “flattered” for their “respect for law and order” as well as for their emphasis on hard work and education, as compared with the riots and social unrest brought about by the African American community’s

¹⁷ The militant student strikes that took place on the campuses of San Francisco State College (now university) and University of California at Berkeley during the academic year 1968-1969, turned into beacons of the movement not only for being the first and longest—5 months—campus uprisings involving the Asian American student community at large, but also, and more importantly, for constituting the seed for the establishment of the nation’s first School of Ethnic Studies at both universities (Omatsu 168; Zia 48). Though ignited by the student community, this movement rapidly spread to larger segments of the Asian American population (Omatsu 165). For a detailed account of the Asian American—or “Yellow Power”—movement, see: Daryl J. Maeda’s *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (2009), and Linda Trinh Vò’s *Mobilizing an Asian American Community* (2004).

involvement in the civil rights protests (Omatsu 192). The term “model minority myth,” which was made popular by conservative political commentators, and later adopted by the New Right in the 1970s, presented a tendentious and distorted picture of the Asian American community in order to use it as “a political and social hammer against other disadvantaged groups” (Zia 46).¹⁸ This constituted the point of inflexion between what Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan called “racist hate and racist love” (65). While African Americans or Hispanics were the target of white mainstream’s race-based hatred for their more belligerent attitudes, Asian Americans’ supposedly less visible—though no less significant—participation in the uprising was seen by structures of power as an opportunity to promote a sort of “racist love” for this minority on account of their “exemplary” invisibility. As a consequence, the Asian American community fell prey to a model of behavior that conditioned them to “reciprocate by becoming the stereotype” and by living “in a state of euphemized self-contempt” in order to gain social acceptance (Chin and Chan 66, 67). Thus, the model minority stereotype and its toxic “racist love” vindicated the “American Dream” and denied the existence of racial discrimination, using the Asian American community as the living example of how subservience, hard work, and self-reliance constitute the only means to move forward (Omatsu 192; F. Wu 44; Zhou and Lee 18; Chan, *Asian* 171).

The consequences of the popularity of the model minority myth go beyond the Asian American community, as it was used to obscure their—and others’—

¹⁸ The term “model minority” is said to have been coined by the sociologist William Petterson in 1966, when he made use of that expression to refer to the Japanese American community in an article entitled “Success Stories: Japanese American Style.” Later that same year, the article “Success Story of One Group in US” appeared in the *U.S. News & World Report*, applying that falsely laudatory stereotype to the Chinese American community (R. Chang 371; Zia 46). The misnomer was quickly adopted by journalists and it soon spread beyond the social sciences field, entering the larger society, politics, and mainstream institutions (Omatsu 192-193; Chan, *Asian* 167).

histories of racial discrimination and blame other minorities for their own unfavorable situation (Zhou and Lee 18; R. Chang 370-371). As Glenn Omatsu puts it, “the Asian immigrant becomes a symbol of wealth—and also greed; a symbol of hard work—and also materialism; a symbol of intelligence—and also arrogance; a symbol of self-reliance—and also selfishness and lack of community concern” (193). This public image turned Asian Americans into a target for racial discrimination and violence, as they were perceived by other minorities as the privileged ones, and thus, a threat (F. Wu 49; Omatsu 193; Zhou and Lee 18).¹⁹ Traditionally labeled as “perpetual foreigners” or “inassimilable aliens” (F. Wu 79; Tuan 212), members of the Asian American community now have to reclaim their place in America and fight off a falsely complimentary and unfounded stereotype that masks the great cultural diversity and socio-economic disparities existing within the rubric “Asian America.”²⁰

As the model minority myth was becoming deeply ingrained in U.S. society, a new wave of Asian-born immigrants and refugees started to enter the country, radically altering the demographic makeup of the Asian American community, and

¹⁹ The charged and provocative imagery behind the “model minority” stereotype is claimed to have triggered bursts of anti-Asian harassment and racist violence in the seventies, eighties, and nineties. Two well-known instances of anti-Asian attacks are, on the one hand, the killing of the Chinese American Vincent Chin during the automobile crisis in Detroit in 1982 at the hands of two white men; and, on the other, the destruction of Korean-owned small businesses during the 1992 Los Angeles riots (F. Wu 70; Zia 57; S. Chan, *Asian* 176; Omatsu 193; I. Chang, *Chinese* 320). For a detailed account of Vincent Chin’s case, see “Who Killed Vincent Chin” (documentary directed by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Pena, 1987), or “Vincent Who?” (documentary directed by Tony Lam, 2009).

²⁰ As critics such as Zia, F. Wu, and Chan point out, the model minority myth is deep-rooted in biased and exaggerated data. Though it is true that people of Asian descent have become more visible in university (especially after the 1960s), and have scored higher educational averages than other minorities—in some states even higher than the average white population—, statistics have failed to put this in relation to Asian Americans’ lower rates of employment return: they earn less than whites in the same jobs, and they are clearly underrepresented in management positions (Zia 209; F. Wu 51; Chan, *Asian* 169). This “glass ceiling” phenomenon evidences the discrimination that still permeates the labor market in the United States, and it also proves that Asian Americans, as F. Wu puts it, have had to “overcompensate” and “overeducate” themselves in order to be able to obtain entry level jobs (51).

challenging all pre-existing labels and stereotypes. The Immigration Act of 1965, known as the Hart-Celler Act, lifted all quotas based on national origin, set an equal 20,000 per-country annual limit, and allowed immediate family reunification on a non-quota basis (Zhou, "Coming" 36; Koshy 473). These sweeping changes in terms of immigration laws, together with the new global economic situation, the increasingly important role of Asia in worldwide finance, and U.S. defeat in the war in Vietnam set the scene for a massive influx of Asian immigrants and refugees in the United States. In fact, after 1965, the Asian American community, which amounted to over 1 million in 1970, would become the fastest growing minority in the country, reaching over 11 million in 2000 (Min 2; Omatsu 184; Zhou and Lee 12; M. Wong 202).

The post-1965 immigrant wave is characterized by its diversity, not only in terms of the country of origin and cultural background of the newcomers, but also regarding their educational level and professional skills.²¹ While many Asian immigrants were admitted as highly educated professionals, many others entered the country as refugees, evidencing the dramatic human consequences of the war in Indochina, and adding new and more poignant layers of class differentiation to the Asian American community (Koshy 473; Omatsu 184; Zia 206; Pelaud, *This* 8). The new and more complex intersections between race, ethnicity, and class that surfaced in the late twentieth century became apparent with the contrast between a growing Asian American upper- and middle-class, and an increasingly

²¹ More than 28 million immigrants entered the United States between 1965 and 2000, and 25% of them (that is, around 7 million) came from Asian countries: Philippines (21%), China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (18%), India (12%), Korea (11%), Vietnam (11%), Japan (11%), and other places such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives (24%) (Zhou, "Coming" 36). It is estimated that the Asian American population grew by 48% since the mid-1960s (F. Wu 20), and its makeup is now much more diverse, as it is claimed to consist of thirty different major ethnic groups (Omatsu 185).

underprivileged immigrant and refugee community from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.²² In light of all this, with segments of the Asian American population—particularly the aforementioned refugees—rating highest in terms of poverty rates, the flagrant and distorted oversimplifications of the model minority stereotype become even more harmful as they obliterate the dramatic situation of these ethnic groups, excluding them from social and political discourse (R. Chang 372; Pelaud, *This* 13).²³

The demographic growth that began to take place around 1965 has introduced important quantitative and qualitative changes into the so-called Asian American community. The heterogeneity of this group, which exhibits different patterns of adaptation, different generations and degrees of transnational attachments, and markedly diverse class stratifications, has not only challenged all previous stereotypes, but it has also put into question the very rubric “Asian American.” As Zia points out, the emergence and growth of new ethnic communities, together with the different experiences of migration and adaptation that they have gone through, highlight the fluidity and changing nature of the Asian

²² As early as in 1964 Milton M. Gordon acknowledged the intertwined nature of the categories of race and class, arguing that racial and ethnic groups may “conceivably have the whole spectrum of classes within it” (48). It was, therefore, wrong to assume that racial and ethnic distinctions run always parallel to class stratification. Gordon referred to each of the strata resulting from the intersection of race/ethnicity and class as “ethclass,” and he maintained that it is more common in the U.S. for people to engage in primary relationships with members of their same ethclass. More recent studies of this matter (Omi and Winant; Balibar; San Juan; Espiritu, “Intersection”) agree on the fact that it is important not to overlook the crisscrossing of these two social dimensions as it is precisely in that vertex where the behavior of ethnic groups and the inequalities affecting them can be best analyzed.

²³ Fifteen years after the Indochina refugee crisis started with the fall of Saigon in 1975, the U.S. Census of 1990 found the highest poverty rates, on a nation-wide basis, among the different ethnic groups making up the refugee community: Laotians (34.7%), Hmong (63.6%), Cambodians (25.7%), and Vietnamese (25.7%). In contrast, the poverty rate among the white population was 13%. (qtd. in Rumbaut and Portes, “Ethnogenesis” 15; R. Chang 372). According to the U.S. Census of 2000, while Vietnamese have significantly improved their socioeconomic situation, with only a 13.8% of poverty rate, Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians still lag behind with a dramatic overall rate of 22.5%, only surpassed by the African American (24.9%) and Native American (25.1%) communities.

American community, which has turned, now more than ever, into a “moving target” (268). There is no such thing as a monolithic Asian American culture, therefore, claiming the much-needed room for and attention to diversity and heterogeneity has become a pressing matter in the field.

It is precisely this concern about the need to broaden the conceptual horizon of the notion of Asian American culture and identity that motivated Lisa Lowe to write her seminal article “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.”²⁴ Aligning her theories with those of Stuart Hall, Lowe insists on the fact that cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being,’” and this processes are always under construction and perpetually incomplete, as they “belong [...] to the future as much as to the past” (Lowe 64; cf. Hall, “Question”). This said, Lowe highlights the nature of the Asian American culture as something inherited, modified, and also invented; as identity traits and practices that emerge “in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian American cultures as ‘other’” (65). It would be foolhardy to think that all Asian-origin ethnic groups living in the United States have established the same kind of relationships with the “host” country, as this process is determined by the socio-historical contexts behind their migration to the United States, the differing degrees of identification with the homeland, and the generational component of each ethnic group. Therefore, Lowe concludes that the intersection of these variables translates into an Asian American community that needs to rethink its racialized, ethnic, and cultural identity in order to be able to

²⁴ Lowe’s article was first published in 1991 in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, but it was later reprinted as a chapter in her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996). I will be using the book version for reference hereafter.

accommodate its heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity (67).²⁵ Despite the undeniable diversity that exists within the notion, critics such as Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee, Robert Chang, and Lowe herself maintain that it is possible, and even necessary, to deploy the term “Asian American” for organizational purposes (Zhou and Lee 11; R. Chang 363; Lowe 82). However, following Gayatri C. Spivak, R. Chang and Lowe insist that this notion has to be used “strategically”; that is, as a tool that provides the racialized community with some kind of political unity in order to fight against the discrimination they still endure (R. Chang 364; Lowe 82),²⁶ but also as a category that reveals its “internal contradictions and slippages [...] so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower” (Lowe 82).

Lowe’s insistence on the heterogeneity and hybridity of the Asian American community, claiming more attention to and room for the new transnational ethnic formations, and allowing for the specificities of each ethnic group to stand out, has been questioned by critics such as S. Wong. Though she had been one of the proponents of a more open notion of the Asian American community, arguing that a pan-Asian identity should be “context-sensitive” and highly conscious of “the unique experiences of each subgroup” (S. Wong, *Reading* 6), Wong later confesses that she disagrees on the way this has been theoretically approached

²⁵ Lowe’s notion of hybridity does not refer to a sort of balanced and equitable fusion of two cultures, nor to a bridge between them. On the contrary, she conceptualizes this notion as the emergence of cultural practices and identity markers that are intrinsic to the disparate histories and experiences of people of Asian descent in the United States. This perspective fosters not so much the assimilation to dominant structures as the creation of new cultural manifestations that mirror the survival and development of the Asian American community (Lowe 67).

²⁶ Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” refers to the “*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (214). That is, labels such as Asian American or Hispanic, though applied to an extremely diverse group, may constitute socio-political resources self-imposed and voluntarily used by members of a given minority who engage in an apparent and circumstantial reduction and essentialization of their characteristics and image—similar to the ones mainstream uses to oppress them—so as to join forces and fight against discrimination of any sort.

over the past few decades. Wong particularly targets Lowe's emphasis on the need to embrace transnationality and hybridity as two new paradigms of today's Asian American community. Wong maintains that, while it is important not to obscure the ethnic and cultural legacies of the group, it is also fundamental to claim and firmly establish their presence in the context of the United States. That is, the transnational dimensions should not "take precedence over its domestic manifestations," and the commitment to "claim America" should prevail over diasporic discourses that appeal to politics of origins and "roots" (S. Wong, "Denationalization" 137). In my view, Wong's vision, aimed at maintaining a strong pan-Asian affiliation, neglects those ethnic communities for whom forgetting about the past and the homeland may not be that easy. This is the case, for instance, of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, for whom, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud puts it, "what happened prior to immigration and what caused [it]" are still crucial for their sense of identity in the United States (*This* 54).

In the new millennium, the Asian American community continues to grow exponentially in a context in which mass media, communications, and transportation are contributing to the proliferation of more frequent and immediate connections between distant—and previously unbridgeable—points of the globe.²⁷ This, together with the shift of the Asian American community towards a foreign-born majority, translates into stronger homeland attachments and increasingly deterritorialized processes of identity formation that ask for new reconfigurations of the study of ethnicity within a transnational context (Koshy 474). Taking into account the current state of affairs, it seems to me that Wong's attempt to

²⁷ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, the Asian American population amounts to 17.3 million, of which 2.6 million are multiracial. According to this data, between 2000 and 2010, the Asian American community has experienced a growth of a 46%, more than any other major race group.

underestimate the real impact of transnational overlappings on the process of Asian American identity formation reduces significantly the applicability of her perspective. From my point of view, it is not about what is more important, domestic or transnational dimensions, what is at stake at this point is the need to acknowledge and pay deserved attention to both, as their dialectics are ultimately inseparable in current Asian American subjectivities.

The multicultural and multiethnic outlook of this doctoral thesis, which consists in a transnational thematic analysis of Chinese American, Japanese American, South Asian American, and Vietnamese American literary works, could not but align itself with Lowe's approach. Bearing in mind Wong's cautionary remarks about the dangers of an overly deconstructed and denationalized Asian American identity, I still believe that Lowe's perspective allows for a much more flexible and objective vision of the Asian American collectivity that leaves room and gives voice to all Asian-origin ethnic minorities, regardless of their degree of assimilation in the United States. One of the variables that Lowe claims to contribute to the heterogeneous and changeable nature of the Asian American community in the present is its complex intergenerational makeup (66). As the demographic data shows, "the tremendous growth in Asian immigration over the past few decades" has not only brought about an increase in the number of Asian-born immigrants, but it has also planted "the seeds for future generations" (Tuan 210). Given that this dissertation will devote some attention to the intergenerational conflicts present in the chosen corpus, I believe it is fundamental to provide some contextualization about the way ethnic ties and identity have been—and still are—rethought and reconfigured over generations.

Ethnic Ties and the Generation Gap

Many of the literary works I will deal with in my dissertation illustrate how ethnicity is not understood, felt, and performed in the same way by all characters. Their situation as immigrants in a foreign country, their racialization, age, gender, social status, and generation constitute very important variables that condition the way they behave in relation to their ethnicity. As Israel Rubin puts it in “Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism” (1975), since ethnicity is often associated with “difference” and “deviation,” ethnic minorities find it very hard to perpetuate their ethnic identity and “differences” over generations within a socio-political context that puts pressure on them to assimilate at the same time that it hinders this process by turning ethnic minorities into the target of discrimination (146).

From as early as the first decades of the twentieth century, multiple theorizations and viewpoints began to appear about how the passing of generations might affect the diasporic community and its ethnic cohesion and identity. While the foreign-born immigrants were often said to display a primordialist kind of ethnic attachment, based—according to Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz—on civic, moral, and emotional ties, and governed by culture and kinship (Shils 130; Geertz 268),²⁸ the kind of ethnic affiliations frequently associated with subsequent American-born generations seem to correspond with

²⁸ The primordialist approach to ethnic solidarities put forward by Shils and Geertz insists on the importance of emotion and kinship as the most tangible and effective ties holding together the ethnic community. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz argues that the basics of ethnic attachment are “given” to us from the moment we are born, and determined by family and socio-cultural environment. The “givenness” to which Geertz refers has earned him, and the primordialist theory in general, a great deal of criticism on the part of other scholars such as Jack David Eller and Reed M. Coughland, who accuse Geertz of describing ethnic ties as something static, pre-social, and based on mystified affections (192).

a more instrumentalist and situational approach.²⁹ If, as Abner Cohen puts it, ethnicity is an artifact driven by intentionality that always operates within an economic and sociopolitical context, it does not seem unwise to think that American-born members of a given ethnic community, influenced by mainstream culture and lacking significant emotional ties with the homeland and its customs, may approach their own ethnic identity in a more self-conscious way (A. Cohen 371). That is, though the ancestral culture often exerts a significant influence on their identity formation processes, U.S.-born descendants, acculturated in this society and aware of the stigma that “difference” bears in the U.S., often wish to “control” the saliency of their ethnicity and adapt it to mainstream social norms (Okamura 452).

However, the behavior of ethnicity on a transgenerational axis is much more complex than this, and it has been approached from various perspectives. The straight-line assimilationist models, defended by Robert E. Park and Milton M. Gordon more than fifty years ago, underestimated the role of race in U.S. society by assuming that all minorities would sooner or later acculturate and assimilate. Consequently, these theories posited that ethnicity would decline and fade over generations, becoming almost meaningless.³⁰ Along these lines, scholars such as Marcus Lee Hansen, Margaret Mead, or Vladimir C. Nahirny and Joshua A.

²⁹ Instrumentalist approaches to ethnicity suggest that ethnic attachments are always socially constructed and motivated by the individual's wishes to attain some sort of social, economic, or political advancement within a particular context. Thus, ethnicity is presented by instrumentalists as infatuated with intentionality and purposeful appeals (Fenton, *Ethnicity: Racism* 93, *Ethnicity: Key* 89; Banks 39; Hutchinson and Smith 7; Yinger 162). The circumstantial and situational approaches, which constitute two variations of the instrumentalist perspective, pay special attention to the motivations and social context behind the individual's behavior towards his/her ethnicity. For a detailed discussion on situational and circumstantial approaches see Yancey et al.; Steinberg; or Hechner. For a criticism of the overly materialistic nature of instrumentalist theories see McKay; Scott; or Hutchinson and Smith.

³⁰ The straight-line model of assimilation was first put forward by William Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole in 1945, and later developed and supported by scholars such as Park in *Race and Culture* (1950), and Gordon in *Assimilation in American Life* (1964).

Fishman concluded that the American-born members of ethnic minorities in the U.S. follow the same pattern: they *choose* to forget their ethnocultural past, and assimilate into mainstream society. However, these theories are based on predictions that are only applicable to white ethnics, for whom “identifying along ethnic lines and pursuing an ethnically embedded lifestyle have largely become optional facets of life” (Tuan 212). In the case of people of color, identifying or disidentifying in terms of race and ethnicity are not matters of choice, and these processes are subject to too many variables and contingencies that challenge the notion of a uniform and “normative assimilation path” (Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant* 263). In 1963, in reaction to the glaringly inaccurate “melting-pot” and “straight-line” theories of the first half of the twentieth century,³¹ Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan called attention to the racial dynamics involved in the experience of non-white immigrants in the United States, for whom assimilation is not based on choice, much less on the fading of their ethnocultural features into obscurity, as assimilationists maintained. In fact, the processes of adaptation that foreign individuals and communities may go through in the United States are as complex and varied as the groups’ uneven relationships with mainstream society and structures of power.³²

In opposition to the straight-line model, pluralist perspectives on the transgenerational evolution of ethnic solidarities in U.S. society began to gain

³¹ The metaphor of the “melting pot” to refer to immigrant patterns of assimilation was coined in 1908 by the novelist and playwright Israel Zangwill. The figure of the melting pot soon reached the field of social sciences and was adopted by assimilationists as a euphemism for the “straight-line” assimilation theory. When this model began to be questioned by pluralists, the melting pot metaphor lost favor to the salad bowl, the mosaic, the patchwork quilt, or the stir-fry: assimilation was a much more complex and multilayered process, and contrary to previous theorizations, immigrants did not “melt” into American society, but adapted to it retaining their own cultural features (Hollinger 65).

³² See Glazer and Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963).

acceptance in the second half of the twentieth century. As Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut put it, “if assimilation theory does not provide a good framework for comprehending this complex set of findings, it would be equally risky to assert that pluralism does so” (“Forging” 302). Though this new approach represented a significant step forward at that time, defending that assimilation was not—and should not be—inevitable, pluralist positions do not seem to allow for “ethnic flux over the life course and intergenerationally” (Espiritu, “Intersection” 47). That is, the ethnocultural traditions and affiliations that American-borns display cannot be regarded as exact and linear continuations of what their foreign-born elders brought along. In fact, ethnocultural attachments are predominantly constructed and highly dependent on context; thus, their significance undeniably varies from foreign- to American-born generations.

This is the point of departure of theories such as Herbert J. Gans’s, who supports the idea that the malleability of ethno-cultural ties over generations not only affects their intensity but also their very nature, since they may eventually turn into a diluted and “symbolic ethnicity.” According to this perspective, for third- or fourth-generation immigrants—and onwards—ethnicity would merely represent a symbol of “ancestral memory,” or a reminder of an “exotic tradition” that does not serve any particular or useful function in their everyday behavior (430). In the same vein, Stephen Steinberg refers to this phenomenon of fluid ethnic significance as “cultural atrophy,” as, following his model, ethnocultural traditions would end up being totally disconnected from its socio-cultural, spiritual, and material habitat, transformed over time into culturally thin reminders of an ethnic tradition and past (63). If this was not controversial enough, Steinberg concludes that ethnic and cultural identities irremediably turn into synchronic residues of the

“authentic” culture that the foreign-born generations brought to the United States. These “residual” cultural and ethnic symbols exist, according to Steinberg, “in limbo, without structural roots either in the home country or in American society” (62).

Once again, these models of intergenerational development are biased towards the experience of white European immigrants: ethnicity is not imposed on them by external forces, and might consequently be reduced to a matter of personal choice.³³ In my view, these two theories are also questionable in that they essentialize the now often complex connection between ethnicity, culture, and place of origin. According to Gans and Steinberg, ethnic identity and cultural practices are only “authentic” insofar as they are deeply rooted in the home country. This vision poses many theoretical problems nowadays, when ethnocultural traditions are frequently deterritorialized and redefined according to new socio-cultural circumstances. This is the case of many multigenerational immigrant communities in the United States, whose ethnicity is a heterogeneous and uniquely American “product,” since it is the result of the renegotiations that underlie the American-born generations’ coming-of-age in the United States (Portes and Rumbaut, “Forging” 302). The complexities intrinsic to today’s ethnic communities in this country are asking for a move beyond the politics based exclusively on the “elsewhere” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 173). As Mia Tuan puts it, the uniqueness of ethnic minorities such as the Chinese American, Vietnamese

³³ In her 1990 book *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, Mary C. Waters acknowledges the need to qualify the matter of self-definition in the United States, where the historically rooted discrimination based on skin color prevents non-white citizens from exercising their legitimate right of decision-making about their own identity and affiliations. Thus, though Waters devotes this piece of research to the study of white ethnics behavior regarding ethnic affiliation, she also makes sure to leave no doubt about the impossibility of non-white ethnics to perform Gans’s “symbolic ethnicity,” as their lives are so strongly influenced by race that their degree of choice over their identity is extremely limited (Waters 18).

American, or Korean American communities has developed as a combination of inheritance, acculturation, and creation, and it is only within this space—if anywhere—“where their true authenticity lies” (211).

In present-day United States, the meteoric growth and the diverse makeup of the American-born generations of ethnic minorities constitutes a firm challenge for any attempt to put forward a homogeneous model of transgenerational evolution.³⁴ In fact, the debate does not revolve any more around the issue of assimilation versus resistance, and the discussion has now shifted towards the intricate intersections of race, ethnicity, and class. As Portes and Rumbaut point out,

[t]o a greater extent than at the beginning of the twentieth century, second-generation youths today confront a pluralistic, fragmented environment that offers simultaneously a wealth of opportunities and serious threats to successful adaptation. In this situation, the central question is not whether the second generation will assimilate to American society but to *what segment* of that society it will assimilate. (*Immigrant 255*, emphasis in the original)

The persistent racial prejudice in U.S. society, together with the inequities and discrimination present in the labor market, does not allow for simplistic predictions in terms of the ethnic American-born’s social behavior. Their situation is particularly complex since, as people of color, they face political and social pressures for upward assimilation, while the racial prejudice they encounter at all

³⁴ Between 1960 and 1990 the foreign-born immigrant population doubled, and the growth of the American-born generations was proportionate to this increase. In fact, “immigrant children, and U.S.-born children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the country’s total population of children under 18 years of age” (Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 19). According to the Current Population Survey of 2005, the U.S.-born population (with at least one foreign-born parent) amounts to thirty million, which represents 11 percent of the total U.S. population (qtd. in Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant* 246).

levels hinders this process and “signals to them that they will never be accepted” (Espiritu, “Intersection” 23). In addition to this already complex social scenario, in their process of making sense of who they are, American-born children of immigrants often experience a certain degree of identity crisis, as they feel caught up in between two different worlds and sets of values: the group-oriented culture of the ancestral homeland which their parents try to instill in them, and the seducing freedom and individualism promoted by mainstream American culture. These divergent perspectives frequently clash and translate into intergenerational conflicts that come down, to some extent, to the fact that parents and children have very different sets of past references and memories where to anchor their present actions and way of life (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 206; Zhou, “Coming” 33). For the foreign-born immigrant parents, the homeland and its culture and traditions survive as realities to which they can refer and attach their present life in the diaspora (Nahirny and Fishman 272). Conversely, the American-born sons and daughters of Asian immigrants “do not have direct memories of the Old World” (S. Wong, “Immigrant” 149), so they cannot connect the values and habits their parents want to instill in them with a past and/or with a sense of belonging in the ancestral homeland. Even today, when transportation and communication are making it possible for immigrant families to maintain a more significant relationship with the country of origin, the type of bond that American-borns establish with the homeland is necessarily different from that of their parents.

The study of second-generation Asian Americans is a relatively new field. Until the mid-1980s, research had focused almost exclusively on foreign-born Asian immigrants, denying much-deserved attention to a growing post-1965 American-born generation (Min 3). Nowadays, the recent and comprehensive

body of research on the different Asian American second-generation citizens allows for a panoramic vision of their experience and commonalities, at the same time that it brings to the fore their ethnic- and class-related specificities and heterogeneity.³⁵ In fact, it would be unwise to overlook the different historical backgrounds behind American-borns of, for instance, Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese ancestry; histories of voluntary migration, internment, war and escape that still affect, in different degrees, their process of coming-of-age in the United States.

Despite its heterogeneous nature, the experience of multiethnic Asian American youth can be said to share some characteristics. On the one hand, the American-born descendants of Asian immigrants or refugees experience an acute “loss of control” over their own identity in the United States (F. Wu 8). Despite the fact that they are American citizens by birth, second-generation Asian Americans—due to their physical features—are generally perceived as foreigners and expected to behave accordingly. This “perpetual foreigner syndrome” constitutes an important obstacle for Asian American youth’s process of self-definition, as they find that this stereotype limits their set of identity options, circumscribing it to the ones imposed on them by mainstream society’s expectation (Tuan 212; Min 9; Zhou and Lee 17). On the other hand, and in connection to this, young people of Asian descent usually experience racial discrimination in the form of direct racist attacks or camouflaged as the

³⁵ The study of the immigrant second generation has recently flourished, with publications such as Portes and Rumbaut’s *Ethnicities* (2001) and *Legacies* (2001). As for the Asian American community in particular, the body of research dealing with the U.S.-born members of this ethnic minority has also increased significantly in the past decade; see Pyong Gap Min’s *Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans* (2002), Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou’s collection *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (2004), or Min Zhou’s *Contemporary Chinese America* (2009), among others.

aforementioned falsely positive stereotypes associated with the “model minority myth.” Thus, as Zhou and Lee put it, Asian American youth often feel “frustrated and burdened because others judge them by standards different from those of other American youth” (18).

There is yet another feature that is present across Asian American youth of different ethnic and social backgrounds: parental pressures for educational and professional success (Zhou and Lee 15). It is not uncommon for Asian-born parents to “see fulfillment of their ambitions not in their own achievements but in those of their offspring” (Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 62). As S. Wong contends, the sacrifices made by the foreign-born generation loom large over the lives of the American-borns, who often feel trapped between their wishes for self-definition in the United States, and their feelings of debt towards their parents (*Reading* 32). Thus, the clash of mainstream society’s individualistic values with the usually more group-oriented mentality of the immigrant generation translates into intergenerational conflicts, as American-born youth perceive their parents’ culture as one-dimensional and stifling (Zhou and Lee 15).

The so-called generation gap between Asian-born parents and American-born children—a recurrent topic in Asian American literature, as will be shown in chapter four—should not be essentialized and reduced to a simple and irreconcilable dichotomy. Despite the second generation’s initial ambiguity or rejection towards their parents’ culture, growing up as an Asian American individual and coming to terms with one’s own identity are processes necessarily and intrinsically linked, to some extent, with the experience of immigration (Zhou and Lee 12). Thus, new Asian American generations construct their own sense of identity out of the few options available for them as a racialized minority, and it

would be wrong to say that their culture(s) today are more or less prominent than before, because they are simply different. Asian American cultural expressions cannot be measured as transplants of their ancestral counterparts, but as constantly reconfigured constructs that emerge, on the one hand, from the American-born's revisions of the immigrant elders' traditions and, on the other, from the resistance of the community as a whole towards the persistent prejudice and discrimination that Asian ethnic groups have experienced in the United States (Zhou, *Contemporary* 200; Zhou and Lee 22).

Where Are We Heading?

In his 1995 book, *Postethnic America*, historian David A. Hollinger offers an innovative approach to the question of ethnicity and race in the United States. Building upon a "rooted cosmopolitanism" that is sensitive towards what he perceives as a new visibility and appreciation of the "ethnos" in U.S. society, Hollinger rejects pluralist models for considering them too focused on primordial and "inherited boundaries" and less open to multiple and dynamic identities and communities (3). As will be dealt with in the next subchapter, neither pluralism nor multiculturalism leave room for increasingly common cultural combinations, since their scope is still too restricted to categories based on "blood and history" (3). As an alternative to these theories, Hollinger offers a new perspective that is not so much a descriptive model of the current reality as a critical proposal of how to approach ethnicity in the present and in the future. Thus, his "postethnic" view mainly stems from the "principle of affiliation by revocable consent" (Hollinger 188), which defends the idea of ethnic affiliations as something highly performative

and preferably voluntary. Hollinger's theory rejects imposed identities and categories rigidly based on history and biology and he upholds individuals' rights, regardless their racial profile, to freely decide about their identity beyond ascribed distinctions.

However, there is something worrying about Hollinger's perspective, as he seems to claim freedom of self-definition only for those ethnic individuals who "choose to devote their energies" to their ethnic communities of descent "even after experiencing opportunities for affiliating with other kinds of people" (13, emphasis added). I do not mean to minimize the need to protect individuals' freedom to exercise their right to perform their solidarities towards their own ethnic communities of descent beyond pressures to assimilate, but, what about those who feel trapped within ethno-racial categories that rule out any opportunity to affiliate with other groups? This is the case of Asian Americans and other racialized groups, whose identity choices, as dealt with in this subchapter, are limited to the few options prescribed for them by a society dominated by politics of color. Though he does not provide any potential alternative, Hollinger is not oblivious to this complicated matter, and he signals the monolithic "ethno-racial pentagon" of the U.S. Census that demographically shapes the nation as living proof of the color hierarchy still in force at all levels (Hollinger 8, 21).³⁶

Is it possible, or will it be possible in a near future to apply a postethnic perspective to a community such as the Asian American? "Will the future be marked by ongoing denial or by steps towards a new vision in which white

³⁶ Previous to the late 1970s, the U.S. Census Bureau's statistics were openly based on racial categories (black, yellow, white, red, and brown). In 1978, the federal government adopted the "ethno-racial pentagon," which is still in use today: Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, and Other Races. These categories are not but a euphemistic version of the old ones, and they have not succeeded in their attempt to conceal the "color-conscious" nature of U.S. socio-political discourse (Richomme 7).

supremacy no longer determines reality?” (Martínez 84). The history of racial discrimination and negative stereotyping that this minority has systematically endured cannot be erased and forgotten overnight, neither by Asian Americans themselves, nor by U.S. society at large, where racially-oriented policies are deeply ingrained. Thus, it is my contention that Hollinger’s “choice-maximizing principle” (13) will not be applicable to this group—nor to any other racial minority—for as long as the binary paradigm of white vs. non-white continues to govern U.S. society, dangerously conflating the notions of culture and race.³⁷ Nevertheless, “color-blindness” is not the answer to this problem (Goldberg, *Racial* 224; F. Wu 147; P. Gilroy 51). Any attempt—however well-intentioned it may be—to erase race from the socio-political scene runs the risk of rendering racialized minorities voiceless and “imprisoned in color-coded boxes” (Hollinger 182), their demands for equality no longer fitting in to any political agenda. That is, borrowing Frank Wu’s words, “color-blindness as a hope should not be confused with color-blindness as a reality,” otherwise, he warns, one would be turning a blind eye “not to race but to racism” (147). In light of this, I believe racial and ethnic distinctions will continue to hold a prominent position in U.S. society in the near future, and “Postethnic America” will, for now, remain an ideal worth fighting for (Hollinger 129).

In such a complex socio-political context, characterized by rapid demographic changes and growing transnational connections between East and

³⁷ Hollinger identifies the “failure to distinguish color from culture” in U.S. society as the main potential obstacle for a postethnic approach (180). He argues that it is necessary to disentangle these two notions at the socio-political level in order to fully appreciate cultural diversity and leave room for voluntary affiliations and performative identities beyond ascribed phenotypical categories (Hollinger 187). However true this may be, this idea also has a utopian ring to it, as U.S. society does not seem to be willing to accept persistent self-identifications that come into conflict with physical marks of descent (Hollinger 191, 192).

West, the study of the Asian American community acquires new dimensions. The following subchapter will provide a brief introduction to the concept of diaspora in order to subsequently look into its features as played out against the backdrop of globalization and transnationalism. The complexities of race, ethnicity, and culture in a world that is increasingly interconnected, and the undeniable and prevailing diversity that governs the United States in the present, will lead us to eventually consider and question the suitability of “multiculturalism” as a political agenda.

1.2. Diaspora and Multiculturalism in the Transnational Context

Another standpoint from where to look into the Asian American experience is that of the theories of diasporicity. I want to argue that a thorough understanding of the heterogeneous subjectivity of this community also depends on the degree and nature of their attachment to the (ancestral) homeland, and the way this bond (or lack of it) affects their self-identification in the present. The notion of diaspora, initially coined to refer to the Jewish experience of displacement, has significantly developed since then, adapting to the experiences of various communities in very diverse historical contexts. Throughout this process of evolution, the term “diaspora” has retained a few of the characteristics that were applied to the Jewish “diasporic” condition, but it has also reconfigured and incorporated many others that respond to the current new socio-cultural and global environment (Safran 83; Robin Cohen ix). This section will provide an overview of the origins of the term, in order to later move on to more recent conceptualizations that apply to the Asian American case in the present. This community, characterized by the significantly

transnational nature of some of its segments, is currently challenging traditional theories of assimilation and complicating the notions of identity and location.

William Safran's "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991) offers one of the most widely accepted characterizations of the concept of diaspora. In fact, Robin Cohen's approach to this question in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997) constitutes a revision of Safran's previous theorization. I will deal with both authors side by side in order to appreciate the cogent arguments that Safran offers, as well as the innovative character of some of the additional features later proposed by Cohen.

To begin with, both Safran and Cohen agree on the fact that the concept of diaspora should be applied to expatriate communities who have—or whose ancestors had—been dispersed "from a specific original 'center,' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign, regions" (83). Given the origins of the notion, Cohen considers it necessary to add the component of volition to the conceptualization of the term: not all diasporic displacements stem from political and religious conflicts that motivated involuntary and forced migration (180). Members of diasporic communities may also actively and voluntarily choose to leave the homeland "in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions" (Robin Cohen 26). I would suggest that, as Cohen mentions, economic motivations are currently at the core of migration and diasporic community formations.

On the other hand, both authors hint at the idea that diasporic communities should retain "a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" (Safran 83; Robin Cohen 26) in order to be considered as such. Besides, Cohen suggests, this attachment to the ancestral home, or idealization of it often brings about a collective feeling of duty and responsibility for a tacit project of restoration

and maintenance of the safety and prosperity of the homeland (Safran 84; Robin Cohen 26, 185). In fact, both authors maintain that the ancestral land is regarded as the true and ideal home where diasporic collective subjectivity wishes to go back to. As Hall puts it, the “New World” is constituted as a location of displacement that “gives rise [...] to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins,’ to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (“Cultural” 245).

This is what Safran calls the “myth of return,” which is said to permeate all stages of diasporic consciousness as a shared drive and “movement that gains collective approbation” (Robin Cohen 26). The “myth of return” is often unrealizable because there is no longer a homeland to return to, or because going back would be highly traumatic (Hall, “Cultural” 245). Nevertheless, as Safran puts it, the maintenance of this feeling of nostalgia for the homeland is one of the elements that solidify the ethnic consciousness of the diasporic community (91). Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan also discusses this politics of return in *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (1996), where he admits to the existence of such a myth or collective sentiment, and he states that the hope for a future return functions as a cure or remedy for the feelings of alienation that diasporic conditions entail (166).

However, Radhakrishnan warns about the dangers that these politics of return may bring along, and he summarizes them in what he calls the paradox of the “real-historical consciousness” versus the “virtual historical consciousness.” That is, the diasporic self is immersed in a constant conflict between the realities and identities existing prior to displacement, and those existing within the contemporary diasporic context, often characterized by racial discrimination and

alienation. Thus, the “real-historical consciousness” of the host society and the diasporic subjectivities and identities created within that context are oftentimes dismissed as being inauthentic and corrupted (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 166). On the other hand, the return to the original, mythical, and “indigenous genealogy” (166) is highly valued as a claim for distinctiveness and attachment to a certain ancestral culture and identity. According to Radhakrishnan, this adherence to the so-called “virtual historical consciousness,” although somehow problematic, since it creates an ideal and uncritical image of the home country (211), should not be altogether refused or reduced to a mere nostalgic gaze to the past because it is in fact “a matter of choice by a people on behalf of their own authenticity” (166).

Along these lines, Salman Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands* (1981) that the memory of the displaced individual works like a “broken mirror” (11) that reflects in the present a partial and distorted image of the past, creating “fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10), which Rushdie compares to black and white pictures from his childhood in India. The ambiguity and clash between the “real-historical consciousness” and the “virtual historical consciousness” put forward by Radhakrishnan, as mentioned above, is also present in Rushdie’s essay. When looking at those evocative pictures in the context of his present life in America—which Rushdie describes as permanently “foreign”—, nostalgia turns those images into faithful mementos of “home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the midst of lost time” (*Imaginary* 9). On the contrary, when revisiting Mumbai, Rushdie finds out that those black and white pictures do not match the reality there any more: they are just a reflection of “his own India” (*Imaginary* 10), a product of his “virtual historical consciousness” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 166).

Just like Radhakrishnan, Rushdie does not dismiss the fragmentary and somehow idealized “broken glass” memory of the homeland as a mere “mirror of nostalgia,” because, as Rushdie puts it, it constitutes a “useful tool [for the displaced individual] with which to work in the present” (*Imaginary* 12). In fact, both critics claim that the intricate combination of the ambiguous loyalties and feelings towards the homeland and the experiences of present life in the host country constitute the core of the fluctuating condition of diasporicity. The dilemma of simultaneity—inhabiting two worlds at the same time—makes the experience of diasporic individuals and communities necessarily double and dual in many aspects. The pressures to assimilate and feel a sense of belonging in the country of residence often clash with the need to maintain an ethnocultural sense of “peoplehood” (Robin Cohen ix), together with other co-ethnic diasporic individuals. Radhakrishnan refers to this idiosyncratic feature of diasporic spaces as intrinsically “contradictory and multiaccentual” (*Diasporic* 173). Thus, framed within this perspective of the diaspora as an “alienated spatiality” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 173), feelings of attachment to both, any, or neither of the worlds comprised in its substantiality can happen intermittently or even simultaneously: “Belonging nowhere and everywhere at the same time, the diasporic subject may well attempt to proclaim a heterogeneous “elsewhere” as its actual epistemological home” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 173). It is precisely this approach that has gained more acceptance in the past decade, since, contrary to traditional conceptualizations, it allows for a multidimensional understanding of diasporic identity that takes into account the complex reconfigurations of the “here” and “there” in the context of globalization.

Globalization and Transnationalism

These two concepts—globalization and transnationalism—are too broad to be dealt with in detail here. Their causes, effects, and consequences cover almost all levels of political, economic, social, and cultural life. Thus, for the sake of conciseness and pertinence, I will only present an overview of the fundamental characteristics of these relatively new phenomena, and focus on the way they have affected—or been affected by—new diasporic movements, and cultural formations. I believe this is crucial to attain a thorough understanding of the situation of Asian Americans nowadays, for their cultural reconfigurations and identifications in the United States are largely the product of an ongoing exposure to the dynamics of such transcontinental connectedness.

Scholars agree that the emergence of the phenomenon of globalization was simultaneous with that of late capitalism, which brought about a new and more interconnected world economy based on “denser transactions between its subsectors due to better communication, cheaper transport, [...] and the effects of liberal trade and capital-flow policies” (Robin Cohen 157). The unstoppable and significant progress in the fields of technology, electronics, communications, mass media, and transportation has brought about a new global system, involving large-scale “interactions of new order and intensity” (Appadurai, *Modernity* 27).³⁸ As most scholars point out, one of the most salient and obvious characteristics of globalization is the so-called “time-space compression” (Kearney 555; Jusdanis

³⁸ For a detailed account of how mass media, the internet, and/or transportation have contributed to the increasingly global character of the contemporary world, see Dahan and Sheffer; Mannur “Cyberspaces,” or Kissau and Hunger.

141; Huyssen 72; Faist 33; Tomlinson 3), which, as John Tomlinson argues in *Globalization and Culture* (1999), brings about a new dialectics of “connectivity” and “proximity” that refer not only to the increasing immediacy of physical connections, but also to the progressive appearance of a common consciousness “of the world as more intimate, more compressed, more part of everyday reckoning” (3).

The aforementioned advances in terms of transportation and communication, which allow people, goods, or ideas to move across the globe at a high speed, have contributed to the emergence of what Arjun Appadurai has termed “a world of flows”³⁹ (“Grassroots” 5). Diasporic movements have increased and their nature has changed, as these new migrations became integrated within the global pulse.⁴⁰ Migration worldwide is nowadays very much at the mercy of information and capital flows as well as driven by “push and pull” factors dictated by labor markets. This results in new massive waves of dispersals that are mainly a voluntary “self-reinforcing” process (Huntington 75), affected by what Gabriel Sheffer calls the “contagion factor” (25).⁴¹ Contrary to the old dichotomy between

³⁹ The contemporary global scenario characterized by the shrinking planetary distance has also been qualified by some as “borderless” (During 81; Jusdanis 141; Appadurai, “Grassroots” 1) according to the ease with which capital, people, and information flow worldwide. However, I believe this borderless metaphor obscures part of the reality, because it seems to be based on a distorted idea of freedom of commerce, migration, and information that, in practice, does not exist. Even though the far-reaching character of mass media is undeniable, it is important to bear in mind that it is not “global” as such, since millions of people all over the world live on the fringes of all kinds of mass flows of information and transportation. Besides, this “borderlessness” attributed to globalization does not guarantee that these exchanges of capital, labor force, and goods are fairly bidirectional. On the contrary, all these exchanges are very much determined and conditioned by capitalist interests, which establish invisible borders between capital-generating and immigrant-receiving countries, and those which export both their goods and their labor force.

⁴⁰ In *Diaspora Politics* (2003), Sheffer estimates that in 2003 more than 300 million people lived away from their homelands (104).

⁴¹ The rapid and sophisticated flow of information worldwide creates “fashionable trends” of migration among ethnic minorities (Sheffer 25). The possibility to communicate with family and friends who remained in the homeland enables migrants to encourage them to follow their steps by providing them with first-hand information and pieces of advice about how, when, and where to migrate (Huntington 75).

“here” and “there,” which highlighted the physical and ontological distance between the homeland and the host country, new studies of migratory movements choose to emphasize the fact that diasporic patterns are no longer unidirectional. In fact, transportation and distance-shrinking communications have transformed displaced communities into increasingly complicated multidimensional and multidirectional demographic phenomena: sequential, non-linear, and intermittent (Sheffer 15; Salgado 184; Chambers 80).

Around the decade of 1990 the new concept of “transnationalism” was incorporated to the theorizations related to migration studies in the new scenario of globalization. The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism are sometimes (mis)used interchangeably; however, there are significant differences in terms of the social phenomena each of them designates. Both diaspora and transnationalism involve elastic cross-border relations of political, economic, and cultural nature brought about by the displacement of a group of individuals. However, while the term “diaspora” is normally used to refer to the community of displaced individuals from a certain country to other places all over the world—the Indian diaspora in the UK, the U.S., or East Africa, for instance—the term transnationalism “commonly refers to migrant communities spanning [only] two nations” (Kearney 559). According to Thomas Faist, one of the main differences between both concepts and approaches is that “diaspora literature usually emphasizes the cultural distinctiveness of diaspora groups, while parts of the transnational literature have started to look more extensively into migrant incorporation and transnational practices” (20). Moreover, diasporas normally constitute multigenerational processes, while the transnational phenomenon is still considered a very recent migratory pattern (22).

Even though the term “transnationalism” was originally used in the field of economics to designate the continuous bidirectional flow of capital (remittances), goods, and labor back and forth between certain countries (Bruneau 44; Kearney 548), it has also been used in sociology to refer to the “transnational cultural exchange” between displaced communities and their homeland (During 92). As Faist points out, these “transnational spaces” constitute “relatively stable, lasting, and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states” (13). These cultural networks and bonds with the homeland survive and evolve thanks to mass media and advanced means of communication—mainly, the Internet—, giving rise to complex dynamics of socialization and identification (Faist 13).

Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc offer a very similar definition of transnationalism and transnational spaces, and they add a theorization of the so-called “transmigrants”: the kind of migrants who develop and maintain multifarious relations across the borders of their host country and homeland, at the same time that they are involved in social, economic, cultural, and political issues in both countries (4). Nevertheless, the definition of transmigrant suggested by Basch et al. is not clear enough, as it does not specify whether transmigrants are only the so-called “circular migrants”—those who maintain a regular pattern of visits to the homeland throughout the years—or if this concept also applies to the “non-circulatory migrants”—those who, due to economic, legal, or political reasons cannot travel back and forth between the host country and the homeland, but still keep close ties with the latter through other means such as remittances, telephone calls, the internet, or the circulation of cultural artifacts and commodities across borders (Grosfoguel and Cordero-

Guzmán 361). Regarding this ambiguity, I agree with Ramón Grosfoguel and Héctor Cordero-Guzmán that the prefix “trans” in the term “transmigrant” should not be understood only in terms of the physical border-crossing of nation-states, but also as the “crossing of sociocultural boundaries” through information, communication, and cultural expressions (363).

According to Appadurai, “the story of mass migrations is hardly a new feature of human history. But when it is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities” (*Modernity* 4). Globalization, contemporary migratory flows and the reconfigured diasporic communities under the new transnational scenario are challenging some essential concepts such as “culture,” “community,” “social scope,” or “boundary” (Faist 33), at the same time that they problematize, as Paul Gilroy puts it, “the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging” in relation with “the local” (123). In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), James Clifford warns about the dangers of “certain localizing strategies in the construction and representation of ‘cultures’” (19), for nowadays, the local, the regional and the global are being constantly crisscrossed at all levels and it is necessary to approach the concept of community and culture as hybrid and cosmopolitan sites of “dwelling and travelling” (31). In fact, many are the scholars who describe the “deterritorialization” of identity and culture, and the blurring of global/local boundaries and distinctions as two of the main socio-cultural implications of the multifarious phenomenon of globalization (Tomlinson 29; Kearney 552; Braziel and Mannur 17). This is the case of Tomlinson’s theorizations on globalization and culture, premised mainly on the idea that the aforementioned dialectics of connectivity and proximity inherent to

the new global dynamics are dramatically transforming the way in which cultures and localities are configured (29). Following Clifford's arguments, Tomlinson argues that deterritorialization permeates our "mundane experiences" (113),⁴² and, therefore, "[c]ulture cannot be thought of as having these inevitable conceptual ties to location, for meanings are equally generated by people 'on the move' and in the flows and connections between 'cultures'" (28-29). As scholars such as Michael Kearney, Caren Kaplan, Saskia Sassen, or Appadurai point out, communities, politics, consumption, cultural expressions, and identities are now very much detached from local places and territories mainly due to mass migration and the meteoric progress in worldwide transportation and communications. The narrow—and to some extent problematic—associations between country of residence, cultural attachments, and social solidarities and networks that traditional definitions of diaspora proposed are now being challenged by the new parameters of migratory spaces. However, this does not mean "the end of locality" (Tomlinson 149).⁴³ In fact, diasporic communities, despite being physically displaced from their territory of origin, maintain a certain cultural and spiritual attachment to their homeland through memory and cultural artifacts. Therefore, the deterritorialization of communities, subjectivities, and cultural belonging is normally followed by new mechanisms of "re-territorialization" (Bruneau 49; Tomlinson 140) that give way to

⁴² According to Tomlinson, our everyday lives are being constantly "interwoven with, and penetrated by, influences and experiences that have their origins far away" (113), and this is partly due to the increasing "commodification of culture," a phenomenon that Tomlinson illustrates by referring to the strikingly rapid transformations in the global food market as examples of the weakening of the connections between culture and/or tradition and territorial location (120).

⁴³ Both Clifford and Tomlinson alert to the dangers of an exaggerated use of these theorizations about the dissolution of the linkages between community and/or culture and territory, admitting, in the case of Tomlinson, that "local life" is still predominant in many areas of the world, where the effects of globalization and transnationalism have not yet penetrated (9). Similarly, Clifford warns against too celebratory a discourse of "nomadology," and he clarifies that, even though he does not dismiss the validity of concepts such as "home" and "locality" in favor of those such as "travel" or "cosmopolitanism," it is his intention to suggest and offer new perspectives from which to analyze these matters jointly (*Routes* 36).

reconfigurations of the concept of community and “cultural home” (Tomlinson 148) as something “slippery”; “no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous” (Appadurai, *Modernity* 48). Mass media and new and more effective means of transportation play a very important part in the processes of reterritorialization of diasporic communities across the globe. It is because of this that some authors refer to this new kind of group subjectivities and social attachments as “virtual spaces, communities, or neighborhoods” (Dahan and Sheffer 86; Appadurai, *Modernity* 195). Clifford argues that diasporic cultural forms involve

dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home. Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct [...] alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (*Routes* 251)

From all this it can be inferred that, in the maelstrom of globalization, transnationalism, and mass migration, it is necessary to rethink—and maybe remove—the already porous boundaries between the local and the global, especially because it is obvious that territorial proximity is no longer crucial for the construction of local and/or reterritorialized subjectivity (Sassen 272). Within this deterritorialized scenario, the search for individual and group identity has turned into a more fundamental and complex process than it used to be prior to the emergence of the global phenomenon. Its complexity lies both in the difficulties of reproducing locality as a structure of meaning detached from its original territory and in the overlapping loyalties with which diasporic individuals and communities juggle, leading to the emergence of hybrid identities and cultures in the context of

reterritorialized communities (Appadurai, *Modernity* 189-191; Braziel and Mannur 5; Salgado 187; Tomlinson 141).⁴⁴

The homogenizing forces of globalization have had the “paradoxical effect of highlighting the concept of the local just because the global has influentially been conceptualized as the local’s dangerous other” (During 105). However, the new emphasis on locality and heterogeneity cannot simply be justified as a reaction to the threatening homogenizing forces of globalization, as, in fact, these two phenomena are “mutually implicative” (Robertson 27). Since the local is not a counterpart or opposition to the global, but an aspect of it, scholars such as Roland Robertson prefer to refer to these dynamics as “glocalization,” implying the constant reinvention of locality that takes place in the context of globalization (35). Therefore, authors such as Michael Dahan and Gabriel Sheffer, Terence Turner, or Appadurai suggest that—as dealt with in the previous chapter—ethnic attachments and solidarities have not been eroded, but their nature has surely changed under the influence of the global networks of people, wealth, information, and images. As Appadurai puts it in *Modernity at Large* (1996), group identities and ethnic attachments—or “culturalisms,” as he calls them—are nowadays turning into large-scale globalized phenomena that transcend and challenge all kinds of spatial boundaries:

⁴⁴ The concept of “hybridity” and the so-called “hybridization of culture” play an important role in the intricate theorizations of globalization and, more specifically, in relation to the question of deterritorialization. As Tomlinson puts it, the idea of hybridization may be useful to describe the new and complex cultural identifications brought about by the processes of de- and re-territorialization (147). The term “hybridization” has been widely used in cultural studies to refer to the “mingling of cultures from different territorial locations” (Tomlinson 142); however, this notion cannot be used thoughtlessly due to the controversial theoretical implications that the term “hybridity” and its derivatives entail in other related fields such as post-colonial studies. Due to space limitations I cannot engage here in a detailed discussion about this matter. For a thorough account of the colonial connotations of the concept of hybridity, see Bhabha; Young; or Hall, “Cultural.”

Sentiments, whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political state and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities. [...] [B]ecause of the disjunctive and unstable interplay of commerce, media, national policies, and consumer fantasies, ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality [...], has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders (41).

Not only does Appadurai insist on the new global dimensions of ethnic attachments, he also points out that ethnic groups are not necessarily undergoing a progressive, linear, and uninterrupted revival. Modern ethnicities follow a “dialectics of implosion and explosion over time” (*Modernity* 157), as they adapt to the new volatile dynamics of the global social and economic system. Therefore, we can conclude that, in certain contexts, ethnicity and culture are very much circumstantial, and even instrumental, for they can be turned into political assets and mobilizing tools in order to defend the rights and interests of a particular ethnic community whenever they feel socially or politically threatened (Turner 420). As Turner reminds us, this new ethnic trend has coincided with an unprecedented heyday of capitalist commodity production and consumption, which has led to the conception of culture and ethnic identity as matters of *jouissance* in light of “the new opportunities for self-creation that the ever-growing world of commodities appears to provide” (419).

In the context of the United States, a country characterized by its ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, this highly symbolic and superficial approach to diversity from a commodity-based perspective runs the risk of turning ethnic identity into a stereotyped reduction of its “acceptable” and “unproblematic” features. That is,

diversity would be embraced only as a malleable and controllable objectification that does not disrupt, but adorn, the still preponderant white homogeneity. This, as will be discussed in the following chapter, is precisely one of the reasons why theories of multiculturalism as an ideology and socio-political attitude have been harshly criticized.

The Dilemma of Multiculturalism

The increasingly multiethnic and culturally diverse scenario of the United States has systematically challenged and invalidated all attempts to map and control the makeup of the country's population. Against the old and pernicious monoculturalist, assimilationist, and melting-pot approaches, and beyond obsolete pluralist perspectives, the multicultural theoretical framework emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century in order to supposedly give more visibility and space to cultural and ethnic diversity. Supported by many for its revolutionary character, but criticized by many others for its reductionist and ethnocentric approach to culture, multiculturalism is still nowadays a highly controversial concept. Before knowing more about the—in my view deserved—criticism towards this perspective, let us briefly deal with its foundational principles.⁴⁵

As Turner puts it in his anthropological study on multiculturalism, one of the basic objectives of this ideology should be the ensuring of a favorable climate for the “empowerment of the basic human capacity for self-creation” as well as “a

⁴⁵ Within the conceptual frame of multiculturalism, there exist several different theorizations, which, due to time and space constraints, will not be tackled in this dissertation. Some of them are: conservative multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, left-liberal multiculturalism, critical and resistance multiculturalism, democratic multiculturalism, polycentric multiculturalism, or insurgent multiculturalism, among others. For a detailed analysis of all these approaches, see Goldberg's *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (1994).

freer and more flexible formation of groups and identities” (424). In order for this to be feasible, it would also be necessary to recognize, in equal measure, the value and rights of all groups, without establishing any kind of favorable or unfavorable distinctions (Taylor 36). According to Steven C. Rockefeller and Amy Gutmann, this socio-political environment of mutual respect brings about the possibility of taking pride in one’s own identity and culture (Gutmann 24; Rockefeller 96). Jürgen Habermas, focusing on oppressed immigrant groups, adds to this ongoing debate that a democratic constitutional state with a serious commitment for the eradication of discrimination and a policy of defense of cultural diversity should ensure that every citizen can enter and participate in the socio-political apparatus of their country of residence without having to hide, or utterly deny their cultural background in order to do so (139). As we gather from all this, the basic objective of multiculturalism should be to grant full citizenship to all individuals regardless their racial, ethnic, or cultural background (During 155).

Multiculturalism has been highly questioned and criticized by conservative groups because of its—for them—excessively open attitude to heterogeneity.⁴⁶ Multiculturalism’s acceptance and integration of cultural diversity has been seen as a direct attack by some conservative, hegemonic, and powerful groups, who perceive this new policy as a “disruptive, unsettling, and dangerous force in American society” (Giroux 336); a force they perceive as a hazard for their privileged position in the political and socio-economic context. Nevertheless, multiculturalism has not only been criticized by the right; the left has also challenged many of its premises. First of all, one of the main flaws of multicultural

⁴⁶ For a detailed description of the challenges posed on white dominant groups by the new visibility of diversity and heterogeneity, see Judith Stiehm’s “Diversity’s Diversity” (1994).

theorizations is the fact that they seem to approach all cultures from a markedly Eurocentric point of view (Taylor 71). Therefore, as Habermas puts it, the question remains “whether it is even possible to transcend the context of our own language and culture or whether all standards of rationality remain bound up with specific worldviews and traditions” (121). If we cannot accept and respect other cultures without analyzing, categorizing, and “translating” them first into our cultural framework and values, the result is a much reduced, and even homogenized, picture of cultural diversity.

In fact, this leads to another of the most criticized aspects of multiculturalism: homogenization and fossilization of difference. Multiculturalist approaches have normally been framed around the concepts of identity and difference, since they all emphasize the need to define and analyze diversity by highlighting differences, while at the same time underscoring a “homogeneity that supposedly unites us all” (Goldberg, “Introduction” 12). Grounding the concept of multiculturalism on the intricate relationship between identity and difference seems to me quite risky, especially when done from an utterly ethnocentric perspective. Thus, by drawing lines based on difference, multiculturalism does not ensure equality, but the persistence of divisions according to the dichotomized paradigms of “us” vs. “them,” as the line between what is considered or not different is, after all, drawn by the powerful majority, always benefitting and harming the same groups (Krupat 237-238). In this vein, Arnold Krupat suggests that the discourse of multiculturalism should dispense with the stiff theorizations based on identity and difference and focus mainly on the “legitimation of heterogeneity,” given that the homogeneity of the nation-state can no longer be considered a fact (3). Along the same lines, Henry A. Giroux proposes a new insurgent vision of multiculturalism

based on the deconstruction and demystification of the concepts of identity and difference, encouraging criticism to go beyond simplistic and harmful binary oppositions:

That is, rather than defining multiculturalism against unity or simply for difference, it is crucial for educators to develop a unity-in-difference position in which new, hybrid forms of democratic representation, participation, and citizenship provide a forum for creating unity without denying the particular, multiple, and the specific. (Giroux 340)

Giroux's claims ask for a multiculturalism that is not based on static and opposed categories. This would result in a fossilized perception of diversity, and the latter would only be able to make itself visible insofar as its peculiarities and differences fit into any of the proposed schemes of "difference." Together with Giroux, Anthony K. Appiah warns about the artificial delimitations and boundaries that this multiculturalist frame imposes on cultures and ethnic groups, not allowing for democratic self-definition outside of imposed categories, and thus rendering hybridity invisible for being unclassifiable (Giroux 340; Appiah 150).

This superficial and biased approach to diversity has also been criticized by Stanley Fish, who analyzed multiculturalist ideas in the context of capitalism and mass consumerist societies. Fish refers to the "false" respect and tolerance promoted by this framework as "boutique multiculturalism"; that is, "the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other" (1). Skeptical as regards any optimistic approach to multiculturalist policies, Fish argues that "total multiculturalism is an impossibility" (1). He claims that one of the most common and widespread versions of multiculturalism, present nowadays in consumerist Western societies, is characterized by its "superficial

and cosmetic” approach towards cultural diversity and difference, mainly oriented to marketability (1). Boutique multiculturalism emphasizes the presupposed, or even imposed, universal features and commonalities among all cultures, as if those were the central mainstays of all of them in the same measure and intensity, while it obscures and pushes into the background the differences, unique characteristics, and core values of each of them. In fact, Fish argues that “boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assumed” (1). Thus, boutique multiculturalism camouflages its prejudices towards other cultural expressions behind a totally superficial promotion of cultural diversity that only tolerates and allows the visibility of those non-conflicting and commodifiable features of the other.⁴⁷ As Gilroy puts it in *Against Race*, “layer upon layer of easily commodified exotica have culminated in a racialized glamour and contributed an extra cachet to some degree of nonspecific, somatic difference” (21). This fake exhibition of tolerance, essentialization and exoticization of difference has been highly exploited in global marketing strategies and it translates into what authors such as Michelle Wallace, Simon During, or the Chicago Cultural Studies Group call the “Benetton effect”: a corporate multiculturalism devoid of any critical content and which incorporates, in During’s apt phrase, a “we-are-the-world feeling” through the simplification and commodification of cultural diversity (156).

As can be gathered from the above, multiculturalism has been accused of creating artificial and fixed categories, reinforcing old stereotypes and paving the

⁴⁷ The exoticization and commodification of certain ethno-cultural expressions of diasporic and/or ethnic minorities on the part of mainstream society will be dealt with in more detail in the next section of this chapter. I will focus mainly on the emergent phenomenon of the exotic food market, viewed by Lisa Heldke as “culinary colonialism.”

way for ethnic and racial prejudice (Wallace 269; During 157). The diversity defended by multiculturalism is deemed to be based on a static and essentialist view on cultural identity “that freezes [...] communities into their differences” (During 157). Deriving from this reductionist conceptualization, the political agendas in charge of the preservation of cultural diversity arguably deprive cultures of their inherent dynamism and vitality, curtailing the individuals’ freedom to revise and adapt to their cultural identities and environment.

Despite the fact that multiculturalism has been highly criticized for being flawed or utopian (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 114; Wallace 259), some of its most fervent critics consider it important not to do away with it because of the values of tolerance and understanding it promotes. The positive though poorly articulated attitudes towards cultural diversity that lie at the core of multiculturalist projects are considered by Henry Louis Gates Jr. to be fundamental for the “challenge facing America in the next century” (205). This challenge has to do with the increasingly heterogeneous and porous nature of communities and states, as well as with the progressive transformation of the concepts of “culture” and “identity” within the contemporary scenario of global and transnational dimensions.

The United States is nowadays a place where getting in touch with different cultural practices is becoming increasingly easy. However, I believe it is necessary to take a closer look at the way in which these exchanges occur, and at the circumstances surrounding them, for seemingly innocuous celebrations of ethnic and cultural diversity may still hide stories of oppression and racial discrimination. The ethnic food market may constitute one of the most suitable examples of this, as the popularity of “exotic food” in the United States—and in other parts of the world—emerges as an uneven “contact zone” between ethnic minorities and

mainstream American society. Following Fish's reading of this seemingly respectful and enthusiastic attitude towards difference, it remains imperative for us consumers not to lose sight of the mechanisms of decontextualization, exoticization, and exploitation that abound in this industry. The success of the ethnic food market is often regarded as the epitome of a genuine multicultural environment and as the fetish of white mainstream population, who find it an easy and risk-free way of getting to know—a minimal part of—the other. The objectification of the ethnic other into his/her foodways will be a recurrent topic throughout this doctoral thesis, as it has a significant impact on the lives of Asian Americans, as well as on their literature. However, a thorough understanding of the implications of the culinary in Asian American writings—the focus of this piece of research—can only be attained through the eclectic and multidisciplinary study of the intricate connections that food and ethno-cultural identity have always displayed in the history of this immigrant community. Thus, after this theoretical and historical introduction, it is time to move on to the culinary element, and see how it fits into this puzzle. My analysis will begin with an overview of some of the traditional perspectives from which food studies have been approached in order to move on to the topic that I have hinted at here: Asian American foodways in multicultural and consumerist U.S. society.

1.3. The Icing on the Cake: Understanding Food

In 1825, Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote the essentialist aphorism of “tell me what thou eatest, and I will tell thee what thou art.” Since then, and even though this affirmation has been severely criticized, the study of food has evolved and crisscrossed many different disciplines. More than one century after Brillat-Savarin’s study of the physiological and psychological implications of the act of eating, structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss became the first anthropologist to explore cultural issues such as eating customs, rites, and cooking styles from a Saussurean point of view. In his article “The Culinary Triangle,” Lévi-Strauss proposes a classification of the meanings behind three different cooking styles—boiling, roasting, and smoking—and he argues that, as phonemes, they function as a complex set of oppositions in a non-verbal system of communication (37).

Though Lévi-Strauss’s idea may seem somehow far-fetched, it has clearly been a source of inspiration for subsequent generations of scholars. One of them is Roland Barthes, who, working on the premise of food as a system of communication offers a psychologically- and semiotically-oriented poststructuralist vision to the culinary in his article “Towards a Psychology of Contemporary Consumption” (1979):

For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior. Information about food must be gathered whenever it can be found: by direct observation of the economy, in techniques, usages, and

advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society.
(Barthes 21)

Very much like Lévi-Strauss, Barthes maintains that the only way to decipher the messages transmitted by food is by making a “complete inventory of all we know of the food in a given society” and then reduce these facts to units of meaning, which would constitute “a veritable grammar of foods” (22). As would happen in a language, these units or signs would ultimately combine and form syntactic and semantic systems that acquire their meaning in a given structure of assumed societal values. I agree with Barthes that eating is never a trivial activity, for food and eating are always the reflection of societal, cultural, and even economic and ecological factors. What we eat, with whom, where, and how are never superficial details, because, as a crucial cultural marker, intimately intertwined with every aspect of our lives and personalities, food is a constant source of information about ourselves, and the historical, economic, and cultural context surrounding us at any particular moment.

Mary Douglas’s anthropological contributions to the growing field of food studies in the 1970s and 1980s constitute another turning point. Moving beyond structuralist and linguistically-oriented perspectives, which paid too much attention to form, Douglas became one of the pioneers in promoting the study of foodways as a mainly sociological phenomenon. In fact, in the introduction to *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (1973), Douglas openly criticizes previous theorizations as she considers them ungrounded generalizations: “The meanings of food need to be studied in small-scale exemplars. Attempts to generalize by using linguistic theoretical

assumptions tend to produce explanations of tastes and preferences that seem too trivial or too bizarre to have much bearing on current food problems” (“Standard” 8). Therefore, though Douglas also dwells on the communicative power of food, she confers more importance upon “the pervading cultural environment” where food practices inevitably take place, since “moral perspectives” are the sources of meaning behind culinary acts (“Standard” 11).

The past two decades have witnessed the publication of several anthropological and sociological studies on food and eating that, though inspired by Lévi-Strauss’s, Douglas’s, and Barthes’s aforementioned theorizations, also pave the way for new trends of investigation, posing new questions, and opening innovative debates. As Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil state in *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society* (1997), “the act of eating lies at the point of intersection of a whole series of intricate physiological, psychological, ecological, economic, political, social and cultural processes” (6). Bearing this in mind, this dissertation will approach the way eating practices are represented in Asian American literary texts as an immensely complicated set of habits and rules predetermined by numerous and interrelated socio-cultural values and attitudes.

Even the most subjective and abstract features of our individual identity are said to be influenced by and reflected in our foodways, and this is what Claude Fischler discusses in “Food, Self and Identity” (1988). In this controversial article, Fischler explores the way in which our food habits interact with our subjectivity and, in order to do so, he proposes his “principle of incorporation.” This theoretical approach follows from the premise that the ingestion of any kind of food implies “the incorporation of all or some of its properties” (279). Thus, similar to Brillat-

Savarin's remark of "you are what you eat," Fischler argues that food becomes "us" and we become "it" as soon as it crosses the boundaries of our bodies.⁴⁸ Back in 1966, in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas had already dealt with the concept of "threshold" in connection to the act of ingestion, as well as with the "liminal" qualities of food. In that book Douglas argued that "bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units" (4), and that food constitutes the external substance to which we most frequently allow entrance into our bodies. Therefore, Douglas looked into the ways in which food might contribute to constructing our identity, drawing special attention to the cultural laws of "pollution" that lie behind established culinary norms and prohibitions.

The permeability of the body as far as food is concerned has been the focus of scholarly attention from the 1980s onwards, and the transgression of bodily boundaries has been approached from many different perspectives. Deborah Lupton refers to food as a liminal substance, "a bridging substance between nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside" (16) that enters our body, a site of identity formation. In a more recent work published in 2008, Xu affirms that "food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways" (*Eating 2*). The bodily boundaries that the act of ingestion transcends between our body and any other substance out there help delimit the material and psychological space of our self as an individual and independent entity. However, as Xu states in the

⁴⁸ It is not my aim to present an essentialist vision of identity and the "self" as innate, pre-social, basic, and invariable phenomena, but neither do I completely agree with postmodern conceptions of individual identity as being arbitrary and completely disconnected from social, cultural, and economic factors. Identity is heterogeneous and it does not constitute a product but an ever-changing process that operates under the direct influence of the social environment surrounding us (Moya 8).

quotation above, another function of food as a liminal substance is that of demarcating the socio-cultural sphere that any community or group occupies, as opposed to other communities who display different culinary habits. As can be gathered from this, both Lupton's and Xu's views bear a significant resemblance with Fischler's "principle of incorporation," but instead of focusing on the individual nuances of the culinary, they veer towards its communal implications. Therefore, Lupton and Xu insist on the power and durability of food as a group identity marker, as it plays a crucial role as far as self-identification, differentiation, and belonging are concerned. That is, it is commonly thought that what a group of people considers edible and proper to eat, the way they cook and eat it, and the meanings they ascribe to those culinary acts distinguish them from other groups of people with different eating habits.

Eating and sharing food with others is such a fundamental daily activity that we often take for granted all the meanings that accrue to it and all the roles it plays in our everyday life. In her article "A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness" (1993), Mary Lukanuski affirms that eating is a "highly ritualized activity," culturally marked as something that should be carried out in the company of others (115). By sharing a meal, the values that keep the community together are reified, and, as Lukanuski puts it, not only is the physical hunger appeased, but also the emotional one (119). As a consequence of this communal understanding of the act of eating, "solo eaters" are often stigmatized because their behavior goes against the social customary norms that rule our eating practices.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The act of eating alone is even seen in some cultures as a punishment for someone who has brought shame on the family. There is a very illustrative example of this in the first chapter of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The "no name woman," ostracized by her family because of her "adulterous behavior," lived and ate as a family outcast throughout all her pregnancy.

Lupton devotes one chapter of his anthropological study *Food, the Body and the Self* (1996) to explaining how food and eating have always been a “vital part of kinship and friendship networks in all societies” (37). In order to explore these issues, she turns to the first stages of an individual’s life: childhood, a period when the social dimensions of food begin to be transmitted from parents to children. In fact, it is specially the relationship between the parents—as caregivers and sources of nourishment—and the newborn baby that constitutes the first step in the process of understanding the act of eating as a group activity. As Lupton mentions, “[t]he family meal’ and ‘the dinner table’ are potent symbols, even metonyms, of the family itself” (39), as it is during this act of food sharing when the emotions and power relationship within the family as a community are reinforced.

The value of food as a gatekeeper of the community’s unity becomes even more relevant when analyzed in the context of migration and diasporic communities, for whom their eating practices often last longer as markers of their ethnic identity than other cultural features such as language, clothing, or even religion (Mintz and Du Bois 109). “The gastronomic habits of diasporic subjects,” as Purnima Mankekar puts it, “become especially fraught areas for contestations and negotiations of [...] community and kinship” (83). Given that these reconfigurations of the individual and group identity emerge as direct consequences of the immigrants’ contact with the host country, food often works as a double-edged sword that helps diasporic individuals to keep in touch with the “homeland” and cultural identity, at the same time that it marks them as different from “mainstream” American society. According to Michel Bruneau, food functions in diasporic contexts as a culturally symbolic signifier and an icon that abridges

“the intricate web of linkages between the members of a community and their territory” (Bruneau 38).

Similarly, Paolo Boccagni affirms that, though self-identification with a certain territory may be easily performed on an abstract or patriotic level, “reminiscence of the sensory features of their daily lives at home—colours, tastes, and smells—may easily fade away” (188) for displaced individuals. Hence, moved by homesickness, and a wholehearted willingness to maintain significant and durable attachments with the motherland in their everyday life in the diaspora, immigrants often try to reproduce these kind of sensory experiences—many of them connected with food and eating—, as they consider them a fundamental part of their “identity reservoir” in displacement (Boccagni 189). In this fashion, as Sutton maintains in *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001), food and eating act as “peculiar mnemonic” triggers that encode powerful and emotionally-charged recollections (Sutton x). The peculiarity to which Sutton alludes lies in the fact that both tastes and smells are hard to recall at will, but strikingly easy to recognize and associate with past experiences.⁵⁰ In his seminal work on the numerous and multifarious connections between memory and food, Sutton concludes that taste and smell are responsible for some of the most “lasting memory expressions,” which function as sensory “points of entry into the blended temporalities of experience” (Sutton 159-160).

The fertile intersections of food, memory, and displacement will be further explored in chapter 2, as memory tastescapes have also inspired Asian American

⁵⁰ Contrary to what happens with images and sounds, which can be easily and voluntarily recalled after a relatively long time, smells and tastes dissipate and they are hard to mentally reproduce at will. In fact, some scholars argue that when we believe that we remember a scent or a taste, it is more likely that we are unconsciously evoking a visual image associated with that smell or taste (Engen 80). These sensory metaphors are referred to as “multisensory or synesthetic food experiences” by Sutton (73).

writers in their narratives of migration and diasporicity. In fact, the complexity of food as a socio-cultural artifact will be a recurrent topic throughout this doctoral thesis, as Asian American writers often use culinary-related tropes to explore matters of affiliation to and disaffiliation from ethnic communities. Thus, food can frequently be read in this literary tradition as an indicator of a character's determination to maintain his/her ethnic attachments and traditions in spite of—or in reaction to—mainstream America's racial discrimination. However, the versatility of food's symbolism also allows for the opposite interpretation in many other works, where eating practices may represent a means of rebellion and escape from ethnic tradition. Thus, it is not uncommon to find Asian American literary works in which food tropes are deployed to illustrate the protagonist's desires to assimilate into white mainstream America.

These acts of self-identification with a community “through the stomach” hint at another important aspect connected to food: choice. Even though one's eating habits are highly predetermined by ecological and socio-cultural matters, one can still make some choices about them, and these choices often function as a window into people's personality and lifestyle. As Leon Rappoport argues in *How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food* (2003), “people develop preferences for foods that represent the type of person they admire or identify with” (55). Rappoport focuses especially on the changes in food preferences that take place during adolescence, a stage when we are more vulnerable to peer pressure and to the drive to explore new experiences that will make us feel part of a certain group. In connection to this, in “Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity” (2007), Michael Owen Jones argues that teenagers often distinguish between the “healthy food” served at home and the “junk food” eaten outside of the domestic

sphere with friends. The tensions between these two often function as material indicators of the conflicts that young adults experience in their process of coming-of-age in and outside the family environment (Jones 148).

As dealt with in the previous subchapter, these intergenerational conflicts become especially poignant in the case of ethnic minorities in the United States, where the American-borns negotiate their ethnic identity in ways that differ from their parents'. The intimate connection established in the diaspora between ethnic identity and culinary habits ensures that food will play a central role in the dynamics of the generation gap. In fact, Rappoport stresses the changing preferences of American-born descendants of immigrants in the U.S., who, especially during adolescence, "tend to reject the traditional ethnic foods of their families in favor of popular 'American' cuisine" (65). As a result, the second generation is prone to introducing modifications in their dietary habits in an attempt to assimilate to mainstream American culture.

Needless to say, Asian American youth are not an exception to this, and their case has been widely narrativized in the literature of this [multi]ethnic community. In fact, this dissertation will devote a full chapter to exploring the culinary dimensions of the Asian American generation gap, following and elaborating on S. Wong's theories of "Necessity and Extravagance" (*Reading*, 20). Among other things that will be further developed in chapter 4, I want to highlight the symbolic character of candy in Asian American literature. According to Wong, sweets play a critical role in the second generation's rebellion against the "no-waste" philosophy of their foreign-born parents. Therefore, treats and fast food, usually associated with white mainstream America, are represented as a way to gain entrance into that segment of society, and also as a sort of "reward" or

“comfort” that helps the second-generation Asian American to cope with rejection and peer pressure (Pumpian-Mindlin 577-578; Rappoport 26). The foods obtained outside of the domestic environment are considered more attractive by young American-borns, for fast-food and candy are pervaded with the smell of abundance and freedom, and seasoned with dreams of acceptance that never seem to fully come true.

Life in Cornucopia

In the midst of contemporary vertiginous consumerism, food has, indeed, gone beyond the mere satisfaction of primary nutritional needs to become “the ultimate consumable commodity” at the mercy of economic interests and markets (Lupton 22). While millions of people, trapped in cycles of poverty and famine, suffer from hunger and malnutrition, others—as will be discussed in chapter 5—find themselves slaves of a schizophrenic consumerist society that promotes careless abundance and unyielding fitness.⁵¹ More than forty years ago, in her article “The Changing Significance of Food” (1970), Mead had already warned about the fact that food was being frivolously “divorced from its primary function of feeding people” in capitalist consumer societies (17). In fact, the meal is losing its qualities as a ritualized and communal activity, and eating is becoming an increasingly aesthetic experience oriented to individual and immediate satisfaction of materialistic whims. The consumerist urges that dominate western societies as

⁵¹ The rise of mass consumerism and mass media have triggered a dramatic increase of eating disorders. In her work *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (1999), Carole Counihan offers an insightful study of anorexia and bulimia as triggered by patriarchal values and mass consumer society’s treatment of beauty as an imposition (61). For more detailed accounts on this matter see Rappoport, or Olson.

part of a globalizing capitalism system have exerted an enormous influence on the food scenario of developed countries such as the United States. In *Food and Cultural Studies* (2004), Bob Ashley et al. analyze the impact that globalization is having on the world's food market and they come to the conclusion that this impact is double, causing confronted effects: the homogeneity vs. diversity paradox.

On the one hand, the commodification of food is producing the worldwide “McDonaldization of Taste” (Rappoport 108), that is, the homogenization of the food market all over the world, with (almost) omnipresent food chains like McDonald's and products—with aggressive advertising campaigns—such as Coca-Cola. This ubiquitous presence and success of the so-called fast food chains, which are already considered one of the main features of global popular culture, has also been given the name of “culinary imperialism” due to its invasive and destructive nature, not only regarding health issues, but also in terms of its socio-cultural implications.⁵² That is, fast food is often blamed for the weakening or loss of traditional cultural values, especially among the younger generations, and the impoverishment of local food businesses (cf. Watson). The culinary values and the importance of the family meal are often whittled away in favor of the quick and “cool” satisfaction that fast food offers. According to Rappoport, “these foods carry an ideology of immediate sensual gratification and convenience that all too easily undermines traditional family values associated with social discipline and respect for authority” (126). Thus, fast food chains, as globalized capitalist commodities, are accused of producing a rupture with the past, with the cultural values

⁵² For a detailed discussion on the health hazards of fast food see Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2002).

transmitted from one generation to the next, as they promote a reductionist and globalized image of the world.

Part of the attractiveness of this kind of food in the developed world is the sense of immediacy and familiarity it provides to the consumers—the certainty that one can travel from Kansas to Moscow and eat the same hamburger before takeoff and after landing. In his article “The Local and the Global” (1995) Kearney refers to these worldwide franchise restaurants as “hyperspaces” in the Baudrillardian sense; that is, he defines them as deterritorialized and commodified environments that are totally “detached from any local reference” and which bear “monotonous universal qualities” (Kearney 553; cf. Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 67). However true this may be, some voices warn against too simplistic a vision of the global influence of commodities, such as fast food in this particular case (Tomlinson 84; Howes 6; Sutton 161). According to Tomlinson, any kind of imported commodity undergoes a complex process of cultural appropriation within the receiving culture (84). Therefore, the social, cultural and symbolic meaning of fast food chains or any kind of globally commodified food item cannot be expected to be exactly the same all over the world: “Culture simply does not transfer in this unilinear way. Movement between cultural/geographical areas always involves interpretation, translation, mutation, adaptation, and ‘indigenization’” (Tomlinson 84). Therefore, the meaningfulness of fast food is somehow adapted, or, using David Howes’s term, “creolized” by each community, in order to make it fit their own particular reality (91).

The expansion of fast food chains has a twin phenomenon: the “exotic” food market brought about by the diversifying tendencies of globalization. Migratory movements and the appeal for the new and the exotic have fostered the diversity

of and easy accessibility to foodways from other ethnic and culinary traditions, which in turn have introduced significant changes in terms of culinary patterns and tastes (Sheffer 219). As Ashley et al. contend, “the consumption of exotic or ethnic foods arguably belongs to a more widespread trend within contemporary societies towards the ‘aesthetization of everyday life,’ fuelled by the consumer’s desire to be continually learning and enriching oneself” (98). Thus, ethnic food and restaurants have become sites of consumerist desires where “Americans [...] encounter other nations and cultures” (Kunow 156). Food works here as a “contact zone,” a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt and inspired by the linguistic theory of “contact languages”; those developed by speakers of different native tongues forced by their need to communicate with each other (8). Pratt makes apt use of this notion in order to describe the “social spaces” where people from different geographical areas and cultural backgrounds meet and interact with each other. However, these food encounters with the other are never egalitarian, as they take place in a context dominated by power relations. In *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (2003), Lisa Heldke explores certain gastronomic “contact zones” and concludes that the somehow imperialistic tone of these exchanges can be best defined as “food colonialism” (5). Therefore, what mainstream population considers “palatable” ethnic food is often simply a reduction and adaptation of the “authentic” or “real thing” (Kunow 157). The appeal of white mainstream population for the so-called ethnic foodways is the result of the combination of the curiosity, suspicion, and in some cases disgust that unknown culinary traditions provoke, together with the exotic and adventurous attractiveness that they exude. Therefore, eating ethnic food becomes, for white Americans, an exotic but safe “expedition into the unknown, a pursuit of the strange” (Heldke xxi).

In her book-length study on what she termed “culinary tourism,” Lucy M. Long contends that exploring and experiencing the food of the other—be it in restaurants, gastronomic festivals, cookbooks, or grocery stores—, apart from creating an immediate aesthetic response, “may be one of the *fullest* ways of perceiving otherness” and satisfying one’s curiosity for the unknown (21-22 emphasis added). She grounds her statement on the fact that foodways, unlike foreign languages or rituals, constitute an easy and accessible vehicle to travel to distant and exotic places, and a “vivid entryway into another culture” (Long 1). What Long optimistically perceives as an exploration of cultural difference and the “fullest” incursion into “otherness” through the palate, I consider only a partial, simplistic, and sometimes even biased experience of other people’s culture.

Usually detached from their cultural, historical, and social reality and background, these exotic gastronomic “adventures” give the eater a very reduced and shallow idea of a certain group’s idiosyncrasy. Culinary traditions of other ethnic groups are thus commodified and turned into an “exoticized” and “othered” object, highly marketable and geared toward mainstream population. This consumerist maneuver to exploit and exoticize difference is not based on innocuous precepts, for it is ultimately built on the racist idea that “whites are the universal standard(s) against which difference is revealed” (Heldke 19). Hence, the marked difference of ethnic foodways needs to be whittled down so that the exoticism it transmits is somehow “familiar, recognizable, controllable”; in other words, palatable, for mainstream tastes. Heldke argues that even though food adventurers take pride in their openness to novelty, this novelty must always fit into some “known category” for them (19).

This almost forced adaptation—and I would even say alienation—of ethnic culinary traditions to pander to Western tastes and wishes is what Heldke finds most problematic and damaging. She believes that food tourism is fraught with morally dubious colonizing intentions, considering ethnic foodways as mere “resources” ready to be used, exploited and modified according to consumers’ desires. As Heldke puts it, “[i]n a capitalist, consumerist economy like that of the US, yesterday’s new exotic cuisine becomes tomorrow’s supermarket special” (13). This approach seems to hint at the idea that nowadays everything is accepted and desirable as long as it is profitable. According to this, the fact that ethnic foodways are widespread and popular throughout the U.S. does not necessarily imply that ethnic minorities are also widely welcome, integrated, and accepted. In fact, as F. Wu contends, racial tensions and discrimination go hand in hand with the rise of the exotic food market; that is, though mainstream America seems willing to, literally, “taste diversity,” this should not mislead us into thinking that “to eat is to understand” (216, 217). This is reminiscent of Fish’s aforementioned notion of “boutique multiculturalism” since, in order to be “accepted,” the other has to be classifiable as such, and this superficial acceptance seems to be directly proportional to the degree of marketability of some of the other’s features, namely food.

If Heldke’s and Fish’s perspectives might seem a bit discouraging, other authors tackle this subject in a much more positive and conciliatory way. Uma Narayan’s article “Eating Culture: Incorporation, Identity, and Indian Food” (1997) looks into the question of food tourism and colonialism from a different point of view, shifting the focal point from the mainstream to the ethnic minority, and giving a more optimistic interpretation of the current ethnic food phenomenon. Instead of

highlighting the negative aspects of mainstream's consumption and adaptation of the food of others, Narayan pays attention to the fact that mainstream population does indeed agree to get in touch with that other through their food:

[A] willingness to eat the food of Others seems to indicate at least a growing democracy of the palate. While eating "ethnic foods" in restaurants might result only in shallow, commodified, and consumerist interaction with an "other" culinary culture, it seems preferable at least to the complete lack of acquaintance that permits the different foods of "Others" to appear simply as marks of their "strangeness" and "otherness" (U. Narayan 180).

Narayan stresses the power of food as a peaceful and effective "contact zone" among cultures. Moreover, she emphasizes that, apart from serving as a vehicle to cross the boundaries between white mainstream and ethnic minorities' spheres, ethnic foodways have always constituted one of the most stable means of economic profit for the immigrant. Even though Narayan highlights these positive features of the dynamics of ethnic food consumption in the U.S., she also acknowledges the fact that mainstream eaters perform the role of "privileged consumers" (U. Narayan 182), who, due to the "complex cultural landscape" existing in the U.S. nowadays, seem to "eat more than they understand" (U. Narayan 183).

From my point of view, a combination of Heldke's and Narayan's seemingly conflicting perspectives would give way to a more realistic and balanced portrayal of the current situation of the ethnic food market in the United States, which is not altogether negative, but which admittedly affects the nature and essence of ethnic foodways in the diaspora, as well as the public image of ethnic groups, who tend to be racialized and stereotyped according to their culinary habits. Despite their

different points of departure, both Heldke and Narayan finally suggest that a change in the power dynamics between “mainstream” eaters and ethnic food providers could possibly be achieved by means of a deeper reflection on the part of the consumers on what they are actually eating. Narayan refers to this attitude as “democracy of the palate,” whereas Heldke names it “skeptical palate,” but both of them seem to suggest the need for a conscious act of “self-questioning” about the ethnic food phenomenon (U. Narayan 180; Heldke 171). In fact, Heldke assures that individual attitudes are the seed for a “cumulative, culture-wide” social change that might pave the way for “food anticolonialism” (169), which she describes as the development of attitudes that foster a respect for other people’s cultures and traditions “without objectifying them or treating them as resources from which to support one’s own lifestyle” (167). However, as Narayan and Heldke themselves admit in their respective works, this is rather utopian, because reflection, in the case of Narayan, or isolated individual actions, as proposed by Heldke, no matter how deep and well-intentioned they may be, will always need to be translated into collective actions and measures if we want them to have a tangible and durable impact on the established ideological and social reality.

Asian Americans and Food

The experience of Asian Americans in the U.S. has always been intimately linked with food, whether as producers, feeders, or consumers (Ho, *Consumption* 11; Xu, *Eating* 8; Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 5). In fact, as will be discussed in this section, food constitutes a powerful symbol of the hardships that this racialized community has gone through, and, because of this, “food and eating occupy a

significant place in the formation of Asian American subjectivity” (8). This group’s historical connection with food in the United States does not stem from any sort of intrinsic or predetermined proclivity towards the culinary on the part of Asian-origin immigrants and their descendants. On the contrary, the complex socio-political and economic circumstances that they encountered in the United States have circumscribed Asian Americans “materially and symbolically in the alimentary realm,” as the very few job opportunities available to them were originally limited to food production and service (Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 1).

Most of the ethnic groups encompassed within the broad category Asian American have been invariably involved in food-related labor in a variety of sectors: from the Chinese and Japanese immigrants’ back-bending labor at the sugar plantations in Hawai’i, to the Vietnamese hard work at the fishing industry, or the Filipinos’ significant presence in agribusiness and canneries, among many others, this multiethnic immigrant community has contributed to the ongoing growth and transformation of the American food system (Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 4; Mabalon 148; Ichikawa 275). In fact, Asian Americans’ critical role in the culinary scene of the United States does not end at the production or processing stage, for they have also gained an important and long-lasting foothold in the restaurant industry. From as early as the 1920s, Chinese restaurants began to be more and more visible in cities such as New York and San Francisco.⁵³ However, these initially small eateries would exclusively cater the Chinese immigrant communities in those urban settings; it would not be until a couple of decades later when Chinese food started to appeal to the white mainstream palate

⁵³ According to Heather R. Lee, in the 1920s, there were around three hundred Chinese restaurants in the state of New York, which employed over three thousand waiters and cooks (54). These figures are at least surprising if we set them against the backdrop of the exclusion laws and flagrant racial discrimination that the Chinese suffered at that time.

(H. R. Lee 60; Padoongpatt 189). Following in the footsteps of the Chinese immigrants, other Asian American minorities such as the Filipino, the Japanese, the Thai, and, later on, the Vietnamese opened restaurants all over the United States. From the outset, the meteoric growth and dispersal of the ethnic food business has been linked to the ambivalent imaginary surrounding this multiethnic community. On the one hand, as mentioned in previous sections, Asians in the United States have historically been portrayed as perpetually foreign, inassimilable, and inscrutable; on the other, this aura of mystery imposed on them has progressively yielded to mainstream's curiosity for what they perceived as an exotic treat.

Let us deal first with taste and smell as sensory frameworks for the negative portrayal and racialization of Asian immigrants in the United States (Padoongpatt 203): if Asian foodways have persistently been described with suspicion as “intimidatingly different” (H. R. Lee 60), disgusting, and even “filthy and unhealthful” (Gardaphe and Xu 5), Asian immigrants have, by extension, been “othered” and stigmatized as filthy eaters, especially those of Chinese, Korean, or Southeast Asian origin, who have insistently been accused of eating dogs, rats, or cats; animals considered non-edible from a Western perspective—and palate (Xu, *Eating* 8; F. Wu 224). Thus, Asian Americans, marked in such ways by their foodways, come to embody all the negative and stereotyped features associated with their diets, and this constitutes the seed of the so-called “trope of the smelly immigrant” (Manalansan, “Immigrant” 42). As Manalansan—responsible for the coinage of this term—argues, “the immigrant body is culturally constructed to be the natural carrier and source of undesirable sensory experiences and is popularly perceived to be the site of polluting and negative olfactory signs” (“Immigrant”

41).⁵⁴ Following the pernicious dictum of “you are what you eat,” Asian Americans have commonly been associated with pungent food aromas that help transmute the concept of race into something tangible for the senses, and thus, subject to rejection.

In light of all this, how did Asian restaurants and foodways become so popular? I believe that their success is the result of several factors, and one of them resides precisely in a romanticized perception of Asians and Asian gastronomy as different from the usual fare: mysterious and exotic. As Edward Said once put it in his seminal *Orientalism* (1978), the West has always defined itself in contrast to the East—the “Orient”—, which has been turned into “one of the deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (2). Orientalism is, according to Said, the political and cultural mechanism whereby the West enhances its authority by translating “mere oriental matter into useful substance” (*Orientalism* 44). That is, in order to keep the foreign and unknown under control and benefit from such an ideological investment, the West engages in a systematic “domestication of the exotic” (Said, *Orientalism* 60). The distant and unfamiliar features of the other—often seen as a threat—are appropriated by Western societies in an attempt to turn them into something mysterious and antagonistic, though appealing and “familiar” at the same time. Mark Padoongpatt’s study of the love-hate relationship that mainstream America has established with culinary traditions coming from Asia is greatly indebted to Said’s understanding of the “Orient” as a sort of “contrasting image” or “surrogate self” (*Orientalism* 2, 3). In

⁵⁴ Manalansan carried out a fieldwork study on the olfactory representations of Asian immigrants in Queens, New York, and he concluded that smell constitutes a code for differences along the lines of class, race, and ethnicity (“Immigrant” 44). That is, Asian Americans are often marked as the “malodorous” community polluting the “mythical image of an odorless Manhattan skyline” (Manalansan, “Immigrant” 43).

“Oriental Cookery” (2013), Padoongpatt maintains that, though the fascination with the East is not new, “the interest in Asian food practices [in particular] occurred simultaneously with the formation of suburban whiteness” during the Cold War (187). The American collective imaginary turned Asian foodways into a site of identity formation and neocolonial contact with the other’s “epicurean delights” (Padoongpatt 191). The transformation of the inassimilable other into a source of pleasure at mainstream’s service helped secure and promote Orientalist representations of Asians at a time of obsessive white conformity. Thus, following Heldke’s notion of “food colonialism” and Fish’s concept of “boutique multiculturalism,” Padoongpatt insists that this appeal for the other’s culinary traditions is driven by a “colonial thirst for adventure” and power, and supported by a superficial respect for diversity (192).

In this context of exoticization and commodification of difference, Asian restaurants multiplied, offering a sugar-coated, adapted, and even Americanized version of a variety of Asian cuisines. According to S. Wong, Asian Americans have, ever since, found themselves enacting negative stereotypes imposed on them in order to pander to mainstream’s tastes (*Reading* 55). Borrowing Frank Chin’s term, Wong defines this ethnic food phenomenon as “food pornography,” as it often capitalizes on the image of Asians as inassimilable foreigners, “wrench[ing] cultural practices out of their context and display[ing] them for the curious gaze of ‘outsiders’” (*Reading* 56; cf. F. Chin 86). Be that as it may, Asians indisputably hold a prominent position within the ethnic food market. Their culinary creations—many of them born in the U.S. to satisfy mainstream palates—have become part of American popular culture, and they constitute the material proof of the complex and fluid nature of Asian American subjectivity: “Dishes like General Tso’s

chicken, California roll, SPAM *musubi*, tandoori chicken, and Korean tacos have come to signify the confused and ambivalent relationships between mainstream American consumptive desires and Asian American assimilative dreams” (Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 4). But the permeability between Asian and American cultures does not stop at the classic sweet and sour pork, *chop suey*, or “fortune cookies”—culinary creations with no equivalent in Asia—, as new forms of identity negotiation through food have recently emerged. From the increasingly popular Asian Latino food trucks—selling a fast food version of fusion cuisine such as the aforementioned Korean tacos—, to the ubiquitous Cambodian Donut shops in California, Asian Americans’ resourcefulness and creativity keep asking for “more expansive definitions of Asian America” that move away from Orientalist paradigms (Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 8; cf. Mannur, “Model” 72; Siu 243; Curtis 24).

Nevertheless, despite the challenges posed on mainstream American society by a heterogeneous and ever-changing Asian American community, this group is still represented in terms of their “exotic” foodways. Mass-media continues to play a critical role in promoting a food-oriented and fetishistic image of Asian-origin minorities, as it capitalizes on the aura of “foreignness” imposed on them. Besides, Asian American foodways, always “on the knife-edge between novelty and familiarity” (S. Wong, *Reading* 58), still bear the mark of power relations and racial and ethnic discrimination. In the introduction to their recently published collection *Eating Asian America* (2013), Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur alert the reader to the dangers of a “superficial multiculturalism that celebrates difference and reconciliation simply or primarily through the pleasures of food and eating” (3). In fact, this attitude seems to be built upon the idea that Asian

Americans are “strange people but they sure can cook” (Kalcik 37), for it indirectly suggests that Asian Americans should only be valued insofar as they continue to constitute a source of sensory pleasure for mainstream society.

However, as Uma Narayan reminds us, we should not look at the ethnic food market as simply a material product geared for a white American clientele, because the individuals running those restaurants or Asian grocery stores, as well as the Asian immigrants who frequent them, may also establish a particular relationship with them. According to Lily Cho, ethnic businesses such as restaurants—especially those in small towns—often constitute “culturally productive spaces” where not only Asian and American influences merge, but where Asian immigrants get in touch with other members of their immigrant or refugee community, turning these locales into sites of memory and agency (13).⁵⁵

From all the above it can be concluded that foodways, and everything surrounding them, constitute fraught arenas of identity formation for Asian Americans (Ho, *Consumption* 11). The multilayered and diverse relationships, forced or voluntary, that this community has established with the culinary turns the alimentary realm into a fertile ground for the historical and sociological study of their immigrant or refugee experiences. However, I argue that the significance of food transcends the borders between reality and fiction and, as already mentioned in the introduction, it provides us readers and scholars with a valuable trope that condenses an overwhelming variety of symbolic meanings in Asian American

⁵⁵ The trope of the small-town restaurant as a site of identity reification and comfort will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter, where the intersections between food, memory, and nostalgia will lead the way in the interpretation of a series of Asian American literary works. For a detailed discussion on the multilayered symbolism and functions of the small-town Chinese restaurant, see Cho’s *Eating Chinese* (2010). From a similar standpoint, Mankekar’s article “India Shopping: Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging” (2002) explores the Indian grocery store as a site for community building; a chronotope that feeds the memories of South Asian immigrants as it keeps them connected to the homeland (85).

literature. Let us now relish the flavors contained in its pages as we uncover the real and fictional stories behind those sensory landscapes.

2. Food and Memory in Displacement: Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" and Chai's *Hapa Girl*

"An immigrant travels with luggage of several kinds. There are suitcases packed with practical goods and memorabilia [...] and there is the baggage carried only in the mind, which contains flavors, aromas, and images from the kitchens of homeland and family."

Cara de Silva, "Fusion City"

It is my intention in this chapter to explore the various ways in which the trope of food, as a "smorgasbord for the senses" (Furiya 46), is intimately connected with memory, ethnicity, and nostalgia in the Asian American narratives of displacement of Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's"—from her award-winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies*—, and Chai's memoir *Hapa Girl*.⁵⁶ Thus, building on Mannur's notion of food as "an idiom for expressing nostalgic desire" (*Culinary Fictions* 29), I argue that the culinary serves in these two texts as a particularly powerful means for the embodiment of pre-diasporic recollections. In the following pages I will analyze how the culinary traditions, and the most mundane and intimate sensory experiences that they trigger are portrayed in these works as central sites for the recreation of diasporic subjectivity, constituting (quasi-)utopian spaces of identification for the displaced and often homesick individual.

⁵⁶ There are three publications listed under Jhumpa Lahiri's name in the "Works Cited" section, but I will be quoting from her short story on most occasions. Thus, unless otherwise specified, whenever I mention Lahiri I will be referring to her short story "Mrs. Sen's."

Reading and interpreting food images in these terms will shed light on the semiotic, social, and affective value of the culinary in Lahiri's and Chai's works, for these metaphors are very much connected with matters of ethnic and diasporic consciousness. In other words, food constitutes a "potent symbol for signifying the ethnic integrity of Asian Americans" and it is often described as a genuine "palliative for dislocation" (Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia" 13). Along these lines, the first section of this chapter will focus on how immigrants are, as Sara Suleri puts it in her memoir *Meatless Days* (1987), often portrayed in Asian American literature as "adamant [and] entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland" (22). The study of food tropes from this point of view will inevitably lead us to discuss the complex relations between gustatory-olfactory experiences and acts of remembrance, assessing how these "poignant pleasures" (Rajan 105) are turned into meaningful literary devices by some Asian American writers in order to evoke questions such as the homesickness and estrangement of the immigrant characters.

Moreover, since memory and identity are very much interwoven, the second section will elaborate on the characters compulsive quest for the elusive "authenticity" in food, as if authentic tastes and smells were the key to regain control over their lives and personhood. Thus, in Lahiri's and Chai's narratives, the culinary mediates between the character's need to remember the past, and their introspective project of identity reconstruction in the present.

2.1. Feeding Memory

"Now I know. I mean *really* know. There are memories, and there are *memories*. [...] what the mind forgets, the body might hold dear."

Andrew Lam, *Perfume Dreams*

Though the neuronal mechanisms and cognitive processes at work in food-inspired memories are still rather unexplored (Sutton 9), many are the scholars who agree on the fact that flavors and smells are the most evocative and long-lasting sensory experiences. According to James Gilroy, taste and smell, "our most delicate and seemingly fragile senses," act as the most "persevering and zealous keepers of our past experiences," working as sensory referents for personal remembrances that live on "in our bodily senses long after the intelligence has lost sight of them" (100-101). In consequence, it seems logical to affirm that the act of eating, as it stimulates both the olfactory and gustatory senses, constitutes an infinitely valuable mnemonic experience in itself, evoking recollections of a strikingly varied nature. Indeed, alluding to its intimate relation with memory, food has been insistently labeled as the "peculiar mnemonic" (Sutton x), the "cultural mnemonic" (Naficy 152), or the "track of memory" (Mehta 250).

The presence of food-inspired memories in literature as powerful figures of speech is not new. One of the most well-known and oft-quoted examples of this can be found in Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, more specifically in the volume entitled *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, where the author

offers a digression about the involuntary and irretraceable nature of the childhood memories triggered by the taste of “madeleines” soaked in tea:

Mais, quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la morte des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeurs et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'edifice immense du souvenir. (68)

Even though almost a hundred years have passed since the publication of the seven volumes of Proust's masterpiece between 1913 and 1927, it is interesting to notice that the literary use of the food-memory synergy has undergone very few changes. In fact, the evocative and emotional power of food, as a cultural artifact, continues to be the backbone of many Asian American narratives of migration and displacement, in which the characters, frequently described as deeply nostalgic and homesick, “eat in order to remember” (Sutton 12).⁵⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the peculiarity of tastes and smells lies in the fact that they cannot be easily recalled at will, therefore, the sensations and recollections that they encode for the diasporic subject can only be activated, and subsequently decoded through the actual embodiment of the sensory stimuli caused by cooking and/or eating “food from a previous world and life” (Bardenstein 353).

⁵⁷ Other Asian American narratives in which food and memory overlap are: Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), A. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Cheryl Lu-lien Tan's *A Tiger in the Kitchen* (2011), or Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011). The latter complicates the dynamics of the sensory and recalling experiences by portraying a synaesthetic Vietnamese American adoptee whose neurological condition causes the “involuntary mixing of senses” (Truong 218). For a critical analysis of this novel, see Begoña Simal-González's “Judging the Book by its Cover: Phantom Asian America in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*.”

This section will, thus, look into the complex link between memory and gustatory and olfactory experiences, offering an interpretation of how this connection between external stimuli, sensory experiences, and remembrances is embedded in the narratives of Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" and Chai's *Hapa Girl*. In both texts food acquires significant and meaningful dimensions, as it acts as a culturally symbolic signifier of the foreign-born immigrant's ethnic identity, mediating in the complex diasporic negotiations between "here" and "there" (Kunow 158), "before" and "now." However, though both authors explore the evocative power of food from similar perspectives, there are some differences regarding the tone of the narratives. While Lahiri's short story treats the question of Mrs. Sen's homesickness in a very thorough way—allowing the omniscient narrator to make incursions into the character's thoughts and intimate feelings of anguish and sadness—, Chai opts for a hyperbolic and humorous stance in order to deal with his father's troubled memories and identity crises. In spite of these differences, both works follow a similar three-stage pattern: firstly, the characters take refuge in food in an attempt to dissipate nostalgia and/or pain and embrace an "authentic" identity; secondly, both Lahiri and Chai present the immigrant as the victim of an episode of veiled discrimination that increases their almost obsessive habits regarding food; and finally, the dangers behind their essentialist and overly-nostalgic attitudes are revealed, hinting at the unsustainable nature of those emotional investments in the past.

The solitude and sadness Mrs. Sen suffers as an arranged-married and newly-arrived South Asian woman in the United States are aggravated by the stifling domestic sphere of the house where she is confined, unable to lead a normal social life due to the cultural estrangement she feels in her new host

country.⁵⁸ I deliberately choose the word “house” instead of “home” in this particular case in order to emphasize that, as Amulya Malladi suggests in her novel *The Mango Season* (2003), “home [is] a feeling and not a brick structure” (203). Thus, Mrs. Sen’s lack of belonging in America is sharpened by the difficulties she encounters when trying to recreate and feel the warmth and sense of community intrinsic to the concept of “home” that she was used to in Bengal, as opposed to the cold, aseptic, and strictly material idea of the “house” where she lives in Massachusetts. As the narrator of the story significantly mentions, “when Mrs. Sen said *home*, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (Lahiri 116, emphasis added).

In an attempt to fight her feelings of “homelessness” in America, Mrs. Sen religiously observes a series of culinary-related Bengali rituals that act as an “emotional anchor” (Mannur, “Culinary Nostalgia” 11) and help her assuage the sadness caused by her having been uprooted from her cultural environment. In fact, according to Sunil Bhatia or Vijay Prashad, the domestic space constitutes for “desis”—diasporic South Asian subjects—a refuge from racism and a site to perform and uphold Indian culture and identity abroad (Bhatia, *American* 223; Prashad 121). This “space-making” process, according to Bhatia, often encompasses three kinds of cultural practices: routines, rituals, and rites of passage (*American* 50, 223, 227). Mrs. Sen’s case can be interpreted from this perspective, as her nostalgia and longing for a feeling of community are mirrored in her daily culinary rituals, and particularly in her special relationship with fish.

⁵⁸ In fact, social, and especially, family support, have been viewed as major resources to prevent or mitigate the initial culture shock of the newly-arrived immigrant. However, in Mrs. Sen’s case, her husband—her only close acquaintance in America—is too busy with his job as a university professor, a position that provides him with a solid social network he does not share with his wife. Mrs. Sen, on the contrary, does not have a job outdoors, and her daily routine is claustrophobically confined to the stifling atmosphere of her apartment, where she takes care of Eliot.

This element, which constitutes a potent “recalling mechanism” for the main character (J. Durán 62), performs an ambivalent role in the story, as it not only stimulates Mrs. Sen’s memories of her life in India, but it also represents a constant reminder of her displacement and estrangement in the U.S.:

‘In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find the fish I like, never a single.’ Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight. (Lahiri 123-124)

The critical role that fish played in Mrs. Sen’s everyday life in India turns it into a “tool for nostalgia” (Madhuparna 185) that has the power to disrupt Mrs. Sen’s emotional stability. In fact, as Krishnendu Ray contends in *Migrant’s Table* (2004), the meaningfulness of fish for diasporic Bengali people—not only as a literary image in this particular story, but also in cultural and social terms—goes as far as to be considered, together with rice, the most enduring and potent symbol of “Bengaliness” (155). While he argues that *ilish* is probably the most emblematic kind of fish for this immigrant community, Ray admits that “any kind of fish in conjunction with rice” works as a remarkable signifier of Bengali identity (155). In fact, though *ilish* is not present in Lahiri’s story, many other different kinds of fish, such as mackerel, butterfish, sea bass, or halibut (Lahiri 129, 133) are repeatedly mentioned, and, despite the fact that none of them “tastes like the fish in India,” Mrs. Sen seems to content herself with them as long as they are fresh (Lahiri 123). Freshness, and a particular—and uncommon in America—prodding and cutting of

the fish by the fishmonger appear to be the most important requirements for this product to qualify as the symbol of Mrs. Sen's ethnic identity in the diaspora.⁵⁹

Bearing this in mind, it is easier to understand the happiness and dedication with which Mrs. Sen—on those occasions when she finds fresh fish—engages in the preparation of Bengali traditional dishes, as if this task meant the reaffirmation of her own subjectivity, and a homage to her geographically distant but emotionally close home in India. The aura of solemnity surrounding the preparation of the fish seems to comply with Bhatia's idea of routine and ritual as ingredients with which to recreate Indian culture abroad: "One by one she drew them from the paper wrapping, wrinkled and tinged with blood. She stroked the tails, prodded the bellies, pried apart the gutted flesh. With a pair of scissors she clipped the fins. She tucked a finger under the gills, a red so bright they made her vermilion seem pale" (Lahiri 127).

In this scene, fish not only stimulates the sight, taste, smell, and sense of touch bringing about memories from her family and previous life in India, this task also constitutes a "means to escape" (Manalansan, "Prairiescapes" 365); a way to travel beyond the blurred edge of location and thus endure the daily challenges of "living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford, *Routes* 255). Borrowing Clifford's words, food attests here to the crisscrossing of "roots and routes" (251) that Mrs. Sen's experience in displacement entails. Her attachment to Bengali cooking mirrors her "connection to a prior home" (Clifford, *Routes* 255), at the same time that the performance of these culinary traditions in the diaspora

⁵⁹ Mrs. Sen's special demands at the fish market—she wants her fishes in one piece, with the heads, tails, and entrails on—, surprises the fishmonger, who wonders if she has a cat at home (Lahiri 127). To this question, Mrs. Sen honestly and naturally answers: "No cats. Only a husband" (127). This spontaneous reaction on the part of the Bengali woman shows that this transaction was absolutely routine and common for her back in Calcutta, where nobody questioned or judged her "fish-ways."

illustrates the often weak ties between cultural expressions and location. This, Clifford contends, is the essence of the new diasporic consciousness, which juggles with questions of memory, community, identity, and culture in a site of permanent "dwelling-in-travel" or "dwelling-in-displacement" (*Routes* 26, 254; cf. Kearney; Appadurai, *Modernity*; Kaplan; Sassen; Tomlinson).

The self-affirming and recalling power of kitchen tasks in Lahiri's story allows for a reading of the domestic sphere as a site of agency for the female character, who, unable to gain access to other spaces, turns her patriarchal and solitary confinement to the kitchen into her personal shrine of Indianness.⁶⁰ One of the elements that symbolizes Mrs. Sen's self-affirmation in the United States is the *bonti*,⁶¹ the blade the protagonist brought from India, and which she uses on a daily basis to chop ingredients as she used to do back home. This ancestral and traditional kitchen tool, "endowed with a wealth of associations reaching far beyond the mundane" (Banerji), represents Mrs. Sen's cultural attachment to her community back in Bengal as well as her rigorous observance of the customs and mores her family has instilled in her:

Whenever there is a wedding in the family, [...] or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous

⁶⁰ Mrs. Sen remains unnamed throughout the whole story. The fact that she is only referred to by her married name seems to hint at her invisibility, loneliness, and lack of independence in the United States. Due to space constraints, this doctoral thesis will not explore in detail the implications that food and cooking have in the field of gender studies, but this reading would offer an interesting insight into the way the kitchen is represented as both a site of patriarchal domination and female agency.

⁶¹ The *bonti* is a curved blade used to chop, peel, or dice vegetables, fish, or fruit in both rural and urban areas of Bengal. The chopping is usually performed by women while squatting or sitting on the floor. As Chitrita Banerji affirms, this instrument is "inextricably associated with Bengali women, and the image of a woman seated at her *bonti*, surrounded by baskets of vegetables, is a cultural icon."

circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night. (Lahiri 115)

The use of the *bonti* in her new and still unfamiliar setting in America helps Mrs. Sen remember the sense of belonging she felt in her hometown in India, in contrast to the loneliness she endures in America, where “she cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri 115). By literally and metaphorically holding onto something that has a deep emotional significance for her, Mrs. Sen is able to recall and maintain strong ties with her homeland and cultural background, preventing these bonds from being diluted or severed by distance. As Jennifer González puts it, “[t]he moment of personal or cultural transition, the movement from one place to another, from one role to another, can create the felt need to have certain objects that form a continuity between a previous life and a new life, a previous identity and a new identity” (146). Thus, following González’s argument, the *bonti*, a fundamental and ritualized Bengali-coded artifact, represents in the story and in Mrs. Sen’s life a personal “autotopographical object” that functions as a “spatial annex” (136) or a “material site for memory” (140) where Mrs. Sen’s Bengali cultural heritage is engraved against the backdrop of time and distance. Using this blade to chop vegetables in America does not simply constitute the reification of an ancestral tradition; Mrs. Sen’s attachment to this culturally-coded artifact anchors her emotions to a material and tangible reality to which she can turn on a daily basis in an attempt to feed her memory, and overcome her nostalgia for the familiar.

Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it,

she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. [...] At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients (Lahiri 114).

The act of chopping those vegetables creates an atmosphere of “home-sounds” and “home-aromas” (Katrak 264) that helps Mrs. Sen feel she belongs in an “alien kitchen.”⁶² Thus, the ritualized aura of the *bonti*, together with the cultural significance of fish as a marker of Bengali identity, becomes a symbolic lighthouse that illuminates the complex and intricate landscape of nostalgia and longing where Mrs. Sen is lost, guiding her, through sensory impulses along the crooked—and more often than not, obstructed—“tracks of memory” (Mehta 250).

The way Lahiri portrays the protagonist of her short story as constantly struggling with an alien environment and dealing with her homesickness by means of food-related actions, parallels in some ways the fashion in which Chai pictures her father in her memoir *Hapa Girl*. However, before moving on to the literary analysis, it is necessary to understand the reasons why Chai decided to write about her father, as this will determine the way we interpret the culinary images in the text. In order to learn more about the motivations behind this autobiographical work, and the stories behind the characters, it is necessary to engage in an exercise of intertextuality. Thus, my reading of *Hapa Girl* will also feed from *The Girl from Purple Mountain* (2001), a family memoir authored by Chai and her

⁶² In her autobiographical article “Food and Belonging: At ‘Home’ and in ‘Alien-Kitchens’” (1998), Ketu Katrak describes her relationship with Indian food in a way that is reminiscent of Lahiri’s short story, for Indian staples such as *garam masala*, *cumin*, or *basmati* rice are similarly infused by Katrak with the overwhelming mnemonic power of transporting the eater “into other skies” (268-269).

father, Winberg Chai.⁶³ In the latter, both Chais offer a reconstructed and collaborative version of the family's history, moved by the daughter's desire to know more about her ancestors' life in China—a story that had apparently been erased—, and by her father's need to remember, after a long time of repressed memories. Behind these silenced recollections lies a life marked by war and escape that starts when May-lee's grandparents, who had migrated to America, decide to return to China in 1932 so that their son Winberg is born in Nanjing, the capital at that time. What they did not know was that nothing would happen as they had planned, because, a few years after Winberg's birth, China would start to “disintegrat[e] into a sea of soldiers” (Chai and Chai 170). In the summer of 1937, the second Sino-Japanese war broke and Winberg's parents got stuck in a war-torn country, desperately moving from one city to the next, escaping Japanese raids—including the “Rape of Nanjing” in December 13, 1937, or the Chongqing bombings between 1938 and 1943.⁶⁴ As the autodiegetic narrator puts it in *Hapa Girl*, May-lee's father's life story “seemed more like nightmares than anything real” (Chai and Chai 202). Thus, it is not surprising that Winberg had suppressed those traumatic memories from his childhood and youth after the family managed to leave for America when he was seventeen years old.

The information we gather from *The Girl from Purple Mountain* casts light on Chai's memoir, which is written from a much more introspective way, as the author explores the frustrations of her “young self” at failing to understand her

⁶³ As Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico cogently argues, three different—though related—“subjects” interplay in life writing: the author, the narrator, and the character (“Autobiografía” 73). In order to differentiate them, I will consistently refer to autobiographers and memorists (authors) by their surname and to autodiegetic narrators by their first name.

⁶⁴ Due to space constraints, I will not discuss in detail the historical events that took place in China right after Winberg's birth. For further information see Chai and Chai's *The Girl From Purple Mountain*. For a thorough study of the Rape of Nanjing (or Nanking), see Iris Chang's homonymous work, first published in 1997.

father's secretive behavior when she was a child. Winberg would never talk about China, much less about the war, and "this silence was a wall between [them]"; a wall May-lee did not know "how to penetrate" (Chai and Chai 195). The painful baggage of memories that he carries in silence also affects Winberg's life in America, as he finds himself lost between two "non-existent worlds": the unspeakable China, and the crazy and frivolous America. Unable to feel he belongs in the United States, but afraid of unearthing and voicing his memories of the past, Winberg resorts to Chinese food as a way to establish an intimate and sensorial link with his previous life. Thus, similar to Lahiri's treatment of Mrs. Sen's identity negotiations, Chai portrays Winberg as immersed in a project of self-assertion through taste, and—borrowing Ben Highmore's words—"through the affective forces that are generated" in such aesthetic experiences (121).

Before moving to the Mid-West, where he lives with his family, Winberg spent some time in New York City with his parents. It is interesting to notice how Chai describes Winberg's past in the East Coast as deeply marked by Chinese food, offering lists of the innumerable dishes he used to eat at multiple Chinatown restaurants: "mitten crabs and sizzling prawns, Shanghai-style 'little dragon' soup dumplings, pork *baozi*, lion's head meatballs, braised greens, winter melon soup," or "Hainan chicken," (Chai 70) among others. The smells, tastes, and noises of New York City's Chinatown seemed to stand for Winberg and his parents as their home away from home: a deterritorialized and transnational location that kept them grounded in their home in China, at the same time that it provided them with a "place" in America. During those first years in America, Winberg took for granted the ubiquity and perennial availability of Chinese food, disregarding the

extraordinary significance that those daily culinary acts held for his ethnic identity and sense of self in the diaspora.⁶⁵

When Winberg and his family—his wife and two kids—move to the Mid-West, an area with a much lower density of Asian Americans, and hence, of Chinese restaurants, Winberg adopts an obsessive behavior: he uncontrollably binges on any variety of Chinese food, and he insists on eating at every single restaurant within a hundred miles radius of every American city he moves to with his family. His compulsive need to have a “decent Chinese meal” (Chai 34) haunts him in each town they settle in, leading him to “drive hours just to try a new Chinese restaurant. Sixty-five miles to Sioux Falls, 130 miles round-trip, just because he saw an ad in the yellow pages for Peking duck. [...] Eighty miles round-trip to Iowa on a rumor of Szechwan-style chicken [or] Sixty-five miles to L.A.’s Chinatown” (Chai 69, 34). Thus, Chai presents Winberg as desperately seeking to reify his identity as a Chinese-born immigrant through his stomach; looking for that perfect meal that would help him make sense of—or maybe quiet down—his repressed memories. This healing process is often interrupted, as Chinese food is not as readily available in the small and mostly white towns where his job takes him. This estrangement from Chinese food makes him miss its flavors so badly that his body begins to suffer serious “withdrawal” symptoms (Chai 70).

⁶⁵ Cases of young adults missing a culinary tradition that they had taken for granted, or that they had altogether rejected at some point in their early lives, are quite common in Asian American literature. See, for example, Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian* (1998), Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Narayan’s *Monsoon Diary*, or Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. In all these texts, the protagonists’ homesickness is mirrored in their urgent need to eat the foods they used to eat back home, at a point in their lives when that particular cuisine is not so readily available for them.

At first it was little things, barely noticeable. The way his mouth would suddenly go dry in the middle of the day. [...] And then his right hand began to tremble, just the thumb and first two fingers, his chopstick fingers. I'd watch them shake at dinner, as we ate our steaks and fries. Later he admitted to my mother that he was beginning to have daydreams that interrupted his thoughts. [...] When you begin to hallucinate about Chinese food you know you are in trouble (Chai 70-71).

The humorous way in which the narrator describes her father's cravings for Chinese food, which borders on the ridicule, contrasts with the dramatic tone of Lahiri's short story.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, reading *Hapa Girl* alongside *The Girl from Purple Mountain* illuminates this seemingly trivial scene. In fact, though Chai does highlight—in a hyperbolic pirouette—the somatic signs of Winberg's desperate quest for a sense of identity, his peremptory need to ingest Chinese food transcends the basic drive for survival. Thus, the memorist's parody of Winberg's consumptive patterns hints at the character's emotional plight, and at his insecurities and unhealthy nonconformity towards his own life, which he perceives—in an exercise of self-pity—as a stumble “on the path to the American Dream” (Chai 158). Unable to give voice to those feelings of frustration and confront the ghosts of the past, Chinese food becomes his only source of comfort, helping him engage in an inner process of identity reconstruction in the diaspora.

The disproportionate and even pathological hunger for any kind of Chinese foodstuffs symbolizes foreign-born Winberg's need to reterritorialize himself in the United States. As discussed in the first chapter, ethnic solidarities and cultural

⁶⁶ Winberg's obsessive consumption of Chinese food is reminiscent of other Asian American texts in which at least one character is portrayed as suffering from a food-related compulsive disorder. See, for instance, S. Chin's "Below the Line" (1997), which tells the story of the daughter of a Chinese-born restaurant owner who cannot stop buying groceries from Chinatown markets, or Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* (1997), which features a Japanese American bulimic child who confronts racism, poverty, and the loss of his mother.

expressions in our increasingly fluid and deterritorialized world are often physically detached from national, local, or territorial referents. As Radhakrishnan states, the location of the diasporic community is a “ghostly” one characterized by a “painful, incommensurable simultaneity” (*Diasporic* 175). However, Radhakrishnan warns against understanding this as a permanent state of liminality, arguing that diasporic subjects seek to reterritorialize themselves “within [their] new location that is neither home nor not-home” (*Diasporic* 175). This reterritorialization and reconfiguration of diasporic identity can only be done, according to Radhakrishnan, by “making a difference” within mainstream, that is, engaging in the reaffirmation of ethnic identity as necessarily “rooted in [and in permanent negotiation with] more than one history: that of the present location and that of its past” (*Diasporic* 176). In Winberg’s case, the history of his past is highly traumatic, and, therefore, this process of self-assertion and reterritorialization is inevitably painful, for he is torn between the need to remember in order to “be” in America, and his desire to “make the past go away” (Chai and Chai 227).

As he wavers between these two forces, Winberg uses Chinese food as a way to cope with anxiety. In fact, his fixation with Chinese gastronomy pushes him to discreetly beg people living in far-away Chinatowns, and even back in China or Taiwan, to send more of what eventually turns into a highly addictive “drug” for him: *rou sung*.⁶⁷

So my father took to eating the *rou sung* by itself, tablespoon after tablespoon, and soon developed canker sores all along his tongue and the

⁶⁷ *Rou sung* is defined by Chai as “a simple snack, nothing fancy. [...] It’s desiccated pork that’s been fried in lard, salt and MSG” (71), and it is normally used as a side complement for rice or noodles. A staple of Chinese food which originally comes from Fujian, *rou sung* is usually eaten together with tofu, soy milk, or *congee* soup.

lining of his cheeks. He began to lisp when he spoke, his mouth was so inflamed, but still he couldn't stop himself from eating more. He even took to hiding the containers at the very back of the refrigerator to keep us from eating any. (Chai 72)

Winberg's pantagruelic and voracious ingestion of any ingredient pertaining to Chinese gastronomy appears to parody the often-quoted cliché of "you are what you eat," coined by Brillat-Savarin. This perspective has been developed by Fischler in his principle of "incorporation." As seen in the previous chapter, due to the cultural and social dimensions of the culinary, when eating, "not only does the eater incorporate the properties of food, but, symmetrically, it can be said that the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practises it" (Fischler 280-281). Reading Winberg's obsessive consumption of Chinese food in the light of Fischler's theorization, it seems the autodiegetic narrator is willing to present her father as compulsively "eating in order to become," as if metabolizing those enormous quantities of *roug sung* would help him overcome his identity crises, and find—and silently intensify—his Chineseness.

This organic association between food, ethnic, and racial identity has been openly criticized in the field of Asian American studies, given the fraught connections between food and diasporic Asianness. Scholars such as Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur alert to the dangers of lapsing into ethnocentric and racist simplifications built around the reduction of a person's identity to a "chopsticks versus fork" dichotomy (8). However, I argue that Fischler's principle of incorporation can be applied, figuratively, to cases such as Winberg's and Mrs. Sen's, characters who clearly choose food as a cultural and affective means to

“be” or “become” in the United States. In fact, the aesthetic component of taste, as put forward by Highmore’s affect theory, is attuned to matters of “emotional resonance” that go beyond the “alimentary self,” and penetrate the complex fabric of feelings and subjectivity (120, 126). Insofar as both of the texts analyzed here describe ethnic attachments as invoked by food-related emotions, this “food-feelings-ethnicity” triad seems to connect Highmore’s theory of affects with Shils’s and Geertz’s primordialist perspectives on ethnic ties as innate “givens” (Geertz 41). According to this approach, ethnic solidarities are characterized by their immediate, ineffable, and unaccountable nature, based on matters of kinship, blood and, mostly, affectivity. Geertz argues that these “attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural—some would say spiritual—affinity than from social interaction” (42). However, even though the affective component of ethnic solidarities cannot be denied or disguised as merely sober, rational, and instrumental, the emotional quality of these bonds should not be inflated, as this could lead to the “mystification of emotion,” and to the complete disconnection between ethnic attachments and social interaction, resulting in a inflexible and deterministic “biological imperative of bond-formation” (Eller and Coughland 192).

In fact, the conciliation and synthesis of primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives on ethnicity, as put forward by scholars such as James McKay, George M. Scott Jr., or Spicer, seem to illuminate the situation described in both Lahiri’s and Chai’s narratives, allowing for a better understanding of how the eating patterns pictured in both texts mirror, not only a question of affective longing for ethnic solidarities, but also a mechanism of self-defense and self-reaffirmation in a situation of “inter-group *opposition*” (Spicer 157, emphasis added). Thus, according to Spicer, it is in the contexts of racial, ethnic, and cultural contact

and/or discrimination such as the ones depicted, in different ways, by Lahiri and Chai, that the displaced individual's ethnic solidarities are usually intensified.⁶⁸ Both "Mrs. Sen's" and *Hapa Girl* illustrate the context of constant cultural and ethnic tension that the Asian immigrant characters endure on a daily basis within mainstream America by describing meaningful scenes of offense and disdain towards the immigrant's eating habits. Asian Americans have always been superficially portrayed and racialized through mainstream's perceptions and representations of their foodways (Xu, *Eating* 8; Ho, *Consumption* 11; Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur 2). The seemingly irrevocable stereotype of Asians as "dogeaters" and consumers of dubiously hygienic food is considered by Xu as two of a series of—anything but harmless—tales "told with the intention of defaming, of othering, and of abjecting Asians in America" (*Eating* 8).

Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" captures this food-related contempt in a couple of scenes which, despite being brief, do not lack in significance. The first of them takes place in Mrs. Sen's house, where the protagonist offers Elliot's mother "a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, [and] a bowl of semiolina halvah" (Lahiri 118). The white woman's attitude towards the food the Bengali immigrant offers her as a sign of gratitude and hospitality constitutes a revealing small-scale sample of mainstream society's not uncommon reticence towards the unfamiliar food of the ethnic other.

⁶⁸ From this idea of "inter-group opposition" it should not be concluded that situations of ethnic difference and contact will always and inevitably lead to ethnic conflict. According to Steinberg, even though "the ideal of a plural society," where different ethnic groups and cultures coexist "in cooperation, harmony and mutual respect, has proved a most elusive one," ethnic difference should not be considered the automatic trigger of conflict (Steinberg 169).

‘Really Mrs. Sen. I take a late lunch. You shouldn’t go to so much trouble.’

[...]

His mother nibbled Mrs. Sen’s concoctions with eyes cast upward, in search of an opinion. [...] ‘It’s delicious,’ she would conclude, setting down the plate after a bite or two. Elliot knew she didn’t like the tastes; she had told him so once in the car. He also knew she didn’t eat lunch at work [...]. (Lahiri 118)

As mentioned in the first chapter, food and eating are considered by some as powerful “contact zones” (Pratt 4) that help cross “boundaries of taste” (Long 10) between different communities, cultures, and traditions (U. Narayan 183; Long 32). In this vein, Donna R. Gabaccia contends in *We Are What We Eat* (1998), that the foods we consume “commemorate a long history of peaceful cultural interaction, our multiethnic eating daily proclaims our satisfied sense of affiliation with one another” (231). However, the naïve and utopian nature of statements such as this one are illustrated by some of the food images in Lahiri’s and Chai’s respective works, which cannot but remind us of the fact that the contact between groups often takes place in contexts of social opposition and discrimination. Thus, Elliot’s mother lies in order to avoid eating Mrs. Sen’s food, and the reluctance and disgust behind her final agreement to do so function in the story as an example of the lack of understanding between those two culturally-distant women. As Rappoport puts it, “ethnocentric food preferences are easily converted into food prejudices”; these may be in turn transformed into “moralistic justifications for social stereotyping and egocentric pretensions to superiority, the commonsense reasoning being that only inferior people would consume inferior foods” (72).

Another scene in Lahiri's short story that hints at this question takes us back, once again, to the symbolic element of fish. In this particular case, fish is the cause of another episode of culinary disdain that takes place during Mrs. Sen's and Elliot's bus ride back from the fish market, when the smell and appearance of Mrs. Sen's fish-loaded bag upsets another passenger: "[A]n old woman [...] kept watching them, her eyes shifting from Mrs. Sen to Elliot to the blood-lined bag between their feet" (Lahiri 132). Mrs. Sen is even asked by the bus driver to open the window in order to prevent the bad smell of fish from "bothering the other passengers" (Lahiri 133). Not only is she publicly humiliated in front of everyone on the bus, but, even worse, her beloved fish, that culturally symbolic element which carries the memories of her life in Calcutta, is deemed to have a pungent and unpleasant smell. If, as Xu contends, those who eat smelly and "filthy" foods are automatically regarded with suspicion for "indulg[ing] in filthy ways" (*Eating* 6), Mrs. Sen's ethnicity, culture, and traditions are altogether put into question by the other passengers, who openly show contempt towards her fresh fish, the staple of her diet. "[S]ensory perception like taste and smell are," according to Padoongpatt, "cultural as well as physical acts in that they are infused with meanings and ways of knowing that are socially constructed and historically specific" (191). Thus, the smell of fish constitutes a mark of alterity that publicly stigmatizes Mrs. Sen as the different and unhygienic "smelly immigrant" (Manalansan, "Immigrant" 42).⁶⁹

A similar episode of racial stereotyping and stigmatization expressed through food can also be found in *Hapa Girl*. In this memoir, this issue acquires

⁶⁹ As Ku, Manalansan, and Mannur put it, the stereotype of the malodorous and unwashed immigrant has contributed to the marginalization of ethnic minorities in the United States. Until the 1970s and 1980s, South and Southeast Asian immigrants were patronizingly asked by government agencies to take care of their hygiene, and to "reduce the odor of their food, especially when frying fish and using exotic ingredients that might offend their American neighbor's delicate sense of smell" (3).

even more significance due to the fact that Winberg questions the existence of any kind of racism against Chinese in America. As the narrator puts it, Winberg “had been raised to believe in the fine art of denial. To save face at all costs. Never to admit weakness or failure or even adversity. The only way to conquer one’s problems was to pretend they didn’t exist” (158). Nevertheless, scenes such as the one I will discuss below show that this is only a superficial mechanism of self-defense that seems to work for him until the racist remarks target his weak point: his dietary habits. I believe it is not a coincidence that Chai’s memoir deals with Winberg’s aforementioned obsessive culinary practices in the same chapter where she explores the widespread cliché of Chinese food as dirty and uncivilized. In fact, the description of this culinary tradition as a “proxy” (Kunow 154) of the troubled memories connected to Winberg’s ancestry clashes with the frivolous and hurtful comments of one of his faculty colleagues at a party that Winberg himself hosts at his house: “why is it that the Chinese could create five thousand years of continuous civilization and yet have such lousy food? You’d think they’d have learned how to fix a steak by now!” (Chai 70). This overtly offensive and racist remark, disguised in the tone of an innocent joke, constitutes a revealing example of the quotidian—and often overlooked as harmless—attacks against Asian foodways, cultures, and traditions. Thus, for Winberg, who had spent all his life trying to keep racism and discrimination “out of sight,” in an attempt to keep it “out of mind,” this seemingly trivial event reminds him of his vulnerability, and, even though he tries to hide it, he is deeply offended: “Later, after everyone else had gone home, we laughed together as a family, as though the man [Winberg’s colleague] had been telling a joke, but even though my father opened his mouth

and made a laughing sound, I could tell that he didn't actually think it was funny" (Chai 70).

In relation to the episodes of food racism discussed above, and going back to the previously mentioned idea of ethnic ties as permanent combinations of affectivity and instrumentalism that can only be conceived as the result of a particular social environment, Scott argues that group tensions

do [...] not lead directly to ethnic solidarity, but operate [...] indirectly through the psychological mechanism of primordial sentiments. [...] Moreover, with respect to the *content* of ethnic identity, the primordial sentiments will also attach to the symbols against which the greatest opposition is expressed, whether language, territory, heroes, music, dance, cuisine, or clothing, such that they will become even more salient in the individual's reckoning of his or her ethnicity (163).

In light of this argument, it seems only logical that the main characters in both Lahiri's and Chai's texts are portrayed as having similar reactions to those instances of "food slurs":⁷⁰ both Mrs. Sen's and Winberg's degree of fixation with their respective ethnic foodways intensifies, as if the act of holding on to their culinary traditions and desperately trying to reproduce "authenticity" would help them protect their identities from "the contemporary crises of fragmentation and racialization in the United States" (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 209). Indeed, many are the scholars who believe that foodways constitute one of the most enduring ethnic markers, even more so than language or religion (Mintz and Du Bois 109; Steinberg 63; Xu, *Eating* 2). Steinberg, who considers ethnic culinary traditions as

⁷⁰ The question of racially- and ethnically-coded "food slurs" will be a constant theme throughout this dissertation as it is a very recurrent topic in many of the works I will be dealing with. Chapter 4 will explore the literary use of episodes of culinary disdain and/or "food shame" so as to illustrate generational conflicts and dilemmas of assimilation or resistance within the private and public spheres of the ethnic family and mainstream society.

“the last bastion” of minority groups in the diaspora, argues that “[m]any who have severed all other attachments to their ethnic background still retain a passion for their native cuisine,” and, he adds, “[i]t would be wrong automatically to dismiss this as trivial” (63). However true this may be, it is fundamental to bear in mind that ethnic symbols such as food cannot be fossilized into timeless essences since they are subject to changes in their significance, intensity, and material qualities as a consequence of their adaptation to new social circumstances and environments.

In the next section of this chapter I will analyze the ways in which Lahiri and Chai explore the various dangers of an excessively ambitious and uncritical sensory quest for ethnic assertion and “authenticity” in the diaspora. A search that sometimes takes the immigrants through bittersweet and risky emotional paths that make them sink even deeper in a whirlpool of melancholia. In fact, this obsession with finding and reproducing “authenticity” leads both characters to fall into the trap of an infatuated, and overly “nostalgic gaze back to the homeland” (Radhakrishnan, “Culture” 11).

2.2. A Pungent Nostalgia

"[W]hen I am far away, in very different landscapes, [...] it's no use reminding myself then that the senses—those semi-magical faculties of sight, smell, hearing—hold not only your most truthful memories but also your most hopeless desires."

Pankaj Mishra, "There's no place like home"

Even though it is undeniable that "identifiable fragrances and familiar tastes represent powerful signifiers of memory" (Mehta 251) and lasting markers of ethnic identity for the diasporic individual, Mrs. Sen's and Winberg's at times excessive mystification of the tastes and smells that symbolically embody their origins and cultural heritage seems to incite both characters to act in extreme ways in order to achieve their culinary objective. These actions lead them to equally uncomfortable and even embarrassing circumstances that hint at the dangers of an overly nostalgic interpretation of the past, and a somehow essentialist perception of their own identity.

In the case of *Hapa Girl*, after the aforementioned episode of "food slurs" that took place in Winberg's house, he was left, according to his daughter, wearing "a worried look on his face that was entirely new" (Chai 73). The offensive comment about his foodways—the only antidote for his distress—meant for Winberg a direct and frivolous attack against his difficult past, and a sign of disrespect towards his family. One more time, Chai dwells on images and scenes of consumption in order to emphasize Winberg's reaction to this racist offense, which involves an intensification of his chaotic behavior towards Chinese food.

Winberg's desperate culinary search for self-reaffirmation turns now, more than ever, into a search for authenticity in an attempt to hold on to his origins and roots. Again, the context of this desperate quest is one of the many Chinese restaurants he visits, as if looking for the flavor that would replace the pain of his traumatic memories with a familiar and peaceful aftertaste. This is illustrated in the memoir by the family's visit to the Yank-Ton Won-Ton Chinese restaurant in South Dakota. The narrator describes the outside appearance of the building as completely dilapidated and desolate, using adjectives such as "dingy," "tiny," "terrible," "dark," "wounded," or "empty" that anticipate the frustration and anxiety that would overwhelm her "pathologically obsessed" father while eating inside (Chai 107). Similarly, the atmosphere inside the place is described as gloomy and poorly-lit; "so dark [the family] had to stand completely still, clustered by the door" (Chai 107) until their eyes got used to the lack of light. In the same vein, the food they order and eat is pictured in a very superficial and colorless way, which only highlights the meager, poor, and even insalubrious quality of what Winberg and his family are offered:

[E]very dish was the color beige. My father ate his entire plate of food in one long, continuous munching motion, his fork shoveling beige fried rice and beige meat chunks with beige peanuts into his mouth. He ate practically without chewing, as though that would lessen the *pain*. [...] Then he drank six cups of tea, trying to wash the flavor from his mouth. (Chai 108, emphasis added)

Chai captures Winberg's emotional instability in a scene of greedy and compulsive eating. If, as Rappoport argues, "our anxieties, aspirations, and modes of relating to others are embodied in our food habits" (59), this character's way of

gobbling down the seemingly revolting dishes he is served constitutes a proof of Winberg's inner conflicts, which he somatizes into an insatiable hunger for the supposedly "more *authentic*" food served in "little-hole-in-the-wall places" (Chai, emphasis added 107). However, Winberg seems to overlook the fact that authenticity—as applied to Chinese food in the United States—is necessarily constructed on the basis of completely different and shifting standards from those he might be looking for. As Manalansan puts it, "there is nothing inherent in the food that makes it authentic," and thinking the opposite would mean promoting an essentialist notion of culture, and thus, an unchanging, and static conception of selfhood ("Beyond" 190). This is precisely what Winberg is looking for by reducing his identity to a stagnant connection with origins, in an attempt to deny its constructedness over time.

As Radhakrishnan argues, in a world that is increasingly characterized by constant flows of peoples and ideas, a world of "mutable, changing traditions and natures" (*Diasporic* 210), the question of identity and the strategies used to perform and maintain its uniqueness have become even more complicated. Thus, diasporic and/or ethnic consciousness in the United States often turns to discourses of "authenticity" in an attempt to "protect and maintain [their] space and history" (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 210). However, Radhakrishnan maintains that the rhetoric of authenticity tends to verge "dangerously towards blood-and-guts fundamentalism," or "mystical and primordial essentialism" (*Diasporic* 162), translating into a fossilization and idealization of the past. An example of this is Ray's debatable point of view on this question: "Authenticity is the elaboration of subjective culture as an essentialist dogma. It is fixed on the past, not the present or the future" (168). This theorization clashes with Radhakrishnan's broader and

more flexible idea of the “authentic,” which, according to him, should be understood as “an invention with enough room for multiple rootedness” (*Diasporic* 162). In other words, the notion of “authenticity” should not be conceptualized as an ideological construct impervious to “historical contingency,” “hybridity,” or “invention” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 162).

The dangers of a dogmatic and past-oriented authenticity—the kind Ray seems to defend and Radhakrishnan criticizes—are illustrated in Winberg’s disappointments at most of the Chinese restaurants he visits, where he is served dishes he had “heard about in jokes, but never imagined could actually exist. Egg foo young. Beef chop suey. Stir-fried rice made with mixed vegetables and Spam” (Chai 69).⁷¹ Winberg’s incessant quest for the ever-elusive and quintessential Chineseness fails once again in the little and rundown Yank-Ton Won-Ton eatery, where he feels sick immediately after eating. Chai succeeds in creating an atmosphere of tension in this scene, and she portrays, one more time, an agitated and infantile Winberg, who drinks tea compulsively and “scrap[s] his tongue with his paper napkin” in a coarse and clumsy attempt to get rid of the “inauthentic” tastes. Even though, as Radhakrishnan puts it, mutability should not be demonized or perceived as “decadent or deplorable” (*Diasporic* 210), the U.S.-

⁷¹ According to Jennifer 8. Lee, there are “some forty thousand Chinese restaurants in the United States—more than the number of McDonald’s, Burger Kings, and KFCs combined” (*Fortune* 9). Their ubiquity, which has turned them into an integral part of the American landscape, has come to be considered one of the most pervasive and visible manifestations of Chineseness in the United States (Som 150; Cho 12; Liu and Lin 137). The Chinese restaurant functions both as the material reterritorialization of the ethnic community and as the main “contact zone” with mainstream society. The overlapping with the America of non-Chinese descent has translated into a constant process of adaptation of the diverse Chinese cuisines in order to make them more palatable and appealing to mainstream tastes (Cho 12; Som 150). *Chop suey*, *chow mein*, or the popular fortune cookies, culinary creations nowhere to be found in China, have come to be known as the most evident examples of the urges of the Chinese American food industry to produce a marketable version of Chineseness (Cho 68-70; Coe 180; Ching 28; Yu 87). For a more intimate and personal account of the Chinese food industry in the United States, see John Jung’s autobiographical monograph *Sweet and Sour: Life in Chinese Family Restaurants* (2010).

adapted—or altogether invented—Chinese dishes that Winberg eats at that restaurant constitute a turning point in his consumptive patterns, leading him “to give up entirely on the Chinese food in the region” (Chai 106).

Winberg's fear of losing control over his own identity in America makes him cling on to the only thing he thought would remain unchanged over time: food. But, can ethnicity be reduced to “a mere flavor, an ancient smell to be relived as nostalgia”? (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 204). This is reminiscent of Gans's notion of “symbolic ethnicity,” as put forward in section 1.1 of the previous chapter. Winberg's traumatic past makes it hard for him to negotiate his identity as a Chinese-born immigrant in America, for he is unable to experience a sense of homeland attachment without feeling the pain of war and loss. Thus, Winberg's quest for ethnic solidarities relies “on ethnic symbols”—most notably food—and it seems to occur in a constant struggle between the wish to root himself somewhere familiar, and the need to establish a connection with those familiar referents from scratch in a new context. Though Gans's theory applies to the American-born's detached experience of ethnicity, I argue that it can also be useful here to understand Winberg's behavior towards his ethnic identity, for his repressed memories have severed or hidden the ties with the homeland that would befit him as a foreign-born immigrant, leaving him with food as the remaining aftertaste of his ethnic background.

If Winberg's fruitless attempts to savor authenticity hint at the “onerous” nature of this “search for pure origins” (Mannur, “Culinary Scapes” 196), Mrs. Sen's devotion and full-time commitment to the daily replication of Bengali culinary rituals would soon reveal the dangers of an excessive nostalgia. In fact, the “culinary routes” that Mrs. Sen navigates—both literally and metaphorically—

between her memories of the homeland and her diasporic condition turn, towards the end of the story, into dangerous alleys and dead ends. As Radhakrishnan puts it, “[t]he diasporan hunger for knowledge about and intimacy with the home country should not turn into a transhistorical and mystic quest for origins” (*Diasporic* 212). However, Mrs. Sen’s obsession with fish—the only element that kept her rooted in the past—hastens the pessimistic denouement of the story. In fear of being humiliated again on the bus, and in a remarkable exercise of agency and self-sufficiency, Mrs. Sen—who once asked if he could “drive all the way to Calcutta” (Lahiri 119)—decides to take her husband’s car, without him knowing, in order to go to the fish market. Thus, even though she does not have a driver’s license, and despite the fact that she is afraid of driving on her own, she resolutely takes Eliot with her in the car and sets out on her first secret ride alone.

The accident occurred quickly. After about a mile Mrs. Sen took a left before she should have, and though the oncoming car managed to swerve out of her way, she was so startled by the horn that she lost control of the wheel and hit a telephone pole on the opposite corner. A policeman arrived and asked her to see her license, but she did not have one to show him. (Lahiri 134)

Mrs. Sen’s car crash before arriving to the market points out the failure of her ultimate and desperate attempt to “fabricate authenticity” and “recreate the conditions of an anterior original essence” in the diaspora (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 32-33). This incident bitterly reminds Mrs. Sen of the difficulties of trying to duplicate her home in Calcutta in her new location in America, where she finds it so hard to adapt. The food-related frustration she suffers leaves her even more homesick and depressed, and, as happens in *Hapa Girl*, where Winberg gives up

on his restaurant expeditions after a series of gastronomic disappointments, Mrs. Sen abandons her Bengali culinary rituals at the end of the story: she “put away the blade that was still on the living room floor and threw the eggplant pieces and the newspapers on the garbage pail” (Lahiri 134). Not only does she quit her beloved Bengali traditions, which had eventually become a source of frustration, but she also resorts for the first time to American snacks such as “crackers with peanut butter” or “Popsicle[s]” (Lahiri 134), as an alternative to feed Eliot; a poor meal that mirrors Mrs. Sen’s hopeless and tasteless existence in the United States.

2.3. Conclusions

As seen throughout this chapter, the cognitive, affective, and, of course, sensorial processes involved in gustatory- and olfactory-related memories are claimed to be highly responsible for the emotional, cultural, and ethnic significance that food and eating acquire in the diaspora. The study of the significance that food-inspired memories acquire in Asian American narratives of displacement opens new paths for the mapping of immigrant discourse. As Mannur puts it, if there is a “pervasive motif in diasporic literature,” that is, undoubtedly, the “desire to connect with the homeland or cultural object” (“Culinary Scapes” 99). However, this is never a simple matter, as immigrants establish different relationships with their pasts, and this translates into disparate ways of approaching their identity in the present. Thus, though both Lahiri and Chai similarly deploy culinary images as indicators of the characters’ attempts to manage memory and/or nostalgia, the

stories behind Mrs. Sen and Winberg ask for a context-related interpretation that clearly determines the meaning of those food tropes in each case.

In “Mrs. Sen’s,” Lahiri represents food as a culinary mnemonic and as a sheltering place for the displaced individual. Culinary rituals and routines set the rhythm of Mrs. Sen’s life in the diaspora, which is, otherwise, tinged with sadness and homesickness. The fish-based dishes that the Bengali protagonist cooks constitute a repository of the character’s ethnicity and identity, and they function as a sensorial and emotional “way to travel ‘back home’” (Manalansan, “Beyond” 292). However, Winberg’s case adds a new ingredient to the food-memory conundrum: trauma. This character’s experiences prior to migration left him with an especially bitter aftertaste that has followed him half-way across the world to his new home in the United States. His inner conflicts take on monolithic culinary dimensions, as he becomes completely obsessed with finding the quintessential and authentic Chinese food. Contrary to Mrs. Sen’s, Winberg’s culinary desires not only represent a nostalgic impulse, but mostly a desperate attempt to heal the wounds caused by his traumatic childhood and adolescence in China. Nevertheless, both characters fail in their quest for wholeness and pure origins, since, borrowing Manalansan’s words, “[c]onsumption is never a complete process,” for, “[w]hile it can lead to satiation, it can also lead to more hunger, more queries, and lingering discomforts” (“Beyond” 299). In fact, unable to find or reproduce the relics of their pasts, both characters sink deeper in their yearnings for a sense of identity and home in harmony with their memories.

The critical role of one’s past in the process of evaluation of “one’s present situation or future predicament” (Manalansan, “Beyond” 292) constitutes a recurrent topic in the Asian American texts I am dealing with in this dissertation.

While this second chapter focused on the individual's emotional quest for identity in a diasporic context, it goes without saying that selfhood, however unique it may be, does not emerge in a social vacuum. As we saw in the first chapter, everyone's sense of identity and belonging is built in relation to others and embedded within the social and cultural characteristics intrinsic to a certain group of people. In keeping with this, the next chapter will explore the way the struggle for a distinct and enduring ethnic identity goes beyond the merely personal, acquiring communal dimensions in Asian American literature. Food is once again the textual indicator of the characters' attempts to nourish a collective memory, and build or reify a diasporic identity.

3. Cooking up One's Roots: Community, Commensality, Commemoration

"Food eaten in the company of others is much more than the mere satiation of one's hunger; it is the great social facilitator."

Leslie Li, *Daughter of Heaven*

"Memories give our lives their fullest shape, and eating together helps us to remember."

Diana Abu-Jaber, *The Language of Baklava*

The prominent role that culinary experiences and food-related rituals play within the process of community building and communal cohesion has been widely explored from various points of view. Insisting on the undeniable power of commensality as a community and/or family unifier, Xu firmly believes that "sharing food plays a central role in the formation of social groupings, "of all the forms of communal enjoyment, alimentary pleasure is the most frequent and visible one" (*Eating* 3). Similarly, Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, as well as Susan Kalcik, posit that food constitutes one of the most enduring and significant ethnic markers, closely connected to individual and group identity. Scenes of culinary gatherings and rituals of commensality abound in Asian American literature, where the symbolic power of food provides a strategy to uncover hidden systems of meaning. Therefore, building on the link between food and individual memory that I put forward in the previous chapter, it is now my aim

to explore the more complex relationship between food and collective memory. In order to do so, I will look into the symbolic “culinary density” (Arfaoui 38) that emanates from scenes of collective consumption present in three different contemporary Asian American autobiographical texts: Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and Narayan’s and Li’s food memoirs, *Monsoon Diary* and *Daughter of Heaven*, respectively.

In these three texts, it becomes apparent that although food “looks like an object,” it is actually “a relationship” (Eagleton 204). That is, gastronomic events function as the “materialized emotion” (Eagleton 204; Xu, *Eating* 3) and cultural touchstone of the family and/or ethnic group. However, owing to the different circumstances behind each narrative, and due to the historical particularities of each ethnic group—South Asian in Narayan’s memoir, Chinese in Li’s, and Vietnamese in Nguyen’s—the meaningfulness behind the scenes of commensality featured in each text needs to be carefully decoded attending to their thematic and structural characteristics. Hence, this chapter will be divided into two sections. The first one will explore some of the most significant food scenes in Narayan’s *Monsoon Diary*, a memoir that privileges the culinary and the familial in order to offer a colorful account of the protagonist’s childhood and adolescence in India, and her later experience of migration to the United States. What makes this text particularly interesting is the fact that Shoba’s retrospective reflections about her life and family in her homeland—evoked and guided by quotidian food events—suggest a late awareness about the importance of the culinary in her life. That is, it seems that moving to the United States in her late teens and encountering an alien social environment raises a new sensorial and emotional consciousness that makes her appreciate food as a community unifier.

As Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussel affirm, foodways not only “bind individuals together,” they also “serve as medium [...] [to] celebrate cultural cohesion, and provide a context for performance of group rituals” (5). In fact, the diasporic survival, adaptation, and transmission of family-centered culinary rituals plays a critical role in Li’s *Daughter of Heaven* and Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*; two memoirs that confer great significance upon the Chinese and Vietnamese celebrations of the Lunar New Year in the United States. The second section of this chapter will, thus, explore both Li’s and Nguyen’s literary representation of this holiday as transcending the mere festive occasion. In fact, this special meal becomes, in both texts, a statement of the family’s survival and cohesion against and beyond all the hardships they went through as Chinese immigrants, in Li’s case, and Vietnamese refugees, in Nguyen’s. Ritualized food sharing proves to be, in these two texts, an important reservoir of collective memory and transgenerational group awareness in contexts of loss and/or trauma, where culinary pleasure provides the immigrant community with a space where to assert their collective identity against discrimination, loss, and even violence.

Food Memoirs

Before moving on to the textual analysis, and given that two of the three works I will focus on in this section are often labeled as food memoirs, I consider it necessary to give a brief account of the special features that accrue to this autobiographical subgenre. As the most evident examples of the presence of food in multiethnic literatures, food memoirs, such as the ones I will be dealing with in the following pages, usually present stories of coming-of-age, characterized by the

depiction of emotionally-charged experiences through the blending and juggling of two elements: food and family. “Culinary memoirs,” as explained by Barbara F. Waxman, “generally trace the memorists’ passage from youth to a maturity in which they have discovered a passion for food (eating it, cooking it, writing about it, travelling to experience it, etc.) and established a niche in the world” (365). In this kind of memoirs, food is not merely a detail or a background ornament; food becomes the protagonist, playing many different and even opposite roles, such as that of identity-marker, an act of trust and love, a bond or a chasm between generations of immigrants, or the symbolic material grounds of memory, superstitions, and religious beliefs, among many other nuances. As Li announces in the foreword to her memoir,

[f]ood, of course—the growing of it, the cooking of it, the people who prepared it, the people who ate it, the rituals surrounding it, the events which required it in splendid abundance—is the foundation of this book, as surely as rice and vegetables are the foundation of any Chinese meal. (xiv)

One of the characteristics that make food memoirs even more culinary-oriented is the fact that they usually contain recipes to illustrate each chapter, rendering the presence of food more vivid and significant. The distribution of the recipes throughout Narayan’s and Li’s food memoirs follows the same pattern: both texts feature them at the end of each chapter, though in the case of *Daughter of Heaven*, some chapters do not contain any. All recipes are thematically related to the chapter where they belong, and this helps emphasize the already outstanding connection between culinary traditions, culture, memory, and family. The actual function of the recipes in food memoirs such as these is ironically

questioned by Ann Skea, who wonders if they really serve a practical culinary purpose, or if, most likely, “reading the stories and savoring the wonderful food descriptions is satisfying enough.”

In any case, the anchorage of abstract memories into material realities and sensory experiences, such as the ones brought about by food, helps ground the narration and give it a sense of corporeality. Moreover, the integration of these recipes into the textual structure of the memoir not only emphasizes the narrative's thematic progression, but it also provides pauses in the discourse that seem to parallel the fragmentary nature of our memories. In keeping with the parallelism between remembering and cooking, it becomes apparent that our memory retains details of an action so that we can later recall it and reproduce it in our minds; likewise, a recipe consists of a record of—often written—guidelines that allows us to “cook” the “same thing” more than once. Thus, in a double exercise of memory, the writer chooses to associate recipes with a particularly relevant experience, in an attempt to emphasize and “freeze” a certain moment in time. However, even if we follow a recipe to the letter, the result will never be exactly the same. Similarly, an action is absolutely unrepeatable, even when our memory of it is thoroughly detailed, clear, and vivid. It is precisely this ephemeral quality of food, and the irremediable transformation of actions into memories, impossible to reproduce and relive, that gives food memoirs a markedly nostalgic taste.

This autobiographical subgenre has been given several names—cookbook memoir, culinary memoir, memoir with recipes, food memoir—but there is one such label, coined by Sutton, that emphasizes the aforementioned emotional nature of this kind of narratives: “nostalgia cookbooks” (143). In fact, nostalgia, melancholy, and memory are key ingredients in food memoirs—the term I will use

here—, where “the relationship between food and memory finds pointedly explicit and conspicuous expressions” (Bardenstein 357). In approaching this type of memoirs, it is fundamental to bear in mind the critical and theoretical insights gained from anthropology, philosophy, and ethnography. In fact, as Waxman stresses, food memorists perform an “auto-ethnographic role” when writing about their own remembrances from childhood or adulthood, for they use food as a culture-laden vehicle for self-analysis (365).⁷²

During the last few decades, several culinary memoirs that feature immigrant families, communities, and individuals living in the diaspora have been published.⁷³ These memoirs are especially evocative in terms of the magnetic and group-uniting powers of food sharing and commensality, matters that I will explore in this chapter. However, it is important not to forget that these multiethnic food memoirs usually illustrate the stories of immigrants in the United States, caught between the explicit and implicit demands to assimilate into mainstream U.S. culture, on the one hand, and the need to uphold the traditions of the homeland, on the other. Thus, in addition to the descriptions of traditional feasts or family culinary rituals as fundamental bonds with the homeland, it is also common to find insights into the culinary traditions and eating habits of the host country as seen from the perspective of the immigrant, who may simply reject them, or try to get

⁷² Ethnography, as one of the fundamental research methods of cultural anthropology, focuses on the lifestyle of different communities, on the possible connections between humans' behavior and culture, and on the many ways in which culture evolves over time. For an insightful introduction to this field of studies see Clifford's "Partial Truths" (1986).

⁷³ Some of them are Aziz Shihab's *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories* (1993), Collette Rossant's *Apricots on the Nile: A Memoir with Recipes* (1999), Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes*, Li's *Daughter of Heaven: A Memoir with Earthly Recipes*, Jaffrey Madhur's *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* (2006), Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* (2006), Furiya's *Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America*, or the recently published *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family*, by C. Tan.

used to them, in an attempt to assimilate. In addition, images and metaphors of food are used in this type of memoirs to explore matters of love, or “emotional starvation,” hunger, desire, family union or conflict, and the importance of a healthy community in attaining happiness (Waxman 380). In fact, one of the most recurrent topics permeating these autobiographical narratives is the question of “home” and “belonging,” usually complicated by experiences of displacement, cross-cultural contact, and generational differences.

3.1. A Culinary Lifetime: Narayan's *Monsoon Diary*

Narayan's food memoir is articulated around a series of gastronomic experiences that constitute very important landmarks in her personal journey to understanding the complexity of her sense of collective identity as a Keralite,⁷⁴ an Indian, and, eventually, a South Asian American woman. What makes this text particularly interesting regarding the literary representation of collective identity and memory is that Narayan chooses to highlight the social and communal significance that ritualized sensorial experiences convey for her and her middle-class Tamil Brahmin family.⁷⁵ Thus, the memorist opens her culinary-structured narrative with a thematically suitable chapter entitled “First Foods,” where Narayan illustrates how the social component of food rituals has governed her life ever since she was born. In fact, the phrase “First Foods” refers to Shoba's *Choru-unna!*; the Hindu rice ceremony celebrated when a baby is six-months old, marking

⁷⁴ A native of the region of Kerala.

⁷⁵ Tamil Brahmins are Hinduist and Tamil-speaking Brahmins from the federal state of Tamil Nadu who have spread to other states in the southeast of the Indian subcontinent. Kerala, where Narayan is from, is one of the *pradesh*—or federal states—with the highest density of this ethno-religious group.

the entrance and welcome of a new member into the community. As the narrator explains, this rite of initiation is usually carried out “in the presence of a priest who recites Sanskrit mantras while the parents, grandparents, and relatives tease morsels of mashed rice into the child’s mouth” (S. Narayan 3). This tradition constitutes a “liminal moment” (Waxman 367) in Shoba’s life, as it symbolizes her new membership and integration into her ethnic, cultural, and religious community by means of the highly symbolic act of being fed her first solid meal: rice and *ghee*.⁷⁶

The multiple “liminal” qualities of certain cultural traditions constitute one of the many food-related issues that Douglas explores in her work *Purity and Danger*, where she insists on the perception of the human body as “a model which can stand for any bounded system” (142). According to Douglas, the significance of “bodily boundaries” should not be interpreted in isolation from all the “other margins” of a certain cultural group or community (150). In fact, Douglas firmly believes that the body’s external boundaries—which she conceives as complex structures of cultural meaning (142)—are the symbolic representation of the margins of a given community, in the same way as “bodily orifices” are synonymous to the vulnerability of that community to external threats or intrusions (150).⁷⁷

⁷⁶ As the narrator of the memoir puts it, *ghee*—a kind of clarified butter—is the “vegetarian caviar” (S. Narayan 8).

⁷⁷ This theory of the body as a bounded system that houses the individual in its core, self-contained and protected behind its physical bodily boundaries has been harshly criticized in the past few decades. An example of these new conflicting views is the theory put forward by Edward E. Sampson, who, drawing from Lacanian, Derridean, and Meadian perspectives, argues that our bodies are not containers of an inscrutable and independent *self*. Indeed, Sampson favors a dialogical and multifaceted conception of the self, based on the constant exchange and intertwined relationship between “self” and “other,” whose respective limits are not clear-cut and intact, since, as Sampson puts it, “otherness is the basis for all identity” (90). However, I have chosen to support my analysis of this particular episode of Narayan’s *Monsoon Diary* with Douglas’s theory of

It is precisely the connection between symbolic rituals and the idea of community boundaries implicit in the first episode of *Monsoon Diary* that leads us to briefly consider Anthony P. Cohen's theories of the symbolic construction of community in an attempt to shed more light over this matter. Cohen's study of the community as a bounded whole and "a system of values, norms and moral codes" that provide a sense of identity for its members (*Symbolic* 9) does not focus on the cultural baggage enclosed within that bounded system, or the structural functions of these groups, but on the "boundary" itself, and on the symbolic meanings it conveys. Consequently, Cohen insists on the community as a mental construct; a consciousness "encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, [...] which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" and "filled with the meanings that members impute to and perceive in them" (*Symbolic* 13, 19).⁷⁸ What makes Cohen's theory of the symbolic construction of community particularly useful and revealing for the study of Narayan's rice ceremony—and for the subsequent interpretation of other scenes of ritualized consumption—is the fact that he believes rituals to occupy "a prominent place in the repertoire of symbolic devices through which community boundaries are affirmed and reinforced" (50).

"external boundaries," as I believe it helps to fully unearth and comprehend some of the symbolic meanings hidden behind the ritual described in it.

⁷⁸ Cohen defines communities in a relational, rather than absolute, way; that is, he believes that community consciousness and sense of belonging exists and is maintained through processes of constant interaction among different groups, in a context that encourages their respective members to infuse meaning and vitality to the highly symbolic nature of their distinct community boundaries, providing them with a referent for their personal identities (*Symbolic* 9, 12, 58, 117; "Belonging" 4-6). Cohen's ideas should not be mistaken with Barth's, who, contrary to Cohen's broad theorizations about culture, ethnicity, and kinship, restricts the discussion about community boundaries to "ethnic boundaries," which not necessarily present a one-to-one correspondence with culture. Besides, Barth highlights the social-organizational and structural functions of ethnic communities and boundaries, and not so much their meaning and symbolic nature (6), as Cohen does. Lastly, both theories differ in the way each author defines the behavior of communities when faced with social interaction: while Cohen affirms that communal attachment and the maintenance of boundaries are possible because of the constant contact and interaction between different communities, Barth considers ethnic communities as categories of self-ascription that exist despite this continuous social interaction, undergoing some adaptive changes (9, 15, 19, 38).

Therefore, the reading of Narayan's scene of the *choru-unnal* in light of Douglas's and Cohen's ideas offers some new nuances: following Douglas, the protagonist's body comes to represent the whole Tamil Brahmin community in that particular ritualized event, while the ritual itself, according to Cohen, works as "an important means through which people experience community," heightening their sense of group identity and belonging (*Symbolic* 50, 53). Bearing this in mind, Shoba's ingestion of the *ghee*-flavored rice has a double and intricate meaning: on the one hand, it symbolizes her life-long respect, observance, and commitment to Tamil Brahmin values and traditions; on the other, given that her own body stands for the entire community at large, the entrance of the sacred rice into her body symbolizes the whole community's welcome and acceptance of its new member. However, as Narayan explains in her memoir, Shoba's first encounter with solid food, in such a spiritual and ceremonious atmosphere, does not go as smoothly as it should:

Women in pristine white sari and dripping wet hair circled the temple muttering prayers; wandering mendicants with matted hair and saffron robes hobbled around [...]. Against this busy backdrop, my family adjourned to a corner where I was to be fed for the first time.

[...] The priest solemnly places a sliver of ghee rice in my mouth. I promptly spat. Everyone went still (5).

The analysis of this scene in light of Douglas's observations about Hinduism allows for a deeper understanding of the symbolic meanings that it encodes. Thus, the *choru-unnal* should be contextualized within the Hindu precepts involving food, cooking, and pollution. As Douglas argues, Hinduism considers food preparation and cooking processes as "the beginning of ingestion, and therefore cooking is

susceptible to pollution, in the same way as eating” (*Purity* 157). Accordingly, the preparation of food in Shoba’s rice ceremony is “entrusted to pure hands” (Douglas, *Purity* 157), those of the Hindu priests, preventing any corrupted or impure foodstuff from going beyond Shoba’s bodily boundaries, as that would not only mean the pollution of Shoba’s embodied subjectivity, but also that of the community at large. Therefore, Shoba’s spitting of the purely cooked *ghee* rice causes anxiety and confusion among the extended family attending the ritual, as it seems to hint at the potentially new member’s desecration of, and rebelliousness against, Hinduism and Tamil Brahmin traditions. Nevertheless, Shoba’s mother, in a desperate attempt to protect her daughter and the entire family from negative omens or accusations, and with an attitude that verges on disrespect, blames the priests of the Guruvayur Temple in Kerala for overcooking the *ghee*: “The priests began to protest, but my family would have none of it. Their first child wasn’t going to eat burnt food for her first meal. The temple would kindly make some fresh *ghee* for the infant’s meal. They would be happy to wait” (S. Narayan 5).

For Shoba’s mother, feeding burnt rice to her daughter in such a ritualized communal ceremony would almost constitute an act of intentional “bodily pollution” (Douglas, *Purity* 150) that might be translated, out of religious beliefs or superstition, into entering the community through the wrong flavor, and thus, with the wrong foot. Luckily, the family’s uncertainty comes to an end when Shoba eats the second helping of the newly cooked *ghee* rice with a good appetite, confirming her mother’s theory: “‘See?’ my mother remarked triumphantly when I eventually swallowed. ‘It wasn’t my daughter’s fault. It was the food’” (S. Narayan 6). In fact, despite Shoba’s central role in this family ritual, and beyond the unintelligible Sanskrit mantras recited during the ceremony, food is the protagonist and the

bearer of all meanings and symbolic import. The communicative and uniting power of the food ritual—in this particular case, and in many others I will deal with in this chapter—goes beyond any kind of written or spoken word. Accordingly, Hortense Powdermaker once affirmed that “the communal eating of food and customs concerning it may be said to have a double function: (1) to maintain the cohesion of the society [...], and [...] (2) to determine, in part, the relation of the individual to the society and to the small groups within it” (236). Therefore, the *choru-unna* described at the very beginning of *Monsoon Diary* comes to represent and anticipate the family cohesion that prevails throughout the whole memoir, together with Shoba’s particular relationship and attachment to it by means of her active participation in this and other food-related rituals.

In the same vein, according to scholars such as Jan Assmann and Ross Poole, social practices, cultural artifacts, and rituals, such as the rice ceremony described in *Monsoon Diary*, constitute key elements of a group’s “cultural memory,” described by Assmann as the “collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society, and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (126). Thus, food and all the ritualized acts of consumption surrounding it create the perfect atmosphere for cultural memory to be transmitted and for ethnic and communal identity to be reproduced and reified (Ashley et al. 71; A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 50).⁷⁹ Shoba, too young at that time to fully grasp the significance of her participation in her first Tamil Brahmin food ritual, is totally unaware of the fact that this rice ceremony would pave the way for her “culinary lifetime” (Mehta 257), one

⁷⁹ For more information on the effectiveness of rituals in consolidating and reinforcing the sense of community see Cohen, *Symbolic*; Ashley et al.; Assmann; Douglas, *Purity*, “Standard”; Kalcik; Lukanuski; Mintz and Du Bois; or Sutton.

that would be marked by the endless and complex interrelationships among food, family, and belonging.⁸⁰

One of Shoba's most vivid memories of her childhood in India is described in the chapter "Mumbai Train," which features a train journey that could be read as a metaphor of Shoba's life journey and coming-of-age. By narrating this event, Narayan looks deeper into the way quotidian collective acts of consumption can be enriched with ritual importance, and infused with societal and communal values. As the author relates, October, apart from marking the beginning of the monsoon in India, is also the holiday season, when Shoba's parents would take the family on train journeys on the *Lal Bagh Express*, the train running between Madras and Bangalore, or the *Bombay Express*, covering the longer distance between Madras and Mumbai.⁸¹ Despite the fact that the Narayan family travels second-class—which means no air-conditioning, crowds, and dust coming in through the wide-open windows—the narrator points out that "[t]he most important thing when traveling by train in India is not the location of your seat [...], whether you have confirmed tickets, or even your destination. The crucial element is the size of your neighbor's *tiffin* carrier" (60). *Tiffin* carriers, a special kind of "lunch box"⁸² used in

⁸⁰ Shoba's life is so thoroughly permeated by food, that even the most important decision of her life, her moving to America, is taken according to the success or failure of a culinary event. Her family, reticent to Shoba's leaving India bound for an unknown country and culture, ponders her maturity and ability to engage in such an experience as if these characteristics were directly proportional to the quality of her cooking: "Cook us a vegetarian feast [...]. If we like it, you can go to America. If we don't, you stay here" (S. Narayan 106). The meal must have been magnificent, because Shoba left India for good, going back only for short visits.

⁸¹ Madras, now known as Chennai, is the capital city of Tamil Nadu, a state in the south east of the Indian subcontinent. Bangalore, one the destinations of the Narayans' train journeys, is the capital of Karnataka, in the Deccan Plateau, also in the south east of the peninsula. Lastly, Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, is the capital city of the federal state of Maharashtra. Located in the northeastern coast, facing the Arabian Sea, Mumbai is around one thousand and two hundred kilometers away from Madras. The train journey between these two cities takes over twenty four hours.

⁸² In the next section of this chapter, I will deal with the multilayered symbolism of school "lunch boxes" in Asian American literature.

India, are usually made of an indeterminate number of stainless steel containers and lids that are stacked one atop the other forming a cylindrical receptacle secured by a tension clip on the side. Thus, Shoba's seat choice was based on the number of containers stacked in the *tiffin* of her potential traveling companion. In spite of her young age, Shoba already knows that Marwari women, natives of the desert state of Rajasthan, are a good and sure bet.

If my school lunch box with its measly two containers was a Manhattan town house, the Marwari matron's tiffin carrier was the Empire State Building, with more than a dozen impressively stacked stainless steel containers. She opened each one at strategic points during our train journey together. At dawn we had roti and potato *saag*. At ten o'clock, a snack of crisp *kakda* wafers speckled with pepper. For lunch, a bounty of *parathas*. (S. Narayan 62)

The unselfish acts of food sharing that take place in this random train across the Indian subcontinent constitute much more than a source of sensory pleasure for the travelers; the collective enjoyment of these dishes also brings about a sense of genuine—though ephemeral—togetherness. If, as Anna Meigs puts it, “the sharing of food [...] is a means by which to establish physical commingling, interdependence, and oneness,” (103) Shoba's coast-to-coast train journey constitutes a very illustrative and colorful example of it. In fact, the Narayan family's “satisfyingly long” (S. Narayan 62) railroad trips between Madras and Mumbai are marked by an overwhelming diversity of smells and flavors that emanate from an equally mouthwatering variety of foods, ultimately creating “a perfect symphony for the senses” (S. Narayan 61).

The smells of the Marwari's *saag*, *paneer*, *kakdas*, and *parathas* mingle with the odors coming from other family's *tiffin* carriers: the chickpea gravy *kadis* of the Gujaratis, the spiced *rajma* of the Punjabi, the sweet *rosgollas* and *sandesh* of the Bengalis, and Shoba's Keralite family's soft *idlis* with coconut *chutney* (S. Narayan 61-62). The author's lively and relaxed picture of the concoction of smells and tastes, together with the image of the generous acts of culinary sharing among people from different parts of India, seems to hint at the power that food purportedly has to deliver "good fellowship" (Douglas, "Standard" 12). Thus, images of collective consumption such as this one transform food into a "contact zone." As seen in previous chapters, Pratt defines these "contact zones" as those "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (4), propitiating the uneven encounter of individuals from different geographical areas and diverse cultural backgrounds. However, Narayan's description of this scene suggests an atmosphere of harmony and understanding among the different families and individuals—belonging to diverse ethnic groups and castes—whose lives crisscross in that particular time and place, embraced by a rainbow of flavors and smells. The crowded train seems like an airtight space, impervious to the social, economic, ethnic, cultural, or religious conflicts that, sadly, prevail in many of the areas traversed by its route.

However, Shoba's fascination for these culinary journeys on the Bombay Express is not only motivated by passengers' food exchanges. Another interesting feature of these trips are the exciting though short adventures in each station along the way. During the few minutes that each stop lasts, Shoba and her father dash out of the coach to buy some of the multiple food specialties sold by the vendors at the platform:

Almost every station in India sells a regional specialty that causes passengers to dart in and out of trains. My parents have woken me up at 3:00 A.M. just to taste the hot milk at Erode Station in Tamil Nadu. Anyone passing by Nagpur Station is entreated to buy its glorious oranges. Allahabad, home to Hinduism on the banks of the River Ganges, is famous for its guavas. [...] North of Delhi, we could buy thick yogurt in tiny terracotta pots. The earthenware pots soaked the moisture from the yogurt, leaving it creamy enough to be cut with a knife. (S. Narayan 63)

The rush of adrenaline produced by choosing the most appetizing delicacies, and bargaining for their price, while knowing that the train can leave the station any minute, not only turns each purchase into a major achievement for the young Shoba, but it also enhances, as the narrator puts it, the “deliciousness” of the food in question (S. Narayan 63). Moreover, eating the oranges, guavas or yogurt on the train with the rest of the family transforms this—at first sight exciting, though trivial—practice into a ritualized act of collective consumption that follows a set of rules, and leads to a “shared consciousness” of family and community (Douglas, “Standard” 21). Therefore, traveling together, and tasting the same foods in each train journey turns those culinary-related activities into powerful magnets that keep the family closely-knit, and stimulate the sense of belonging and integration into that particular community of kinship. As Douglas cogently argues, “[f]ood may be symbolic, but it is also as efficacious for feeding as roofs are for sheltering, as powerful for including as gates and doors” (“Standard” 12).

Narayan’s narration of these autumnal train journeys enhances the almost magical qualities of the exuberant richness and diversity of Indian cuisines: “It was access to this glorious, multicuisine, home-cooked food that made the train

journeys of my childhood memorable” (S. Narayan 61).⁸³ However, the food-guided and motivated communal activities do not come to an end when the train calls at its last station. In fact, arriving in Mumbai is only the beginning of yet another bout of intense interpersonal culinary events that usually materialize in a series of “binges of gluttony” (S. Narayan 65), which function as the perfect coda for the Narayan family’s holiday trip. In a race against time, Shoba’s family, together with some other relatives living in Mumbai, would engage in an urban marathon-like route along the streets, beaches, and promenades, enjoying the countless different types of snacks sold outdoors in this city, “famous for its street food [...] and dizzying array of chaats” (S. Narayan 64).⁸⁴ The narrator describes these days of endless and miscellaneous gustatory experiences as family “rituals” (S. Narayan 64), whose meaningfulness and symbolic properties are embodied, one more time, in the foods they eat together, ranging from *vada-pav*—the “Bombay’s version of a hamburger”—, *gol-gappas* and *pav bhajji*, mangoes with salt and paprika, or ice cream with almonds and pistachios, among many other tidbits (S. Narayan 64). Despite being the cause of an occasional indigestion, the disproportionate amount of food and its luscious combination of flavors, spices, and textures taste like “pure heaven” (S. Narayan 64) to the young Shoba, who is not yet completely aware of the fact that participating in those collective journeys

⁸³ India is a very extensive country with an overwhelming diversity of ethnic groups, cultures, languages, and traditions. As a result of this, there is no such a thing as a homogeneous Indian cuisine, given that the heterogeneity of culture translates into heterogeneity of food practices. As Uma Narayan puts it, “‘Indian food’ lacks the clear reference in India that it has in Western contexts. While I can intelligibly say ‘Let’s eat Indian food’ in Western contexts, this would make little semantic sense in India” (173).

⁸⁴ *Chaats* are snacks served by street vendors in India, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries. There are many different varieties, but the basic ingredients in all of them are yogurt, onion, coriander, *sev*, and a type of *masala*. For more on *chaats*, and Indian cuisines in general, see “Chaat Recipes.”

along the culinary spots of Mumbai constitutes a very significant “living part of [her] family history” (Blend 155).

As Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen contend,—and as has been illustrated here—“food offers powerful ways to make and communicate cultural meanings, [...] define group and gender identities, celebrate social cohesion and perform rituals of cultural belonging” (2). In the same vein, even though the concept of “ritual” is usually laden with cultural and spiritual nuances, Anthony P. Cohen points out that ritualized practices do not need to be “esoteric” or “large-scale and elaborate” occasions in order to be profoundly meaningful (*Symbolic* 53). In fact, some of the most effective group-consolidating events are said to be those “diffuse and festive occasions” pertaining to local and small-scale community affairs (A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 53), and drawing from “the common fund of human experience” (Douglas, “Standard” 141). According to this, the eating practices portrayed throughout “Mumbai Train,” however mundane and trivial they may seem, are narrated by Narayan in a way that denotes their ritualized nature and the ethnic and cultural significance they hold for the protagonist’s family.⁸⁵ This constitutes yet another proof of the fact that the physical and substantial properties of eating are on some occasions overshadowed by its social and emotional functions in Asian American literature, bestowing on food the ability to “transform itself into situation” (Barthes 26).

Thus, Shoba’s enthusiastic though naïve participation in the culinary train journey, as well as her active role in the gastronomic stroll with her family along the streets of Mumbai silently reify her feelings of belonging within her closer

⁸⁵ The way this scene is narrated, using the auxiliary verb “would,” denotes a ritualized action, an act of collective consumption that is repeated from time to time, following the same pattern.

community. In fact, these collective events would turn into mainstays of Shoba's diasporic identity in America, as they become a critical part of her cultural baggage and sense of "Indianness." Shoba arrives in America in the eighties, at a time when the most numerous wave of South Asian immigrants entered the country (DasGupta and Das DasGupta 326; Zia 200). As many of her post-1965 immigrant compatriots, Shoba's reasons for leaving India were purely educational, as she wanted to pursue a graduate degree at Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts.⁸⁶ Thus, leaving behind her reticent parents—worried that their daughter may detach herself from her Indian background—, Shoba embarks on a solitary journey to America, where everything is new: "Vegetables in boxes with nary a soul to hagger; cold cereal instead of warm *idlis* in the morning. Strangers smiled and said hello. Nobody littered, spit [*sic*], or cursed" (S. Narayan 111). But the main difference between Shoba's life in India and her new environment in the United States is her lack of a significant community. It is precisely this situation that makes her come to a deeper understanding of what all those seemingly unimportant food-related events mean for her as a member of a family, an ethno-cultural community, and now, a diasporic one.

As Anthony P. Cohen argues, we usually become more self-conscious of our culture "when we are brought up against its boundaries: that is, when we become aware of another culture, of behaviour which deviates from the norms of our own" ("Belonging" 4). Therefore, Shoba's experiences—most of them

⁸⁶ Subsequent to the relaxation of immigration laws after 1965, a significant wave of people—many of them educated professionals—migrated to the U.S. from various places in Asia (DasGupta and Das DasGupta 334-335). Many of them came from the Indian subcontinent as a result of a 'brain drain' encouraged by U.S. immigration policies. According to Zia, between 1965 and 1990, almost half a million South Asians moved to the U.S. in order to complete their university studies or as skilled labor force (205). In 2000, out of the approximately one million South Asians who resided in the U.S., 710,000 (69%) were college graduates; figures that situate this ethnic minority above the white average regarding educational attainment (Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant* 69, 73).

culinary—as a newly-arrived South Asian immigrant woman in America trigger off her retrospective realization of her collective identity, ethnicity, and culture, and, consequently, “food becomes the essential link between the ancestral land and its diasporic configuration in the United States” (Mehta 231). The increasingly obvious detachment between the concepts of “community” and “locality” as a result of the dynamic and fluid movement of people and information across the globe makes it indispensable, as Rocío Davis suggests, “to overcome fixed and essentialized assumptions about cultural identity, identification, and homelands” (*Relative* 93). In keeping with this, the autodiegetic narrator in *Monsoon Diary* describes how culinary practices from Kerala help Shoba not only to reproduce her ethnic identity in the host country, but also to negotiate the new meanings and nuances that her subjectivity acquires in a context of migration and displacement.

The performance of collective food-related practices takes on a special significance in the process of ethnic and/or cultural diasporic community awareness (A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 53, “Belonging” 5). Narayan’s memoir captures the importance of food as a facilitator of togetherness in Shoba’s casual encounter in New York City with a Keralite taxi driver:⁸⁷ “To my delight, I discovered that the driver was from Kerala and quickly lapsed into Malayalam. His name was Gopi. He had grown up near Vaikom, he said, and in fact his parents still lived there” (S. Narayan 128-129). This fortuitous encounter ends up with Shoba sharing a meal with Gopi and his wife Shanti in a semi-collapsed house in an alley under Queensboro Bridge: “I hadn’t eaten Indian food since I came to Mount Holyoke

⁸⁷ From the late 1980s onwards, the presence of South Asian men in New York City’s taxicab industry has been rather significant. Burdened by endless shifts, low wages, and no health insurance, South Asian taxi drivers were also the target of racist offenses. In the late 1990s, in the face of social unrest regarding the supposedly inadequate attitude of South Asian taxi drivers—accused of dangerous driving—, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani repeatedly referred to this group as “reckless,’ ‘lawless,’ and ‘terrorists’” (Zia 202).

some months ago, and the most delicious smells were wafting out of the kitchen” (S. Narayan 130). This culinary gathering not only proves the generosity of this humble couple; it mostly constitutes an example of the power of commensality in creating and expressing bonds of solidarity and belonging among displaced individuals hailing from the same cultural background (Meigs 103; Douglas, “Standard” 20; Lukanuski 113).

Shanti set out a sumptuous *sadhya* (feast) for us. I fell on the food with the fervor of a parched desert traveler spotting an oasis. Red rice straight from Kerala, spicy onion *theeyal* with a dollop of *ghee* on top, and a delicate *olan* brimming with coconut milk. It was sublime, returning to me the memory of several bus trips that my parents and I had undertaken in Kerala. (S. Narayan 130)

Food is the element that gathers these strangers around the table, activating their memory and sense of community in the diaspora. This case is particularly revealing since Shoba and Gopi's family did not know each other previously. However, the fact that all of them are immigrants from Kerala in the United States seems to create an instant emotional bond based on empathy, familiarity, and a shared consciousness of their past and of their present condition as South Asian immigrants in the United States. Thus, the meal they share—an act of commensality, support, and strengthening of communal ties (Rappoport 34)—functions as a site where their immigrant anxieties and homesickness are collectively negotiated and assuaged within a familiar context. Avtar Brah argues that diasporic subjectivities should always be understood as fluid spaces of ongoing confluence, juxtaposition, and interrogation of cultural, psychological, and social identities (208). Thus, Shoba's and Gopi's family's respective processes of

re-shaping and re-mapping of their identities as members of the South Asian diaspora in the United States grapple and meet at this point while sharing a meal based on dishes “straight from Kerala” (S. Narayan 130).

This spontaneous fellowship and complicity emerge precisely from the yearnings for home and familiarity that Gopi, Shanti, and Shoba share, and these feelings find conspicuous expressions in the foods they consume, because, as Sutton puts it, “there is an imagined community implied in the act of eating food ‘from home’ while in exile, in the embodied knowledge that others [the family left behind] are eating the same food” (84). According to Wannan W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, South Asian immigrants in the United States, as well as many other Asian immigrant communities, find themselves caught up between the present and “physical space” of the host country, and the imagined and “emotional space” of dwelling in South Asia (14). The latter is marked by familial attachment, and by an affective and psychological awareness and sense of belonging in the “elsewhere,” which is, in turn, dependent on past memories and emotional ties to the land of the forebears (Wannan and Lee 14). Thus, even though they have just met, and despite the fact that they come from different economic segments in Kerala, the *sadhya*, the red rice, the spicy onion and the *olan* they share all bear the same meanings and symbolism for Shoba, Gopi, and Shanti, who experience similar dilemmas over their notion of “home,” and whose lives are governed by patterns of cultural memory in displacement. In the context of this scene, the simple—though incredibly meaningful—meal they share helps them maintain and heighten “the continuity between past and present” (A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 103), reconciling—yet only momentarily—their otherwise fragmented “physical” and “emotional” homes. Therefore, the culinary practices of their ethnic and cultural

background help them inject some sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar—and sometimes disconcerting and hostile—environment in the United States, thereby re-asserting their sense of belonging as a constant negotiation between “here” and “there.”

As Jelena Sesnic contends, identity is not necessarily tied to “spatiality” any more (186), and “locality” is no longer a place easily found on a map; on the contrary, it “circulates in representations, be they oral, written, visual, or otherwise, and in the acts of commemorative, evocative, and memorial ethnic stories” (134). Therefore, the weakening and blurring of the geo-social boundaries of the community, evidenced by people dispersed by exile or voluntary migration, brings about a renewed “symbolic expression” of the sense of community, which is now, more than ever, “largely in the mind” (A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 114). In this context, food, as a polysemic cultural artifact, plays a crucial role in the process of mental and symbolic construction of the community, being the bearer of an important part of its cultural and emotional baggage, and constituting a potent and long-lasting marker of ethnic identity, both at the individual and collective level (Mintz and Du Bois 109; Steinberg 63; Xu, *Eating* 2). It comes as no surprise, then, that foodways and eating habits turn into some of the most appreciated and cherished cultural traits for people living in the diaspora, as they represent the repository of their shared knowledge, culture, and memory after migration or exile (Mehta 7; Poole 152; Assmann 130). According to Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard, “food can be seen as a link with one’s family and ancestors, which is visible in the preparation and celebration of ethnic dishes on foreign soil” (216). Thus, reproducing the foodways of their countries of origin in a festive and ritualized context usually helps the immigrants feel closer to the socio-cultural environment left behind; reviving a

fraction of the familiarity of the homeland, and finding new ways to articulate their identity in the diaspora. This is precisely what I will explore in the next section, which focuses on the literary representation of culinary rituals in a selection of Asian American texts.

3.2. The Lunar New Year: Food and Agency in Li's *Daughter of Heaven* and Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*

The Asian American community's experiences of migration, as outlined in chapter 1.1., are marked, in different degrees, by the trauma and loss connected to the historicities of their displacement. Life prior to migration, the facts leading to their dispersal, and its immediate consequences usually survive in the collective memory of the community, shaping their process of adaptation and their search for a sense of identity and belonging in the United States. Thus, diasporic reconfigurations make it obvious that, as Judith Butler argues, though irretrievable, "the past is not past," as it keeps informing the present and even the future of a given displaced community (467). In connection to this, it has been widely argued that ritualized events may play a crucial role in the process of reconstruction and transmission of collective and cultural memory in diasporic contexts, constituting emotionally meaningful links with the past mediated through shared commemoration (Ross 12).⁸⁸ Taking this point a step further, Sutton argues that those rituals which specifically involve culinary traditions create extraordinary

⁸⁸ For more on the role of rituals in contexts of displacement, see Pleck; Etzioni; Ross; or Baxter.

spaces where memory and food are tied together conjuring up “worlds of experience and interpretation” (15).

This idea permeates Li's *Daughter of Heaven* and Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, two Asian American coming-of-age memoirs that focus on the impact that family rituals have had on the writers' process of identity formation as Chinese and Vietnamese Americans, respectively. Without overlooking the fact that these two texts deal with very different experiences of displacement, reading them together allows for a new perspective on the significance of the culinary ritual in Asian American literature, as both authors portray the iconic festival of the Lunar New Year as a food-centered celebration that provides a site for agency and for the transmission, “reconstruction, and repair of familial memory” (Irwin-Zarecka 55) in a racialized context. Li's and Nguyen's texts imbue the New Year's family meal with the power to “create lasting memory impressions” that mediate the remembrance and commemoration of the vital—but often painful—connections between present and past (Sutton 160). This process of remembrance is aided by the symbol-laden foods consumed during the celebration of the Lunar New Year—Chinese *Chunjié* and Vietnamese *Tet*—, rituals similarly portrayed by Li and Nguyen as strong cultural and emotional links with the homeland.⁸⁹

The socio-historical context of the celebration, the familiarity of the tradition, and the sensory experiences triggered by the food keep the foreign-born generations connected to what they often perceive—driven by trauma or nostalgia—as a lost time and place. In addition, what makes the joint study of

⁸⁹ Li's *Daughter of Heaven* and Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* portray the celebration of the Lunar New Year: the *Chunjié*, or Chinese New Year, in the case of Li's memoir, and the *Tet Nguyen Dan*, or Vietnamese New Year, in Nguyen's case. Both the *Chunjié* and the *Tet* follow the lunar calendar and they usually fall between late January and early February. Besides, the Lunar New Year not only commemorates the beginning of a new year, but also the arrival of the spring, since the lunar calendar marks the beginning of the spring season on the first solar term.

these two memoirs particularly interesting is the fact that both authors put especial emphasis on how memories of war, displacement, and loss transcend temporality during the New Year's feast, as they are adapted and adopted by the second generation—who has no direct experience or recollection of them—in a dynamic that is reminiscent of Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory."⁹⁰

Both Li and Nguyen portray the Lunar New Year as the one event where all family members engage in an heterogeneous exercise of recollection and re-imagination of the past by "retelling and reenacting a group's narrative" (Ross 17). Each generation's different baggage of experiences translates into diverse interpretations of the same ritualized signs, which altogether turn the New Year's meal into an almost reparatory past-, present-, and future-oriented festival that comes to represent the ethnic community's "struggle against the displacement and fragmentation of migrant experiences" (Manalansan, "Immigrant" 45). By putting the ritual into words and by hinting at the evocative power of food in this symbolic domestic setting, both Li and Nguyen create literary "taste-scapes" (Sutton 91) in which the productivity of the past is mobilized in an attempt to reaffirm the sense of community and challenge dominant discourses that have repeatedly silenced the voices of unwelcomed immigrants and invisible victims and refugees.

The Contexts and Meanings of the Ritual

According to Amitai Etzioni, the elements of a given ritual "have no intrinsic value or meaning" (7), as it is the group that imbues these objects—in this case

⁹⁰ While Li is a U.S.-born Chinese American, Nguyen is a 1.5 Vietnamese American. That is, she was born in Saigon, but left Vietnam with her family when she was only eight months old.

food—with symbolism and significance. To decipher what the New Year celebration means in each text and for each Asian American family, it is necessary to frame it within the specific contexts of their displacement.

Li's *Daughter of Heaven* features the celebration of Chinese New Year; the most significant and most assiduously observed holiday within the Chinese American community (Pleck 117). Joyful, family-oriented, and food-centered, the Lunar New Year tradition has been celebrated in the United States ever since the early Chinese immigrants established themselves in this country in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Mostly young bachelors or married men who had left their wives and children in China, these first Chinese immigrants in the United States “were celebrating a family holiday without their family” (Pleck 117). This turned the—at that time—humble meal and festival into a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it was a reminder of their solitude; on the other, it was “a source of solace and a means of preserving cultural ties to their family and China” (Pleck 122). Over time, Chinese New Year celebrations in the United States have acquired different layers of meaning according to the sociopolitical situation of the Chinese immigrant community. From anti-Communist political statement to multitudinous tourist attraction, this holiday remains one of the beacons of Chinese identity in America. An interesting fact about the socio-political context surrounding this celebration in the late 1960s—when Leslie was growing up in Riverdale—is that, while Chinese New Year festivities were becoming more and more popular in the United States, this festival was being stigmatized in China during Mao Ze-tung's Cultural Revolution. Paradoxically, immigrant families kept holding on to this ritual in the diaspora in order to maintain their ties with a country in which few dared to openly celebrate it. Thus, though seemingly free from underlying political

meanings, the strong attachment of the Li family—and especially the grandmother Nai-nai—to this celebration turns it into an occasion for cultural self-assertion and reaffirmation of communal bonds in the diaspora. On an emotional level, this festival still holds an aura of nostalgia for some Chinese immigrant families, such as the one portrayed in this memoir, for whom the loneliness and loss associated with their displacement continue to loom large behind this culinary-oriented celebration.

Li's memoir not only deals with Leslie's experiences as a Chinese American girl growing up in the Bronx, where life seemed to revolve around her "shame to be Chinese" (Li 12); constantly trying to hide her ethnicity from her peers, and her shame from her family. It also constitutes an emotional account of her father's and grandmother's chronic homesickness and longing for family.⁹¹ As the wife and the son of Li Zongren, an acclaimed "military tactician for the Chinese Nationalists during the Sino-Japanese War" (Li 24), and China's first democratically elected vice-president, Nai-nai and her son Yau Luen's lives were governed by strict military values and were vulnerable to the highs and lows of the Nationalist Party. These circumstances had an indelible effect on Leslie's father, who, as the "eldest son and head of the Li clan," was "honor-bound with filial piety" (Li 49), which obliged him to tend to "the most intransigent icon and underpinning of Chinese culture—face: its maintenance, its gain, its loss" (Li 49-50). As for Nai-nai, apart from having to cope with Li Zongren's hectic lifestyle, she was forced to take a back seat when her husband became increasingly powerful and influential:

⁹¹ Leslie's mother, absent throughout most of the memoir, was an American-born half-Caucasian half-Chinese woman. Born to a "paper son" and a Polish refugee, she and her sisters became very popular in the first half of the twentieth century as the Kim Loo Sisters, a jazz vocal quartet. Despite her mother's adventurous and interesting life, in this memoir, Li focuses primarily on her father's side of the family.

Grampa and Nai-nai were physically separated about a year after they were married. Grampa, who was on one or another battlefield during the internecine regional wars raging China during the 1920s, met Dejie (Madam) and took her as his second wife. She was beautiful, educated, young [...], and was a politically appropriate wife for the rising star that my grandfather was at the time. Except for one year in Canton, Nai-nai never lived with Grampa again. (Li 25)

Even though their reasons for migrating to the U.S. are not clear, leaving China plunged Leslie's father and grandmother into a "well of loneliness" (Li 61) from which they could not seem to find their way out. Disregarded by her husband and uprooted from her home, Nai-nai's life in the United States is described as marked by nostalgia and gnawing feelings of longing for home and family. In an attempt to deal with those emotions, Nai-nai seeks refuge in food, which becomes the core of her existence—"not so much the eating of it as the cooking of it" (Li 2). The ultimate expression of her devotion to Chinese cuisine is the feast that she rigorously prepares for the last evening of the year, described in *Daughter of Heaven* as a moment of renewed energy, food-transmitted optimism, and family commemoration in a liminal space: the threshold between the past—marked by loss and frustration, and symbolized by the year that is coming to an end—and the future, the new year that is about to begin. As an antidote against the frustration and loneliness that plague the lives of Yau Luen and Nai-nai in the United States, the Chinese New Year celebration becomes a manifesto of good wishes for the present and the future, silently conveyed through the messages hidden within the dishes themselves, which were "as generous in number as they were auspicious in name" (Li 30). In fact, during this ritualized "food marathon" (Li 29), participants are not allowed to speak, as "unbroken silence" (Li 31) is the key ingredient for a

proper celebration in which kumquats are a harbinger of prosperity (Li 24), coconut candy represents family togetherness (25), fish promises abundance (28), and peaches or noodles augur longevity (28-29). The complex and fascinating relationship between food and language in Chinese tradition, turns this ritualized meal into a system of subliminal messages that provides nourishment beyond the physical, as it hails communicative, intellectual, and even spiritual spheres.

The intensity of such connection between food and communication goes beyond mere symbolism and superstition, given that, in some cases, the Chinese ideograms for the food and those for the wishes that they stand for are very similar, if not identical. In fact, looking deeper into the linguistic nuances of Chinese food, the narrator comments on the relevance of homonymy in determining the meaningfulness of certain food items, as in the case of lotus seeds, whose homonym means “many children,” and is thus considered to be beneficial for fertility (Li 25). Complicating even more the fascinating food-language and talking-eating binaries, Leslie explains how the rich assortment of dishes set on the dinner table for Chinese New Year is prepared not only according to taste, tradition, and preference, but also taking into account the meanings resulting from the combination of its corresponding ideograms and homonyms. Thus, the good wishes for the New Year are not voiced by the guests, but written on the foods they eat:

“Happiness to everyone” wasn’t said but served in the form of shark’s fin soup. Then came “Happy Spring Festival,” also unspoken but more than implied in the shape of spring rolls. [...] It preceded a concoction made with dried oysters, or *haosi*—a word that means “something good is bound to happen”—black mushrooms, *bok choy*, and *fat choy*, a black hairlike seaweed whose auspicious name not only signifies wealth but also

provides half of the Chinese New Year greeting. Taken together, the ingredients comprise a dish appropriately called *gung hay fat choy*.⁹² (Li 28)

As S. Wong affirms, food banquets such as the one featured in *Daughter of Heaven*, characterized by the endless symbolism and communicative power of the foods prepared and consumed, “exist as a cultural institution cementing relationships *within* the ethnic group” (*Reading* 65, emphasis in the original). These culinary creations constitute a fundamental element of the diasporic community’s “symbolic and iconographic capital,” defined by Bruneau as “the material and symbolic condensation of the intricate web of linkages between the members of a community and their territory” (39). Consequently, for Leslie’s Chinese-born family members, the participation in this food- and family-centered ritual represents an attempt to reproduce some of the sensory features of their homelands and thus reestablish and maintain a “cultural and spiritual relationship [with it] through memory” (Bruneau 48). All the encrypted meanings associated with this ritual create a “symbolic landscape” (Ross 6) where the family reaffirms its Chinese identity through the constant re-interpretation of the culturally-specific meanings conveyed by food. The performance of this ritual in foreign soil not only allows them to feel that they still have control over this cultural aspect of their lives, but it also becomes a “sentimental occasion” (Pleck 132) on which, as Lukanuski affirms, commensality itself “not only fulfills [their] physical hunger, but [their] human hungers as well—the need for love, security, and comfort” (119).

⁹² “Gung hay fat choy!” is a Cantonese phrase used to express good wishes during Chinese New Year.

If Chinese New Year is laden with emotional significance in Li's autobiographical narrative, Nguyen's portrait of the *Tet* festivities in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* constitutes a historical and spiritual journey to a tortuous past. The ironies of celebrating *Tet*—the most symbolic Vietnamese tradition—on American soil, with all the political and social connotations that this celebration entails for the Vietnamese American community, imbue this family ritual with meanings that go beyond the festive arrival of a new year. In fact, the war in Vietnam and the celebration of the Lunar New Year are connected in a very sinister way in the collective imaginary of the Vietnamese community. Beyond its traditional cultural and religious significance, this ritual will always be a reminder of one of the bloodiest attacks on the civil population of South Vietnam, a military operation that would come to be known as the *Tet* Offensive. On the *Tet* of 1968 (January 30), only six years prior the Nguyens' escape, "approximately 80,000 North Vietnamese regulars and guerrillas attacked over 100 cities throughout South Vietnam" killing thousands of people (Berman 21). This historical landmark, apart from constituting the "wake-up call that finally alerted America to the unwinnable nature of the Vietnam conflict" (Gilbert and Head xiiv-1), left an indelible print in the minds of the Vietnamese population, both in Vietnam and in the diaspora.

The terror of violence and famine marked the last years of the Nguyen family in Vietnam, where they witnessed the death and disappearance of relatives as their lives were shattered beyond repair by a war that seemed endless. Thus, this memoir, even though witty and funny, stems from a tragic event: on April 29, 1975—the day Saigon fell to the Communists—eight-month-old Bich, her sister, her father, and her grandmother Noi fled the city by boat, leaving Bich's mother

behind, as she was not at home when the family made their desperate escape to the harbor: "A full panic had hit the city, the kind that sent people racing after airplanes on the runway, that made people offer their babies to departing American soldiers" (B. Nguyen 5). The family, crippled and terrified, spends the first following months in refugee camps in Thailand, Guam, and Arkansas, where the barbed-wire contained a mob of thousands of unhoused Vietnamese awaiting their fates. Grand Rapids, Michigan, was the family's final destination, where they arrived "with five dollars and a knapsack of clothes" (B. Nguyen 1).

Disoriented and deeply traumatized, the Nguyens' experience of resettlement in the United States was not easy. Memories of the war haunted Bich's father, who "did not know how to sleep through the night. He paced around the house, double-checking the locks on the front door; he glanced sideways out the taped-up window, in case someone was watching from the street," and for the couple of hours he would doze on the sofa "he kept one hand on the sword he had bought from a pawnshop with his second paycheck" (B. Nguyen 2). The mental and emotional scars of the war and exile also torment Noi, the grandmother. Her attachment to her homeland and to her deceased relatives is so strong that, following the Vietnamese tradition of reburial, she had the ashes of her husband and son "dug up from the burial ground in Saigon and sent to [her house] in Michigan," as she "couldn't bear the thought of abandoning them in Vietnam" (B. Nguyen 188).⁹³ Crucially, despite all the suffering and loss that the U.S.-supported military conflict in Vietnam brought about in her life, there is no evidence in

⁹³ As Viet Thanh Nguyen states, "Vietnamese believe a person should be buried twice" (34). The first time, the person is buried somewhere far from the village where he/she grew up in in order for the earth "to eat the flesh." The second time, "the survivors must disinter what remains [...] and then they will bury the bones once more, this time closer to the living" (34). Thus, Noi's insistence in bringing her husband's and son's ashes should not be solely attributed to nostalgia as it also has to do with Vietnamese funerary rites.

Nguyen's memoir that hints at Noi's bitterness or hatred towards her host country. In fact, similar to Li's grandmother in *Daughter of Heaven*, Noi appears to seek refuge in food and ancestor worshiping as a way to stay grounded in her homeland and free herself from the pain of its loss. Proof of this is her single-minded dedication to the arrangement of the *Tet* ceremony, an event whereby the culinary and the spiritual come together, as the family welcomes the Lunar New Year by commemorating the past and offering food to the ancestors:

Noi spent days preparing for Tet, and long before we got up she would have arranged a feast before Buddha. [...] *Banh chung* could take two days to make: the sticky rice, the green beans mashed into a paste, the marinated pork. All of these had to be folded together in the right proportion for each cake, encased in banana or bamboo leaves, and tied into square bundles. [...] *Banh chung* was a symbol of Tet—its painstaking effort, its presentation as a gift. When we ate these cakes we were supposed to honor the beginning of a new year of hopes and good wishes. (B. Nguyen 100)

As Li does in her memoir, Nguyen describes commensality during *Tet* as a symbol for the community's optimism towards the new year. However, these wishes for prosperity and happiness are complicated in the context of a past marked by war and loss. Thus, before the *banh chung*, dried papaya, *cha gio*⁹⁴ or fried shrimp chips are even set on the dinner table, these special foods are offered to the ancestors, whose omnipresence and central role in Vietnamese culture turn them into a fundamental part of the life of the refugee community in the United States. "Among the candles, incense, trays of fruit, and vases of gladioli stood

⁹⁴ *Cha gio* is one of the most popular Vietnamese appetizers. It has the appearance of a Chinese spring roll, but the ingredients are different: *cha gio* is made of pork meat, diced vegetables, and prawns or crab, all wrapped up in *bang tranhg*—a thin slice of rice paper (Tran 29).

black-and-white portraits” (B. Nguyen 187-188) of one of Noi’s sons, a ground soldier killed during the war, and her husband, whose mysterious death was claimed to be caused by sadness (B. Nguyen 32). As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, one of the most immediate and universal characteristics of the Vietnamese refugee experience is their inability to openly mourn their dead in the United States, where dominant discourses have systematically and strategically refused to publicly acknowledge Vietnamese suffering (10), consistently representing the War in Vietnam as an “American tragedy” (Espiritu, “Toward” 424), and turning the Vietnamese traumatic experience into “ghostly stories” (Espiritu, “About” 1700).

Traditionally, food offerings have a great spiritual value in Vietnamese culture: they renew “the bond between the living and the dead,” as each family asks their ancestors for protection throughout the New Year (Van Huy 85).⁹⁵ However, the historical link between *Tet* and the horrors of the war complicates the nature and significance of the ritual and it turns this culinary spiritual commemoration into a complex and multilayered symbolic act in Nguyen’s memoir. Thus, the display of “dried papaya, persimmon, [...] and plates heaped with *banh chung* rice cakes” (B. Nguyen 188-189) in the altar bespeaks the suffering that has been silenced, and they serve as a way to intimately mourn the family’s losses in an attempt to claim and understand their position as victims, survivors, and refugees. In fact, by insistently remembering a side of the story that

⁹⁵ Scenes of food offerings are recurrent in Asian American literature. Li’s *Daughter of Heaven* emphasizes the significance of the “Grave Sweeping Festival” in China: an ancestor worship ceremony consisting in cleaning the “homes” of the deceased—the graves—and offering them “the essence of food” (Li 210). Similarly, the narrator of Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* delves into the importance that food offerings had, as a sign of profound respect for the ancestors, in a context marked by poverty, violence, and abandonment. As Shirley puts it, even though food was scarce and hunger was a constant feature in her family’s life, the best food items were destined for the altar, especially during the *Cheng Beng*, or “Festival of the Hungry Ghosts,” which kept the family closely-knit “in ways that could not be unknotted” (Lim, *Among* 46).

has been intentionally ignored and obliterated, the Nguyen family engages in an intimate exercise of counter-memory and assertion of Vietnamese subjectivity.

The ritualized commemorations that take place during *Tet* function in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* as a “reminder of the human consequences of politics without ethics” (V. Nguyen 12) and as a celebration of survival; a survival that can only be understood in light of the past. As V. Nguyen points out, “the haunting presence of the dead and the lost in Vietnamese refugee memory” can also be turned into “self-empowerment, a word with not only political but also therapeutic connotations” (V. Nguyen 32). Thus, aided by the healing aura of the foods offered and consumed during *Tet*, the remembering and retelling of their experiences help the Nguyen family find a site for agency and self-representation in American society, claiming ownership of their life stories beyond dominant discourses. By meticulously reproducing this ritualized event in the diaspora, Noi makes sure that all the stories hidden behind the *cha gio* and *banh chung* are remembered and retold: “She would never let anyone go hungry” (B. Nguyen 188), and she would much less let anyone be forgotten.

Both Li and Nguyen feature their grandmothers as the engines behind the ritual, translating their grief into something positive and healing. Their culinary creations, which culminate in the sumptuous New Year's dinner, are the result of processes of “productivity” and “melancholic agency” that, according to Butler, emerge from the ruins of loss (468). By transforming the family's suffering into ritualized culinary expressions, both Nai-nai and Noi contribute to the maintenance of the diasporic community in a way that is intrinsically linked to “a loss that cannot be recovered or recuperated but that leaves its enigmatic trace” (Butler 468). As Davis contends, this process of construction and negotiation of identity occurs in

an “imaginary place of connection,” that is, “the space of dwelling,” given that “the subjects have lost access to the original home and have, by force of circumstances, established vital connections with the results of the process of loss” (*Relative* 93). Therefore, the food-centered rituals of Lunar New Year, due to their unbreakable ties with the past, become “vestiges of memory” (Mehta 229) or “islands of time” characterized by “retrospective contemplativeness” and “mnemonic energy” (Assmann 130). The almost timeless nature of this celebration enables the members of the diasporic community to explore and reconfigure their stories so as to make sense of their collective identity and cultural memory in the present and in the host country.

The Ritual as a Transgenerational Space

The transmission of this collective and cultural memory from one generation to the next is usually complicated, as the younger generations are often alienated from their family's experience of loss and displacement. *Daughter of Heaven* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, as two memoirs of coming-of-age in America, focus respectively on Leslie's and Bich's childhood and adolescence, which are described as marked by ethnic anxieties and ambivalence towards their cultural heritage. Interestingly enough, both memoirs metonymically present the protagonists' desires to assimilate to mainstream American culture by stressing their almost obsessive fascination with all kinds of American-coded foods, the kind that “real people” eat (B. Nguyen 56). As Mannur contends, “many second-generation texts seem to pledge culinary allegiance to the United States because that gesture of avowal implicitly repudiates a connection with an elsewhere”

(*Culinary Fictions* 170). Along these lines, as an indicator of their complicated relationship with their ethnic identity, Leslie and Bich recall how they both went on a “hunger strike” against “Nai-nai’s ubiquitous bok choy” (Li 3) and Noi’s *pho* (B. Nguyen 127), respectively.⁹⁶

However, in spite of their systematic refusal to eat any of the dishes that their grandmothers prepare for them, Leslie and Bich seem to embrace the celebration of the New Year and the food served on that occasion as the most accessible gateway into their family’s history and traditions. In fact, it is precisely in the atmosphere of the ritual where the American-born and/or raised generation is deeply “touched by the past,” which, as Roger I. Simon explains, “is neither a metaphor for simply being emotionally moved by another’s story nor a traumatic repetition of the past reproduced and re-experienced as present. Quite differently, the touch of the past signals recognition of an encounter with difficult knowledge” (10). The celebration of Chinese New Year and *Tet* conjure up sensory spaces for the silent transmission of the experience of displacement, aided by certain culinary traditions that facilitate the inclusion of the younger generation in narratives of “educative inheritance” (Simon 5). As Hirsch argues, when oral and written accounts fail in their attempt to transmit a difficult memory—that of war and/or displacement—“postmemorial work strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (111, emphasis in the original). This way, the aesthetic and sensorial responses that the New Year meal triggers in Bich and Leslie open a window for

⁹⁶ In the next chapter I will shift the focus—without losing the culinary perspective—from successful family gatherings and communal cohesion to generational conflicts and identity crisis caused by the different life experiences that parents and children have had, as foreign-born immigrants, and American-born descendants of Asian immigrants.

them into the structures of postmemory, the relationships established between the “postgeneration” and the stories of the generation that preceded them (Hirsch 106).⁹⁷ This bond with the past is not “mediated by recall but by imaginative investment” (Hirsch 107), and the celebration of the New Year provides a propitious site for imagination and creativity. On these occasions, food, as a cultural artifact, functions as a shortcut that bridges the generational distance separating the experiences of the American-born members of the family from those experiences shaping the shared memory of their elders. This mobilization of the past creates a discourse of remembrance comprehensible to the younger family members, who are negotiating their identities in two spheres at a time: their ethnic community, and American society at large.

Hirsch highlights the important role of photographs in the process of transgenerational inheritance of Holocaust memory. I argue that these two Asian American transnational memoirs posit the power of ritualized culinary traditions as non-verbal triggers of narratives of war and/or displacement that preceded the birth of the protagonists. Borrowing Sneja Gunew's words, “to some extent words and food are in competition with each other” (“Mouthwork” 98) and this becomes evident in *Daughter of Heaven*, where a specially “intense and yet non-verbal communication” (Li 186) unfolds during the sumptuous dinner of Chinese New Year. During this highly ritualized feast “the meal is the message” (Li 31), as food proves to be much more effective than orality to convey and maintain the taste and scent of the past. As Cho suggests, “taste can evoke a memory that [...] taps into

⁹⁷ A very graphic example of food as a trigger for postmemory in Asian American literature can be found in A. Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Tan uses the image of the duck eggs in her novel as a material link between past and present. Through the discovery of the uneaten and hidden eggs, Olivia feels finally connected with her family's particular story, and this event activates her own “postmemory” locating and contextualizing her existence within her ancestor's memory and narrative.

a transpacific archive of experience” (150), and I would argue that, as can be seen in Li’s memoir, it is precisely in acts of food sharing where the stories from a different continent take on special nuances as they become “the meat of the meal” (Li xv). As if food were a particular record of the history and memory that preceded her existence, Leslie feels that eating Nai-nai’s fish or kumquats implies “ingesting Chinese cultural concepts and values. Eating our words, if you like” (Li 25). In the context of this family gathering, the stories of the previous generation are commemorated and retold by the signs implicit in the food, which are, in turn, re-interpreted and re-imagined by Leslie, creating complex and interwoven “affective structures of identification” (Simon 3).⁹⁸

The ritualized culinary signs and the stories behind them are the ultimate cornerstones of the family’s collective memory, and as Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argues, their nature as “reused and reusable material” over time and generations is responsible for their “shifts in meaning” (7). Knowing little about her forebears in China, Leslie reads and interprets these ritualized food-related signs in a way that is inevitably different from that of her elders. While the symbolism of the food is strongly tied to a physical and remembered past of struggles for Nai-nai and Yau Luen, Leslie’s only referent for those signs are the stories of a past that she has vaguely heard about in the present. This paradoxically gives a sense of actuality to this legacy, as it is constantly re-imagined and re-interpreted by the

⁹⁸ Furiya’s *Bento Box in the Heartland* also puts special emphasis on the celebration of the *Oshogatsu*, the—less popular abroad—Japanese New Year (solar calendar). The narrator, Linda, explains how her mother would devote herself to the preparation and neat arrangement of the *jubako*: the “three-tiered lacquered boxes” where the sushi, deep fried tofu, and *makis* were traditionally served on this holiday (108-109). As Furiya puts it, eating with her family during *Oshogatsu* is much more than a pleasure for the senses, as this banquet symbolizes her family’s efforts and strength to move on despite all the suffering that all her elders have gone through as Japanese immigrants during the hostile times of WWII. Same as Nguyen and Li, Furiya affirms that most of what she learned about her Japanese American identity and ancestry was passed on to her during cooking and eating rituals.

“postgeneration” in order to make it meaningful for their experiences in the present.

Leslie affirms that, for most of her life, she felt as distant from her Chinese-born elders—especially from her father—as though they “inhabited two different continents” over which they had been trying to construct “a stone bridge, unstable and unfinished” (Li 69). However, Chinese New Year rituals help Leslie build her own bridge of postmemory in order to connect with the experiences of her family. She becomes aware of the fact that her sense of identity as a Chinese American subject is indebted to her relatives’ stories, and by actively partaking in such a symbolic celebration, Leslie learns to appreciate and engage in her Chinese family’s collective memory. Food seems to act as a guide throughout Leslie’s process of group-awareness, and silent commensality proves to be more than enough to confirm family unity in this particular situation. This memoir’s emphasis on the collective component of one’s identity constitutes, according to Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico, a common feature among autobiographical texts written by members of minorities, for whom the shared experiences of displacement and/or oppression often turn the “I am who I am” into a “I am because we are” (“Autobiografía” 92).

The dynamics of postmemory are also present in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, where Bich tries to make sense of her existence as a Vietnamese-born refugee girl in a white dominated town and country: “Throughout my childhood I wondered, so often it became a buzzing dullness, why we had ended up here and why we couldn’t leave. [...] I would feel something I could only describe as missingness” (B. Nguyen 12). It is once again during the ritual of the Lunar New Year that Bich is able to fill in that gap by participating in the food offerings and the meal, both

marked by the aftertaste of war and exile. The case of second or 1.5 Vietnamese Americans is a delicate one, for coming to terms with the victimization of their people can prove to be a psychologically and emotionally hard process that keeps the young ones caught up between the moral imperative of “honoring the survivors’ memory” and their wishes to dissociate themselves from this legacy (Espiritu, “Toward” 425).⁹⁹ However, Bich’s acquaintance with her family’s traumatic past is cushioned by the hypnotic and spellbinding atmosphere of the food offerings celebrated during *Tet*. On this occasion, the ritual becomes both the “screen” where the traumatic past is projected and a “protective shield of trauma itself,” as the warm atmosphere of the celebration diffuses the shock and the pain that accompanies any memory of war and forced displacement (Hirsch 125).

The allure of the fruits—their roundness, aliveness—enchanted my sister and me, but the choicest pieces went first to a plate that lay before the golden statue of Buddha in the living room. This was the altar for him and for our dead relatives [...]. The fruit made a solemn offering, [...]. I was in awe of this process. Did Buddha and the ancestors know the fruit was there for the taking? Did they prefer apples or bananas or plums? Once in a great while Noi put an entire pineapple on the altar and I wondered how they would eat it. (B. Nguyen 18)

Young Bich’s naïve perspective on this ritual allows postmemory to work its way through her imagination. Bich, who is only beginning to understand her

⁹⁹ The Vietnamese American collective identity is marked by the experience of refugeehood as a direct consequence of the war. As Simal-González and Pelaud point out, though not all Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. as refugees, it was only during and after this conflict that their presence in this country became conspicuous (Simal-González, “Andrew”; Pelaud, *This* 8). The impact that the war had on the Vietnamese American community turned the “refugee paradigm” into the “master narrative” for this ethnic group (Simal-González, “Andrew”). The new generation’s desire to transcend discourses of victimhood raises awareness about the difficulties of dissociating Vietnamese American identity from the memories of the war “without eradicating its legacy” (Pelaud, *This* 2).

family's complicated and traumatic story, uses her creativity to get in touch with the most painful consequences of war: the loss of loved ones. Thus, during *Tet*, she would "imagine [her] ancestors and relatives descending into the room" picking at the fruit, "perhaps wishing for the kinds my father talked about having in Vietnam" (B. Nguyen 189). The almost magical relationship that Bich establishes with her dead relatives—some of whom were direct victims of the armed conflict—brings the past into the present, adapting and reimagining history in order to make sense of it. This way, Bich participates in an exercise of "postmemory" by bonding with those who did not survive the war; those whose spirits are "[n]ot a ghost, but something like memory, a respect for the past" (B. Nguyen 188).

The second generation's acquaintance with the war and its aftermath is articulated in this memoir through the sumptuousness and mystical character of Noi's food offerings, which draw the young girl's attention: "Whatever Noi set on the altar took on a glow of greater resonance, turning an ordinary orange into a radiant globe" (B. Nguyen 188). The magical aura that foods such as the *banh chung* rice cakes acquire after being set on the altar turns them into testimonies of the family's somber past. Thus, it does not escape Bich's notice that, hidden behind the celebratory character of *Tet's* emblematic *banh chung* and *cha gio*, lie bitter memories that taste "like a secret long kept, old and familiar and unspeakable" (B. Nguyen 116). As in the case of Li's text, these secrets are not spoken, but implied in the signs of the ritual, which the protagonist embraces as though it were a door into her family's cultural and collective memory. Even though she does not enjoy the taste of "green sticky rice cakes" (B. Nguyen 104), she takes part in their preparation and consumption as if trying to cook the lost past into being: "I liked to take my time, finding more pleasure in the unwrapping. I liked

that first glimpse of green, glossy rice, the leaf color soaked right through it. The musty Saigon market smell of the bean paste filled my nose as I bit into the cake. For a while we sat there, happily chewing away” (B. Nguyen 102).

Tet's ritualized meal and food offerings teach Bich about the importance of mourning and honoring losses, but also about the need to celebrate survival. Thus, by the time the beautifully arranged food offerings are finally transferred to the dinner table and “transformed into human food again” (B. Nguyen 188), she realizes that, for her family, who has narrowly escaped death, sharing the red bean cake pastries, the noodle dishes, or the fried shrimp chips feels as if they “were eating gifts every time” (B. Nguyen 19). This culinary ritual has ultimately become the beacon of the refugee family’s survival, a reminder of the fact that, after all, they “were among the lucky” (B. Nguyen 2).

The celebration of the New Year is pictured in *Daughter of Heaven* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* as though it were a piece of paper where all the family members wish to write their wishes for the future. However, this is not a blank piece of paper, since the baggage of experiences that the community has gone through informs their present plans and aspirations for the future. In keeping with this, Brinda Mehta argues that in contexts such as the ones described in these two autobiographical texts, pervaded by feelings of loss after a more or less traumatic displacement, collective memory—especially when evoked through emotionally-coded rituals—has the power to transform “the past into a future inspired present” (6), thereby symbolizing “an active stance of resistance to erasure” of the ethnic community in the diaspora (10). As Irwin-Zarecka argues, people’s actions in the present, apart from being shaped according to a remembered past, are somehow oriented to the future; that is, they have the intention of transforming themselves

into “witness[es] to the times’ [...] in much the same way the older memory works have done for us” (102). This is what Sutton calls “prospective memory,” which is, he argues, poignantly conjured by collective culinary practices (19). Sutton believes that, entangled in the past-present fabric of remembrance, family gatherings around the table also present a marked future-oriented taste; that is, they are guided by a firm desire to “remember [past and present] food events in the future” (19).

In other words, food gatherings such as the ones described in these two “gastrophilic” narratives (Roy 472) are not only meant to celebrate the union of the community in the present, but they also constitute a direct manifestation of their participants’ desires for the group to remain closely-knit throughout the years, overcoming the traumas and difficulties inherent to their experiences of displacement. Thus, in *Daughter of Heaven*, the Chinese New Year meal anoints Leslie’s relatives’ tongues and palates “with familiarity,” at the same time that it awakens their “mind[s] to recall” (Li 113) and to imagine a future where the family maintains their Chinese traditions and attachment to the homeland, overcoming their gnawing feelings of loss and loneliness. As the narrator puts it, despite the fact that many years have passed since the last time Leslie celebrated Chinese New Year at her grandparents’ house, the symbolism of those meals has left an indelible mark in her mind, for the message of those memorable banquets reverberates and “remains audible; all the louder for Nai-nai’s [...] absence” (Li 31). In the case of Nguyen’s memoir, the difficult memories of the war in Vietnam and the complicated circumstances of the refugee community turn the celebration of *Tet* into a mnemonic feast that reinforces the community’s projection towards the future; a future in which they hope the grief and hardships of the Vietnamese

American community may be acknowledged and taken into account. Thus, Vietnamese culinary traditions such as *banh chung* and *cha gio* become precious symbols of the family's survival instinct. The sharing of this holiday meal constitutes a way to make up for all the suffering, and, needless to say, after all they have been through, they can "never get enough" (B. Nguyen 19).

3.3. Conclusions

This chapter has sought to explore three different Asian American literary works in which food gatherings and rituals are represented as sites for collective memory and community cohesion both before and after migration/exile. The close reading of Narayan's, Li's, and Nguyen's texts demonstrates that scenes of collective culinary enjoyment—be they quotidian or ritualized—are deployed by the three memorists as a way to evoke a certain sense of "togetherness" and homeland attachment that transcends temporality and spatiality. As Satya P. Mohanty contends, "the community that defines our cultural identity is constructed through a complex and ongoing process involving both emotional and cognitive efforts" (54). Along these lines, my discussion on *Monsoon Diary* aimed at stressing Shoba's progressive awareness of the affective component hidden behind some of the seemingly trivial food events that took place throughout her life. The fact that Narayan's memoir is set both in India and in the United States offers the possibility of analyzing the way Shoba's "food-induced" community affiliations evolve and come to the fore during the actual process of migration, as

she comes to terms with the “nebulous threads” making up the “substance of belonging” (A. P. Cohen, “Belonging” 11).

While Narayan ascribes special importance to fairly quotidian food events—with the exception of the rite of the *Choru-unna!*—, both *Daughter of Heaven* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* present the different generations of the author's families as approaching the ritual of the Lunar New Year from heterogeneous perspectives. The role that this celebration plays in these two Asian American memoirs confirms that, as Lowe argues, “culture is also a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however fragmented, imperfect, or disavowed” (x). In fact, each of the families' historicities and stories turns Chinese New Year and Vietnamese *Tet* into cultural spaces of agency where “postmemory” translates the scars of loss and trauma into palatable tales accessible to the younger generations. Eventually, different understandings of the past combine during this celebration, creating heterogeneous “generational structures of fantasy and projection” (Hirsch 114). This, in turn, allows for a reinterpretation and reconstruction of the community's identity and collective memory in the diaspora, as the younger generations provide new present-informed ways to approach the past.

Scholars such as Safran, Bruneau, and Boccagni agree on the fact that family union in the diaspora is very much dependent on a certain attachment to the country of origin, which acts both as a referent for individual and communal identity in the host country (Boccagni 188, 201) and as a nostalgic “pole of attraction via memory” (Bruneau 36). Thus, it was my intention in this chapter to dwell on the recurrent trope of commensality as a bond with the homeland and as a synonym for group cohesion and understanding in Asian American literature.

However, this cultural legacy and the “unbroken relevance of the motherland” (Boccagni 188) can also turn into a major source of conflict within the bosom of the Asian American family. Intra-group tensions, which frequently have to do with intergenerational disagreements, have recurrently been portrayed in Asian American literature through culinary images. This is precisely the subject matter of the following chapter, where I will explore less harmonious attitudes towards the culture and traditions of the homeland, by examining in detail the oftentimes conflicting eating habits of the immigrant generation and those of the American-borns, who find themselves, borrowing Bhatia’s words, permanently “struggling with [...] asymmetrical cultural positions” in the host country (*American* 37). In order to do so, I will not only focus on Li’s and Nguyen’s memoirs, but also on other Asian American narratives.

4. Food and the Generation Gap: “Big Eaters” and Lunch Bags

“Am I Indian or American?

[...]

My heritage and my future
are the poles that pull me apart,
wrenching me in half.

Doomed forever to never really belong completely in one culture.

I know not whether I am part of a ‘melting pot’ or part of a ‘fruit salad’.”

Rashmi Sharma, “What’s in a Name?”

“[H]ow faint the aroma of your own kitchen has become, how strong the scent of the street?”

Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian*

As shown in the previous chapter, food is often portrayed in Asian American narratives as a precious cultural artifact that produces an emotional bond between generations of immigrants and exiles (Waxman 363; Inness 3). The abundance of food tropes and scenes of food sharing present in this literary tradition hints at the importance of a closely-knit family and ethnic community as fundamental mainstays for people in the diaspora, for whom this sense of belonging provides a stable supply of social and cultural capital, necessary for the survival of individual and collective ethnic identities in the host country (Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 64-65, *Immigrant* 266; Zhou, “Straddling” 212; S. Wong, *Reading* 37). In keeping with this, Gill Valentine argues that a regular pattern of commensality and family

meals helps create and intensify the sense of group identity and cohesion (492). However, research shows that the family or ethnic community does not necessarily constitute a “single unit of consumption”; in fact, its members may follow “contradictory consumption patterns” (Valentine 502). Thus, if eating habits are a crucial part of one’s identity, the existence of a multiplicity of food preferences within a family or group mirrors the fact that communal membership does not imply the “absolute sameness or constancy” of all its members throughout time (Hames-García 111). In fact, Charles Taylor warns against static and essentialist approaches to identity and he suggests that one’s sense of self emerges and is nurtured through an ongoing dialogical process; that is, our identity is not a product, but a process that reflects our interactions with others in a certain social context (32; cf. Callero; Mohanty; Moya). Identities are, therefore, not passed down in an absolute, vertical, and changeless way over generations, but are, to a large extent, socially, dialogically, and experientially constructed and negotiated within the social and cultural scenario that each generation inhabits. According to scholars such as Pyong Gap Min or Bhatia, ethnocultural identities and traditions in the Asian American diasporic context cannot be regarded as mere and unaltered givens inherited by the younger generations. On the contrary, constructionist and dialogic theorizations, such as the ones proposed by Min and Bhatia, defend that the ethnic group’s socio-cultural identities undergo constant revisions due to the new generations’ more active interactions with mainstream society (Min 13; Bhatia, “Acculturation” 61). Along these lines, the social spheres of the immigrant family and the ethnic community—sites where opposing interests and attitudes towards life in the diaspora often meet and clash—become not only

the most immediate "sources of support" for the second generation, but also "primary sites of conflict" (Zhou and Lee 15).

The intergenerational transmission of culture and traditions from the country of origin is not always as easy and effortless as it seemed in the previous chapter, and the difficulties added by the experience of migration and the group's current life in the diaspora are insistently mirrored in Asian American literature through diverse culinary images. Kurjatto-Renard cogently argues that "[f]ood permits establishing a certain pattern and endows everyday life with the sense of repetition and regularity" that facilitates the consolidation of family ties. Nevertheless, she warns against studying food images in Asian American literature as mere peaceful links between different generations of family members, since, in the same way as commensality may evoke a harmonious understanding among the participants, "family disorder is [also] shown through what is going on at dinner table" (220-221). In the same vein, Lupton affirms that food and eating should not be associated solely "with the positive emotions of happiness, pleasure and [...] family bonding" (55), for eating practices may also reflect "struggles over power, all the attendant frustrations, unhappiness and hostility that go with this on the part of both parents and children" (55).

In keeping with this, it is my aim in this section to dwell on the abundant culinary representations of the so-called generation gap in Asian American literature. The intergenerational conflicts portrayed in these texts, which usually involve the immigrant parents and the American-born children or teenagers, come down, to a large extent, to the fact that parents and children have very different sets of past references and memories where to anchor their present actions and way of life in the host country (Zhou and Lee 14; Zhou, "Straddling" 207). For the

foreign-born immigrant parents, the homeland, together with its culture and traditions, survives as a reality they remember and to which they can refer and attach their present life in the diaspora (Nahirny and Fishman 272). However, in the case of the children of immigrant parentage, “their lack of meaningful connections to their parents’ homeland” (Zhou, “Coming” 33) makes it difficult for them to feel integrated within the—often past-scented—“cognitive maps” of the ethnic community and family (A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic* 101). In fact, the homeland often exists for them simply as an abstract and ideal concept transmitted by the first generation.¹⁰⁰ The lack of a physical, real, and/or mnemonic reference to their immigrant parents’ country of origin makes the need to adjust and assimilate into mainstream U.S. culture more acute for the second generation than for their parents, given that the only homeland the American-borns have physically and socially experienced is the United States. As Zhou maintains, children born in the United States to Asian-born immigrant parents, “are unlikely to consider a foreign country as a point of reference, and are much more likely to evaluate themselves or to be evaluated by others according to the standards of their country of birth or the one in which they are being raised” (*Contemporary* 194).

However, the decision to perform their ethnic identity or dissociate from it constitutes by no means a straightforward and easy one. Second-generation Asian American youth experience various degrees of cultural duality and identity crises,

¹⁰⁰ Zhou warns against overly essentialist interpretations of intergenerational conflicts. That is, though the differences between the experiences of the first and second generations are undeniable, the study of the Asian American community should not be simply polarized along generational lines, for these lines are not always clear-cut (Zhou, “Straddling” 207), nor are they immutable. In a similar fashion, and extrapolating this question to the literary field, Lowe cautions against theorizations of Asian American literature as a dichotomized narrative of intergenerational differences and conflicts (63). Though she acknowledges the ubiquity of this theme, Lowe believes that focusing on too narrow a view on this matter would reduce the cultural politics of Asian ethnic groups in the United States to “a privatized familial opposition” (63).

for they tend to feel caught up in the uncomfortable position of having to balance two different—and often opposed—sets of values. The already complicated task of straddling two cultural worlds is intensified by the “conflicting signals” (Zhou, “Straddling” 188) they constantly receive from peers and parents: on the one hand, their parents want them to excel in school and behave according to the norms the foreign-borns have brought along from their country of origin; on the other, the young ones are subject to their peers’ pressures and urges to fully assimilate in order to conform to the larger American social scheme. The formation of one’s own identity and sense of self within this context of permanent and contradictory cross-cultural references and intergroup relations often results in American-born children and adolescents finding themselves painfully torn between their immigrant families and their peer environments, “feeling at ease with neither” (Zhou and Lee 14). Besides, the young descendants of foreign-born Asian immigrants are usually the target of more or less explicit racism and discrimination both at school and in the streets. The racial prejudice to which Asian American children are subject in their everyday lives outside their home and/or co-ethnic environment constitutes a factor that aggravates the generation gap and “the estrangement of parents from children” (F. Wu 327).

In this section, in order to deal with the “cultural ambivalence” (Fachinger 39) and identity crises experienced by the second generation, the attention will be drawn towards the parental-filial relationships portrayed in a selection of Asian American literary works that includes Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, Chao’s *Monkey King*, Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Furiya’s *Bento Box in the Heartland*, and Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, among others. If we explore the question of intergenerational conflicts

alongside the countless culinary images and metaphors present in Asian American narratives, we obtain the perfect tandem and “springboard” in order to dive into the nature and causes of the ethnic identity crises portrayed in them.¹⁰¹ Thus, in order to interpret the abundant food scenes and metaphors present in the aforementioned selection of works, apart from incorporating various studies on this matter to my research, I will mainly follow S. Wong’s groundbreaking theories on food as an indicator of the generation gap, as put forward in her pioneering work *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. It is my intention to demonstrate that Wong’s thorough study of the context-sensitive culinary semiotics of Asian American literature, framed within the parameters of “Necessity” and “Extravagance,” remains valid today, and it can still be applied to works written subsequent to its publication in 1993. Though Wong maintains that Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* laid the foundations for the paradigm of “Necessity” and “Extravagance,” she also acknowledges the ubiquitous presence of food images in later Asian American works. In fact, Wong argues that the different ways in which food images are deployed in diverse Asian American literary texts create a vertical and intertextual pattern that functions as a “a kind of echo chamber” for the precepts of “Necessity and Extravagance,” and the sound resulting from this reverberation “is not any less worthy of scrutiny” (*Reading* 35).

¹⁰¹ For more on the culinary representation of identity crises in Asian American literature see Cobb 12; Fachinger 39; Fung ii; Gardaphe and Xu 5; Outka 450-1; S. Wong, *Reading* 26; or Xu, *Eating* 2.

4.1. "Necessity": The "No Waste" Philosophy

"My mother could contend against the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them, and she could not-eat them on the days when good people fast."

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Wong's study of the trope of food unfolds around what she calls "the case of the stone bread," a food image at the beginning of Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981). During the main character's visit to her newly widowed aunt, Naomi finds a hard and blackened loaf of bread that had been baked by her—now dead—uncle. This "stone bread" image is interpreted by Wong as a representation of the miseries and hardships of Naomi's elders as Japanese *issei* in Canada during WWII, horrible circumstances and events with which she is not acquainted. Thus, the hardness of the stone bread not only symbolizes the misfortunes of Naomi's family in the internment camps, but also the strength of those who survived that traumatic experience, digesting it and reconstructing their lives from scratch, as her Aunt Emily did. Naomi, who discovers in her adulthood many of the dramatic details of her relatives' lives, finds that stone bread too hard to chew, for its toughness and sour taste also affect her own sense of identity in the present.

Interestingly enough, the objectification of the obstacles and difficulties that Asian American immigrants—especially the first generation—experience is not unique to *Obasan*. In fact, two works published more than twenty years after Kogawa's novel, use a very similar narrative device to hint at the hard lives of—mostly foreign-born—Asian immigrants in the U.S. If the stone bread, which

requires “strong teeth” and “tough digestion” to be eaten (Kogawa 43), constitutes a testimony of Naomi’s family’s sad life story, Li’s use of the image of “sucking on a stone” (xi) at the beginning of *Daughter of Heaven* elicits similar interpretations. The narrator, Leslie, opens the food memoir by informing the reader about the infallible trick her mother used to play on her and her sisters in order to make them finish their meal or stop complaining about its taste: Leslie’s mother would tell them about a shocking scene that she herself had witnessed in China, where she had to spend some time with her husband in the 1940s. Thus, Leslie’s mother would proceed to tell them about the group of beggars she had seen in the streets of Shanghai, who, “dressed in rags and squatting by the roadside” (Li xii), tried to cook some rice and a few cabbage leaves on a small fire, using flattened tin cans as pots and pans. However, the most surprising and dramatic detail is that, since they could not afford to buy any meat or fish, “they had to fry stones for something savory to eat. They sucked on that hot, oily, salty stone, spat it out onto their bowl, ate another mouthful of rice, then picked up the stone again with their chopsticks and sucked on it some more, until all the rice and cabbage were gone” (Li xii). Be it a legend or part of Leslie’s mother’s vivid recollections of her time spent in war-torn China, this story has significant effects on her daughters’ education. In a similar fashion as that of the stone bread motif in *Obasan*, the stones featured in Leslie’s narration become much more than a simple anecdote, since they symbolize the difficulties—more political than economic in nature—and the repression that some members of the Li family had to undergo in China. In fact, as the narrator puts it, by sucking hard on the virtual stones her mother gives her, Leslie discovers that they contain “sermons” and “stories” about her own life, and about the lives of her ancestors in China (Li xiii). In contrast to the toughness and

tastelessness of the stones, which evoke poverty, sadness, and despair, Leslie's mother wants her children to sense the softness and rich flavors of the foods she prepares for them, in an attempt to awaken their consciousness of the past so as to appreciate and be grateful for the "bounty before [them] in America" (Li xiii).

The metaphor of eating or sucking on hard or inedible things can also be found in Furiya's food memoir *Bento Box in the Heartland*. It is interesting to note that, just as in *Obasan* and *Daughter of Heaven*, the image of "hard eating" is found at the very beginning of the memoir, and its connotations permeate the narration until the very end. Moreover, another surprising parallelism stems from the fact that both Li and Furiya use this image to narrate a story embedded within another story; that is, both authors present the "hard eating" scene as a tale their mothers used to tell them when they were little. In the case of *Bento Box in the Heartland*, Linda's mother tells her daughter the "fish bones" story, in which the fish bones play a very similar role to the one played by the stone bread in *Obasan*, and the stones in *Daughter of Heaven*. If Leslie's mother's tale was set in Shanghai in the 1940s, Linda is transported by her mother's personal story to a humble, war- and earthquake-shaken neighborhood of Tokyo in the 1930s, where her mother used to live as a young girl. There, as the story goes, a group of women would gather to share resources and feed their children some rice, vegetables, and fish.

Often the fishmonger's wife brought a whole fish to broil until the skin charred and cracked on a small outside grill. The mothers slid the flaky, sweet, white meat off the bone with the tap of a chopstick.

Using their fingers to feel for any stray fish bones, they thoroughly mashed, pinched, and poked the tender fish meat before mixing it with rice and moistening it with *dashi* (fish stock). Despite all the care, sometimes a

transparent bone, pliable and sharp as a shark's tooth, slipped past scrutiny. (Furiya 1-2)

In this scene, the figure of the sharp fish bone is, once again, the materialization and objectification of the problems and hardships that individuals need to overcome in life. As a matter of fact, even though mothers treat their children with extreme care, trying to protect them from all kinds of harm, the little ones will always encounter, throughout their lives, some “stray fish bones” (Furiya 2) that they will need to either fight against or swallow. Therefore, eating fish was the “infant's first test of survival” (Furiya 2), and the ability of the newborns to swallow or push out the fish bones would be taken as an indication of their courage, strength, and capacity to fend off by themselves in the future. Linda, too little at that time to extract all the meaning from her mother's fish bone story, understands throughout her childhood and adolescence that her mother was ultimately trying to teach her a lesson of strength and courage, because there are things in life that parents cannot protect their children from.

The metaphor of the fish bone becomes even more significant in Linda's own life when the focus of the narration shifts towards the racism and discrimination that she has had to endure as a second-generation Japanese American girl growing up in—and trying to blend in with—the predominantly white farm town of Versailles, in Indiana. Insulted and marginalized at school, Linda feels that seemingly innocent racist slurs such as “Chinky, chinky, Chinese” or “Jap” do not go down easily (Furiya 8, 7). Her anger and frustration accumulate and they turn into a lump in her throat, which she compares with a fish bone scratching at the back of her neck (Furiya 9). Furiya's food memoir is, in fact, an

account of her coming-of-age to understand that the only path to self-acceptance lies in the right measure of "swallowing" and "spitting" (Furiya 8) those fish bones; that is, some offenses are worth fighting and spitting out, but some others, it is better to ignore, swallow, and forget, in order not to fall in a deep and useless well of bitterness, hatred, and grudge that would only consume its bearer from the inside out.

In fact, as the narrator expresses towards the end of the food memoir, Linda, with the hindsight of time and maturity, grows to admire the way her parents have overcome all the fish bones they encountered in their lives: her father's internment in a POW (prisoners-of-war) camp during World War II in Japan and his later migration to the United States where he suffered the consequences of racism, hatred and poverty; or her mother's blind marriage and permanent separation from her family in Japan, as she settled down with her husband in one of the "whitest" areas of America. Despite it all, as the autodiegetic narrator puts it, "rather than wallow in their own self-pity or allow their anger to overwhelm them and their families, my parents always opted to rise above their pain," dealing with all those hard and sharp fish bones the best way they could, "not allow[ing] themselves to get pulled under by disappointment and resentment" (Furiya 295).

Alimentary images such as the stone bread in *Obasan*, the stone-sucking beggars in *Daughter of Heaven*, and the fish bone fighters in *Bento Box in the Heartland* are considered by Wong as the seed of her theorizations of "Necessity and Extravagance." However, as Wong herself affirms, these culinary images are not an isolated literary motif, and they must be "read alongside the many other images of unpalatable food and strenuous eating found in Asian American literary works" (*Reading* 24). Exploring Asian American writings from this point of view

reveals a tapestry of food-related tropes that represent the foreign-born immigrant's "Necessity," defined by Wong as "all the hardships, deprivations, restrictions, disenfranchisements, and dislocations that Asian Americans have collectively suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white dominated country" (*Reading 20*).

Wong's reading of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng's "A Red Sweater" (1986) from this theoretical standpoint provides further insight into the symbolic representation of the eating habits of foreign-born immigrants and the reactions that these habits trigger in their American-born descendants. Thus, Wong explains that the immigrant generation's particular eating habits, as generally portrayed in Asian American writing, demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice their own nutrition for the sake of their children, and their readiness to turn the most "unlikely creatures into food" (*Reading 25*). In keeping with this code of "Necessity," Wong highlights the scantiness of Mah's eating, in "A Red Sweater," as an example of maternal sacrifice: while her children eat the best parts of the pigeon, their mother sits alone in the kitchen "sucking out the sweetness of the lesser parts: necks, backs, and the head," telling their children, as if to relieve them from any feelings of guilt or shame, that "[b]ones are sweeter than you know" (F. Ng, "Red" 52).¹⁰²

Scenes of parental "sacrificial eating" (S. Wong, *Reading 40*), which mirror the kind of sacrifices immigrant life requires of them, abound in Asian American literature, and Mah's way of caring for their children at the expenses of her own health resounds in works published years after F. Ng's text. A clear example of

¹⁰² F. Ng's "A Red Sweater" was published as a short story in *The American Voice* in 1986, but it would later become the seed of her novel *Bone*, published in 1994.

this can be found in M. Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, which describes the peculiar—and almost incestuous—relationship between Ruby, a second-generation Chinese American young adult, and Bell, her Chinese-born mother. Much like Mah in "A Red Sweater," Bell's life in the United States—working until exhaustion at the family's laundry in Queens and coping with discrimination and with the lack of resources for upward mobility—is portrayed as a series of misfortunes that she bears so that her children can enjoy a better life. Thus, M. Ng condenses all the hardships the immigrant generation endures for the sake of their descendants in the symbolic act of Bell feeding her daughter the best morsels: "She and her mother had always loved each other through sacrifice and worry, and ever since she could remember, her mother had been better at it. Look at their bowls. Ruby's bowl is piled with all the good bits, and there, in her mother's bowl, a heap of bones" (14). In spite of the instability of the Lee's domestic sphere—shaken by financial problems, marital and intergenerational conflicts, and self-hatred caused by their continuous exposure to racism—food always attests to the feeder's affection, care, and selfless dedication. Therefore, Bell expresses her willingness to keep on sacrificing herself for Ruby's wellbeing in the United States by placing the best pieces of meat in her daughter's bowl (M. Ng 11). Echoing Mah in F. Ng's "A Red Sweater," Bell disguises her self-denial in the appearance of a conscious and desire-driven food choice by lying to Ruby: "More sweet near the bone" (M. Ng 12).

Even though generational conflicts permeate the novel, and, as Elisabetta Marino puts it, "the plot follows the pattern of the "Chinese mother - Americanized daughter encounter," it is interesting to note how Bell's grim way of eating causes a deep impact on her daughter, who, no longer sure about her feelings for her

white boyfriend Nick, decides to put an end to the relationship on the grounds that he always eats

all the good meaty bits [...] leaving the bony parts for her [Ruby]. This made her quiet, and she felt sad suddenly that she loved a man who took the good bits for himself. She had been taught to give the good bits to the other person and that the other person would give her the good bits, and in this way, they would take care of each other. (M. Ng 234)

For Ruby, who seems to have inherited her mother's ways of "sacrificial eating," the fact that Nick does not know "how to eat" constitutes a bigger act of betrayal than "going with another woman" (M. Ng 241). According to the implicit codes of "Necessity" that rule the lives of the foreign-born generation, and which are oftentimes passed down in ambivalent ways to the American-borns, Xu concludes that for the Lee family "knowing how to cook, eat, and feed others is knowing how to love" (*Eating* 155). According to this, Nick's egoistic attitude towards food, so distant from Bell's, denotes his selfishness and insufficient love and care for Ruby.¹⁰³

The dictates of "Necessity," which permeate the lives of first-generation immigrant characters in Asian American literature, not only consist in this kind of parental selfless way of eating. In addition to these already illustrative tropes,

¹⁰³ Other examples of first-generation sacrifices pictured through alimentary scenes are also present in other Asian American texts such as A. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, or Chao's *Monkey King*. Tan presents Chinese-born Suyuan Woo showing her unconditional love for her American-born daughter by eating a half-rotten crab with a missing leg—considered a bad omen in Chinese folk culture—only to prevent her daughter from eating it (A. Tan, *Joy* 202). Similarly, Chao insists on the trope of the selfless foreign-born immigrant by highlighting Sally's grandmother's frugal eating habits (118).

Wong points out the recurrence of the image of the first-generation Asian immigrant as a "big eater."¹⁰⁴ That is,

[w]hat unites the immigrants in these stories is an ability to eat unpromising substances and to extract sustenance, even a sort of willed enjoyment, from them; to put it symbolically, it is the ability to cope with the constraints and persecutions Asian Americans have had to endure as immigrants and racial minorities. (S. Wong, *Reading* 25)

This could be considered as the core and most peculiar aspect of "Necessity," and, Wong explains, its most likely precursor is Brave Orchid, the Chinese-born mother in Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* (*Reading* 35). This character is hyperbolically described by Maxine, the autodiegetic narrator, as capable of eating almost any kind of animal: "raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub" (Kingston 90). Thus, by highlighting Maxine's mother's omnivorous appetite, Kingston offers a deep insight into the immigrant's capacity to digest and overcome the difficulties she encounters, including racial stigmatization, discrimination, and violence.

Following the path set by Brave Orchid, culinary metaphors of immigrant bravery and survival skills have proliferated in Asian American writing, with Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* featuring a very revealing example. This novel, set in the mid-1970s in Hilo, the main city of the Big Island, offers a "prosaic and realistic" description of a Japanese immigrant family in Hawai'i,

¹⁰⁴ Wong highlights the figure of the immigrant as a "big eater" in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, F. Ng's "A Red Sweater," and Ashley Sheun Dunn's "No Man's Land."

whose lives are marked by discrimination and financial hardships (Ho, *Consumption* 50). In an attempt to challenge the stereotypical image of Hawai'i as a peaceful tropical paradise, "the novels of Lois-Ann Yamanaka provide an antidote to mainstream/mainland audiences' uncritical consumption of media images" of this state as an idyllic place located on the fringes of racial, ethnic, cultural, or economic conflicts (Ho, *Consumption* 50).¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, the culinary images in Yamanaka's novel hint at the Nariyoshi family's domestic conflicts, which stem mainly from their poverty and from their condition as descendants of Japanese immigrants in post-World War II Hawai'i—both factors turning them into an easy target of racial hatred and discrimination.

Hubert Nariyoshi—the father of the child protagonist, Lovey—shares with *Brave Orchid* the belief that "big eaters win" (Kingston 90), which he learned throughout a life marked by poverty and racism.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Lovey's comments about her father's eating habits echo Kingston's descriptions of *Brave Orchid*'s "omnivorousness" (S. Wong, *Reading* 29): "Once my father cooked turtle meat and said it was steak. It tasted like fishy chicken. He never tells us when he changes

¹⁰⁵ Yamanaka's attempt to present Hawai'i's Asian American community through narratives riddled with loss, trauma, and "racial grief" (A. Cheng 172) has earned her fierce criticism. *Blu's Hanging*, a novel published one year after *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, was at the center of a controversial debate in Asian American academia due to Yamanaka's portrayal of the Filipino American character as a "libidinous villain" (Suzuki 35). This was interpreted by some Asian American critics and readers as "reaffirming a stereotypical portrait of a sexually-charged Filipino American predator" (Suzuki 35). This polemic intensified when the novel was awarded the 1998 fiction prize by the AAAS (Association for Asian American Studies), only to have the prize rescinded after several protests coming from different sectors of the Asian American community. Nevertheless, despite the uproar surrounding the novel, it has been widely read and studied by critics who want to offer an alternative reading (see Cheung; Davis, *Transcultural*; Fujikane; Otano; Rodrigues; Russel; Suzuki; C. Wu).

¹⁰⁶ Even though the main character of the novel, Lovey, is a *Sansei* (third-generation Japanese American) and her parents are *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese Americans), their poverty and the experiences of discrimination and social invisibility they have faced throughout their lives in the United States have led Lovey's parents to follow to the letter the rules of "Necessity" instilled in them by their *Issei* (Japanese-born) immigrant predecessors.

the meat. I can only tell by a faint smell in the kitchen. Yesterday's fishy-chicken smell turned out to be frog legs. And rabbit also tasted like chicken, though he never tells us" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 91). Just as Kingston's emphasis on Brave Orchid's "big eating" constitutes a clear reference to her capacity to "swallow" and "stomach" the hardships she faces as an Asian immigrant woman and mother in the United States, Yamanaka's detailed accounts of Hubert's "big hunting" and merciless slaughtering of all kinds of creatures to turn them into food or sell them for profit could also be read as a materialization of the same code of "Necessity." In fact, the novel is scattered with explicit descriptions of Lovey's father's wild game hunting, which includes killing geckos, goats, mongooses, deer, partridge, or sheep: "The black ewe that's hit scrambled to her feet, pulling her hindquarters. Father straightens his glasses—twisted sideways in his face—[...] and shoots her in the head. Thick gelatin blood spurts and sticks to our faces and black blood pools on the lava as Father kicks her to make sure she's dead" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 224). The brutality of the hunting scene, all justified by his idea of "better him than you" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 172), alludes to Hubert's unscrupulousness and pragmatism, focused primarily on meeting his family's basic needs. The "no waste" motto of "Necessity" compels him "to convert the seemingly useless into useful" for the sake of survival (S. Wong, *Reading* 24, 26). Therefore, not only does Hubert eat those animals, but he also uses their hides to make clothes for the family and he sells their feathers, eggs, and fur in the local market, so as to supplement the family's extremely low income.

Each of the wild creatures that Hubert remorselessly slaughters could symbolically stand for each of the hardships he—or any Asian American for that matter—has faced throughout his life; deprivation and marginalization have

toughened his character and fed his courage to fight adversity. If Brave Orchid overcomes her difficulties by metaphorically ingesting them—an ability illustrated by her eating of the “sitting ghost” (Kingston 57-75)—, Hubert’s way of dealing with life’s obstacles consists in hunting them down and turning them into sustenance or economic benefit. However, even though the first generation’s “difficult ‘swallowing’” and “brave eating” are performed “to ensure a continued supply of nourishment for the next generation” (S. Wong, *Reading* 26), the youngest American-borns are often portrayed in Asian American literature as having difficulties in digesting the codes of “Necessity” to which their parents adhere so strictly.

It is interesting to note that one of the most recurrent representations in Asian American literature of the differences between first and second generations has to do precisely with the question of “big eating,” which leads, on some occasions, to “tales of pet animals that end in tragic awareness” for the American-born children (Davis, *Transcultural* 34). Accordingly, Wong underlines a particular episode featured in “A Red Sweater,” in which the children protagonists find it hard to eat the pigeons their mother cooks for them because they do not see those animals as food, but as pets: their “baby love birds,” which they feed leftovers of watered rice, only to, one day, “come from school and find them cooked” (F. Ng, “Red” 51; cf. S. Wong, *Reading* 32-33). This “food vs. pet” dilemma also appears in Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, when Hubert brings home a calf that he plans to fatten for slaughter, as it would provide the family with plenty of meat supplies. However, the relationship that Lovey and Calhoon establish with the little cow is very distant from Hubert’s, apparently cold and matter-of-fact.

The black-and-white calf, with round brown eyes and crying so loud that Calhoon and me see his fat black tongue. Cal and me pet him. He cries all day and all night for two days.

Calhoon names him Bully, and Father says, 'Don't name him. Don't you dare call him that. We going eat um and how you going eat if you name him?' But everyday now, Calhoon and me go to play with Bully. Cal with her goat jerky and me with my handful of milkweeds" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 92).

As soon as Lovey and her sister Calhoon name the calf, they personify the animal and begin to consider him "an adopted member of their family," and "a special playmate" (Ho, *Consumption* 60). While Hubert only feeds the calf to fatten him up, Lovey and Calhoon give him *honohono* grass, guavas, *waiwi* and *ti* leaves because they enjoy "the sound of Bully eating and the way a cow smiles" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 92). "Necessity" leads Hubert to treat the calf as a future meal; however, when the time comes to slaughter Bully, he suddenly sees him through his daughters' eyes, and deviating from the principles of "Necessity," he declares his inability to shoot the animal. Nevertheless, this does not save the calf, as Gabriel Moniz, one of the other co-owners of the animal, resolutely takes the gun and "blass um right between the eyes" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 94). When the animal eventually becomes one of the so-called "Bully burgers," Lovey and her sister recognize the taste of their pet friend and they refuse to eat.¹⁰⁷ Reminiscent of Maxine's identification with the monkey in the brain-eating story her mother tells her (Kingston 91-92)—proving Brave Orchid's indiscriminate eating once again—, the killing of Bully feels almost like a murder to Hubert's daughters, who openly

¹⁰⁷ The "food vs. pet" conflict also appears in Chai's *Hapa Girl*, where the autodiegetic narrator explains her Chinese-born grandfather's intentions of killing one of Chai's brother's pets: a snow goose. When told that he cannot kill and eat the animal because it is a "pet," Chai's grandfather shakes his head in disapproval, as for him—a survivor and "big eater"—the idea of "petting" an animal that could easily be turned into a source of nourishment is completely incomprehensible.

reject the animal's meat, as eating him seems almost cannibalistic, something they "cannot perform out of family love and loyalty" (Ho, *Consumption* 62). Despite the fact that Hubert, deeply moved by his daughters' sadness, also leaves his burger uneaten, Lovey feels overwhelmed by what she conceives of as her father's voracious and merciless eating habits. In relation to this, Wong maintains that "[t]he very fact that the American-born children identify with the slaughtered animals, not with the parents who have to conduct the slaughter, shows the extent of their obliviousness to the context of the family's life" (*Reading* 39). Ironically enough, second-generation's unsympathetic attitude towards their parents' difficult experiences of displacement stigmatizes the foreign-borns as heartless torturers; an image that is far from the reality of racism and marginalization that Asian Americans have endured in the United States. The American-borns' estrangement from their parents' hardships become apparent in Asian American literature through images that evoke the weak nature of the younger generation's palate. Thus, it seems that racism and mainstream's pressures to assimilate have different effects on foreign-born parents and American-born children, toughening the first generation's digestion, and rendering their offspring's palates finicky and whimsical.

4.2. "Finicky Palates" and "Candy Lovers"

The efforts that the Asian-born immigrants have made in order to raise the second generation in the diaspora often translate into educational and occupational pressures that take a heavy toll in their American-born children. The

younger generation is not only expected to obey and follow the traditions of their parents' homeland, but also to excel in their academic and professional lives as a way to make up for their elders' sacrifices, and fulfill their unfulfilled and often frustrated dreams (Zhou and Lee 14; Zhou, "Coming" 42, *Contemporary* 187; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 62). In turn, members of the American-born generation tend to feel stifled and claustrophobic under the weight of too many responsibilities and expectations which, if taken and lived up for, could, in some cases, hinder their processes of assimilation into the alluring mainstream American society. Thus, even though parents strive to instill in their children the values, traditions, and moral codes of their country of origin in Asia, the unavoidable influence of American culture and the peculiarity of the second generation's position as straddling two vastly different worlds, make this task extremely difficult to accomplish.

As the narrator in Kingston's memoir explains, the first and the second generation share the racial prejudices aimed at them, accumulating and taking root in their subjectivity as if they were words tattooed on their backs; "so many words—"chink" words and "gook" words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (53). However, each generation copes with their condition as racialized individuals in the United States in very different ways, and this is also mirrored in Asian American writings, particularly in texts that privilege the second-generation child's perspective. As Davis contends, the "child archetype" allows for an imaginative and creative discourse in the context of racial conflicts, processes of self-awareness, intense identity crises, and cultural contingencies and negotiations (*Transcultural* 27, 29). All of them part of what Mannur calls "the vagaries of racialized life for children" (*Culinary Fictions* 178).

In keeping with Wong's theories of "Necessity and Extravagance," one of the most obvious ways in which this intergenerational conflict is represented in Asian American literature is, once again, through a series of alimentary images that dwell on the contrast between the immigrant generation's single-mindedness and purposeful insistence on self-sufficiency and survival—symbolized by their "big eating"—, and their descendants' willingness to distance and dissociate themselves from the rules of "Necessity"—mirrored in their negative attitudes towards their parents' food choices, and their own "finicky palates" and "extravagant" tastes (S. Wong, *Reading* 26, 44). Ample illustration of this can be found in Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, as well as in Chao's *Monkey King*, which feature revealing scenes of the second generation's attraction to American culture as implicit in their compulsive—and sometimes imaginary, or "illegal"—consumption of treats, and candy in particular.

In *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, Lovey is ashamed of her family's poor and "non-*haole*" diet,¹⁰⁸ her mother's vegetable garden, or her grandmother's odd habit of sucking out the eyes of the fish (Yamanaka, *Wild* 10-11). But mostly, she feels deeply embarrassed about her father's animal slaughtering, and his transforming the garage into a dubiously hygienic slaughterhouse:

Cut the body open from jaw to belly. Slice the hide off the head. Gelatin eyes, skeleton teeth—black-and-green smiling teeth hidden behind all that skin.

The fat bubbles where my father slices and the sound of Saran Wrap stretched and cut as he separates the hide from the body, careful not to leave meat on the hide. So much salt for one body, throw the rock salt over the carcass as he works. The flies buzz around the pieces of meat sliced

¹⁰⁸ The Hawaiian word *haole* is used to refer to white American people. Depending on context or intentionality, its meanings range from the merely descriptive to the openly racist offense.

from the hide and flicked off the hand, stuck on the floor of the garage.
(Yamanaka, *Wild* 224)

Lovey's reservations towards his father's "big," "brave," and "efficient eating" (S. Wong, *Reading* 28) arise not only from her ambiguity towards her Japanese ethnic background, but also from her progressively painful awareness of her family's poverty and social status, which she comes to associate with her father's struggles "to put food on the table" (Ho, *Consumption* 51). Thus, if Maxine—the child character in *The Woman Warrior*—manifests her revulsion towards her mother's "big eating" by affirming that she would rather "live on plastic" (Kingston 92), Lovey's categorical rejection of his father's food choices similarly denotes a clear hostility towards Hubert's pragmatically oriented and "Necessity"-driven alimentary patterns and lifestyle: "I hate anything homemade. [...] Next Daddy going tell us eat dirt for dinner 'cause good for our body and you going believe him. He take us to the dump and tell us thass treasures and you believe. Not me, I ain't being dumb no mo'" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 289).

In response to her food-related embarrassment, and in an attempt to obliterate the "memories of privation" (S. Wong, *Reading* 28) and family "inherited traumas" of racial shame, guilt, and abjection (Suzuki 42) that accompany the kind of nourishment she receives at home, Lovey takes refuge in a mostly imaginary world dominated by store-bought products, and mass-marketed snacks. Her attraction to edible commodities is not a matter of taste or preference, as she has never tasted most of the treats she craves for. Her hypnotic infatuation with brand-name candies has to do with the aura of whiteness and wealth attributed to them, as well as with the fact that they represent a tempting "comfort beyond

subsistence”: a break from the clutches of “Necessity,” and a sweet and juicy incursion into the world of “Extravagance” (S. Wong, *Reading* 46). Thus, one of Lovey’s safety valves and points of entry into this world of sensorial pleasures are her fantasies about “the perfect haole house,” where she *is* able to drink “real hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon” or, Coca-Cola and 7-Up “with automatic ice cubes that drop out of a clean freezer” (Yamanaka, *Wild* 24). In contrast with the Nariyoshi’s humble and austere domestic sphere—marked by a traumatic experience of poverty and racial discrimination that has been passed down from one generation to the next—, Lovey’s imaginary *haole* home brims with happiness and abundance, and it always smells of Pez candy, hot dogs, and plain white bread (Yamanaka, *Wild* 24). If, as Kalcik contends, food preferences and cravings constitute “an especially significant symbol in the communication of statements about ethnic identity in the United States—about links with ethnicity and denial of it” (55), Lovey’s almost obsessive desire for white-coded and plastic-wrapped food, and her deep-rooted prejudices against anything homegrown or homemade attest to her still naïve, yet growing and reality-grounded, anxieties towards her ethnic and class positions.

One of the rare occasions when Lovey gains real access to candy and snacks is precisely during the all-American party of Halloween, when she goes trick-or-treating with her friend Jerry to Reed’s Island, the richest part of Hilo. The reason why they go there is precisely because the white people living in that wealthy area “give real chocolate,” and not “the cheap black-and-orange candy wrapped in waxed paper” that the low-income families of Lovey’s neighborhood offer (Yamanaka, *Wild* 119). In contrast with the hardships and necessities inherent in the Nariyoshi’s domestic environment, marked by the low-paid hard

work and the labor-intensive tasks aimed at obtaining the most basic means of sustenance, Reed's Island represents, for Lovey, an ideal of happiness and carefree life, symbolized by the bowl of dimes and candy neatly arranged at every doorstep, and voiced in the welcome message hanging from each door: "*Happy Halloween. Please take one*" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 121, emphasis in the original). Candy and snacks represent for Lovey and Jerry a world that unfolds "beyond what is needed for survival" (S. Wong, *Reading* 44), because these tidbits are available and "kindly" given for free, and, thus, obtained effortlessly. As a consequence, the children, raised as they are in an atmosphere of sacrifice and privations, succumb to the allure of the boxes "full of premade goodie bags," or the "whole bars of Nestlé Crunch and Big Hunk. Not the miniature kind, but the real candy store kind" (Yamanaka, *Wild* 120, 121).

Lovey's untempered desires for white-coded products echoes in Chao's first novel, *Monkey King*. In this narrative, Chao describes Sally's traumatic childhood as the eldest American-born daughter of a Chinese immigrant couple. In addition to the racial discrimination that she has to endure from a very young age, Sally is the victim of her father's sexual abuse, and her mother's oblivion and incredulity about it. Thus, Sally resorts to candy not only as a rebellion against the "Ching Chong Chinaman" world her classmates accuse her of belonging to (Chao 129), but also as a kind of momentary relief from her father's incestuous abuse. The most significant episode of "Extravagant" eating present in Chao's novel portrays Sally, her sister Marty, and their friend David stealing candy from a shop:

In the drugstore we wander around, waiting for old man Kramer to get busy with someone's prescription in the back of the store. David is a pro. [...] He goes first, a Mars bar in his socks, and then watches Marty and me from a

nearby aisle. I grab blindly, but my sister's brow wrinkles, choosing. Afterward, I go to loiter in front of the birthday cards until Marty comes up and pinches the skin under my arm. Mr. Kramer is back in his regular place, by the front cash register. (146)

If Lovey's uncontrollable fantasies about, and hunger for, American-coded sweets lead her to disown her family's environment and poor neighborhood in favor of the Halloween spirit and abundance of a white and rich area, Sally and her sister's wishes to have a bite of American mainstream culture and society prompt them to a minor though very significant act of theft. According to Marilyn Halter, "[i]n modern times, people most often construct their own identities and define others through the commodities they purchase. With the rise of individualism and the evolution of mass consumerism objects become an extension of the self" (7). It comes as no surprise then that Sally and Marty have fallen for this frenzy of "you are what you buy" (Ho, *Consumption* 52); however, lacking the financial resources to fully—and legally—become consumers, they find themselves compelled to steal.

This act of minor shoplifting could be interpreted as a form of rebellion not only against parental authority and pressure, but also against the "model minority myth" stereotype that, as discussed in chapter 1.1., pictures Asian Americans as overachievers, passive, and even submissive. This distorted and reductionist image of the heterogeneous Asian American community is far from being laudatory, as it is based on the premise that minorities should be manageable and silent in order to make it in America; a country that is, in turn, falsely depicted as a place completely devoid of racial discrimination, where the success or failure of an ethnic community only depends on the behavior and degree of effort of its

members (Omatsu 192; F. Wu 44; Zhou and Lee 18; Chan, *Asian* 171). Sally feels that her Asian features not only render her vulnerable to racial discrimination, but they also determine the way she should behave, as if she were perpetually trying to meet mainstream's stereotypical vision of "Orientals," who "never do anything bad" (Chao 146).¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the act of consumption itself is described by Chao as a pure act of "Extravagance": the "Nestlé's Crunch bar" and "Neccos" that Sally eats on her way back home symbolize her ambition to transcend the staples of "Necessity" that prevail in her Chinese domestic environment. Besides, Sally admits that her motivation for eating those treats is nowhere near hunger: "I eat it, [...] although I'm not hungry" (Chao 146). Therefore, this act of gluttony mirrors Sally's wishes to do something for the sake of doing it: eating that candy bar not because she is hungry, but as a mere whim—because she can. Borrowing Wong's words, what attracts Sally and her sister Marty to candy "is less its sweetness per se than its status as a 'useless' Extravagance" (*Reading* 46).

Lovey's and Sally's "sweet teeth" (S. Wong, *Reading* 44) are not only a sign of the typical adolescent quest for freedom from parental constraints, these treats are also a form of self-reward (Pumpian-Mindlin 578) and compensation for the troubles and lack of understanding they face at home, and the discrimination they have to endure every day on the streets. However, Lovey and Sally crave for these particular snacks primarily because they want to fight racialization through consumption, thereby "nourish[ing] an idealized self-image" (Suzuki 45), and

¹⁰⁹ In the film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003), his director, Justin Lin, attempts to show the inaccuracy of the "model minority myth" by portraying the lives of a group of Asian American adolescents, who, confused about their identities, attempt to create a unique self-image, as well as multidimensional and distinct cultural expressions. Besides, Lin tries to dismantle the insidious image of Asians as passive and incorruptible by calling attention to the fact that Asian Americans may also be affected by drug addictions, or be involved in different types of crime, and morally dubious activities.

eating their way through what they ingenuously believe to be “a more socially accepted identity”; one that can only be “sustained through brand name nutrition” (Ho, *Consumption* 57, 56). As Rappoport argues, people’s—especially children’s and young adolescents’—food preferences tend to represent the kind of person or lifestyle they admire, and would like to identify with (55). Thus, following Fischler’s “principle of incorporation” (279), which highlights the qualities of food as a crucial identity trait, Sally and Marty hope that by eating candy, they will absorb and incorporate some of the “white” and middle-class attributes that these edible products embody. However, what the protagonists of Yamanaka and Chao’s respective novels do not realize is that, as Wong metaphorically puts it, “the giver of candy is also the holder of the gun” (*Reading* 48). That is, by participating in what Lupton calls “American cultural imperialism” (27), Lovey and Sally, both lower-class ethnic subjects, are feeding the system responsible for the destructive racialization that puts them into that unfavorable position. This is evidenced by the spaces in which those acts of consumption occur. On the one hand, Lovey’s trick-or-treating takes place in a neighborhood whose houses look, as the narrator puts it, “like *Gone with the Wind*, or like the sugar plantation owner’s houses” (Yamanaka, *Wild* 119)—an architectural aesthetics that recalls the widely-known racial atrocities committed against another ethnic group. On the other, Chao chooses to link the image of the candy with the space of the shop, the quintessential symbol of capitalism, and the “white-coded” and aggressive consumerist culture.

Apart from the aforementioned connotations and contradictions inherent in this act of consumption itself, the reactions displayed by Lovey and Sally’s respective fathers towards their daughters’ outrageous acts of “Extravagance” and

openness to American consumerism prove that, even when stolen or obtained for free, "treats do not come cheap" (S. Wong, *Reading* 44). Once both girls arrive home, the fantasy of the perfect white American life vanishes, as they encounter their fathers' anger, who, worried about their daughters' excessive freedom, high-speed Americanization, and lack of respect for their ethnic background and parental authority, scold them and remind them of where they come from, and of all the sacrifices their elders have made for them:

[M]y father says this to me when he's fed up. When I get something expensive.

[...]

'We no had car. No TV. No nothing.

'I walked two miles, no, five miles, no, ten miles to school. In the rain. Barefooted.

'No candy. No ice cream. Never.' (Yamanaka, *Wild* 166-167)

The austerity of the first-generation "no-nonsense regime" (F. Wu 43) of "Necessity," which derives from the challenges of the immigrant experience, and which is characterized by an outstanding capacity of self-sacrifice and courage, aims at realizing "the luxury of choice for the second generation. [...] In practice, however, the code of Necessity creates its own enslavement: one sacrifice calls for another" (S. Wong, *Reading* 33). Therefore, the self-denying way of life that the immigrants have led in order for their descendants to enjoy a better life in America translates into parental "expectations of filial self-sacrifice" (*Reading* 32) and cultural attachment. This finds conspicuous expression in the "secular puritanism about food" (S. Wong, *Reading* 29) that Lovey's and Sally's respective fathers try to instill in their daughters, in the hope that the little ones will repress any self-

interest or desire for sensory pleasure, as the immigrant generation believes that, in Brave Orchid's words, "if it tastes good, it's bad for you" (Kingston 92).

However, Lovey's father's scolding seems mild when compared to what Sally and Marty have to endure when they arrive home. Their Chinese-born father, who has been informed by the owner of the store about his daughters' petty theft, is not only upset because of the robbery itself, but mostly because this action constitutes, on the one hand, a shameful surrender to the temptations of "Extravagance," and, on the other, a direct attack against the Chinese notions of "filial piety" and "face" (Zhou, *Contemporary* 194). Interrogated by her father on the contents of her bulky pockets, Sally proceeds to unload all the stolen candy on the coffee table: "[T]he half-eaten roll of Necco wafers, the three packs of Juicy Fruit" (Chao 147). Reluctantly following her sister's example, Marty does the same with her loot: she "jerks her T-shirt out of her jeans and two Hershey's almond bars and one strawberry Bonomo Turkish taffy come flying out to skid over the carpet" (Chao 147). These treats are, in the eyes of their father, a sure sign of his daughters giving in to an "Extravagant" self-indulgence and individualism, and to what he considers as the corrupted world of American popular culture: "'DISCRIMINATION!' He thunders out the word as if he has just invented it. [...] 'Your mother and I try for one month to find apartment in California. Look all over town. No room, everyone says. No Orientals allowed. This is what Americans think of us. This is why you have to be twice as good as anybody else'" (Chao 149). Their father's burst of anger has psychosomatic effects on both Sally and Marty, and the latter vomits all the candy she has eaten, now transformed into a "yellowish brown puddle" (Chao 147-148) that attests to the embarrassment and

guilt that, according to the rules of "Necessity," invariably accompanies the "pleasures of the senses" (S. Wong, *Reading* 30).

Both Yamanaka and Chao picture the second generation as feeling trapped in "endless cycles of dissatisfaction," moving from privation—and even trauma—to desire, from desire to deviation, and from deviation to punishment, which inevitably leads back to privation, and thus, to desire (Outka 453).¹¹⁰ For the protagonists of both novels, this cycle not only means the association of pleasure with deviation, but it also entails a serious conflict over their own sense of identity, as they start to be aware of the duality in their lives: "You are an American citizen. In your heart you are a Chinese" (Chao 129). Since she is unable to understand this, Sally compulsively eats white-coded foodstuffs, to which she attributes almost ontological and transformative properties. Similarly, Yamanaka hints at Lovey's identity crisis as a poor and racially-stigmatized child who feels trapped between the irresistible appeal of wealth and *haole* culture, and her father's constant reminders of her ethnic and class background: "Fuck you, Lovey. Good-for-nothin' nobody. You always make like we something we not, I tell you. When you going open your eyes and learn, hah? You ain't rich, you ain't haole, and you ain't strong inside. You just one little girl" (*Wild* 290).

Though these two novels appear to present a highly dichotomized—and even problematic and abusive—relationship between Asian American parents and children, intergenerational conflicts should not be narrowly understood, according to Wong, as caused by the clash between the aspirations of the "freedom-loving

¹¹⁰ The question of "trauma" in relation to identity conflicts and food habits—an extremely fruitful path that will not be fully explored in this dissertation due to space constraints—becomes particularly obvious in the case of Chao's novel, *Monkey King*, which pictures Sally as developing a serious eating disorder that, however, cannot be only attributed to intergenerational and cultural conflicts, as it is mostly the consequence of having been sexually abused by her father as a child.

son or daughter” and the “tyrannical” ways of the parents (*Reading* 41). The rhetorics and nature of this question are much more complex, and they transcend the almost universal parental-filial tensions that arise when the son or daughter struggles through the process of self-awareness that begins to take place in childhood, and reaches its peak in adolescence. Thus, the intergenerational differences portrayed in Asian American literature should be read as one of the most visible manifestations of the Asian American youth’s response to mainstream’s racialization and othering, as well as an indicator of the identity conflicts that arise when this is combined with the opposing sets of values they have to juggle with in order to construct their sense of self.

4.3. “Whatcha Bring?”: Lunch Bags and Identity Conflicts

If, as Mustafa Koc and Jennifer Welsh affirm, food and foodways are a valuable vehicle to explore questions of social identity and acculturation—or resistance to it—in the context of immigrant experience (1), I contend that the sphere of the school is one of the spaces in which this complex relationship between food and subjectivity becomes more visible and revealing. According to Eugene Pumpian-Mindlin, one of the circumstances that shape and accelerate the process of the child’s self-awareness, formation of personality, and growing sense of self-identity is precisely his/her entry into school; that is, the lone incursion into the world “outside the confines of his[/her] home and family” (578) without the vigilant presence of their parents. Likewise, Portes and Rumbaut highlight the importance of the extrafamilial contextual factors encountered by the child in

school, given that this situation brings about the second generation's exposure to different social and cultural worlds:

Until completing their formal schooling, children and adolescents spend more time in schools than in any other setting outside their homes. As such, schools play a critical role in their development, [...]. Indeed, for children of immigrants, American public schools since the last century have served as quintessential agencies of acculturation. It is in school settings that immigrant youths come most directly in contact with their native peers—whether as role models or close friends, as distant members of exclusionary cliques, and as sources of discrimination or of peer acceptance. (*Legacies* 203)

The first significant contact of ethnically-marked children with American mainstream culture and its solid racial bars usually takes place in school. This sudden acquaintance with white dominant standards may cause them to negatively evaluate their own ethnocultural background (Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 177). As a consequence of the differences they start to perceive between their ethnic domestic sphere and the school environment itself, children begin to develop discernible dichotomies between the private and public domains of their lives and identities, as well as strong binary oppositions between "us" and "them." As Lahiri declared in an interview given to Readers Read in 2003, her girlhood as a U.S.-born South Asian American was marked by the uncomfortable feeling that she was growing up "in two worlds simultaneously," and thus, leading "two very separate lives"—at home and at school—of which none seemed to provide her with a sense of belonging.

The existential confusion created by the "in-between" and "dual" cultural space that the second generation inhabits (Zhou and Lee 22) often results in a

burden for the children or adolescents, who feel “torn between a hegemonic polarity that demands that allegiance must always be rendered to a singularly defined identity” (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 178). Therefore, given that foodways are one of the most evident ethnic markers, culinary practices are often perceived by children as obstacles standing in their way to group acceptance. This common social and psychological phenomenon has found a fertile ground of expression in Asian American literature, which, as Eileen Chia-Ching Fung argues, serves as a site to negotiate the formation of ethnic subjectivities, and explore the aforementioned “private and public conflicts through consumptive practices” (ii). This becomes particularly apparent in Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and Furiya’s *Bento Box in the Heartland*, for the three narratives feature cases of food-related shame and culinary-manifested identity conflicts.

The usual rebellion of the child or adolescent against the dietary habits of their parents in an attempt to assert and demonstrate his or her own independence (Rappoport 48, 209; Lupton 55) finds new motivations and expressions in the case of children born to immigrant parents, who, apart from the common urge for autonomy and self-sufficiency, often reject their parents’ ethnic cuisine for being the constant reminder of an “embarrassing difference” (Marino). This is the case of Leslie, the autodiegetic narrator in Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, for whom the cultural distance between her and her classmates can be measured and understood in terms of their different food habits. Therefore, even though Leslie secretly loves her grandmother’s Chinese food, she is deeply ashamed of it—of *bok choy* in particular—as it is nowhere near what any of her friends eats: “In retaliation, my sisters and I went on a hunger strike against Nai-Nai’s ubiquitous *bok choy*. We ate as little as possible of the detested vegetable without attracting

the attention of our parents, who would respond by filling our bowls with the stuff" (Li 3).¹¹¹ For Leslie, who seems to follow to the letter the very much debatable precept of "you are what you eat," the categorical rejection of *bok choy*, a staple of Chinese diet, symbolizes her insecurities towards her ethnic ancestry, as she appears to naively believe that "what we refuse to eat we are not" (Rappoport 34).

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Bich's attitude towards her grandmother's cooking is strikingly similar to Leslie's.¹¹² Repressing her liking for the Vietnamese food Noi cooks, Bich also goes on strike against it, as she associates that culinary tradition with her inherent racial "difference," her family's hardships, and their status as Vietnamese refugees in the United States: "All of my stepmother's talk about boycotts and Chávez had given me the brilliant idea of going on strike at dinnertime. [...] I said I was sick and tired of eating the same thing—*pho* and stir-fries [...]—and I was going on strike until we started eating better food" (B. Nguyen 127).¹¹³ As a 1.5 Vietnamese American girl "whose childhood is marked by an abundance of signs of exclusion" (Martín-Lucas 30), Bich finds it very difficult to

¹¹¹ *Bok choy* is a kind of cabbage commonly consumed in China and other Asian countries such as Korea.

¹¹² It is important to mention that many of the works I am dealing with here share a common characteristic: the blurred—or altogether absent—mother figure. In Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces*, or Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*, motherhood is dysfunctional or simply non-existent due to a tragic and traumatic event—be it permanent separation, disappearance, or death. In the case of Li's *Daughter of Heaven*, or Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* the writers chose to put emphasis on the relationship between the father figure and the children protagonists, relegating motherhood to the background. Time constraints make it impossible to carry out a thorough analysis of this particular feature, but it surely is a recurrent theme in numerous Asian American narratives that would be worth exploring.

¹¹³ *Pho* is often referred to as Vietnam's national dish for its widespread popularity. Made of noodles and beef or chicken broth with a variety of vegetables, *pho* is not a side dish, but a main course. As for its origins, many Vietnamese culinary experts agree on its Chinese and French colonial influence. According to Lam, *pho* was born in the villages surrounding Hanoi around a century ago, and when Vietnam split into two in 1954, this dish travelled south along with the Northern Vietnamese who escaped communist rule (*East* 127). With the massive migration/exile of Vietnamese people to other countries, and to the United States in particular, this dish has also become one of the most popular and adaptive Asian noodle dishes outside of Vietnam. For more on the history of this Vietnamese staple, see Lam's "Ph[o]netics" in *East Eats West* (2010), "The History and Evolution of Pho," or Andrea Nguyen's "Viet World Kitchen."

digest her family's stories of war and persecution so as to find her place in American society, while simultaneously keeping her Vietnamese roots.

As Zhou argues, the special circumstances that surrounded the arrival of Vietnamese people to the United States—constant warfare, political repression and persecution, expulsion from their homeland, lack of choice about their new place of resettlement, and financial hardships upon arrival—“exact a heavy toll on the children” whose lives in the United States are shaped by the refugee collective imaginary, and “deeply affected by family histories and stereotypes about their ethnicity in the host country” (“Straddling” 195). Along the same lines, Portes and Rumbaut contend that the nebulous presence of a traumatic exile and the complex circumstances of resettlement still loom large in the Vietnamese American community, causing the children belonging to this ethnic group to report the lowest self-esteem scores, together with Laotians, Hmong, and Cambodians, who have gone through similar experiences (*Legacies* 207). Therefore, the fact that Bich rebels against eating the *pho* and stir-fried that Noi prepares, on the grounds that these foods are not good enough, mirrors her own feelings of inferiority and confusion towards her Vietnamese origins; a pernicious self-perception that is, in turn, a product of her new awareness of both mainstream American values and the racialized society in which she lives.

According to Gardaphe and Xu, “demands for assimilation and inculcation of ethnic inferiority often impact the ethnic individuals’ alimentary desires,” leading them—especially children and teenagers—to “spurn their ethnicities through disavowal of ethnic foodways” (5). This behavior, borrowing Xu’s words, constitutes a very frequent manifestation of ethnic “self-loathing and self-abjection” (*Eating* 67), which reaches its most conspicuous expression through images of

indigestion and vomit. In *Daughter of Heaven*, Leslie's especial food-related behavior does not stop at her strike against Chinese *bok choy*; in fact, apart from showing her feigned—yet, in her eyes, socially-required—, disgust towards her grandmother's Chinese cooking, she also refuses to eat and digest the American foods prepared by her father. However surprising this might be—taking into account Leslie's cravings for American foods, and, by extension, American lifestyle—, her complicated relationship with her father, a Chinese-born immigrant with a "near-military sense of discipline" and an obsession with the maintenance of "face" (Li 49), manages to erase the American-coded flavor of those comestibles, and turns them into another mechanism of parental control. In fact, as the narrator puts it, even though his father was a very good cook, the taste and quality of those Friday dinners were dreadful, as if he purposefully ruined those dishes in an attempt to dissuade his daughter from the firm Americanizing intentions she had acquired when reaching school age:

I [Leslie] hated those Friday dinners and, despite my best intentions, despite the knowledge that my father was watching, silent and disapproving, I picked sullenly at my food. I would manage to get a forkful of the dubious fish and greasy bread crumbs or some limp, sodden noodles into my mouth. I tried not to chew but simply swallowed, or tried to. Instead I gagged. Out came the fish stick, nearly intact, back onto my plate (Li 51).

The fact that Leslie regurgitates the food that her father cooks, regardless of it being Chinese or American, might be read as indicative of her difficulties in digesting the strict Confucian values and attitudes that her father tries to instill in her in America. Besides, the indigestion and nausea caused by these "American" foods also function as metaphors of the identity crises and confusion she feels

both towards her ethnic background—symbolized by her father: the feeder—, and the newly discovered sphere of mainstream American culture and society, materialized in the fish sticks.

Leslie comes to hate the Chineseness which she feels is “contaminating” her self; she abhors those features of her identity which make her feel different and ostracized within the society to which she wants to adapt. According to Julia Kristeva, when the “I”—the self—has an insurmountable “uncanniness” to adapt to the outside—American culture and society in Leslie’s case—self-hatred is articulated through abjection, a mental state or feeling characterized by negation, transgression, denial and repudiation of the self. Kristeva also points out that “[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2). This way, the fact that the second generation rejects the foodways of their ethnic and cultural background, as is the case of Leslie in *Daughter of Heaven*, or Bich in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, constitutes a physical objective correlative of the self-loathing that takes place at all levels of their consciousness: rejecting their own foodways is equivalent to abjecting themselves (Kristeva 5).

In light of this, it is not surprising that ethnic foodways represent one of the most immediate sources of shame for second-generation children trying to socialize with other non-Asian kids at school. As Nora Cobb puts it, her own childhood as a Korean American was marked by her constant—and mostly futile—attempts to hide her ethnic origins and imitate her white classmates. Interestingly enough, Cobb explains how food turned for her into an extremely shameful aspect of her daily life, frequently jeopardizing her friendship with other children:

I've been shamed by *kim chee*: there was no way to hide that much of it in the back of my refrigerator. Leaves of *won bok* fermenting in red pepper and garlic would peek out from between and behind the loaf of white bread, the bottle of milk. My friends who came over would point to the five gallon mayonnaise jars filled with *kim chee* and squeal, "Gross! What's that?" [...] When I learned in third grade "You are what you eat," I stopped eating *kim chee*. Then, when someone asked, "What's that?" I'd mumble, "I don't know... something my mom eats" (12)

Once children realize that food is one of the most visible markers of their family's ethnic identity, they usually begin to develop serious cases of what I will call—borrowing Li's words—"food shame" (11), which unfolds in the three narratives I discuss here in ways reminiscent of Cobb's *kim chee* incident. In Leslie's case, the embarrassment she felt when bringing her school friends home was caused by the visibility of her grandmother's Chinese foodways. Thus, whenever Leslie invited one of her non-Chinese friends over, she would always use the back door of the house, as she wanted to make sure that her companion would not see the embarrassing vegetable patch taking up the main entrance (Li 3-4). Nai-nai's garden, which consists of products brought from China by Leslie's grandmother—such as the aforementioned *bok choy*—, represents the prosperity and survival of the family's Chinese ethnicity and culture in America. In contrast, for Leslie, the visibility of this garden is stigmatizing, for it reveals all those traces of Chineseness that she tries to hide in front of her friends. However, despite the fact that she relegates her own identity to the back door, Leslie does not succeed in totally concealing her Chinese ancestry, as "the back door posed its own problems," such as *bok choy* leaves hanging from the clothesline, chili peppers drying in the sun, or freshly killed chicken hanging from the ceiling (Li 3-4, 6).

The fact that Leslie cannot hide her Chinese background—symbolically materialized in those culinary beacons of her alien identity—hints at the fact that, as Portes and Rumbaut argue, American-born children of non-white descent “cannot so easily reduce their identity to the level of a voluntary decision” (*Legacies* 55). In fact, for colored people in the United States, race—the most superficial feature of their identity—turns them into targets of simplistic and discriminatory categorizations on the part of white dominant structures. Thus, although identities are claimed to be socially constructed in an ongoing process of dialogic negotiation and interaction (cf. Callero; Moya; Mohanty), this hypothesis poses serious problems regarding the uneven power relations that govern these dynamics of self-identification, for they render certain groups prisoners of the identities imposed on them by dominant discourses (Sampson 155). That is, Western articulations and projects of identity are usually “self-celebratory” and constructed in opposition to “a serviceable other” whose qualities ensure that this “self versus other” dichotomy, which obviously benefits Western supremacy, remains “unscathed and intact” (Sampson 37). Thus, Leslie, Bich, and Linda—protagonists of *Daughter of Heaven*, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and *Bento Box in the Heartland* respectively—suffer the consequences of the fact that their racial and ethnic identities are, in fact, a Western invention that highly compromises their degree of control over their own selfhood. Therefore, the fact that these three memoirs emphasize the Asian American characters’ frustration for being unable to disaffiliate from their ethnic and racial background calls attention to the impossibility of a “postethnic” approach such as the one put forward by Hollinger. As mentioned in chapter 1.1, for as long as skin color continues to govern socio-

political interactions, ethnicity—often conflated with race—will not be a matter of choice for those categorized as “others.”

The most telltale sign of the prevalence of racial prejudice in the United States is the fact that children of school age naïvely reproduce this discriminatory behavior. Borrowing the words of the recently deceased Nelson Mandela: “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his [*sic*] skin” (qtd. in “Verbatim”). Racism is learned and passed down from one generation to the next as attitudes that ultimately constitute the seed for the perpetuation of such hatred. According to Portes and Rumbaut’s research, “a majority of second-generation youths report feeling discriminated against in school and other settings” (*Legacies* 38). Asian-looking children are often the target of these negative attitudes, which are usually voiced through insults such as “Chink,” “Jap” (Furiya 6), or “Gook” (Truong 172); or through racist chants and rhymes such as “Ching chong Charlie sitting on a fence / Couldn’t make a dollar out of fifteen cents” (Li 12). As the narrator puts it in Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011) these words constitute the reflection of how other children view racially-marked bodies (172). To add insult to injury, these derogatory labels are often accompanied by some characteristic and explicit gestures that attempt to caricature the “slanted shape” of the children’s eyes (Furiya 6; cf. Li 12; B. Nguyen 75; F. Wu 5). However, there is yet another way of verbal racism used by children that is not directly aimed at any particular physical trait, but at a crucial ethnic marker and cultural characteristic: foodways. Therefore, as can be gathered from Asian American texts, it is not uncommon for school-age children to be the target of ethnocentric food slurs, which, professed by their non-Asian classmates, usually accuse them of “eating

shit" (Chao 128), or dog (M. Ng 168), or of being as filthy, disgusting, and indigestible (Jones 136) as the foods they are stereotypically deemed to consume.

Second-generation Asian American children, willing "to belong to the cultural terrain of the United States and to rid [their] body of the stigma associated with otherness" (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 153), feel powerless, as if they had no control over their own identity, which is imposed on them by Western ideals and structures of power (Sampson 166). "As a child," claims the narrator of *Bento Box in the Heartland*, "I was ashamed of the uneasiness I felt toward my Japanese ethnicity. I hated feeling this way. My outward Japanese appearance was a facade toward which I held secret animosity, a constant condition I didn't know how to deal with" (278-279). Similarly, in Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the American-born child's inner conflicts about her ethnic background are expressed through images of food shame on the part of Bich, who tries to make sure that no one at school knows how her family "really" eats (B. Nguyen 13). As can be gathered from this, the Asian American children portrayed in these texts not only blame their physical appearance for their difficulties in fitting in, but they also seem to regard their family's culinary habits as an obstacle in this process. This does not come as a surprise, since, according to Mannur, "food marks the [already] racialized body in more traumatizing ways" (*Culinary Fictions* 150). Thus, aware of the fact that racial physical features can rarely be changed or concealed, the children protagonists of Li's, Nguyen's, and Furiya's narratives try to fight this imposition of identity and racialized alterity during school lunchtime, when food—packed in the so-called "lunch bags" or "lunch boxes"—becomes, once again, the cause of conflict, and the weapon in the battlefield.

As cultural critic F. Wu argues, “the ordinary encounters of daily life, which should have nothing to do with race,” such as children’s meals during lunch break, “can easily turn into unnerving incidents that are racially charged” (12). Thus, a seemingly trivial and unimportant element, such as a school lunch bag acquires the status of a serious “social statement” (Tarica), and it is described as such by Li, Nguyen, and Furiya, who devote a chapter of their respective texts to dealing with “tales of lunchtime edibles and coming of age in multiracial societies” (Mannur, “Food” 210). Bearing in mind that food proves to be a lasting ethnic marker and an important boundary element between groups, it could be said that the lunch bags described in these texts constitute ethnically- and culturally-charged food items that cross the boundaries between the domestic and private sphere of the ethnic family, and the public and non-ethnic world of white mainstream America, as these packed meals are usually prepared in the former, but publicly consumed in the latter. Thus, more often than not, the “foreignness” of these Asian American children’s parents “finds its way into the lunch box” (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 151), and, given that this meal must be carried to school and openly eaten in the company of non-Asian classmates, the content of these lunch bags—and even the container itself—turns into the sign of a stigmatizing, and “disruptive otherness” (Bhatia, *American* 140).

The chapter entitled “Food Shame and Sand-Wishes,” from Li’s memoir, deals precisely with this matter, focusing on the fact that the “‘weird’ Chinese food” that Leslie brings to school in her lunch box usually manages to make her feel like an “outsider,” unable to integrate with the other children in the schoolyard: “Instead of the Sno Balls and Twinkies from the local Shopwell or Grand Union,” Leslie’s packed meals often “came from faraway Chinatown” (Li 12). The fact that her

lunches do not conform to the socially accepted type of meal the other children eat elicits all kinds of negative responses on the part of her potential friends, for whom the appearance of Leslie's food suffices for considering her irretrievably different:

For my sister and me, no matter what grade we were in, any faux pas we committed was doubled by one inherited and irrefutable fact: Nai-nai, who, among other unforgivable embarrassments she caused us, filled out lunch bags with 'icky looking tree bark,' 'disgusting animal turds,' and turpentine-laced 'poisonous' fruits. All of which we secretly loved (Li 20).

Leslie's troubled contact with American lifestyle in school, where she spends most of the day, makes her more aware of her own ethnic and cultural distinct features, which she starts to regard through the eyes of her non-Asian friends. This change of perspective, together with her acute and newly acquired self-awareness, leads Leslie to lapse into a spiral of alienation and self-hatred, which can be observed in her use of those offensive names—"icky looking tree bark," "disgusting animal turds," or "turpentine-laced fruit"—to refer to the Chinese foods her grandmother lovingly packs for her, and which she has to enjoy in silence: dried beef, *guy-ying-gee*, or *guy-lan* and oyster sauce, among others (Li 12, 13, 21). In spite of the openly negative reactions that her meals trigger among her classmates, Leslie gives Laurie—her best friend—a bite of her food, to which the girl instantly responds by energetically spitting it "onto the waxed paper it was wrapped in. Her face was red; her expression horrible, a kind of seizure. Finally, she gasped: 'Oh, it's awful!'" (Li 14). This failed attempt to convince her best friend of the "edibleness" and even tastiness of the contents of her lunch box, leaves Leslie feeling lonely for not being able to share her Chinese packed lunches with anyone. If "revulsion for the food eaten by another is," according to Lupton, "a

common expression of discrimination and xenophobia" (4), this scene constitutes a clear illustration of it. Similarly, Xu argues that the conjunction of racial and culinary differences in a given context often translates into "divisions along the lines of culture, religion, [and] race/ethnicity" that turn into harmful ethnocentric conceptions about alterity and other people's foodways (*Eating* 4). Therefore, Leslie, aware of the underlying racist messages behind her friend's negative reaction towards her food, wonders if, after that "episode of near poisoning," their relationship "would remain intact" (Li 14).

What Leslie learns from these experiences is that to publicly display her "culinary heritage to the mainstream [means] pav[ing] the way for racism" (Mannur, "Food" 210). As a consequence of this gnawing feelings of vulnerability, Leslie's unfulfilled desires for a "normal" lunch bag increase, as she believes that both her Chineseness, and the trauma of being different would be lessened if her daily school lunch consisted of the admired "sandwich, thermos of milk, apple, and cookies" in a plastic container "with Lassie, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Betty Boop, or some other much loved characters on the lid" (Li 15).

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Nguyen also draws especial attention to the culinary and identity dilemmas of the Vietnamese American protagonist, Bich, who, like Leslie, presents a nearly obsessive behavior towards her school lunch bag when she discovers the renewed importance that food has on the school playground: "At Ken-O-Sha, whatever academic success I had was completely eroded at lunchtime. Here, a student was measured by the contents of her lunch bag, which displayed status, class, and parental love" (B. Nguyen 75). As a consequence of the new situation that she encounters beyond the confines of her family's household, Bich's already prominent desires for American-coded food

increase, and they become more urgent due to the serious and tormenting “tension between the corporeal and the ontological” (Xu, “Psychoanalytical” 8). In other words, Bich feels trapped within the confining boundaries of her racially-marked body; however, her “self”—her ontological dimension—longs for freedom in order to transcend phenotypical definitions (Xu, “Psychoanalytical” 8). The almost “schizophrenic” characteristics of this kind of “self,” which Xu defines as being “torn between the body (yellow and foreign) and the mind (white and American)” (*Eating* 41), become apparent when focusing on Bich’s food habits during lunchtime at school.

I didn’t tell anyone that I packed my own lunch. [...]

The anxiety of what to pack weighed on me every school week. The key was to have at least one shining element: a plain sandwich and baggie of potato chips could be made tolerable with the right dessert snack. If the planets and grocery sales aligned in my favor, I might even have a Hostess Cupcake. [...] I imagined careful bakers hovering over each cupcake, forming the curlicue design with unerring precision. (B. Nguyen 75-76)

Bich’s unabated desire to pack foods that she considers “white” and, thus, more acceptable suggests a peremptory need to identify herself and comply with a “normative expression of citizenship” (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 156). That is, by packing her own lunch bag and avoiding the “degradation of styrofoam meal trays” of “fish sticks and baked beans” (B. Nguyen 78), Bich is clearly making a statement about her identity: she does not want her lower-class and refugee condition to turn into a stigma, since that would render her vulnerable to an even higher degree of racism and discrimination than what she already suffers due to her Asian features. However, her decision to take care of her own lunches does

not produce the expected results. On account of her family's complicated financial situation, Bich cannot afford to buy the expensive and brand name foodstuff that she longs to proudly carry to school. Thus, instead of the "fluffier" and "more luxurious" Wonder Bread that Bich's white friends eat on a daily basis, she has to make do with cheaper imitations for her sandwich (B. Nguyen 76). Her failed attempts to obtain "peanut butter and jelly, olive loaf, or thin packets of pastrami and corned beef made by a company called Buddig" (B. Nguyen 76), make her feel even more like an outsider, performing a cheap, fake, and shabby version of the idealized and consumerist identity she venerates.

As Slavoj Žižek contends, "the final purpose of our demand for an object is [...] not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but confirmation of the other's attitude towards us" (5). Therefore, Bich's appetites are a clear projection of white America's urges onto her, to which she innocently responds by engaging in an endless spiral of self-hatred, and celebration of the oppressor's demands. This attains its most explicit expression when Rosa—Bich's stepmother—, tired of Bich's lunch box whims, signs her up for the school lunchroom. This opens a new world of possibilities for the girl, who, not used to the concept of "choice," develops "eyes bigger than [her] stomach" (B. Nguyen 174), and desires to eat all the foods listed on the menu:

Each month a new lunch menu was posted on a bulletin board outside the gym-cafeteria. Reading it over and over, to the point of memorization, became one of my pastimes.

Grilled cheese sandwich / Fried chicken / Whipped potatoes and gravy
/ Choice of corn or peas / Fruit cup.

Their words sent me dreaming; every day seemed a promise. Most provocative were listings that mentioned choice, the word itself conjuring

possibility: 'choice of hamburger or cheeseburger'; 'choice of whole milk or chocolate milk'. (B. Nguyen 77)

The free choice available for Bich in the school dining hall makes her feel part of the white mainstream American idealized picture, based on freedom, abundance, and individualism. Thus, Bich's whimsical food habits are only directed at satisfying her own desires and fantasies of "whiteness," contributing to her project of eating as "a means of becoming" (Xu, "Psychoanalytical" 9). In fact, this careless way of eating and the choice of foods listed on the menu constitute the markers of what Bich refers to as "real eating" and "real food" respectively (B. Nguyen 55-56). Her amazement about them hints, once again, at her self-loathing and celebration of an ideal of white American citizenship: "I hadn't stopped liking her [Noi's] food—*cha gio* and pickled vegetables still held an iron grip on my heart—but now I knew what real people ate. [...] Real people ate hamburgers and casseroles and brownies. And I wanted to be a real person, or at least make others believe that I was one" (B. Nguyen 55-56).¹¹⁴ Bich dismisses her own ethnic identity, for she cannot find a way to make it fit within the stifling and omnipresent frames of "white" and "American." Thus, she resorts to "culinary passing" (Cauti 40), and she develops an imitative identity in order to free herself from the aura of otherness that embraces and embarrasses her. Significantly, Bich draws her models of WASP perfection not only from her white classmates, but also from commercials, television series, and books. In fact, as Belén Martín-Lucas convincingly argues, Bich finds her own alter ego in Laura Ingalls, the

¹¹⁴ As Nguyen does in her memoir, David Wong Louie's novel *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2001) dwells on the main character's embarrassment about his own—and his Chinese family's—foodways. Like Bich, this U.S.-born Chinese American judges his own eating habits according to what he considers "real food," the kind "real people"—whites—consume (Louie 76).

young protagonist of the *Little House in the Prairie*, whose idyllic white family and descriptions of homemade hearty food represent Bich's fantasies of "perfection" and "normalcy" (Martín-Lucas 32). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the more she engages in this painful and unsustainable fantasies of "whiteness," the more she evidences her "lacks," and "differences." If her self-packed lunch bags worked as an indicator of her family's low income, the fact that she now eats at the school dining hall, which is "unanimously described as gross" (B. Nguyen 77), is interpreted by her schoolmates not only as a sign of Bich's humble origins, but also as a proof of Bich's stepmother's carelessness (B. Nguyen 78).¹¹⁵ The definition of family, and motherhood that she learns from her classmates and from Laura Ingalls writings,¹¹⁶ finds a conspicuous confirmation on TV commercials, which Bich watches as if they were lessons on how to become a "real [white] person": "To me, life lived in commercials was *real life*. Commercials were *instructions*; they were news. They showed me what *perfection* could be. [...] [They] had a firm definition of *motherhood*, which almost all of my friends' mothers had no trouble fulfilling" (B. Nguyen 125, emphasis added). Thus, the fact that Bich does not carry a homemade and neatly packed lunch to school,—like the ones she sees on TV, and which her classmates take out to recess—functions as a poignant reminder of her biological mother's absence, and this heightens her feelings of

¹¹⁵ Motherhood is a complicated matter in Nguyen's work. Bich and her sister escaped out of Vietnam with their father and some other close relatives while her biological mother stayed behind. This issue is not explored in detail, but from the narration it can be inferred that Bich has no contact whatsoever with her mother until she is already an adult and they see each other again in the U.S. in 1993. Furthermore, her father's second marriage with another woman—a Mexican immigrant—in America is not easily digested by Bich, who feels her already dual and confusing cultural upbringing complicated by Rosa's Mexican identity (B. Nguyen 167).

¹¹⁶ *Little House in the Prairie* started off as a series of children's books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder and published between 1932 and 1943. A few decades later it was turned into a successful TV series aired on NBC network between 1974 and 1984 ("Laura's"). Though Bich arrived in the United States while the series was being broadcasted, she only refers to Ingalls's books in her memoir.

inferiority as it symbolizes her inability to fulfill her aspirations for what she considers a perfect American family.

Interestingly enough, the trope of the lunch bag as the cause of anxieties for the American-born child is found in yet another Asian American autobiographical narrative, Furiya's food memoir *Bento Box in the Heartland*. This book offers a clear insight into Linda's troubles when trying to fit in in the small village of Versailles in Indiana, where she grew up as the only child of a Japanese-born immigrant couple. Furiya's life is marked not only by her experiences in the present as a Japanese American girl, but also, and most importantly, by the ethnic and cultural legacy that she inherits from her parents. Her father, born in America to Japanese parents, but sent back to Japan by his widowed father when he was a little boy, often tells Linda about the miseries of his childhood as a servant, and his later life back in the United States after his traumatic experience as a POW during WWII. Linda's father turns these painful memories into stories that he usually recounts over dinner, when "the rhythm of the stirring" and the taste of the food seems to put him "in the mood for storytelling" (Furiya 51). Thus, Linda, shocked at the brutality of his father's past, comes to associate her Japanese background with the flavors and smells of the Japanese traditional cuisine that her parents prepare at home.

Linda's first notion of "how different" she really was from her white peers struck her "among the pastel-colored molded trays and long bleached wood tables of the school cafeteria" (Furiya 3). This realization is triggered off, one more time, by the appearance and contents of the other children's lunch boxes, which turn into magnetic and enigmatic culinary fetishes for young Linda, who had never eaten lunch away from her Japanese-born parents' household: "my eyes

wondered towards the lunch boxes other children brought from home. From inside the metal containers, they pulled out sandwiches with the crust cut off, followed by tins of chocolate pudding and homemade cookies" (Furiya 4-5). As early as in elementary school, Linda discovers the power of food as a marker of her own ethnicity and culture, and as an indicator of the boundaries between groups of people. As Döring, Heide, and Mühleisen claim, "food has always operated to define homes as well as cultural otherness. It is an essential part of the discursive practices that determine a community's insiders and outsiders" (4). Therefore, in an attempt to feel part of what she calls "the lunch box brigade" (Furiya 5)—an only-white and middle-class group—, Linda asks her mother to pack a lunch bag for her, instead of sending her to the school dining hall. Linda's happiness upon her mother's reluctant agreement, her fantasies of integration, and her hopes for school popularity beyond her "racial" features only last until the very moment she opens her first lunch bag in front of the other children and their perfectly arranged sandwiches:

When I joined Tracy and Marty at lunchtime, carrying my own lunch box, I studied the girls, who carefully unpacked their containers as if they were unveiling family heirloom jewelry, observing the packed lunch protocol. I unlocked my lunch box and casually peeked under the lid. My stomach lurched. I expected a classic elementary school lunch of bologna, cheese, and Miracle Whip sandwich and a bag of Durkee's potato sticks, but all I saw were three round rice balls wrapped in wax paper. My mother had made me an *obento*, a Japanese-style boxed meal. (Furiya 5)

In her comprehensive study on Japanese *obentos*—highly crafted packed lunches for school-age children—, Anne Allison dwells on the multilayered symbolism that these boxed lunches have both as an emblem of Japanese identity

and as a “representation of what the mother is and what the child should become” (228). Therefore, while Linda’s mother devotes herself to the meticulous preparation of the aesthetically- and culturally-coded *obentos* as a way to assert and reaffirm her role as a mother and her identity as a Japanese immigrant, Linda is deeply disappointed and ashamed at discovering the homemade and ethnically-marked contents of this package, which is strikingly different from “the store-bought consistency” of her classmates’ lunches (Huneven).

As happens in *Daughter of Heaven* and *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, Linda’s ambiguous relationship with the traditional foods of her ethnic background—which carry the aftertaste of her father’s dramatic life story—reaches a critical point when she finds out that, in the context of her school, the colors, shapes, and especially the smells of her *obento* lunches function as a widely visible and “glaring reminder of the ethnic differences” between her and her peers (Furiya 5). According to Manalansan, the immigrant body is usually associated with a series of “undesirable sensory experiences” and smells that work as a “pivotal index of moral, racial, ethnic, class and cultural difference and marginality” (“Immigrant” 41). Thus, Linda’s *obento* constitutes a source of anxiety for her, as it is the bearer of the smells, colors, and shapes associated with her Japanese origins, and thus, with her indelible “foreignness.”

Aware of both the visual and “olfactory stigmas” inherent in her lunch box, Linda believes that her consumption of the Japanese *obento* in front of her classmates would constitute a “daily risk of humiliation” (Huneven), as those Japanese foods would not be accepted as part of the social lunchtime ritual, and this would dangerously compromise her position as an “insider” within the exclusive “lunch box brigade.” As Kalcik maintains, foods that divert from the norm

are often "seen as an attack on the community and its sense of unity," and this categorically determines "which side of the boundary the strangers should be placed" (47). However, conscious of the importance that these elaborate Japanese culinary creations have for her parents as "the only daily thread [...] to their culture" and a source of "comforting familiarity" (Furiya 95), Linda, instead of rebelling against her mother's *obentos* by going on a hunger strike—much like Li and Bich do—, decides to surreptitiously eat them behind her friends' backs, hiding in the girls' restroom:

Huddled in the pewter-gray toilet stall with the medicinal smell of Lysol, I cradled one of the three firmly packed rice balls in my hands. Its seaweed wrapping had the crispness of handmade rice paper. My pounding heart steadied a moment as I imagined Mom shaking salt on the palms of her clean wet hands and then pressing and rotating each ball three or four times until it was uniform. (Furiya 10)

This eating practice transcends the anecdotic and it becomes a habit for Linda, who, feeling her loyalties and identity divided between her family and her peers, adopts this rather degrading consumptive pattern at school in an attempt not to jeopardize her integration and belonging to either group: "I wanted to be a good, helpful kid, but the pull of pressure and the desire not to be different from my classmates was much stronger" (Furiya 187). Thus, on the one hand, Linda satisfies her mother—and her family—by eating even the last bite of her *obento*, which is interpreted by her parents as a sign of Linda's respect and care for her Japanese family and origins. On the other, by eating her meal alone and hidden, and by preventing her classmates from seeing and smelling the salmon *onigiris* and rice balls of her *obentos*, Linda—perceived as too Americanized at home, but

too Asian at school—tries to protect herself from being even more “othered” through an essentialist racial discourse.¹¹⁷

The similar perspectives from which the three protagonists of these memoirs approach their own Asian American identity—striving to replace it with an American one, in the case of Leslie and Bich, or trying to conceal it at all costs, in the case of Linda—ultimately mirror the ways in which they struggle to conform to the white norm in public spaces. These episodes of children’s first experiences of food and racial shame illustrate the process in which “all children of immigrants are inescapably engaged and of which they are acutely aware: making sense of who they are and finding a meaningful place in the society of which they are the newest members” (Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies* 190). Therefore, the progressive self-awareness and the identity crises that the Asian American characters in Li’s, Nguyen’s, and Furiya’s respective texts experience go hand in hand with an understanding of the multilayered and heterogeneous nature of their identities and sense of belonging, which cannot be easily ascribed to any of the two opposing pressures dominating their lives: ethnic family vs. mainstream America. In fact, as Bhatia puts it, and as could be observed throughout this section, the immigrant’s, or second generation’s

¹¹⁷ The culinary trope of the child’s lunch bag as a trigger of self-awareness and identity crises is not exclusive to the works discussed here. In fact, it represents a recurrent image in multiethnic literatures, and it can be found in narratives such as Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*, Pooja Makhijani’s “School Lunch” (2003), or Geeta Kothari’s autobiographical essay “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?” (1999). Besides, both the sociological and the literary importance of packed school lunches has been acknowledged and explored by scholars such as Bhatia in *American Karma*, or Mannur in *Culinary Fictions*. Last, but not least, the symbolic power of this element has also reached the celluloid, displaying a very significant role in Ang Lee’s film *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), in which the especial relationship between the main character—the chef Chu—and the little Shan-shan is portrayed through their respective attitudes towards the child’s lunch bags. For a comparative and transethnic analysis of the lunch box trope—and other food-related issues—in two contemporary multiethnic memoirs, see Paula Torreiro-Pazo’s “Living in the Taste of Things: Food, Self, and Family in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* and Leslie Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*” (2011).

journey from the majority culture to the minority culture and vice versa is [not] an undisturbed, balanced, and effortless journey. On the contrary, [...] this developmental process is marked by incompatibilities, conflicts, and asymmetries between their immigrant culture and the host culture, [...] the majority and the minority culture, and the mainstream and ethnic cultures" (*American* 232).

Therefore, the liminal situation of the second generation as inhabiting a trans-cultural and even "transgenerational space" (Sesnic 193) requires a reconfiguration of the concepts of selfhood, belonging, and culture as "multiple, fractured, dual, fragmentary, shifting, and hybridized" (Bhatia, *American* 231). Food becomes part of the conversation in this context of cultural duality and hybridization, and, using Petra Fachinger's culinary simile, "there is no simple recipe for negotiation between cultures" (47). Thus, in their complicated process of coming-of-age as American-born descendants of Asian immigrants, Asian American youths try to "strike a balance between two cultures" (Lee and Zhou 318), and they do so by creating unique spaces and cultural forms of expression as alternatives to the white dominant culture (Lowe x; Maira, "Mixed" 232). Hence, in their ongoing and non-linear process of coming to terms with their "made-in-the-USA ethnic identities," (Portes and Rumbaut, "Forging" 302), second-generation children are represented in Li's, Nguyen's, and Furiya's works, as "conduits of change, importing American culture" into their ethnic homes (N. Friedman 116), and publicly displaying—much to their chagrin—their ethnic and cultural background in white-dominated environments.

4.4. Conclusions

In an autobiographical essay entitled “Don’t Ask, Just Eat” (1998), Gish Jen digresses about something that had often worried her as a child: the limits between the edible and the inedible (123). As a second-generation Chinese American born in Long Island, Gish, the narrator, confesses that she used to be “grossed out” by her parents eating habits (Jen, “Don’t” 124), which seemed to be based on standards of edibility that radically differed from those of her white friends’ families. Thus, while Gish’s classmates would jokingly drink down a bee with a Coke as a sign of bravery, Gish’s parents would naturally sit at a table and eat “brains from a fish head,” or a “dish of silkworm larvae” (Jen, “Don’t” 123, 125). In hindsight, Gish understands now that those culinary discrepancies between her and her parents were much more than a matter of opposed individual preference, and she conceives them as indicators of her family’s cultural and intergenerational conflicts,

[f]or these [conflicts] are what come with a move, such as my family has made, from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance. My parents were from rich families in China. They were not the ones who ate tree leaves during famines. But a culture intimate with famine is a culture that, even in its upper reaches, never forgets food. [...] It is a culture that wastes no food at home. (Jen, “Don’t” 124)

Like Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, F. Ng’s “A Red Sweater,” or Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, Jen’s essay highlights Gish’s parents’ “omnivorousness” in an attempt to acknowledge their courage and

survival instinct. The "Necessity" that permeates the lives of the foreign-born generation contrasts, once again, with Gish's feelings of discomfort towards a food-related behavior that seems totally disconnected from the experiences she has gone through as a second-generation Chinese American. Her "extravagance"—like that of the other second-generation characters dealt with in this chapter—used to be described by her parents as that unexpected change "that happened in a generation" (Jen, "Don't" 125). A lapse of time that, on account of the young ones' early contact with American culture, often translates into a sizable gap between parents and children.

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the foreign-born immigrants, who have sacrificed themselves for the wellbeing of the next generation, are recurrently described in Asian American literature as "big eaters" who believe that the American-born generation's "finicky palates" are the cause of them "hav[ing] so much, do[ing] so much, think[ing] so much that they have to be taught to enjoy the delicious" (Jen, "Don't" 125). The experiences of poverty and migration that the first generation has gone through turn "even the most modest fare [into] a treat" (S. Wong, *Reading* 51), as the pleasure of eating does not come from sensory enjoyment, but from the self-sufficient satisfaction of the family's basic needs. As illustrated in the analysis of Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* and Chao's *Monkey King*, the second generation's fascination with snacks and candy mirrors their idealization of American culture as embodying abundance and careless consumption. An almost hypnotic attraction that has the perverse side-effect of rendering their ethnic identity even more visible, causing the children to realize that their Asian features, no matter what they buy, steal, or eat, turn them

into the “other,” the “perpetual foreigner” (F. Wu 77), the “unassimilable alien” (Espiritu, *Asian* 100).

Significantly, Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and Furiya’s *Bento Box in the Heartland* allow for an interpretation of the recurrent representation of the school “lunch bag” as another crucial indicator of the second generation’s increasingly conscious ambivalence towards their ethnic and cultural background. Thus, the episodes of “food shame” depicted in these three memoirs present the lunch bag as the ethnically-marked element that renders the main character vulnerable to racial discrimination and humiliation. Thus, the child’s wishes and demands for white-bread cheese sandwiches, jelly, or cookies neatly arranged in boxes decorated with fashionable cartoons, should not be read as merely a whim, for these desires mirror the dangerous and ubiquitous structures of power and discrimination that start to affect racially-marked subjects in America as early as childhood.

While the American-born characters studied in this chapter display a nearly-obsessive attraction towards American-coded foods, the next one will open with a discussion on the Asian immigrant’s “shock of arrival,” as portrayed in the characters’ diametrically opposed reactions towards American eating habits. Therefore, I will offer an interpretation of the recently arrived immigrant’s reservations towards mainstream’s foodways as a signifier of his or her difficulties in adapting to the new social environment. While this rejection usually emerges from a conscious opposition to cultural practices that clash with the set of values the immigrant brings to the United States, there is yet another kind of food rejection that is characterized by its involuntary and psychosomatic nature: the one that accompanies the “shock of return.” Thus, the second section of the following

chapter will explore the literary renderings of the immigrant's return to the homeland through a series of images of culinary disappointment and indigestion.

5. Food Goes Full Circle: The Shocks of Arrival and Return

“What stays the same [...] when you travel?”

James Clifford, *Routes*

In an era increasingly marked by multidimensional and multidirectional flows of goods, information, and people; a world in which identities are more and more deterritorialized and contested, and a time when diasporas have become more fluid and remarkably transnational, it is no surprise to see contemporary literature echo some of the most significant features of these phenomena. Globalization, the ever-elusive and protean term used to refer to this compendium of economic, political, social, and cultural matters, finds in literature a fertile ground where to be thematically represented and fleshed out.¹¹⁸ As Suman Gupta argues in *Globalization and Literature* (2009), North American literatures—and I would say Asian American literature in particular—frequently portray a variety of “strands of everyday and social life that are symptomatic of globalization. These often deal with protagonists and events caught in the machine of multinational business, located in the confrontation of global political forces from above and below, placed

¹¹⁸ Though globalization is a very broad phenomenon that crisscrosses all aspects of life, and thus, all fields of study, due to space constraints, this section will restrict its scope to those culinary manifestation of globalization that are somehow relevant to the narratives studied. For more on the phenomenon of globalization and its effects on migratory patterns, refer to chapter 1.2. of this dissertation, or see Anderson and Lee; Clifford, *Routes*; C. Lee; During; Grosfoguel and Cordero-Guzmán; Kearney; Scott K. Wong; Lim and Dissanayake; Salgado; or Schiller.

in the cosmopolitan spaces of global cities, or moving fluidly across national and cultural boundaries” (13).

As explored throughout the previous chapters of this dissertation, Asian American literature, which is ultimately the result of displacements and relocations, has extensively dwelled on experiences of migration: the nostalgia for the homeland, the willingness or refusal to assimilate, racism and discrimination, or the often narrativized transgenerational conflicts are some of the most recurrent issues present in Asian American texts. However, this last chapter seeks to explore the literary representations of the emotional responses brought about by the very acts of mobility of the immigrant against the backdrop of globalization and transnational forces. As Clifford contends, migration is no longer a one-way trip, for “people leave home and return, enacting differently centered worlds, interconnected cosmopolitanisms” (*Routes*, 27-28). The time-compressing and distance-shrinking machinery of globalization, together with its homogenizing and particularizing forces, has modified “diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification,” as well as the immigrant community’s “border relations with the old country” (Clifford, *Routes* 247).

In this vein, and building on this new order of social attachments, criticism has mostly focused on the resulting configurations of locality and identity brought about, among other factors, by the transnationality of current diasporic communities. However, this has been done without paying deserved attention to the immediate emotional and behavioral aspects that such “travels” back and forth may engender for the subjects undertaking them. As Kaplan puts it, though travelling and stepping out of one’s comfort zone may constitute a learning

experience, it can also turn into a source of anxiety and confusion (x).¹¹⁹ This is especially so in the case of immigrants, for whom the physical and emotional estrangement from their homeland and the encounter with a new culture become more intense due to the uncertain or distant return. In a similar vein, the advances in transportation and communication have rendered “the Asian American population more fluid and more closely linked to communities in Asia than in the past” (Partridge 101), in many cases turning the “myth of return” (Safran 86) into a material reality. But, can one actually *return* to the homeland? Or has this place been irreversibly turned into a “mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination”? (Brah 192). Asian American writers have felt drawn by the personal experiences of displacement and return, turning them into narratives marked by the immediate “shock of arrival” in the United States, and/or with stories about the long awaited trip back home, also known as “narratives of return.”

In keeping with the culinary focus of this dissertation, I argue that the trope of food, often seen as the most tangible and ubiquitous sign of globalization in the West (Farrer 4), constitutes a prominent and recurrent literary mechanism used by Asian American writers to portray instances of multidirectional “culture shock.” That is, culinary metaphors provide the means to “go full circle,” tracing the immigrant’s experience of dislocation and return through scenes that privilege the socio-cultural and symbolic nature of food practices. The first section of this chapter will be devoted to Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* and Desai’s novel *Fasting, Feasting*,¹²⁰ which contain illustrative examples of how food

¹¹⁹ Following Kaplan and Ward et al., it is important to qualify here that when dealing with travelers, I am referring to those of long duration: sojourners, immigrants, exiles, or refugees.

¹²⁰ Desai was born in a village near Delhi in 1937 to a German mother and a Bengali father. On account of her late migration to the U.S. (she was already forty five), some critics are reluctant to refer to Desai as a South Asian American writer. However, as the author herself affirmed in 2004 in

is metonymically and symbolically used to represent the “shock of arrival” that the immigrant may experience when getting in touch for the first time with U.S. culture, and, more specifically, with mass consumerism. Closing the transnational migrant circle, and following the immigrants on their journey back to the homeland, the second section will explore the scenes of consumption present in Chin’s short story “It’s Possible,” and Pham’s memoir *Catfish and Mandala*, two texts that deal with the “double shock” of returning “home”—to China and Vietnam, respectively—, only to realize that home, as they remembered it, does not exist any more.

What all these narratives have in common is the fact that food functions in all of them as an “edible chronotope” that stands for a time-place dimension and its idiosyncrasy (Long xiii; cf. Bakhtin), revealing, on the one hand, the difficulties the immigrant encounters when trying to understand and/or adapt to the culture and lifestyle of the United States, and problematizing, on the other, the returnee’s notion of “home and away” (Kaplan 1) as s/he negotiates her/his sense of identity and belonging.

an interview with Melissa Denes for *The Guardian*, the scarce visits she now pays to her homeland, and her constant traveling (Mexico, Cornwall, Cambridge, etc.) are making her feel more and more like a “drifter”: she does not feel at home in India any more, but she cannot imagine feeling at home anywhere else. In any case, if not part of the Asian American community *per se*, Desai is certainly a diasporic South Asian American woman and her writings, though concerned with many different themes, also contribute to the literary discussion on Asian diasporicity. For this reason, and due to the interesting dimensions that food acquires in her work, I have decided to explore one of her fictional texts in my doctoral thesis.

**5.1. The “Shock of Arrival”: Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces*
and Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting***

“Do you think I would take food from a man on disability and living in a housing project? For God’s sake, my fat wife keeps our two refrigerators filled with food. I’m on a diet myself, too much cholesterol and high blood pressure. Please don’t talk to me about food. This is America. Look around you. Even the poor here are very fat, fatter than the rich for sure. Think of progress, improvement, education. Think of living well and prospering...”

Andrew Lam, “Hunger”

The experience of leaving one’s home country to begin a new and completely unpredictable life in an unknown land must be, without any doubt, quite a hard challenge. Immigrants, refugees, or exiles not only leave their families and friends behind, but also their cultural environments. As Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner, and Adrian Furnham state in *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (2001), this experience might be to some extent “stimulating and rewarding,” but it can also turn into “a major stressful event” (7). Many of the circumstances, habits, and material realities that meant home and familiarity in the native land—such as weather conditions, language, interpersonal relationships, religion, clothing, and food—will not be the same, or will not be altogether present, in the host country. The rupture with one’s native culture and physical environment, and the series of changes and new situations that the immigrants must confront upon arrival, usually translate into deep feelings of nostalgia, insecurity, and estrangement,

which—combined with the stress of adapting to a new daily routine—causes what is known as “culture shock.”

In close relation to this, food, our most immediate source of sustenance, and one of the most lasting markers of ethnicity, has proved to be among the leading factors involved in this process. J. P. Spradley and M. Phillips developed the “Culture Readjustment Rating Scale” (1972) in which they listed thirty-three life changes and circumstances connected with cross-cultural stress. It is worth mentioning that food occupies the first position in the ranking as the most relevant factor involved in the culture shock of the newly-arrived immigrant (522). As shown in previous chapters, food is often described in Asian American literature as an intimate sensory connection with the past and the homeland. Eating foods from their ethnic, cultural, or regional background is frequently narrated as an embodied act of remembrance and relocation for displaced individuals, who find in their culinary traditions a way to combat homesickness and reaffirm their identity. However, the relationship of the first-generation immigrant characters with American-coded food suggests a very different reading that has a lot to say about the initial struggles and alienation of the migrant. Thus, I agree with Manalansan that food, apart from creating imaginary landscapes of belonging, can also “dislocate people, taking them into terrains of the unfamiliar, the strange, and the absurd. Far from an easy equation of *food equals ontology or being*, food is also about the conflicting and often ambivalent experiences of homelessness, [...] cultural shock, and confusion” (“Empire” 94, emphasis in the original).

In one of the most emblematic discussions about the culture shock in relation to the Asian American community, Meena Alexander poses the following question: “What does it mean to arrive in America?” (153). This question, short

though extremely complex, seems to ask for a close examination of the different ways in which the Asian immigrant faces the bewilderment of cross-culture contact, and how s/he comes to terms with being immediately classified as different and “Other.” Along these lines, Alexander insists that “[t]he shock of arrival in the new world is crucial to an understanding of contemporary Asian American art” as it

crystallizes the jagged boundaries of the disjunctive worlds that the artist presses into play, and clarifies the painful gap between desire and the brute actual. It is replayed, over and over again, through the thematics of passage, arrival and dwelling, figurations that permit us to make sense, however minimally, of the rupture [...] between intimate memories and a place where one is rendered strange, where the body is marked as Other. (152)

The use of globalization and food as the overarching frames to navigate the literary representations of the culture shock in Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* and Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*¹²¹ not only provides a fertile ground to study the immigrant's initial reactions towards this “rupture” with the familiar and venture into the unknown, but also, and equally interesting, it offers an “outsider's” insight into American lifestyle, as driven by the globalizing capitalist clutches of mass consumerism.¹²² In her memoir, Lim recounts her traumatic past in Malaysia and

¹²¹ There are two publications listed under Anita Desai's name in the “Works Cited” section. Unless otherwise specified, I will be referring to *Fasting, Feasting* whenever I cite Desai.

¹²² Globalization has been widely described as the inextricable and complex combination of the mutually implicative forces of homogenization—also known as McDonaldization, Coca-Colonization, or cultural imperialism (Howes 3)—, and the particularizing or heterogenizing global trends (Hollinger 146; Robertson 26; Jusdanis 149; Appadurai, “Disjuncture” 30). This chapter will mostly focus on the immigrant's initial reaction to the forces of homogenization in the context of American consumer society; however, it is not my intention to offer a one-sided picture of globalization, or to promote the “triumph” of homogenization. On the contrary, this chapter—and the entire dissertation—remains aware of the increasingly visible heterogeneity, which, boosted by

her culture shock upon arrival in Massachusetts through an autodiegetic narrator whom I will henceforth call Shirley. Born in 1944, “at the peak of Japanese torturous repression, and of food shortages and mass starvation” (Lim, *Among* 38) within what came to be called the Pacific War (1941-1945), Shirley’s life was marked from the very beginning by war and hunger: “What an odd sensation hunger was! An emptiness, it left me giddy and weak. Nothing mattered much. Time seemed to have slowed down, and I was sitting or lying somewhere outside it, watching its motions” (Lim, *Among* 43). This emptiness associated with malnutrition was paired with a dramatic lack of affection on the part of her family: abandoned by her mother, and beaten by her father, insecurities and shame invaded her from a very young age: “The shame was like a hot stone I had swallowed, different from the pain of the caning. It was inside my body, it went bruising, slowly, down my chest, and settled in my stomach” (Lim, *Among* 33).

Against this backdrop of drama and poverty, and faithful to the topic of “intersections” and “crossings” that pervade Lim’s poetry and prose (Lim, “Being” 245),¹²³ Shirley emphasizes her personal cross-cultural experience in America, a place where she arrived as a young adult, driven by her own necessity to “move out of the range of the grinding millstone of poverty” (Lim, *Among* 84). Despite her determination to leave Malaysia in search of an academic career and a hopefully better life in the United States, Shirley started to feel a gnawing disconnection from

the push of consumerism towards diversity, has come to constitute a crucial dimension of globalization (cf. Halter; Tomlinson; Robertson).

¹²³ As Lim mentions in an interview with Marino, she sees her literary works as a collection of fictional and autobiographical testimonies of “movement across countries, cultures, languages, histories” (Lim, “Being” 245). In her first publication, the anthology of poems *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), Lim inspired herself in her Chinese grandparents’ story of migration to Malaysia. Her texts have always been thematically oriented towards migration and cultures in contact, and she confesses that the reasons behind her insatiable interest in this topic are autobiographical, as her life, as she describes it in *Among the White Moon Faces*, has been made up of a series of “uprootings”—or “crossings”—and relocations that have not yet ended (Lim, “Being” 245).

her homeland as soon as she got on board the plane that would, minutes later, take off from Kuala Lumpur: it was “the disconnection of the stranger,” as she knew she would “never see Malaysia again, except through the eyes of a traveler” (Lim, *Among* 138). This moment of irreversible “rupture” (Alexander 152) is followed by her arrival in wintry Boston, and her first encounter with American postindustrial consumer society. Interestingly enough, Lim chooses to dwell on the notion of the “supermarket” as the quintessential space of Western “industrialization-globalization of food” (Tomlinson 124) in order to illustrate the protagonist’s initial discomfort and anxiety in America, unable to understand, and much less adapt, to what she perceives as “the bizarre US culture” (Lim, *Among* 147):

In the A&P, long banks of fluorescent lighting illuminated heaped up gleaming packages of bright red beef, pale fat wrapped sides of pork, whole chickens frozen to stony condition, and tubes of processed meat all of equal dimension. [...] Everything was in containers, even [the] apples in their waxed coats. Butter came in separate oblongs, covered in gold paper, then contained further in cardboard boxes (Lim, *Among* 148).

Not used to encountering so many layers of plastic and cardboard wrappings between her mouth and the food, Shirley finds it hard to perceive those foods as something really edible. She desperately looks for the familiarity inherent in the ripe fruit and fresh natural vegetables she used to eat—though scarcely—in Malaysia. However, among the artificiality and anonymity she finds in the supermarket aisles, where fruit appears to be “scrubbed clean,” there seems to be no room for “a single scent of ripeness, a welcoming softness to suggest salivary delight, a tang whether sharp or sour promising kitchen smells and steaming

dishes” (Lim, *Among* 148). In her article “Identifying Foods, Identifying Selves,” written seven years after the publication of her memoir, Lim further comments, in a more direct way, on the differences she perceives between fruit sold in markets in Malaysia—which she enthusiastically describes as “succulent with fructose, red and gold, cream and pink, and purple and yellow fleshed”—and those found in supermarkets and grocery stores in America—characterized, according to Lim, by their plastic-looking “rind, watery glucose, and mushy pulp” (“Identifying” 297). In a less than subtle criticism aimed at the globalizing and frenetic consumerist culture of Western countries, Lim adds that “for all America’s power and wealth, there can be no comparison between the fruits that go into its citizens’ mouths and those so casually consumed everywhere in Singapore and Malaysia” (“Identifying” 297).

As Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz argue, the values mostly put into play in the U.S. when it comes to food production and consumption are those “of a hyperaesthetics, associated with speed, with motion, with a fast and modern lifestyle” (8). Thus, American food trends are mostly driven by a fetishistic desire for beauty, abundance, and convenience, epitomized in Lim’s memoir by the air-conditioned space of the supermarket, “crammed with hundreds of tins of fish and beans, bottles of oils and sauces, boxes of cereals and grains, scores of soaps and detergents; [...] hissing cold giant icebox stuffed with gallons of ice-cream, shrink-wrapped Boston cream [and] frozen cheesecakes” (*Among* 148). In reaction to the dehumanized and chemical appearance of these food stubbornly wrapped in “unyielding metal, thick polyvinyl, [and] pounds of cardboard” (Lim, *Among* 148), Shirley describes how her stomach shut down during her first year in Boston, as if she were allergic to American-coded foods. Thus, ironically enough, in her attempt to free herself from destitution and hunger in post-war Malaysia, Shirley ends up

starving in the “land of plenty.” However, this hunger differs from the one she endured for years as a child; this time, her hunger constitutes a rebellion against the obscene overabundance and gleaming perfection of industrialized and mass-produced food.¹²⁴

According to critics such as Tomlinson and Kearny, and as anticipated in section 1.2, one of the engines behind food commodification and abundance, and probably one of most visible aspects of globalization is the detachment of socio-political processes from locality; a notion that came to be widely known as “deterritorialization” (Kearny 552; Tomlinson 122; Robin Cohen 173). As Kearny emphasizes, one of the main characteristics of deterritorialization in relation to production and consumption is the emergence of “hyperspaces,” constructed around intricate and—invisible at first sight—webs of global mass marketing. Such is the case of shopping malls and supermarkets, which, with their year-round availability of all kinds of products from a variety of places, and the increasing presence of processed foods “[dissolve] what might be seen as a positive, particular connection between diet and locality determined precisely by restriction—by the limits of availability of local produce” (Tomlinson 123). These “hyperspaces,” or, borrowing Marc Augé’s term, this “non-places,” are characterized by “solitary contractuality” (76). That is, social interactions are reduced to a minimum, and “shoppers engage in a silent, solitary congress with labels, instructions and self-weigh machines” (Tomlinson 110). This contrasts with

¹²⁴ Same as eating, shopping for food, far from being a banal activity, is very much culturally conditioned and ritualized, implying a daily routine and a pattern of socialization. In fact, the impossibility of reproducing the daily routine of shopping in a familiar environment and social milieu, and the anxiety that this often causes, is also featured in Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*. One of its chapters is indeed devoted to describing Bell’s shock of arrival in the U.S. through food images that unfold in the space of the supermarket, where the closest thing to the live chickens she used to buy in her village in China is “a can with a picture of a chicken on it” (M. Ng 32).

the more intimate and “social” activity of buying “juicy pearly *rambutans*, [...] fresh citrusy *langsats*, [...] or odorous golden-fresh durian” (“Identifying” 297) in Malay night markets or roadside stalls, where, according to Lim, food was celebrated “for its associations with family and community, belief systems, political tolerance and diversity” (“Identifying” 300). Thus, the aseptic and frivolous space of the supermarket, along with its nauseous scent of overabundance, intensifies Shirley’s feelings of isolation, for she is unable to find nourishment—physical, nor emotional—in her new place of residence. In fact, as Lim confesses in an interview with Marino, “US packaged and frozen foods” became “iconic of a western winter that seemed starved of the senses” and emotionally crippled (Lim, “Being” 248).

Paradoxically, in an attempt to stay away from the baffling loneliness that she felt at the A&P supermarket, surrounded by hundreds of other robotic shoppers, Shirley, hungry and disoriented, engages in an even more isolating and impersonal act of consumption: she starts to feed “coins into vending machines,” chewing “the slippery fudge centers of handfuls of chocolate bars” (Lim, *Among* 149). Thus, Shirley’s shock of arrival leads her into malnutrition; an insufficient and unhealthy diet provoked, not by lack of food,—as was the case during her childhood—but by an excessive intake of saturated fats and calories. The addictive satiety provided by the chocolate bars does not last for very long, and Shirley finds herself craving for more at 3 a.m., “dizzy with hunger,” and edgy due to caffeine (Lim, *Among* 149). This hunger, which does not originate in an empty stomach, but in a full one, reminds Shirley about the hunger she used to feel as a child in Malaysia, when her shame for being abandoned by her mother and beaten by her father filled her growling stomach with stone-hard shame.

My clothes became too tight, and I wore the same pair of tight blue jeans every day. One night, [...] I looked into the small mirror in my bedroom and saw my mother's face. It was pale, pudgy, deeply unhappy. My hair hung long and limp like dead moss. With a fury of revulsion, I found a pair of paper scissors and cut it from waist-length to just below the shoulders. But my mother's face continued to stare at me out of the mirror. To come so far, and to find myself swallowed by my mother! (Lim, *Among* 149).

Shirley thought that leaving Malaysia behind would help her repress the memories of physical and emotional starvation that had always accompanied her. However, her shock of arrival ultimately revives the hungers and fears of the past, symbolized by her mother's haunting reflection in the mirror. In fact, Shirley explains that her traumatic past has always been present throughout her experience as an immigrant in the U.S., often making it difficult for her to adapt and even enjoy "the very things she [was] chas[ing]" (Lim, *Among* 10). In retrospective, though proud of her academic and literary success—which has an American Dream-like flavor to it—Shirley admits that, in "the move from hunger to plenty, poverty to comfort," she has remained a "renegade" (Lim, *Among* 9). The frivolous superabundance of America has made Shirley's lacks and needs even more poignant, making her come to the crude realization that, had she had any choice over her own history, she would have never chosen her mother and father as characters and agents in her life (Lim, *Among* 10).

In a similar manner to Lim's memoir, the "cultureless ubiquity" (Gupta 37) of the supermarket as a space of culture shock is also featured in *Fasting, Feasting*, by Desai, who devotes half of her novel to discussing the "awkwardness of the contact with America" (N. Friedman 114). Gender differences, lack of opportunities, and cross-cultural encounters are the main topics running through

this narrative, sharply divided into two sections that seem to have some connection with the novel's evocative title. The first half of Desai's novel tells the story of Uma, a young Indian woman confined in an oppressive domestic environment, where she is looked down on and ostracized for being epileptic, unattractive, and, most importantly, unmarried. After two failed attempts to marry her off, Uma's parents—who are referred to in the novel as the single repressive entity "MamaPapa" (Desai 5)—prevent Uma from getting any sort of education, keeping her at home as domestic labor, thus reducing to a minimum her opportunities to escape from that stifling environment. However, while Uma's parents deliberately limit her life choices and mobility, "MamaPapa" make sure that their son Arun gets an education in the United States. Desai devotes the second half of her novel to describing Arun's experience abroad, as opposed to his sister's claustrophobic and hopeless existence in India. However, far from being an essentialist and Eurocentric manifesto about America as the land of opportunities, and India as a patriarchal and oppressive society, this bifocal narrative remains aware of "the uneven processes of travel, capital accumulation and consumption" (Poon 36), at the same time that it underscores the fact that access to education and mobility still "varies for gendered subjects in a globalized world" (Poon 35). Though it may seem a priori that Uma's identity as an unschooled woman condemns her to a life of deprivation and frustration while her brother Arun enjoys a life of satisfaction and fulfillment, Desai's narrative leaves the reader wondering who of the two is actually "fasting" or "feasting."

For the purpose of my analysis, and given that this chapter focuses on the experience of people "on the move," I will explore Arun's shock of arrival in the United States after leaving his family's conservative Hindu home in India. In fact,

though granted the “privilege” to travel abroad and study at an American university, Arun seems unable to make the most of the experience, and he “looks at the new society before him with the appalled gaze of increased self-consciousness and a heightened sense of difference” (Poon 43). His insecurities make him seek anonymity, and he spends his first academic year in Massachusetts in complete solitude, constantly trying to go unnoticed. Shocked by the party-oriented behavior of the student community—even the South Asian student association—, and intimidated by the assertiveness and talkativeness of his classmates, Arun becomes a hermit, always looking for excuses to eschew anything that involves social interaction:

The truth is that he had no plans, only the hope that his time in the US would continue in this manner, that he could always share a cell of a room with a silent roommate who concealed his facial expression behind a screen of smoke, that he would attend lectures where the lecturer never even learnt his name, and find food in a cavernous cafeteria where no one tried to sit beside him. (Desai 172)

However, his self-imposed lonely life undergoes a dramatic change when Arun moves to the Pattons’ family house in the suburbs. Unable to stay at the dorm during the summer months, and desperate after failing to find any other affordable accommodation, Arun has no choice but to accept the offer of Mrs. Patton, the sister of Mrs. O’Henry, who was in turn the wife of the Baptist missionary at the town where Arun grew up in India. As his parents had told him on the phone, “it was a kind offer, generously made, and not to be rejected” (Desai 175). However, as if anticipating what was about to come, the first thing Arun felt upon accepting it was “nausea” (Desai 175).

Arun's discomfort and inability to socialize had been, from the very beginning of his stay in the U.S., a consequence of his culture shock, as he feels completely alienated, as though he were living in "another world, another civilization" (Desai 170). However, his stubborn and calculated isolation had kept him blind, and thus immune, to many of the idiosyncrasies of mainstream American culture and society. It is precisely during his stay at the Patton's house when Arun fully experiences the rupture and the estrangement that characterize the "shock of arrival." As mentioned above, Desai also makes use of the fraught image of the supermarket in order to highlight Arun's disorientation in America. In fact, in her thorough description of Arun's first encounter with mass consumerism, the novel transcends the space of the supermarket, providing a broader caricature of the quintessential American suburban family as seen through the eyes of a newly-arrived South Asian student.

When Arun arrives at the Pattons' residence—one of the many identical and neatly arranged houses making up the neighborhood—he is welcomed by a big American flag, and by Mrs. Patton, who is "unpacking several large brown paper grocery bags" with scientific-like precision and thoroughness (Desai 161). This evocative image is just a premonition of Arun's struggles with Mrs. Patton's obsession with shopping, which consists in buying things in massive quantities, and filling their house with countless material possessions that lose their value as soon as new goods are purchased. Enthusiastic about his arrival, Mrs. Patton—who remains nameless throughout the novel—invites Arun to accompany her to the shopping mall, where he quickly picks up on the fact that shopping in America was not merely about buying stuff, it had a strange aura of competition: "He was perplexed to find these stores and their attendant parking lots, bank outlets, gas

stations, Burger Kings, Belly Delis and Dunkin' Donuts," places crowded with people wearing t-shirts that read slogans such as "Born to Shop" or "Shop Till You Drop" (Desai 181, 183, 184).

As Jean Baudrillard posits in his seminal work *The Consumer Society* (1970),¹²⁵ our lives today are driven by an obsession with objects; with their consumption and accumulation (or destruction). In relation to this, supermarkets and shopping malls, "with their abundance of canned foods and clothing, of foodstuffs and ready-made garments, are like the primal landscape, the geometrical locus of abundance" (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 26). Contrary to Shirley in *Among the White Moon Faces*, Arun has never experienced hunger or poverty, as he grew up in a conservative and well-off family in India. In spite of this, the shopping frenzies he witnesses in Massachusetts are very far from the values of austerity and self-control that his traditional parents had instilled in him. Therefore, overwhelmed by the barrage of special offers, and shocked at the overall extravagant and wasteful environment, Arun feels there is something disturbing about the way Mrs. Patton joyfully walks up and down the aisles, reading labels with gleaming eyes, and carelessly tossing disproportionate quantities of food into her already full cart. However, while he grows tense "with anxiety over spending so much, having so much" (Desai 208), Mrs. Patton exudes enthusiasm and lightheartedness when surrounded by abundance and affluence, which, according to Baudrillard, constitute the postindustrial "signs of happiness," "stimulating magical salivation" (*Consumer* 26, 31).

¹²⁵ Though Baudrillard's book was originally published in French 1970, I will be using an English translation edited in 1998 and reprinted in 2004.

In a mass consumerist society in which identity is very often constructed through the commodities one possesses (Halter 7), Mrs. Patton's whimsical and compulsive purchases at the chilled atmosphere of the FoodMart match her desperate and pathetic attempts to show off, and to feign happiness and status: "I want it," I buy it, therefore, I am (Desai 209, emphasis in the original). However, this fakeness is solely obtained through fakeness; that is, the objects that dominate American consumerist society are not real, but a "simulation": "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 2). As Baudrillard puts it, present-day Western parameters of reality are based on a deceiving and "hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (*Simulacra* 23). That is, simulation entails the actual creation of the real to make it coincide with strict and programmatic models of artificial perfection, blurring—if not completely erasing—the differences "between the real and the imaginary" and fabricating a new "hyperreality" (*Simulacra* 2-3). Thus, the artificially-looking packages of raw meat and fish neatly arranged in the open freezers, and the suspiciously shiny and colorful fruits and vegetables that load Mrs. Patton's cart strike Arun as "a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing—which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised—but the unreal thing—clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment" (Desai 185). The odor-free and bright perfection of the supermarket arouses Arun's suspicions, yet it does not trigger his appetite, as that exhibit of fetishistic abundance and artificiality seems to have an unsettling glitter of "kindergarten attractiveness" to it (Desai 183). In fact, as Constance Classen argues, the corrosive, though sugarcoated,

appearance of the supermarket could be defined as a “Disneyland of processed foods combined with an Eden of perfect produce” (48).

For Arun, eating was a simple “no-choice” event on a daily basis in India, with his parents controlling every bite he put into his mouth, always making sure he had enough, but never too much; excess was not allowed in his household. Consequently, Arun’s upbringing clashes with America’s frenetic consumerism, the omnipresence of the global brands and mass-cultural icons, and especially, the almost obscene commodification of food: he is mostly revolted by the sheer amount of products, the innumerable choices beyond necessity, and the unstoppable power of the—mainly irrational—consumer desires, urges, and cravings. On their way back home after the shopping expedition, Arun cannot stop thinking, in disgust, about the “gigantic meal” that Mrs. Patton is going to prepare with all the foods she has bought (Desai 197). However, he would soon realize that Mrs. Patton’s obsessive consumerism never leads to any sort of “meal,” because, for her, the final step of the shopping process and her main satisfaction lies in stocking up the canned foods, plastic-looking vegetables, and cereal bars in perfectly neat rows, as if they were trophies “won from the maze of the supermarket” (Desai 184). As Delores B. Phillips puts it, as a result of this complete objectification beyond any nutritious functions, “food is rendered useless, made inedible by the symbolic referents that it accumulates” (“Questionable” 95).

Excess invades the Pattons’ kitchen, but the only functions of these goods seem to be the fattening up of Mrs. Patton’s ego, and the creation of enormous amounts waste.¹²⁶ In fact, the kitchen is described as a barren place of disordered

¹²⁶ Baudrillard identifies waste as another characteristic of the consumer society, which he also calls “throwaway society” (*Consumer* 42). He argues that, in a society that bases its existence in

and poorly nutritious frozen meals: no one sits at the table any more, and cooking has been substituted by defrosting and micro-waving (Desai 197). This contrasts with Arun's family's meals in India, where eating together was a "ceremony" (Desai 24) that, though far from being exemplary, was carried out every single day: "It was actually wonderful to see what fertile ground the dining table was for discussion and debate" (Desai 14). This atmosphere of togetherness and communication around food is nowhere to be found in the Pattons' house, where the individualism of a hectic lifestyle has destroyed the family meal: "Everyone eats at different times and wants different meals" (Desai 197).

Interestingly enough, in keeping with the culinary-oriented caricature of middle-class suburban America, Desai presents this pattern of dysfunctional meals to be almost taken to a halt during a culinary gathering organized by Mr. Patton: a barbecue, the quintessential—and white-coded—American hobby.¹²⁷ However, this clumsy attempt to gather everyone around the table turns into a scenario of cultural tensions when Arun confesses his strict vegetarianism.¹²⁸ Revolted by the bleeding carcasses that Mr. Patton is chopping and charring over the fire, Arun embarrassingly turns down his offer of a hamburger, saying that he will only eat "the bun and the salad" (Desai 167). Angry and offended at Arun's refusal to eat his share of meat, and completely unsympathetic towards his guest's beliefs and

that of its objects, destroying them, turning them into trash, and substituting them by new ones constitutes a sign of wealth (*Consumer* 42-47).

¹²⁷ Within capitalist consumer society, happiness has become compulsory—or, at least, the search for it. As Jeffrey Kluger puts it, "[i]f you're an American and you're not having fun, it just might be your own fault" (*TIME*). Thus, unwilling to be deemed as failures, consumer society seems to promote the idea that, in the absence of genuine happiness, one is better off with a fake happiness than with none. This leads to the "look-at-me-impulse"; that is, the exhibitionist drive to show one's happiness to the world (Kluger). This is what might lie behind the pervasive motif of the barbecue, the need to show—or pretend—that you have a nice family, money, and free time.

¹²⁸ Arun observes Hindu vegetarianism though both his parents eat meat.

customs, Mr. Patton professes a series of comments that show his rancid Eurocentrism and/or ignorance:

Mr. Patton gives his head a shake, sadly disappointed in such moral feebleness, and turns the slab of meat over and over. 'Yeah, how they let them [cows] out on the streets because they can't kill'em and don't know what to do with 'em, I could sho 'em. A cow is a cow, and good red meat as far as I am concerned' (Desai 166).

Mr. Patton's behavior towards meat, besides making his racist and mocking attitude visible, appears to be grounded on the idea that "meat is macho food" (Heldke 72). In some Western countries such as the U.S., "meat eating demarcates individual and societal virility" (Adams 66). In fact, mass consumerist culture infuses animal eating with a masculine bias that marks those males who refuse meat as different and effeminate (Adams 66-67). Mr. Patton's speech is indeed contaminated by this stereotype, as he accuses Arun and his people of being feeble for not eating cow meat. Ashamed of being the cause of Mr. Patton's anger, Arun tries to eat the lettuce and tomato while his stomach twists in disgust at the blood-stained plates and the smoke of the dying barbecue. However, not all the members of the Patton family react in such a negative way to Arun's eating habits. Upon finding out about Arun's vegetarianism, Mrs. Patton, totally oblivious to the personal, cultural, and/or religious reasons behind his diet, keenly declares that she will also stop eating meat: "I've always hated eating meat—oh, that red, raw stuff, the smell of it! [...]. But I've always liked vegetables best [...].—they're so *pretty*, they're so *good*. [...]. Look, Ahroon, you and I —we'll be vegetarians together!" (Desai 179, emphasis in the original). Mrs. Patton's enthusiasm about Arun's diet could be interpreted as a mild criticism to the superficiality with which

white mainstream America approaches the food of the other. Talking about food in these terms suggests, on the one hand, that food is for Mrs. Patton an object to be observed, cherished, and collected for its aesthetic external appearance, and, on the other, that vegetarianism is for her a matter of fleeting preference, fashion, and entertainment: "It'll be my vegetarian summer" (Desai 180).

According to Joanne Filkenstein, eating is increasingly becoming a mass culture entertainment (203), and, thus, enticing the curiosity of the consumer constitutes the main goal of the marketing industry. The treatment of food as a hobby or an "adventure" is primarily characterized by a constant search for the exotic, and the commodification of "difference."¹²⁹ As bell hooks puts it, "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (181). This "spice" is promoted as providing a more intense pleasure, a different "sensation," or a dangerous "expedition into the unknown" (hooks 181; Baudrillard, *Consumer* 80; Heldke xv). This is, indeed, what Mrs. Patton seems to be looking for when she decides to imitate Arun and become a vegetarian, driven by a frivolous curiosity for things coming from the distant and exotic lands of "India—gee!" (Desai 177).¹³⁰

¹²⁹ For cogent insights into the commodification of difference, see Heldke; Long; U. Narayan; P. Gilroy; Manalansan "Cooking" and "Empire"; Halter; or Mannur *Culinary Fictions*, "Culinary Scapes," "Model," and "Peeking."

¹³⁰ Mrs. Patton's fascination with India seems to correspond with what Sunaina Maira calls "Indo-chic," a "trend of orientalist cool" or "late capitalist orientalism" (Maira, "Indo-Chic" 221, 222) that emerged in the 1990s and which is characterized by its fetishistic treatment of India within American popular culture (Prashad 18; Sandhu 136). An example of the commodification of everything "Indian" can be found in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), a novel that has been accused of pandering to Western orientalizing tastes by presenting an exoticized and overtly sexualized image of the South Asian American female (Mannur, *Culinary Fictions* 85; Simal-González, "Magical" 137; Shankar 30). In addition to Divakaruni, other Asian American writers, such as Kingston or A. Tan have also been the target of criticism for their supposedly orientalist discourse (Ma; Lau) and their allegedly voyeuristic and essentialized representations of "a remote but fascinating China" (S. Wong, "Sugar" 187).

After putting up with Mrs. Patton's regular shopping sprees at the supermarket, Arun, overwhelmed by the amount of food filling up the kitchen cabinets, and confused about Mrs. Patton's sudden interest in his foodways, is the one in charge of preparing the "vegetarian" meals. With a limited array of ingredients—tomato, lettuce, lentils, and a few spices—Arun tries to cook something similar to what he used to eat back home, with an added difficulty: he has never cooked, and he has never paid enough attention to his mother's cooking. Under the intimidating gaze of Mrs. Patton, who feels as if engaging in an exotic and exclusive adventure in her own kitchen, Arun nervously "runs water over the lentils, [...] sets the pot on the stove and adds the spices she hands him, without looking to see what it is he is adding" (Desai 193). Despite Arun's clumsy and not very successful results, Mrs. Patton is delighted and, in an attempt to verify the "authenticity" of the culinary experience, she asks Arun if that is "the way [his] mother made it" (Desai 193).¹³¹ As happens on a larger scale at so-called "ethnic restaurants" all over the United States, the eater, in this case Mrs. Patton, uses the food prepared by "the native" as a form of "culinary tourism" (Long 1), imbuing the meal with misplaced novelty, authenticity, and exoticism. In doing so, Mrs. Patton is essentializing and exoticizing Arun, assuming that those qualities are inherent in his condition as a foreigner—an "other"—, and decontextualizing certain aspects of his culture in order to adorn her own monotonous life.

The current visibility and commodification of difference has been claimed to be symptomatic of the "epidermic" multiculturalism promoted by mass

¹³¹ As previously mentioned in this dissertation, the authenticity of a cultural artifact is certainly a complex matter, as its standards depend on the perspective from which the object in question is judged. However, there is one thing that all discourses of authenticity have in common: their obsession with roots and origins. Thus, Mrs. Patton's fantasy about the genuine Indian culinary experience leads her to imagine that dish as part of Arun's mother's repertoire of recipes, thus, mentally locating the origins of the food in a remote and exotic place.

consumerism. Many are the scholars who warn against too optimistic approaches to this “heterophilic age” (Werbner 17), since this appetite for the new and the exotic, which frequently targets “ethnic food,” does not contribute to fighting social inequalities and discrimination. In light of this, it remains clear that Mrs. Patton’s interest for Arun’s culinary habits is far from being a sign of genuine appreciation and respect, but stems from a consumerist drive that tends to perceive difference as an exotic commodity. This is reminiscent of Fish’s theory of “boutique multiculturalism,” which refers to “the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other” (1). According to Fish, a boutique multiculturalist, as could be the case of Mrs. Patton, is moved by curiosity towards a certain aspect of another culture, wishing to experience its allure, and establishing a “superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection” (1).¹³² Desai’s novel dwells on an example of how food often becomes the object that arouses mainstream’s desires and fantasies for the other, acting as a contact zone between groups (Heldke 44; hooks 182; U. Narayan 184). However, as dealt with in previous chapters, this contact is never egalitarian (Kong 52), and eating the other’s food is frequently tinged with an aura of imperialism and exploitation. As Mannur contends, “[i]t is seductive to think that racial inequities and national differences can be overcome by sitting down and sharing a meal of Tandoori chicken and mezclun greens, but [...] food alone cannot effect a politics of inclusion” (Mannur, “Culinary Scapes” 145), particularly when the food of the other is appropriated, used, and abused for the mainstream’s purely hedonistic

¹³² For insightful discussions on the issue of multiculturalism and the appetite for the exotic see Kong; Partridge xii; P. Gilroy 22; Turner 410; Gunew, “Melting” 146, “Multiculturalism” 227; Rudrappa 145-146; Goldberg, *Racial* 31-32; Heldke 19; or hooks 200.

enjoyment.¹³³ Such is the case of Mrs. Patton's shallow and sudden adherence to vegetarianism, which, though perhaps stemming from a sign of solidarity with Arun during those meat-ridden barbecues, ends up becoming a "ham-fisted, inappropriate, and intrusive" tourist expedition (Phillips, "Questionable" 95). This not only reduces Arun's foodways to a mere fashion to be followed, but it consequently turns him into "an object to be emulated and not a person to be understood" and respected (Phillips, "Questionable" 95).¹³⁴

Feeling scrutinized by Mrs. Patton, and insulted by her daughter Melanie, who refers to his food as "shit" and "goo" (Desai 194, 195), Arun "sits in front of his bowl of dhal [and] stares at it, nauseated" (Desai 194). Cooking lentils at the Pattons' house has increased his self-consciousness about his identity, ethnicity, and culture. His foodways, which had always been an organic and unquestioned part of his life in India seem to have acquired a new and unexpected dimension beyond that of mere nutrition, constituting for the first time the object of someone else's desires or revulsion. Thus, Arun's shock of arrival also has to do with the fact that he finds his foodways—and by extension his culture and religion—constantly on the spotlight, being either appreciated or judged, when it had never

¹³³ The intersection of mainstream's consumerist urges with the so-called "ethnic food" market constitutes a complicated matter. Some scholars agree on describing this act of consumption as having an imperialist and colonialist flavor to it, for it consists in appropriating those features of the other that suit the consumers' desires in order to provide them with an opportunity to taste the coveted diversity and—often fake—exoticism without having to step out of mainstream's comfort zone (Heldke; hooks; Mannur, *Culinary Fictions*).

¹³⁴ As anticipated in the first chapter, diasporic subjects also play an active role as agents in the process of commodification of their own ethnicity, often turning their eating habits, and themselves, into self-orientalized and marketable objects (Nguyen and Tu 23). This manipulation of ethnic foodways—strategically exoticizing some aspects and toning down others—has transcended the realm of the restaurant, and is now shattering audience records on several American TV channels. Pioneer cooking celebrities of Asian descent such as Padma Lakshmi's or Ming Tsai have paved the way for the spread of this phenomenon with their respective cooking shows: *Padma's Passport* and *Ming's Quest*. For critical discussions on this commodification of culinary alterity—what F. Chin would call "food pornography" (86)—see Manalansan "Cooking"; Mannur, "Culinary Scapes," "Model," "Peeking"; August; or Kong.

occurred to him that such a thing could even be done. As Sharmila Rudrappa explains, one of the aspects of the culture shock derives from the fact that “everyday ways of doing things are not taken for granted anymore,” and the almost unconscious acts or daily actions become self-evident and have to be carefully monitored (136). This pressure over what used to be the most quotidian matters make him crave for the first time in his life “what he had taken for granted before and even at times thought an unbearable nuisance—those meals cooked and placed before him whether he wanted them or not [...], that duty to consume what others thought he must consume” (Desai 185).

Arun’s culture shock would not stop here, because living with the Pattons’ would grant him full access to the “generalized hysteria” of a society of overconsumption, in which, as Baudrillard argues, the body is “the finest consumer object” (*Consumer* 129). Thus, the fantasy of the pleasures and happiness provided by plenty and affluence violently clash with the notion of the body as a “menacing object which has to be watched over, reduced, and mortified for ‘aesthetic’ ends” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 142). Some of the manifestations of these contradictory trends materialize in the ubiquitous eating disorders of this “obesophobic” consumer society (Brumberg and Striegel-Moore 212), which turns food into a problem, at the same time that it promotes eating as one of the most accessible mass culture entertainments. Along these lines, Desai puts special emphasis on Arun’s reactions towards Mrs. Patton’s daughter’s bulimic behavior, which constitutes a visible symptom of the family’s desocialized and dysfunctional eating habits, as well as an act of rebellion against Mrs. Patton’s obsession with

abundance.¹³⁵ Melanie is consistently described throughout the novel as a lone eater: gorging on candy, peanuts, or ice-cream in front of the flashing TV, or sitting in hidden and dark corners of the house:

He [Arun] retraces his steps to find her [Melanie] sitting on the bottom stair, [...] holding a party-sized bag of salted peanuts into which she reaches and from which she draws out a fistful. She sits in the gloom of the unlit staircase, munching the nuts with a mulish obstinacy, [...]. Has she been crying? She looks sullen rather than tearful. It is her habitual expression. (Desai 164)

Arun's multiple attempts to understand her behavior, or engage in conversation with Melanie are futile, and his puzzlement intensifies when he finds her crouching down next to the toilet bowl, "retching heartily into it" (Desai 189). Melanie voraciously eats the excessive and unhealthy food that her mother brings home, as if trying to quell the anxieties caused by that same overabundance. Thus, feeling like a "garbage bag" that her mother "keep[s] stuffing and stuffing" (Desai 207), Melanie's disordered eating patterns simultaneously express her aversion towards her family's obsession with junk food, and her inability to stop consuming it, as if trapped in an endless and painful vicious circle. As Phillips puts it, "her vomit reifies the discardability of the food her mother buys," as she desperately calls attention to the unhealthiness and "obscenity of the plenitude in her kitchen" ("Questionable" 97) by compulsively devouring it, and systematically "sicking it up" (Desai 204). Contrary to Melanie's parents and brother, who simply believe that "she's nuts" (Desai 204), and despite his ignorance about this kind of

¹³⁵ According to Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Ruth Striegel-Moore, eating disorders are not just the result of Western societies' "cultural infatuation with extremely thin women" (216), but they are also partly the consequence of the increasing de-humanization and de-socialization of the act of eating, which is losing its familiar tone, its functions as a social facilitator becoming blurred (217).

affluence-related disease, Arun seems to be the only one to realize and worry about the inner war that Melanie is fighting. Though not sure about what lies behind her strange behavior, Arun recognizes in shock that “[t]his is no plastic mock-up, no cartoon representation such as he has been seeing all summer; this is a real pain and a real hunger” (Desai 224).

Melanie’s attitude ultimately hints at the fact that, in a world that promotes excess, abundance is ironically demonized by an antagonistic obsession with beauty. Thus, in the midst of freedom, choice, and affluence, the consumer is rendered prisoner of the narcissistic needs of the body, which dictates that excess cannot be consumed, as it is only meant to be enjoyed in a vicarious and self-restrictive way. Accordingly, after succumbing to the hypnotic allure of abundance, the body has to be punished for not abiding by the laws of beauty and slimness (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 141). Therefore, Melanie, who ends up in a center specialized in eating disorders as a consequence of her wild attempts “to turn herself into a slim chick” (Desai 204), uses her self-inflicted vomit as a mechanism to get rid of excess and neutralize the guilt for having consumed it.

This cult of physical appearance seems to run in the family, as Arun is also witness to Melanie’s brother’s obsession with fitness—jogging and weightlifting all day long—, and to Mrs. Patton’s sudden decision to diet and get tanned.¹³⁶ No one reheats food in the microwave any more, and no one seems to buy groceries: “there is now only a litter of empty jars and cartons that have been opened and

¹³⁶ Desai describes Rod, Mrs. Patton’s adolescent son, as pathologically obsessed with being in shape. His compulsive jogging outings are symptomatic of the consumer society’s aesthetic and narcissistic approach to “health.” This basic biological principle loses its “link to survival,” and it is substituted by a “social imperative linked to status” (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 139). Looking healthy and fit, which also implies being slim, constitutes some of the most visible indicators of social prestige. Similarly, Mrs. Patton’s strict regime towards the end of the novel illustrates the intimate relationship between dieting and social class. As Roxanne N. Rashedi puts it, “dieting is, after all, a luxury available only to those who have the financial resources to limit their caloric intake” (39).

emptied by various members of the household when hunger has overtaken them, then abandoned on counters and tablecloths in ruined attitudes” (Desai 216). It is as if, in their fantasies of happiness and perfection, the solicitous and narcissistic needs of the body had taken over every single aspect of their lives, for tending to these matters is also marked in consumer societies as a signifier of social status (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 131).

Arun, lost in this whirlpool of hysterical consumerism and self-enslavement for the sake of physical appearance and social prestige, tries to decipher the intricacies of this corrupt system while remaining a mere on-looker. Caught up in the “sugar-sticky web of family conflicts” (Desai 195), and distrustful of the notion of “plenty,” Arun cannot but wonder about “what hunger does a person so sated feel?” (Desai 224). The extreme control that his parents exerted over his meals back in India, the absence of waste, and the unthinkable possibility to indulge in overeating made it almost impossible for him to understand the Pattons’—and by extension upper-middle-class America’s—lifestyle: “One can’t tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness” (Desai 204-205).

It could, in fact, be inferred from Desai’s caricature of American suburban society, that plenty and satiety are far from being the keys to happiness. As Jeffrey Kluger puts it, the goal of “consumptive happiness,” that of spending and having, “can leave us feeling bored.” According to Kluger, the clue for this merchandized idea of happiness to succeed over time is that the real pleasure and reward does not lie in the “product”—in happiness itself—, but in the infinite path towards it. In this restless search for happiness, what Kluger calls “the happiness of pursuit,” the Pattons’ paths crossed with Arun’s, a young man from somewhere near Mumbai who had never given much thought about the meaning of life, nor happiness.

However, his stay in Massachusetts sets him face to face with the extravagant “anxieties and addictions of the overfed” (Lim, “Identifying” 302), who, in their compulsive quest for happiness and perfection, fall prey to the corrosive demands and expectations of a society hypnotized by beauty and status. Far from getting used to this dynamic, Arun progressively realizes that the persistent and annoying sensation that had “filled every cell of his body” ever since he arrived in the United States, was not just a deep feeling of estrangement, but a firm and growing “resistance to being included” (Desai 171).¹³⁷

Lim and Desai’s close-up of the Asian immigrant’s arrival in the United States allows for a thorough reading of the protagonist’s encounter with the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of America’s capitalist society. Both stemming from the symbolic space of the supermarket as a perverse and dehumanized space of rampant consumerism, *Among the White Moon Faces* and *Fasting, Feasting* present their respective main characters as trying to decipher the echoes that reverberate within the “hollowness at the heart of plenty” (Poon 45). Lost in the midst of this oppressive abundance and unable to engage with it, Shirley and Arun feel empty and lonely. The protagonist in Lim’s memoir describes the painful void she felt inside her when she first arrived in America; a regressive emptiness that transports her back to the time when hunger ruled her life. Thus, ironically enough, America’s affluence is the cause of Shirley’s malnutrition and emotional starvation during her first months in Massachusetts, when satiety does not seem

¹³⁷ While Desai dwells on the anxiety and discomfort that Arun feels in the United States due to the ubiquity of the “hyperspaces” of consumerism, such as shopping malls, supermarkets, or fast food chains, S. Chin’s short story “Beltway” (1997) portrays these locales as the refuge of a Chinese immigrant. The protagonist of the story, obsessed with routine, finds “reassurance” in mass marketing icons such as Safeway, CVS Drugs, or McDonald’s, since these omnipresent shops and restaurants “fix the landscape” (S. Chin 101), providing him with a sense of familiarity and safety wherever he goes in the otherwise disorienting America.

to bring about anything else but a hallucinatory break from the shame and hunger that still growl in her stomach.

In the case of Desai's novel, the protagonist's cross-cultural stress upon arrival in Mrs. Patton's suburban neighborhood illustrates his shock at discovering what really lies behind America's pride for overabundance. The Pattons' macabre consumerism, filling the kitchen cabinets with food until the rot sets in, and yielding even emptier and self-sacrificed stomachs, moves Arun—and the reader—to wonder about the real meaning of "fasting" and "feasting." If abundance and feasting lead to satiety, which in turn leads to guilt and self-punishment, fasting seems to be the right way to go in America. Appalled at the dangerous incongruence of this system, Arun remains a mere observer, seeking shelter in his own solitude, as he watches the smoke of the barbecue "spiraling in at the open windows of the rooms where Melanie hides" (Desai 202), furiously punishing herself for being unable to refrain from the "poison" Mrs. Patton keeps on bringing home from the supermarket (Desai 207).

Both Lim and Desai seem to suggest that satiety is overrated in Western consumerist societies, because, in fact, "hunger" is the new happiness. That is, the abundance of "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 67) is there to be desired, admired, and hungered for; however, happiness does not come from appeasing this consumerist hunger, but from keeping it alive. For Shirley, whose childhood and adolescence had been marked by the real and gnawing fear of starvation, and for Arun, whose education in self-control and austerity had not prepared him for his life in the land of "feasting," the abundance of America's consumer society has an insufferable aura of frivolousness from which they both wish to stay away.

5.2. The “Shock of Return”: Chin’s “It’s Possible” and Pham’s

Catfish and Mandala

“‘Exile’, it says somewhere in *The Satanic Verses*, ‘is a dream of glorious return.’ But the dream fades, the imagined return stops feeling glorious. The dreamer awakes. I almost gave up on India, almost believed the love affair was over for good.”

Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line*

As the title of this chapter indicates, food tropes “go full circle” in Asian American literature. That is, it is not only possible to explore the “shock of arrival” of the immigrant/exile/refugee in the United States through culinary metaphors, food images also constitute suitable vehicles to follow displaced subjects in their journeys back to the homeland. Thus, it is my aim to close this chapter, and this dissertation by exploring the immigrant’s homecoming experience in two first-generation “narratives of return”: Chin’s “It’s Possible” and Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala*. These two texts—the first fictional, and the second autobiographical—portray the long awaited return to the homeland of the foreign-born exile and refugee as an almost traumatic experience that forces the returnees to reconsider their own sense of self, and their previous notions of “home” and “belonging.”¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Chin’s and Pham’s are only a sample of the many others Asian American narratives that have been published over the past few decades dealing, totally or partially, with the topic of the foreign-born’s “return”: Kyoko Mori’s *Polite Lies* (1999), Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and C. Tan’s *A Tiger in the Kitchen* are just a few examples. Other Asian American writers have chosen to explore the American-borns’ first encounter with their elders’ homeland. Such is the case of Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953), David Mura’s *Turning Japanese* (1991), Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), Lydia Yuri Minatoya’s *Talking to High Monks in the Snow* (1993), A. Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and *Hundred Secret Senses*, Ien Ang’s *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001), Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Annie Choi’s *Happy Birthday or Whatever* (2007), and Ann Mah’s *Kitchen Chinese* (2010), among many others.

As Patricia Chu contends, Asian American narratives of return usually present the “homecoming” as the immigrant’s attempt to appease their thirst for familiarity, and/or their last hope for striking a “balance between their Asian heritage and their identification with America” (204). This stands true for both Chin’s and Pham’s works, but the outcome of the exile’s and refugee’s journey back to China and Vietnam, respectively, suggests that the wholeness, self-(re)discovery, and reconciliation that this return promises is only a fleeting illusion. The circumstances that surrounded their migration or forced displacement—which are in both cases tinged with histories of violence and dispossession—, and the nostalgia with which the displaced individual usually envelopes the memories of the past progressively give way, in these narratives, to a distorted and ahistorical image of the homeland (S. Friedman 193; Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 210-212). These “fictionalizing memories” of the past (S. Friedman 195), or “broken mirrors,” as Rushdie puts it (*Imaginary* 11), can only project a fragmented and stagnant image of the homeland, and the immigrants’ dwelling on these misleading “memoryscapes” constitutes the brewing ground for what I will refer to here as the “shock of return”: that of realizing that, as Brian Snorgrass states, “the long lost homes of memory do not wait for their former tenants to return.” After all, and in spite of the exponential advances in transportation technologies and communication in the age of multidirectional “global flows” (Appadurai, *Modernity* 30), migration might still be, at the emotional and subjective level, a one-way trip, for no return guarantees the reencounter with the past, which, as its name indicates, is past, and long gone.

In keeping with this, both Chin and Pham portray the main character’s homecoming as filled with anxieties and disappointment, and their “shock of

return” is metaphorically described through recurring images of unpleasant food consumption that begin to take place as soon as the returnees set foot in their birthplace. Thus, scenes of dysfunctional banquets, dubiously edible and even decomposing food, together with cases of extreme indigestion or food-related diseases come to symbolize the returnee’s disappointment upon realizing that the place they longed for has disappeared in the sands of time. If, as Manalansan argues, eating is “not always about sensory fulfillment and enjoyment” (“Prairiescapes” 362), both Chin and Pham choose to dwell on the negative and even tragic connotations that culinary metaphors may convey in order to express the ambivalence and, to some extent, somatic rejection that the returnees profess towards their homeland, which they do not perceive as “theirs” any more.

“Be Careful What You Wish For” Because It May Not Exist

This dissertation opens with a chapter that explores the nostalgia of the immigrant in Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” and Chai’s *Hapa Girl* as expressed through their main characters’ behavior towards food. Each text presents a character who is frantically obsessed with finding or reproducing the culinary traditions of the homeland, as if feeding their unquenchable wishes for a remote return. This desire to go back to the homeland, the one place where they feel they belong, often survives in the collective imaginary of the immigrant community as a defense mechanism; an “utopia—or *eutopia*—that stands in contrast to the perceived *dystopia* in which actual life is lived” (Safran 94). However, as this section will demonstrate, in the cases in which the return materializes, food frequently functions in Asian American literature as the indicator of the immigrants’ shock at

discovering that the “there” they had been cherishing, the past that had constantly shadowed the present (Clifford, “Diasporas” 304), no longer exists, or had never existed, in the first place.

A very illustrative example of the complex and interwoven relationship between nostalgia, food, and return is Chin’s “It’s Possible,” one of the short stories compiled in her collection *Below the Line* (1997). Using a first person female narrator, Chin explores Mr. Chang’s fossilizing nostalgia for the past and his eventual return to Kiangsu, in eastern China, after more than four decades of exile in Taiwan and, later on, in California. A former military man with a mysterious career, he worked for the Chinese government before the communist takeover in 1949; a historical event that would mark the end of Mr. Chang’s life in China.¹³⁹ As an exile, his life then became a series of forced dis-locations and re-locations that never brought him any closer to his homeland. Because of this, and in spite of his aversion towards the communist government ruling his beloved “mainland,” Mr. Chang is portrayed, borrowing Monica Ali’s words, as being afflicted with the “Going-Home-Syndrome” (32). However, the object of Mr. Chang’s nostalgia is not just his country or the family left behind, he mostly missed a past time of his life, a period when he had power, when he had choices, and when he was “talented” and “capable” (S. Chin, “Possible” 23).

His almost pathological obsession with going back and the impossibility of doing it for so many years make Mr. Chang hold on to the food he used to eat in

¹³⁹ Mr. Chang’s military career remains a mystery throughout the story: “Oh no, he was too smart to get shot by the Japanese. Or the communists. He never put himself in the position where he would lose” (S. Chin, “Possible” 10). From this quotation it can be inferred that Mr. Chang fought with the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) against the communists before their victory in 1949, and also, that he was involved in the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945). In fact, Kiangsu province, home to Mr. Chang and his wife, was among the most severely affected regions during this armed conflict.

his village near Shanghai, as though it were the only thing that enabled him to stay in touch with his family and cultural environment. Food becomes, in this case, the material element where Mr. Chang's memories can rest, and eating helps him assuage his gnawing sense of loss, as he nurtures his hopes of a potential return. If, as Sutton argues, tastes and smells "hold the promise of the return of the memorable whole" (88), food acts in this short story as a means to represent and/or reconstruct a beloved and somehow lost past. In fact, the protagonist's peculiar eating habits regarding certain kinds of fruit reveal his need to enact his "myth of pure origins" (Mannur, "Culinary Scapes" 100) through the memories evoked by their tastes, smells, and textures. One of the scenes in which we first perceive Mr. Chang's strange behavior towards fruit takes place during the visit that his niece—the narrator—pays him when he is still living as an exile in Taiwan. Mr. Chang's exaggerated perfectionism about the way fruit had to be systematically served with almost "military precision" (S. Chin, "Possible" 5)—"cut in wedges, with forks, at room temperature" (S. Chin, "Possible" 9)—seems to reflect not just his strict work-related habits, but also his need to establish a connection with his homeland and his past. Tropical fruits such as pineapple or melon, staples of Mr. Chang's diet in Kiangsu, have become the last and most precious sensory link with his life before exile, conjuring up, as Gunew puts it, "the memory of another corporeality" ("Introduction" 230). Thus, Mr. Chang's hunger for a lost time and place drives him into a perpetual and compulsive search for the perfect and authentic flavor in fruit, the one that will bring him back to his life prior to exile, and assure him that nothing has changed back home:

'Don't do anything to the fruit, (...) Just buy the best and serve it as it is. When it's ripe, of course. That way you'll *preserve* the taste, and each time you eat a pineapple or a melon it will *remind* you of many things.'

[...]

'It will make you *remember* how much you liked eating the pineapple or the melon before, and how much you will like eating it again. You will never *forget*.' (S. Chin, "Possible" 9, emphasis added)

If the senses of taste and smell are some of the most faithful guardians of our memory (Sutton; Mazaira), the flavor of pineapple and melon appear to function in "It's Possible" as "preservatives" of Mr. Chang's storage of recollections. Hence, Mr. Chang's ritualization of the apparently simple act of eating fruit and his obsession with obtaining the "right" taste from it mirror his need to retain his memories of the past safe and intact, in an attempt to fight "the alienation from [his] true being, history and heritage" which he feels is haunting him since he left China (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 166).¹⁴⁰ Thus, as can be inferred from the previous quotation, the life of the protagonist, having left his homeland decades ago, is marked by the complex dynamics of loss and memory: utterly gripped by a fear of "forgetting" and losing who he is and where he comes from, Mr. Chang wholeheartedly devotes himself to "remembering" and mentally preserving the material, abstract, and emotional aspects that made up his "before";

¹⁴⁰ The idea of fruit as a keeper of memories is similarly presented in Malladi's *The Mango Season*, where the smells and tastes of different kinds of mango pickle function as an inspiring sensory experience for the main character of the novel, a South Asian-born woman who, after seven years in the U.S. goes back to India to announce her engagement: "The smell of a ripe mango would still evoke my taste buds, my memories, and for a while I would be a child again and it would be a hot summer day in India. [...] There was more to a mango than taste" (Malladi 2). What makes the connection between long-lasting memories and sensory experiences even more poignant in this text is the fact that Malladi seems to suggest that the potent preservative properties of mango pickle prevent not only certain foods from decaying, but also the protagonist's memories from sinking into oblivion.

his life and “home” in Kiangsu, a place that has become, at the mercy of nostalgia, “an imagined space” and a “black hole of desire” (S. Friedman 195).

Mr. Chang’s especial relationship with food does not stop here, as he also makes a habit of going to Shanghainese restaurants, wherever he may be, so as to eat the dishes that gave flavor to his life prior to exile. This is reminiscent of Winberg’s insatiable quest for “authenticity” in Chai’s memoir *Hapa Girl*, an unfulfilled desire that makes this Chinese-born immigrant grow more and more aloof after each culinary expedition. However, contrary to Winberg, Mr. Chang seems to feel at home in Chinese restaurants. During a visit to one of them in Taiwan, the food and atmosphere of the place make Mr. Chang travel back in time: “Noodles here. Dumplings there. The shrimp and vegetable dumplings were the best. I ate a lot of them and that’s how I misspent my youth. In a place like this” (S. Chin, “Possible” 12). As the narrator puts it, the noodles and dumplings were among the very few things that made Mr. Chang relax and become communicative and even friendly (S. Chin, “Possible” 11). When eating the dishes that made up his diet in China, his sense of smell and taste tell him what he needs to hear: that everything “is just the way it was before” (S. Chin, “Possible” 12), and that he is still the same man he was before exile. As González cogently argues, food works in this case as “material proof of having been a particular person in a particular place, time, and community” (141). Cognizant of, but resistant to the unavoidable changes his identity and self have undergone during his time away from China, Mr. Chang privileges a static conception of his identity, immune to changes and new experiences over time. Thus, while he perceives his exilic condition as “erroneous, inauthentic, not [his] own” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 166), Mr. Chang

still believes that his true self is the one connected to his home in Kiangsu, and he keeps this illusion alive by feeding it the best fruit and dumplings.

As a consequence of his nostalgic obsession about the past, Mr. Chang ends up creating, with the help of the evocative power of food, an idealized and imaginary version of his homeland, a China “of the mind,” as Rushdie would call it (*Imaginary* 10); an illusion or a blurry “retrospective mirage” of what home used be (Halbwach 48). Furthermore, in order to make his homesickness more tolerable, Mr. Chang had already made up his own fantasy of how his return would be; an easy reunification with the past, as if his forty-year long absence from the homeland was just a bad dream:

He wanted to believe, my mother said, he wanted to know he could always go back one day. There, at the gate of the village he had last seen when he took his new wife to Shanghai, there he would find the past he had left behind. He would step off the boat onto the riverbank, and the severed years in between would be joined just like that, in one step. (S. Chin, “Possible” 20)

What Mr. Chang did not seem to factor in when day-dreaming about his return is the fact that, as Rushdie rightly argues, “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated” (*Imaginary* 12). Thus, the obsessive rigidity of his memory, which sought an embodied confirmation in the familiar taste of certain foods, together with his picturing of the past as an ideal and “cozy home” (Irwin-Zarecka 88), turns Mr. Chang’s long-awaited return to his long-lost homeland into a highly traumatic experience. After migrating from Taiwan to the United States and acquiring an American passport, the main character decides, against his wife’s will, that it is time to return to his hometown in China, even though just for a short

visit: “After some forty years away from home, he was going to go back now and show that he hadn’t forgotten anyone or anything” (S. Chin, “Possible” 19). Again, Chin emphasizes Mr. Chang’s fear of oblivion and his near-obsession with memory, which are both the product of a searing feeling of nostalgia that has followed him throughout his whole life as an exile.

According to the etymological origins of the word, “nostalgia,” which comes from the Greek words *νόστος* (return) and *άλγος* (pain), literally refers to the pain caused by a strong and seemingly unfeasible wish to go back (“Nostalgia” 615). In this short story, Chin explores the complicated relationship between this nostalgic pain—both physical and psychological—and the actual materialization of the return. Faithful to the etymological connotations of the term, Chin’s short story illustrates that “nostalgia” can also be the pain caused *by* the return itself. In fact, Mr. Chang’s visit to Kiangsu—which he had been planning for months, buying presents for everyone—becomes a complete disappointment, since “nothing happened as he had planned” (S. Chin, “Possible” 19). What he had expected to be an exciting and “glorious return” (Rushdie, *Step* 197) fades away and transforms itself into a deep emotional shock when he learns that most of his relatives have died in a dramatic “web of consequences that led back to him, the landlord’s son, the one who had joined the army of counter revolution” (S. Chin, “Possible” 20). As a consequence, the magnificent and lively family gatherings and social events he had wishfully foreseen find their meager counterpart in a humble and gloomy banquet organized in a building under construction by the few distant relatives he finds in Kiangsu, who are only interested in his American money and material possessions.

In a building with unfinished walls, in a room with no ceiling, just slabs of rough, flaking cement [...] my uncle, the party secretary, the old men at his table, and the young men at the other tables, all sit under a cloud of cigarette smoke, rising, commingling with cement dust, falling. Between the cold appetizers and the first hot dish, the wind enters the wall-less walls and pushes the evening damp into their faces. (S. Chin, "Possible" 21)

This ill-fated and "unsanitary" feast (S. Chin, "Possible" 21), which bears no resemblance to the idyllic image of the extended family gathering that the protagonist had longed for, constitutes a turning point in the narrative, and a symbol of Mr. Chang's "shock of return." In his search for family, love, and truth, he finds death, poverty, and guilt, aspects that suddenly inform him about what had been happening in China during his absence, social and political changes from which he had escaped, leaving his family behind to pay the consequences. Thus, contrary to other culinary-related scenes throughout the story, where foods and dishes are vividly described, in the case of the welcoming banquet in Kiangsu, the reader does not obtain any information about the food eaten by the guests. For the first time in the story, Chin portrays food as totally devoid of social and emotional significance and she highlights the hostility of this culinary event. In fact, the inhospitable and unwelcoming atmosphere, as well as the emotional distance between the participants, washes away any kind of evocative power or community-related significance that food might have as "a common store of ethnic wisdom, maxims, [...] and cultural passion" (Boelhower 115).

According to William Boelhower, the ethnic feast is one of the most recurrent and "transparent literary topoi" to explore the dynamics of an ethnic community, since it is a "rigidly codified" social event that reveals a lot of information about the "grammatical systematics of ethnic semiosis" (113).

However, if, as Boelhower argues, the presence of food-related ethnic gatherings in literature accounts for the positive reaffirmation of ethnic identity in a context of “historical synthesis in which each participant feels integrated into the semiotic space of his ethnic culture” (116), the scene of the banquet in “It’s Possible” constitutes a clear exception to this theorization. In fact, the bleak and gloomy description of the feast mirrors the protagonist’s realization of the fact that there is no longer a community to go back to, no “home” whatsoever that matches the one he had been cherishing in his memory.

Due to his condition as a political exile and the censorship that controlled the few letters he had exchanged with his relatives during those four decades of absence, Mr. Chang had cultivated and held on to an image of an atemporal and unreal Kiangsu, based on vague memories and half-truths, and on the utopian mirage that nothing had changed since he had left. These are, according to Radhakrishnan, “harmful projections of individual psychological needs that have little to do with history” (*Diasporic* 211-212). In fact, as Said puts it, the notion of home, and the bond that the exile establishes with it from the distance are contingent on the nature of “home” as lost and imaginary (*Reflections* 185). Thus, Mr. Chang’s attempts to find the material counterpart of this necessarily nebulous concept ultimately create a deep frustration in him as a returnee, who realizes now that the homeland, the center of his existence, does not exist any more.

If Mr. Chang had fossilized and embodied his memories of the past in the taste of familiar foods, the extreme psychological toll of his disappointing trip to China, which starts to become apparent right after the banquet, also manifests itself in a somatic and embodied way: “He sweats through the night and into the next day. Chills and fever, he coughs and coughs. [...] He flies back to his sun-

drenched condo, my aunt holding his arm. The cough comes with him. [...] it doubles him up and takes over his lungs, his heart, he coughs and coughs until he goes back to the beginning of time and there is nothing left to remember” (S. Chin, “Possible” 22). Mr. Chang’s illness might symbolize the aftereffects of his shock of return, since now not only his present life in exile is “foreign” (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 9), but also his past. “[T]he ontological reality of [his] place of origin,” which helped him cope with the endless process of spatial displacement, has been shattered beyond repair, leaving him completely lost in the “ghostly [...] unreality of his present” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic* 175).

In a dramatic turn of events, Mr. Chang’s cough turns out to be a deadly lung cancer that kills him in a few months. Surprisingly enough, some members of his family, who were from the very beginning reticent to Mr. Chang’s trip to China, claim that his disease and his death are in some way a result of his “shock of return,” represented by that dreadful banquet: “‘Before the fish and the meat, that’s when it happened,’ my mother said. ‘The cancer. It started with the banquet, I’m sure.’ [...] He got cancer from going home, that’s all, that’s what my mother told me.” (S. Chin, “Possible” 22). Thus, Mr. Chang’s “Going-Home-Syndrome” (Ali 32) ends up having terrible and irreversible consequences, as he discovers that he is not the same person he was before exile, not the talented and respected military man, but the vaguely known and guilt-ridden returnee whose hopes for recovering the past vanish in front of his eyes. The mythical and fragmented image of the homeland that he had been cultivating during those four decades of exile, savoring it in each bite of pineapple, melon, or Shanghainese food, fades away, leaving behind a huge hole in his life. This void, taken up by a deep sense of loss and sadness, is symbolized by his illness, which eats him up from the inside out. Mr.

Chang learns that, for the long-absent exile, there is, literally, “no place like home,” since home is always already “a nowhere, an imaginary space longed for” (S. Friedman 192). As the song that Mr. Chang’s family sing at his funeral says, “[i]n the sweet by and by, [...] there’s a land that is fairer than day, and by faith we can see it afar” (S. Chin, “Possible” 22).¹⁴¹ From this we gather that Mr. Chang’s beloved China was only a projection of his faithful nostalgia; the China of his imagination could only be seen “from afar,” for trying to come any closer to it, as it happens with any mirage, only causes the illusion to fade and disappear.

The Refugee’s Return: A Tough Dish to Digest

The stability of the notions of “home,” “identity,” and “belonging” is often overestimated by displaced individuals, and particularly by those whose dislocation is inseparable from acts of violence and repression. As Said contends, exiles—and I would add refugees—find their lives torn apart in “a discontinuous state of being” (*Reflections* 177). Traumatically cut off from their roots, and losing all control over their lives, exiles and refugees “feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives” (Said, *Reflections* 177). This project of reconstruction, as could be seen in Chin’s “It’s Possible,” is often based on the wrong and idealized conception of a pure and unchangeable identity essentially linked to the—somehow mythic—place called “home.” If Chin emphasizes the obsessively nostalgic homeward gaze of a Chinese exile, Pham’s memoir *Catfish*

¹⁴¹ These verses belong to a Christian hymn from the nineteenth century entitled “In the Sweet By and By.” Written in 1868 by S. Fillmore Bennett and composed by Joseph P. Webster, the song became one of the best-known gospel standards and it was extremely popular in American hymnals and funerals (*Cyber Hymnals*). I believe the use of these verses here by Chin constitutes not so much a straightforward religious allusion, but a symbolic double meaning connected to the protagonist’s mystification of his past and homeland.

and Mandala uses an autodiegetic narrator—Andrew—to recount the struggles and disappointments of a first-generation Vietnamese American returnee in search of clues to understanding his past and his present.

Andrew's description of his life in this memoir leaves no doubt about the dramatic impact that the war in Vietnam had on him and his family. Victims of violence, persecution, and imprisonment, Andrew's relatives, already emotionally crippled and traumatized, do not find peace of mind in their condition as refugees in America, where they perpetually feel as if they "were playing in someone else's backyard" (Pham 194). Arriving in America as a shocked ten-year-old Vietnamese boy, Andrew developed a series of insecurities about both ends of his bicultural upbringing that still torment him as an adult: uncomfortable about what his Vietnamese origins mean in America, and unable to fully integrate into his host country after more than twenty years there, Andrew finds himself straddling two vastly different worlds, and feeling ambivalent towards each of them: "Who are my people? I don't know them. [...] I move through your world, a careful visitor, respectful and mindful, hoping for but not believing in the day when I become native. I am the rootless one, yet still the beneficiary of all of your and all of their sufferings" (Pham 9).

Confused about who he is, and feeling guilty for his privileged position at the expense of those who were left behind in a war-torn Vietnam, Andrew decides to go back in an attempt to connect the dots of his own history, as well as to pay homage to a country that still holds the precious memories of his childhood.¹⁴² As

¹⁴² Another factor leading to Andrew's return to Vietnam is the death of Chi, his older sister. Chi suffered not only due to her—and her family's—forced relocation in America, but also because of her parents' intolerance towards her homosexuality. Rejected by her own family, Chi runs away from home and spends fourteen years living on the streets. When she comes back as the postoperative transsexual Minh, Andrew's parents cannot fully accept the fact that their daughter is

Uma Parameswaran cogently argues, “the memory of the past and its re-invention as an imaginary homeland are of the utmost psychological significance. Identity operates through narrative, and narrative needs to start in the past and pace its way to a future that embraces and resolves the discrepancies between past and present” (xxviii-xxix). This is exactly what Andrew expects to obtain from his return to Vietnam: a complete re-connection with the past, a better understanding of the present, and, thus, a sense of wholeness to be projected towards the future. However, his homeward journey will come with the painful realization that “the new Vietnam [...] has eclipsed the country of his memory” (Phillips, “Quieting” 67), leaving only shadows of what once was. Furthermore, getting in touch with the remains of his past will reveal to him that he is “no longer Vietnamese but Vietnamese American” (Pham 7), as the experiences he has gone through since that fateful spring of 1975 have shaped his identity in a way that no longer fits in the puzzle he finds upon arrival in Saigon.

What makes Pham’s memoir especially interesting from a literary point of view is the fact that, beyond the circularity that any narrative of return entails, *Catfish and Mandala* structures the protagonist’s return to Vietnam around a series of symbolic concentric circles: cyclic images of consumption and indigestion that, with an almost déjà-vu-like link between past and present, function as literary representations of Andrew’s complicated reunion with his birth land.¹⁴³ The first of

now their son. Minh commits suicide a few years later, and this constitutes an insurmountable shock for all his relatives, and especially for Andrew. His return to Vietnam is also a tribute to Minh, who, unlike him, will never be able to go back.

¹⁴³ The persistent circularity of this memoir, both structurally- and thematically-speaking seems to be inspired by the notion of the “mandala,” as the title suggests (Duneer 206). Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism profess the idea of the “mandala” as a metaphysical connection between one’s body and mind with the cosmos (Beatson 163). The inseparable nature of the physical and the spiritual, is represented in the very means of transportation that Andrew chooses to take on his journey to Vietnam: a bicycle. Apart from the similitude between the geometric representation of the mandala and the shape of a bicycle wheel, Andrew’s bike tour in Vietnam

these food-related circular metaphors connects Andrew's two "border-crossing" moments (Pham 186)—the one of his desperate escape from Vietnam, and the one of his dreamed return—through a recurrent trope that suggests the anxiety surrounding both experiences: vomit. Andrew's story, with its interlaced account of past and present events, makes especial emphasis on his family's narrow escape from Vietnam on a small fishermen's boat right after Saigon fell on April 30, 1975. Their journey towards Thailand—their escape's first stop—lasted for a few days, a time which Andrew, a little boy then, can only remember through a nauseous blurriness:

Although the fishermen claimed it was a good sailing day, sunny, moderate wind, average seven-foot waves, we were seasick. Except for Dad, who seemed to be holding up, Mom, Chi, Auntie, and us boys vomited, making the deck slippery. I felt horrible. My stomach fisted. Sour mush gushed out of my mouth. I broke out into a cold sweat, curling up in my own fish-smelling fluid. [...] My skin hurt, burning. I couldn't keep food down. (Pham 92)

Andrew, exhausted and terrified, was not aware at that time that the last look he took at the shore while the boat was navigating the darkness might as well have been the last time he would see his homeland. However, his naïve obliviousness to the military conflict that was destroying Vietnam, and his lack of knowledge about the reasons behind their departure do not prevent Andrew's fears from surfacing, blocking his digestive system with the help of a persistent seasickness. As if moving away from his homeland had a psychosomatic effect on

seems to have a somehow mandalic nuance to it, for it fuses the physical effort that a journey like that entails with the psychological and emotional turmoil that the protagonist experiences upon arrival in his long-lost homeland.

him, what Andrew remembers most vividly about that journey is his body's rejection of any kind of food. Interestingly enough, this uneasiness of the stomach which accompanied him on his flight from Vietnam, would invade Andrew again on his return, closing the full circle of his experience as a refugee with scenes of vomit as the somatic counterpart of an extreme state of discomfort and anxiety. However, while young Andrew's fears during the family's escape were justified by the traumatic nature of their dangerous circumstances, Andrew's anxieties upon his return would derive from his failed attempts to fit in in the place he used to call "home" two decades before.

As soon as he sets foot in Saigon International Airport, attired in cycling gear, and carrying an old bike and "a pocketful of unconnected but terribly vivid" memories (Pham 98), Andrew manifests his desire to cultivate and embrace his "one-hundred percent Vietnamese" identity, symbolized by the quintessential Vietnamese "undiluted-concentrated fish sauce" (Pham 63).¹⁴⁴ In order to do so, his first weeks in Vietnam are characterized by a compulsive voracity; an urge to eat and drink everything in a desperate attempt to understand and reabsorb his own cultural background, as well as to gain the acceptance of his fellow countrymen, who look at him with suspicion for being a Viet-kieu—a returned Vietnamese.¹⁴⁵ However, these episodes of brave omnivorous consumption

¹⁴⁴ Fish sauce—*nước mắm* in Vietnamese—is "at once a condiment, a dipping sauce, and a flavour added to Vietnamese soups and noodles dishes" (Daley). This quintessential Vietnamese ingredient is made from long-jawed anchovies that must be washed and marinated inside earthenware together with sea salt. This mixture is usually covered with mosquito nets and bamboo and left untouched for several months. Natural fermentation extracts the liquid from the fish, which is eventually pressed in a fashion similar to that of olive oil. The resulting liquid is the so-called *nước mắm*, which literally mean "fish water" (Daley).

¹⁴⁵ Vietnamese expression to refer to Vietnamese returnees. It literally means "overseas Vietnamese," and it is not a term of self-identification, that is, it is usually only deployed in the People's Socialist Republic of Vietnam to refer to people of Vietnamese ancestry living abroad (Miyares and Airriess 7; Simal-González, "Andrew").

systematically end up in indigestion and vomit, which hint at Andrew's inability to fully identify with Vietnamese culture and adapt into the country he encounters. The first of these food-related and recurrent scenes is described by the protagonist as a kind of rite of passage, for he is challenged by a group of locals to swallow the still-beating heart of a cobra: "*You said you want to be Vietnamese. You want to try everything we do. It doesn't get more Vietnamese than this*" (Pham 84, emphasis in the original). The heart, transplanted from the cobra into a shot glass full of rice wine, "pulses swirling red streamers of blood into the clear liquor" (Pham 83). This sight repulses Andrew, but his determination to reconnect with his Vietnamese roots, and his need to prove himself and the locals surrounding him that his time away from Vietnam has not changed him give him courage to toss the throbbing heart down his throat. Unfortunately for him, his stomach immediately reacts against the "squishy live organ," making Andrew double over and "retch it onto the floor" (Pham 84). His vomit, an indicator of his body's rejection of that obsessive quest for identity, is taken by the Vietnamese men surrounding him as a sign of his weakness, his "Viet-kieu fickleness" (Pham 82).¹⁴⁶ In fact, this label, Viet-kieu, would follow Andrew wherever he goes in Vietnam, preventing him from feeling as "one of them," and making it also impossible for him to go unnoticed as a mere tourist.

As a returned refugee, Andrew is constantly regarded as the lucky one, the "lottery winner[...]" (Pham 183) who managed to escape and live the "American

¹⁴⁶ *Catfish and Mandala* contains many other scenes similar to this one, in which Andrew eats food described as disgusting and dubiously edible in order to gain acceptance or avoid confrontations. Such is the case of the scenes of consumption that take place during Andrew's long train journey to Hanoi, where he succumbs to peer pressure and eats the "delicacies" that his journey mates offer him: intestines, livers, hearts, goat testicles, goat blood pudding, pig brain, or stew made with unshaved pig are some of the things he eats before, once again, vomiting them as a sign of the physical and psychological unhealthiness of his compulsive quest for identity (Pham 208-210).

Dream.” Thus, Andrew’s difficulties in digesting his reencounter with his previous life are seen by those who had to stay behind in a war-torn land as the whims and extravagances of a “Viet-kieu crybaby” (Pham 126). Longing to be treated as an equal and to acquire a sense of belonging in a country that does not necessarily welcome him, Andrew does not cease in his efforts to transcend this label and let Vietnam “infuse every cell of his body” in order to “truly be Vietnamese again” (Pham 126). But his quest for reconciliation, his desire to stop being a “*mat-goch*—lost roots” (Pham 63) would encounter another obstacle along the way: the shock at realizing that the Vietnam of the present does not match the one of his memories: “Turning to and fro, [...] I feel out of phase, a man panning for the memories of a boy. [...] The old angst, now unfamiliar, worms back through the years at me. Memories. My man-child fascination” (Pham 183).

In spite of the disorienting discrepancies between the landscape of his memory and the unwelcoming reality, Andrew’s urges to embrace his past push him not to give up on his search for familiarity in the country’s flavors. Thus, as if trying to attain what Mannur calls a “culinary citizenship”—that is, the performance of “certain identitarian positions via [...] food” (*Culinary Fictions* 29)—Andrew’s visit to the “alley-world” (Pham 94) of his childhood is marked by his fascination with street food, and his, once again, physical rejection of it. In fact, Pham’s memoir abounds with descriptions of food markets, street-corner eateries, and food stands and carts, as if all of them encapsulated the true soul and dynamics of the cities Andrew traverses with his bike:

A bustling trade of sidewalk concessions rings the traffic. Cafés and food stands mark their territory by the foot. In addition to these [there] is a steady stream of vendors passing through with their pushcarts, their baskets of

food, bells clanging, calling out their wares. The acrid bite of exhaust is blunted by the smell of food: sweet meat grilling on coal, soy-sauce soaked liver sizzling, [...] pork buns warming in tiers of great bamboo steamers, pork chops sautéing in fishsauce and garlic. (Pham 105)

Street food used to be an organic part of Andrew's life in Saigon and Phan Thiet, the two places where he spent most of his childhood in southern Vietnam. There, he used to wander around the crowded alleys among dumpling stalls, dog-meat sellers, and Chinese herb shops with the confidence that only comes with a deep sense of belonging (Pham 95-96). However, on his mission to recover as an adult such a physical and emotional rapport with his homeland, Andrew spends his days in Vietnam on a continuous vicious cycle of "food binges [...], and bouts of diarrhea" (Pham 123). In fact, his ingestion of steamed intestines, pan-fried frogs, ice-coconut, or even *pho*—all of them watered in abundant beer or liquor— invariably ends up with Andrew's stomach heaving, and him sprinting to the toilet (Pham 82). As Phillips argues, Andrew aims to integrate "both the food and the urban landscape into [himself]," hoping thus to gain "an intimacy with the city that can be achieved only through the very personal act of putting something of it into [his] mouth and ingesting it" ("Quieting" 65). Along the same lines, Simon Choo describes street food as "an ideal medium through which to explicate how people 'sense' and 'make sense' of their worlds," for the sensory experiences involved in this act of consumption are inseparable from time-space contexts (620). However, instead of finding such a sensorial and emotional intimacy, Andrew's contact with the street food world—a space of poverty, malnourished child-beggars, and prostitution that bears no resemblance to his idyllic memories—begins to fill him with an unshakeable sense of rejection towards both his Vietnamese and

American cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, the protagonist is deeply shocked and saddened by the battered Vietnam he finds on these southern urban areas: a place full of needy strangers clamoring for money, food, and dignity while desperately selling themselves to any taker through corrosive sexual and tourist industries (Pham 109).¹⁴⁷ On the other, Andrew cannot but feel ashamed of his American passport,¹⁴⁸ a document that marks him as a privileged traitor who returns to Vietnam to witness—and consume—the suffering of its people through the eyes of a tourist.

Andrew's stops at the street food stalls, and the contradictory feelings that these experiences of consumption bring about translate into yet another physical reaction: the aforementioned incontrollable "bouts of diarrhea and unexplainable fevers" (Pham 199), which ultimately symbolize Andrew's difficulties to reconcile his increasingly antagonistic Vietnamese background and his American citizenship. If Vietnam is "a country of skinny people obsessed with food" (Pham 123), Andrew's digestive problems render him an outsider, incapable of adapting and fully participating in such a culture. In fact, his stomachaches, fevers, and persistent diarrhea accompany him all through his journey, as a sort of sickness in motion that reflects Andrew's anxieties as he bikes across the heterotopias of memory and reality (Phillips, "Quieting" 50).

¹⁴⁷ Another very interesting topic discussed in this memoir is, indeed, the impersonation and feminization of Vietnam as a prostitute: selling her landscape and her culture to tourism and multinational companies in exchange of money. In fact, Cuong, a tour guide Andrew meets in one of the cities he visits, tells him about the dubious morality behind his job, which sometimes makes him "feel like a pimp," showing the poverty and the war scars of his country to Western tourists (Pham 329).

¹⁴⁸ For a digression on the symbolism of the passport for the Viet kieu, see Lam's "Two Passports," a brief autobiographical essay included in *Perfume Dreams* (2005). As Simal-González rightly argues, the Vietnamese and American passports that Viet kieus hold "function as metonymic reminders" of their own "transnational life" and freedom to travel, in contrast with the Vietnamese nationals, "whose mobility is more limited if not severely curtailed" ("Andrew").

According to Chu, the displaced individuals' homeward journey is also driven by a desire to understand their parents, who are, in the returnees' mind, "symbolically intertwined" with the notion of "homeland" (204). *Catfish and Mandala* also presents Andrew's need to look at Vietnam through the eyes of an adult, as if trying to imagine the impact that the war had on his elders, and thus make sense of their behavior in America. Frustrated by their parental pressures and angry at their submissiveness, Andrew declares that he cannot be the kind of Vietnamese American his parents expect of him: "I see their groveling humility, concessions given before quarters are asked. I hate their slitty-measuring eyes. The quick gestures of humor, bobbing of heads, forever congenial, eager to please" (Pham 25). But, where does this behavior come from? To what extent did suffering mold their character? These questions seem to find an answer in another episode characterized, one more time, by the cyclic nature of its food-related metaphors: Andrew's dinner at Uncle Tu's hut.

One night, after a long journey of cycling through muddy roads near the jungle, Andrew meets a one-legged man, a former member of the North Vietnamese Army, who invites him to spend the night at his house. Uncle Tu, "a stranger-once-enemy" to Andrew's Southern Vietnamese family (Pham 266), is the impersonation of the dramatic consequences of the war, regardless which side one is on. Crippled and lonely after losing all of his family in the war, Uncle Tu reminds Andrew of the hardships his parents went through during the military conflict, and the kind of fate that would probably have awaited them had they stayed in Vietnam. As Pelaud puts it, this country "does not embody a return to a romantic past, but emerges [for Andrew, in this case] as a place where memories of violence and abandonment repeatedly surface" (*Catfish* 228). In fact, Uncle

Tu's evocative presence acts as bait for Andrew's traumatic recollections regarding his parents and the war. Memories that become even more vivid when Uncle Tu generously decides to treat his guest with some clay-pot catfish.¹⁴⁹

As he watches Uncle Tu add some fishsauce to the stew and set the pot on the stove, Andrew's "mouth waters in anticipation" (Pham 264). He had eaten clay-pot catfish countless times as a child, and, if there is one thing he could remember about it, is the fact that this dish could keep well "for weeks without refrigerator. The older the dish, the deeper the flavors" (Pham 264). Thus, when his host proudly announces that the concoction is three days old, Andrew's memory immediately transports him back in time to one of those occasions when his mother would leave a pot of that dish ready for him to eat in her absence. As the narrator explains, when the country fell to the communists, he and his family were incarcerated due to his father's anti Viet Cong propaganda. Andrew, his siblings, and his mother were released after some time, but his father was kept prisoner and taken to forced labor camps in the jungle—also known as "dead camps." That was the reason behind Andrew's mother's long absences from home, as she would travel throughout all Southern Vietnam to petition for her husband's release. Before leaving on one of those desperate, and mostly futile, trips, Anh—Andrew's mother—sure about the long duration of the stew, and making use of her son's naivety, would promise him to be back by the time he finished the pot. For Andrew, too young to grasp the gravity of the situation, clay-pot catfish became a "magical" dish, for his mother would always arrive before he was done with it:

¹⁴⁹ Clay-pot catfish is a very popular dish in the southern part of Vietnam, where Andrew is from.

So I ate fast. It was gone in two days. There was nothing left in the clay pot except sauce, bones, and the big catfish head. I had saved every scrap of fish, [...] like Mom told me, and put them back into the pot after every meal. Then I would give it a squirt of fishsauce and bring the pot to a boil. [...] When there was no meat, the pot magically kept on yielding plenty of peppery, fishy, salty, buttery sauce, tasty enough to be poured on plain white rice for a meal. And sure enough, Mom came home before the clay-pot catfish ran out of magic. (Pham 97)

Eating this dish again in Uncle Tu's humble hut speaks to Andrew about his mother's suffering and courage like nothing had ever done before. However, while that meal used to efficiently satisfy "his physical hunger," and alleviate "his sense of loneliness by reminding him of his mother's imminent return" (Dalessio, *Are* 114), Uncle Tu's clay-pot catfish no longer holds the promise of any magical return, as it attests to all the things that went wrong, all the hardships his family went through—tragedies that cannot be undone, and sufferings that cannot be kept at bay with the shield of innocence. Once again, as a metaphor of the unbearably painful memories evoked by this food, Andrew's meal ends with another episode of heaving intestines and diarrhea that force him to use an outdoor communal latrine near Uncle Tu's hut. Significantly, the natural pond beneath the latrine begins to churn as Andrew "take[s] care of business," and through the latrine hole he makes out "the catfish com[ing] to feed" (Pham 265).

Again, circularity is the most prominent feature of this image, not just because of the fact that the latrine becomes "a human link in the Vietnamese food chain" (Dalessio, *Are* 115), but also because this same scene had also been experienced more than twenty years ago by Thong, Andrew's father, during his endless months of labor camp in the Vietnamese jungle. As Andrew learned from

his father's horrifying stories, Thong's days were a blurry combination of dark and dirty huts, hunger, and daily executions. Every night, the silence was only broken by the voices of the Viet Cong soldiers announcing through the loudspeakers the names of those who would be killed. Thong, sadly convinced that the only way out of that hell was death, was only unsure about how this would befall him: a nocturnal shooting, a jungle disease, or a land mine. In the midst of this anguish, Andrew's father recalled the meager dinners of dirty rice and catfish soup; the same catfish that he would also watch "[fight] vividly for their meal, leaping out of the water" beneath the wooden structure of the latrine (Pham 16). The desperate and claustrophobic nature of Thong's situation was mirrored in the endless vicious cycle of this act of consumption: "Feed[ing] the catfish at dawn, and [eating] them at dusk" (Pham 20).

The cyclic and regressive power of this scene ultimately brings Andrew back as an adult to a time he could only remember through the naïve haze of childhood. This seemingly trivial encounter with Uncle Tu helps Andrew put himself in his parents' shoes and understand the misfortunes that each of them went through. He can now fully appreciate and admire the courage that his father—who was eventually released from the labor camp—and his mother summoned to take care of their children in those dire circumstances. This teaches Andrew a lesson on love and survival, and helps him attain a higher understanding of his parents' attitude in America, a land that meant for them both defeat and hope. However, this does not provide him with any sense of reconciliation with his Vietnamese past and identity, which he feels are somehow intoxicating him. Andrew's obsessive quest for his roots leads him to search for the remains of his life prior to displacement and "consume" them in an attempt to return to that earlier

state. His negative bodily reactions constitute a metaphor of the fact that what Andrew is actually consuming are only the ashes of “the humble life that came before” (Pham 98). As Minoli Salgado puts it, the displaced individual’s “contact with a host country constitutes a temporal and spatial bifurcation point that generates cultural complexity and diversity that are irreversible” (186). Thus, Andrew’s tenacious determination to find and embrace an identity corresponding to a time prior to that bifurcation proves to be futile and painful: “What was I thinking? Did I really believe that coming here would bring back dead memories? I guess I was hoping something miraculous would happen. [...] I had been banking on a stupid Hollywood ending, too embarrassed to admit as much to myself” (Pham 98).

Finishing his eight-month journey in Vietnam, and still far from showing signs of adjustment, Andrew emphasizes his increasing self-doubt and anxieties, which feel like “a monster eating [his] heart” (Pham 108). Similar to Mr. Chang in “It’s Possible,” Andrew’s psychological and emotional discomfort, recurrently represented in scenes of indigestion, reaches its dramatic peak towards the end of the memoir. All those episodes of vomit and diarrhea that plagued his stay in his birth land turn out to be a severe case of dysentery that puts Andrew’s life in danger, causing him extreme pains and uncontrollable fevers. As in the case of Mr. Chang, whose lung cancer is claimed to be a result of his unsuccessful quest for the past, the physical symptoms of Andrew’s disease function as the sharp shock that shakes him “out of his shell and prompts [him] to reassess everything” (Pham 327). However, contrary to Mr. Chang, whose return to China causes him to get stuck in the void between an unreal present and the ghostly past, Andrew’s sickness acts as the ultimate wake-up call that makes him give up on his all-

Vietnamese “undiluted [...] fishsauce” mission (Pham 63), and embrace a “dynamic, multivoiced and dialogical notion of self” (Bhatia, *American* 35). If Mr. Chang’s realization of the nonexistence of his idea of home left him completely lost and disoriented, Andrew’s disappointment brings about new ways of approaching the “border space” in which he stands as a Vietnamese American (V. Mishra 433).

By coming to terms with the shifting and transformative nature of his dual identity, Andrew finally realizes that his quest for belonging and reconciliation was untenable, as the cultural spaces he inhabits are “ambivalently enjoined,” and in constant negotiation (Bhabha 224). As Homi Bhabha puts it, it is necessary “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1). This is precisely what Andrew is determined to do by “eluding the politics of polarity” that used to split his identity into two irreconcilable halves (Bhabha 39). His experience in Vietnam brings him closer to understanding the “Third Space” he inhabits as a Vietnamese diasporic subject: a disjointed and disjunctive “structure of ambivalence” (Bhabha 216) in which he will allow “belonging to come to him in small moments of acceptance” (Phillips, “Quieting” 74).¹⁵⁰ Thus, on his flight back to America, carrying back his bike, a sore abdomen, and a set of memories that are difficult to digest, Andrew describes himself as a “chameleon,” with “no truer sense of self than what he is in the instant” (Pham 339). He eventually comes to terms with the notion of identity as something decentered and immediate, an interminable production that is continually constructed and performed “on the move,” as his multiple affiliations and cultural attachments keep grappling and overlapping.

¹⁵⁰ For more on the concept of the “Third Space” see Der Veer and Papastergiadis.

Therefore, as Anita Duneer concludes, though Andrew's "physical journey has come full circle, [...] his journey of self-identity resists an easy resolution" (218). He certainly did not find what he was looking for in Vietnam, but his open-mindedness and his ability to adapt to new circumstances have finally yielded a more flexible self-identification, one that seems to fit better the rhythms of the fluid world he inhabits. No longer burdened by the responsibility of having to reconcile and unite his Vietnamese and American subjectivities, Andrew embraces a highly performative identity that fits his nature as a "mover of between" (Pham 309). His present shaken by a fading past, Andrew feels there are no stable masses of land from where to build the bridges that used to string his life together. Thus, as if trying to protect himself from the same kind of void that swallowed Mr. Chang after his return to Kiangsu, Andrew learns to constantly reinvent himself and "oscillate," moving back and forth along the space in-between, as "he rides the hyphen that structures/deconstructs his own identity" (Phillips, "Quieting" 76).

5.3. Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to trace a full circle around the Asian American diasporic experience. In order to do so, I have explored how food images are integrated within transnational plots that narrativize the shocks resulting from the displaced individual's outward or inward border-crossing moments. While the first section focused on the newly-arrived immigrant's sensitivity towards the initial conditions s/he finds in the United States in Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* and Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*, the second section looked into Chin's "It's Possible"

and Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* in order to analyze the opposite situation: the difficult return to the homeland. Though each journey entails a different kind of shock for the protagonist, food is flavored in all of these texts with complex and highly symbolic meanings that hint at the cultural conflicts taking place in the threshold between home and abroad.

As discussed in the first section, the “shock of arrival forces the immigrant to new knowledge” (Alexander 1). Both Lim and Desai metonymically represent this initial moment of acquaintance with the host country by means of images of culinary consumption that mirror the characters’ discomfort and alienation. This contact of the Asian immigrant with American society, though unsettling at first, translates over time into “an awareness of simultaneous dimensions”; an awareness that, as Said metaphorically puts it, is “contrapuntual” (*Reflections* 148). Thus, when the displaced individual’s urges to return to the homeland materialize within this contrapuntual state of simultaneity—as is the case of Mr. Chang and Andrew—, the trip back reminds them of the ahistoricity and synchronism of their memories, and the shifting nature of their diasporic identities.

Food, the trope that holds these four works together along the same line of analysis, functions in all of them as a signifier of the characters’ frustration for not being able to adapt to either the host country or to their own homeland upon return. The inability to “eat from the same dish” as the people surrounding them becomes a constant in the four narratives. If disgust and nausea prevented the main characters in Lim’s and Desai’s texts from interacting with American consumerist culture and lifestyle, Chin’s and Pham’s narratives of return present characters tormented by the terrible digestive aftereffects caused by their almost kamikaze desires to belong in a culture and society that does not exist any more.

To conclude, this food-centered literary analysis of the journeys outlined in these Asian American narratives suggests an interesting shift in the meaning of the word “homesickness”: while Lim and Desai describe situations in which the newly-arrived immigrants feel utterly “sick for home,” longing for its familiarity, and unable to digest their new circumstances in America, Chin and Pham reverse the meaning of this word by portraying the nostalgic returnees as literally “sick of home” (S. Friedman 191).

6. Conclusion: Food in Asian American Literature— An Unfinished Banquet

I would like to put an end to this dissertation with a story:

It was March 30, 2005, and, as every other Wednesday, the Powerball multistate lottery was aired on TV at 10:59 p.m. (central U.S. time). As usual, six random balls were automatically air-popped by a machine and shown to the cameras by an assistant for all lottery players in America to see: 28, 39, 22, 32, 33, and 42. It would have been an uneventful draw had not been for the fact that, instead of the estimated 3.7 second-place winners, more than 110 people were celebrating their prize across all the states: “No one had ever seen anything like this in the history of American lotteries” (J. Lee, *Fortune* 4). Accountants and statisticians, startled, estimated that the odds of this happening were about one in 195 million. Disconcerted by the unprecedented coincidence and afraid that it might have been a case of fraud, Powerball officials opened a coast-to-coast investigation that would lead them, to everyone’s surprise, to a fortune cookie. Oddly enough, what all those winners had in common was that all of them had read that combination of numbers inside a fortune cookie and they had later chosen to use it to participate in the Powerball lottery.

This curious story, though it may seem taken from a novel by Gish Jen or Ruth Ozeki, is not fictional; it is actually an account of a true story that hit the media shortly after that unusual Powerball draw. As *The New York Times* reported

on May 12, 2005, “investigators visited dozens of Chinese restaurants, takeouts and buffets. Then they called fortune cookie distributors and learned that many different brands of fortune cookies come from the same Long Island City factory, which is owned by Wonton Food and churns out four million a day” (J. Lee, “Cookie”). The lucky numbers had been randomly chosen from a bowl by the workers in charge of inserting the message inside the fortune cookies, which would later be distributed all over the United States. This way, people from Pennsylvania to Minnesota, from Wisconsin to Arizona, from Rhode Island to Tennessee confided their luck to the quintessential Asian American dessert—and the fortune cookie did honor to its name.

This anecdote, which became the seed of Jennifer 8. Lee’s book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* (2009),¹⁵¹ struck me as a very illustrative and humorous example of the food-related racialization of the Asian American community at large, whose lives have always been inextricably linked to the “production and consumption of racially, and ethnically coded foods” (Mannur, “Asian” 4). In fact, the fortune cookie vs. Powerball incident could be interpreted a sign of the complexities inherent in the Asian American experience, which, as Lowe maintains, is characterized by its heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple nature (66). In order to see this clearly, it is necessary to understand the convoluted origins of the fortune cookie, which hide stories of war, dispossession, and survival. Most people probably think that these crispy folded cookies originally

¹⁵¹ Lee’s *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, narrated in a humorous and anecdotal style, contains a detailed account of the history of the fortune cookie, together with digressions about other Chinese American culinary creations such as *chop suey*, *chow mein*, or General Tso’s chicken, which the author defines as “the biggest culinary prank played by one culture on another” (49). Lee offers an overview of the history of the Chinese community in the United States by focusing on significant food-related events that, once again, come to confirm this group’s—and other Asian immigrant communities’—close relationship with the food and restaurant industry in America.

come from China. Nothing further from the truth. According to Lee's investigation, if we had to point out an Asian country as the birthplace of this treat, it all indicates that it would be Japan (260-265). In fact, when Japanese began to migrate to the United States in the late nineteenth century, they brought with them the recipe of the traditional *Tsujiura senbei*, a rice cracker astonishingly similar in shape to the fortune cookie. Some Japanese entrepreneurs set up small bakeries and shops in the West coast where they would sell these cookies, until, one day, most of them were forced to abandon their businesses and their homes. It was 1942, the peak of World War II, and right after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, all Japanese immigrants living in the West coast of the United States, regardless of their citizenship status, were put into internment camps. The hatred towards the Japanese American community spread like wildfire, while China's alliance with the United States during the war gave way to a more positive and sympathetic perception of the Chinese immigrant community. The growing popularity of Chinese cuisine among mainstream population helped Chinese Americans to innovate and expand their businesses, and they saw in the dormant *tsujiura senbei* a good opportunity to cater to American tastes. Thus, taking advantage of the dramatic Japanese absence, and using their flourishing restaurant industry as a runway, Chinese set the foundations for a product that would not only become an inexhaustible financial asset, but also an icon of American popular culture.¹⁵²

¹⁵² The dispute over the origins of the fortune cookie is not over. Though the Japanese hypothesis seems to be the most plausible, other researchers hold different theories: LuMing Mao defends the Chinese background of this cracker, as he assures that "message-stuffed pastry [...] as a covert means of communication" is a centuries-old Chinese tradition (4). Others believe that the fortune cookie was invented and initially made popular in America by David Jung, the founder of the Hong Kong Noodle Company in Los Angeles (Driscoll).

There are chocolate-dipped fortune cookies, [...]. There are fortune cookies available in cappuccino, mint, blueberry, and cherry. [...] You can buy custom fortune cookies for ad campaigns. You can buy silver fortune cookie jewelry on eBay. There are giant fortune cookies the size of a football. [...] There are scandalous X-rated fortune cookies for bachelor and bachelorette parties. To counter them, there are Christian biblical cookies. (J. Lee, *Fortune* 43-44)

Going back to Lowe's theory, as formulated in the first chapter of this dissertation, the trajectory of the fortune cookie reveals, on the one hand, the "heterogeneity" and "multiplicity" of the Asian American experience in terms of its ethnic diversity and socio-political, legal, and economic status. On the other, as LuMing Mao contends, the fortune cookie represents the uneven contact and power relations of various different cultures in a social and gastronomic "border zone" (4). Thus, the "hybrid" nature of the fortune cookie—a product brought to the U.S. by the Japanese, but adapted and made popular by the Chinese according to American consumer's tastes—does not seem to match a straight-line and passive process of assimilation. Rather, it symbolizes the Asian American community's history of survival in the constantly shifting—and often adverse—social, political, and material conditions of each specific historical moment (Lowe 67).

The popularity of Chinese food, and of its apocryphal fortune cookies, acquires a tangible nature in this Powerball incident, in which the aforementioned dessert becomes the common denominator of all the winners' stories, as well as a contact zone between different genders, classes, and ethno-racial groups. In fact, the case of fortune cookies represents merely a fraction of all the food-related social, material, and cultural expressions that have come to articulate the alterity of the Asian American community. As referred to in the first chapter of this

dissertation, this community's predominant presence in the food system of the U.S. and the prevailing stereotypes about the exoticism and/or unhealthiness of their foodways have paved the way for the emergence of what Mannur calls the "Asian American Food Scape" ("Asian" 4).

Behind the fortune cookie anecdote, and weaving the social and historical tapestry of migration that it evokes, lie the lives and personal experiences of thousands of Asian immigrants whose stories of nostalgia, trauma, racial discrimination, and survival have fed the literary discourse. Interestingly enough, as this dissertation has aimed to prove, Asian American literature has recurrently narrativized the experience of this ethnic community by resorting to food-related themes and tropes. Aware of the multifarious symbolic connotations of the culinary images that color the Asian immigrant consciousness, I have tried to explore the variety of scenarios that unfold when food, memory, identity, and the notion of "home" converge in the space-time of the text. In fact, as Lim maintains in her memoir, "nurturing is a human act that overlaps categories" (*Among* 67), and this applies not only to the material world surrounding us, but also to the fictional universes created in Asian American literature. Thus, the second chapter of this dissertation dwelt on the most immediate—but no less enigmatic—connections between food and memory, which yield evocative and revealing literary mechanisms whereby Lahiri and Chai convey their characters' nostalgia in "Mrs. Sen's" and *Hapa Girl*, respectively. The semiotic value of the culinary, which functions as an amulet for the transplanted (Sims 50), is portrayed in these texts as an aftertaste of a belonging that used to be, a quest for familiarity that renders the protagonists prisoners of their homesickness in America.

However, the intricate web of food images displayed in Asian American literature transcends the innermost recesses of the individual connections between food and nostalgia to venture into the social properties of collective acts of consumption. Thus, chapter three focused on Narayan's *Monsoon Diary*, Li's *Daughter of Heaven*, and Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* in order to navigate the nebulous terrain that extends between the "imaginary homelands" of the collective immigrant consciousness and the often painful reality of the present in America. Narayan's relatively unproblematic and descriptive narration of the culinary and group-oriented events that shaped her life in Kerala and her later resettlement in America contrasts with the tensions and traumas described by Li and Nguyen in their respective memoirs. The study of these two autobiographical texts side by side demonstrates that culinary rituals, such as those celebrated during Chinese and Vietnamese Lunar New Year, constitute sites of memory, as well as fertile grounds for the immigrant family's reconstruction of a sense of agency and belonging in the diaspora. Along these lines, I argued that both Li's and Nguyen's narratives use ritualized culinary traditions as liminal spaces of resistance where to give voice to the silenced echoes of a painful past. Echoes which, especially in the case of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, whisper about the traumas of war and displacement, and about the difficult and indelible memories that these experiences engender. Therefore, by looking closely at the food metaphors in these texts, eating becomes an act of transgenerational communication and memory transmission, integrating the 1.5 or American-born members into the collective imaginary of the community.

However, as S. Wong's seminal theories suggest, postmemory and empathy towards the foreign-born generation do not always come naturally for the

American-born descendants, who are often described in Asian American literature as struggling between the pressures to assimilate and the traditions of a supposed “homeland” that seems to have been partially eclipsed by America. Thus, as discussed in chapter four, Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, Chao’s *Monkey King*, Li’s *Daughter of Heaven*, Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and Furiya’s *Bento Box in the Heartland* illustrate the intergenerational complexities that emerge from Wong’s conflicting paradigms of “Necessity and Extravagance.” These works confirm the continuing applicability of these theories years after the publication of her *Reading Asian American Literature*. While Ng dwells on the self-sacrificing nature of the foreign-born’s eating habits, Yamanaka, Chao, Li, Nguyen, and Furiya focus on the younger generation’s fascination with American-coded foods and their disdainful attitude towards the survival-oriented eating habits of their elders—as symbolized, for instance, in the “food shame” episodes of the lunch bags. All in all, food stands out in these narratives as the indicator of the heterogeneous nature of the immigrant experience, and of the consequently different approaches that each generation adopts towards their Asian American identity.

While the main characters of the aforementioned narratives display a clear attraction towards white- and American-coded foods, the versatile nature of culinary images in Asian American literature surprises the reader once again in Lim’s *Among the White Moon Faces* and Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*, with scenes in which American foodways elicit completely opposite reactions in the newly-arrived Asian immigrant. The characters’ “shock of arrival” in the U.S.—as explored in the first section of chapter five—revolves around the culinary manifestations of America’s consumerist society. Thus, supermarkets, vending machines,

precooked dishes, eating disorders and, in short, the pernicious commodification and overabundance that characterize mass consumerism are used by Lim and Desai to illustrate the immigrant's unsettling first contact with a society dominated by the "hyperreality of appetite" (Filkenstein 201). If sharing food within a community of people suggests a certain bond, or a degree of belonging in it—as could be seen in chapter four—the scenes of food-related anxiety or outright rejection that both texts feature evoke the Asian immigrant's unwillingness or inability to integrate into American society and lifestyle.

This reading of the gastronomic shock of arrival in the United States, a place that is often represented in Asian American literature as the immigrants' "unhomely" location (Bhabha 9), does not promise an unproblematic return to the place they still consider "home." If the displaced individual is often unprepared to face the unfamiliar environment of the host country, as illustrated by Lim and Desai, s/he is frequently even less prepared to endure the feelings of alienation that await her/him in the homeland. In fact, as discussed in the very last section of this dissertation, the complicated notion of "home," which resonates in the immigrant's memory and discourse, hides a warning against dramatic realizations. As Said once put it, "homes are always provisional" (*Reflections* 147), and their elusive nature makes them all the more hypnotic for the displaced individual. In this vein, both Chin's and Pham's texts describe the exile's and refugee's initially hopeful journey back to the homeland through a series of images of indigestion and food-related diseases that ultimately symbolize what I resolved to call, echoing Alexander, the "shock of return."

The circular structure of this dissertation, which begins with a chapter on the fictionalization of the immigrant's nostalgia, and ends with an analysis of two Asian

American narratives of return, seeks to evoke the transnational nature of this community's cultural, social, and literary discourse. The increasing flow of people and information between the immigrants' homelands in Asia and their place of residence in America make it difficult to align with strictly fixed representations of the "here" and "there," which are starting to merge into cross-cultural spaces and multiple identifications. Thus, while the fortune cookie vs. Powerball incident constitutes a graphic example of the uneven clashing and commingling of Asian and American traditions at the macrosocial level, this dissertation has sought to highlight the ways in which the immigrant's experience is consistently represented through culinary metaphors in a corpus of Asian American literary texts.

Though the focus of my research has primarily been the intricate relationship between food, memory, identity, and the notions of "home" and "belonging," the endless interpretive possibilities of the culinary in Asian American literature turn this field of study into an unfinished banquet. Open for discussion are the crisscrossing categories of food, gender, race, and class, as well as the thriving ecocritical perspectives on the representation of food and/as nature, among many others. Jen's *Typical American* (1991) and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) allow for a culinary-oriented reading of the author's representation of the American Dream, offering a gastronomic portrait of the intertwined notions of race, ethnicity, and class (cf. Dalessio, "Joy"). Similarly, David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians are Coming* (2001) presents a plot ridden with class and gender conflicts, always flavored by the foods the protagonist—a Chinese American chef—prepares (cf. Xu, *Eating*). As for the connection between food and nature, Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), as well as Don Lee's *Wrack and Ruin* (2008) arguably constitute, until the present day, the most

suitable Asian American texts to be studied from a food-related and ecocritical standpoint. The three novels present highly transnational scenarios through the description of global agribusiness and food production chains—of meat, potatoes, and brussels sprouts respectively—as responsible for serious cases of environmental threats and identity conflicts (cf. E. Cheng, Stein, Estok, Kim, Poulsen, Hsiu-chuan Lee, Ho “Acting”).

For as long as the “Asian American Food Scape” (Mannur, “Asian” 4) keeps absorbing and turning the whimsical fluidity of our globalizing era into nourishment, and for as long as we keep tasting with our brain, as neuroscientist Francisco J. C. Mazaira affirms (17), I venture to say that Asian American literature will continue compelling us to build new bridges of interpretation between the fields of food and literary studies. After all, if we both taste a flavor and interpret a text with our brain, food and literature will never be far from each other.

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Appendix: Resumen/Resumo

Los sabores de la diáspora: comida e identidad en la literatura asiático-americana

Esta tesis doctoral busca adentrarse en el mundo culinario representado en una selección de obras literarias escritas por autores asiático-americanos, entre los que se encuentran Jhumpa Lahiri, May-lee Chai, Shoba Narayan, Leslie Li, Bich Minh Nguyen, Linda Furiya, Mei Ng, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Patricia Chao, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Anita Desai, Sara Chin y Andrew X. Pham. Mediante el análisis de estas obras en conjunto trataré de probar que la compleja relación que los emigrantes asiáticos mantienen con la comida en el imaginario colectivo americano ha traspasado los límites entre la realidad y la ficción, alcanzando nuevos horizontes simbólicos en esta tradición literaria. Considero que la intrincada red de metáforas culinarias que pueblan estos textos, cuya presencia va frecuentemente asociada a conflictos de tipo cultural, étnico o racial, ofrece la posibilidad de explorar las historias reales e imaginarias derivadas de las experiencias de esta minoría étnica, a menudo racializada a través de sus hábitos alimenticios. Así pues, el objetivo de este trabajo es contribuir al todavía incipiente estudio del tropo de la comida en el contexto literario asiático-americano mediante una aproximación que combina teorizaciones previas con nuevos puntos de

partida que acercan estas “metáforas comestibles” a cuestiones derivadas de la naturaleza transnacional de esta comunidad.

Las obras seleccionadas para este trabajo de investigación no pretenden erigirse como representantes de toda la literatura asiático-americana, sino que mi elección se ha basado en criterios temáticos y de interpretabilidad. Es decir, para demostrar la panoplia de significados y connotaciones que el tropo de la comida entraña, he escogido una selección de textos que presentan una amplia variedad temática. De esta manera, como veremos a continuación, el análisis del componente culinario en las obras de los autores arriba mencionados va desde lo más íntimo y personal, como son los sabores, la memoria y los sentimientos, hasta sus implicaciones socio-culturales para la comunidad inmigrante.

El carácter ineludible y cotidiano de la comida, así como su potencial simbólico en la literatura hacen necesaria la diversidad de puntos de vista para su estudio en profundidad. Es por ello por lo que el aparato teórico en el que se apoya mi análisis es eminentemente ecléctico. Esto puede observarse en el primer capítulo de la tesis doctoral, el cual expone en tres apartados diferentes, aunque íntimamente relacionados entre sí, los fundamentos teóricos sobre los que se cimienta mi investigación. El primero de estos apartados ofrece un acercamiento a las nociones de etnicidad y raza mediante la comparación y contraste de las teorías de Ronald Cohen, Frederik Barth o Anthony P. Cohen, entre otros. Teniendo en cuenta que el objeto de estudio de esta tesis doctoral es la comunidad asiático-americana, las aclaraciones conceptuales iniciales dan paso al tratamiento de la situación de las minorías étnicas en el contexto socio-político de los Estados Unidos de América. Cuestiones como la integración de la población inmigrante, la alteridad, las categorías raciales y la supremacía blanca

se observan en este apartado desde la perspectiva de autores como Werner Sollors, Alan Wald, o Michael Omi y Howard Winant. Además, como no podía ser de otra manera, en esta primera sección incluyo una panorámica de la historia de la emigración asiática a EE.UU., basándome en los estudios de un amplio elenco de críticos entre los que destacan Ronald Takaki, Sucheng Chan, Yen Le Espiritu, o Lisa Lowe. Es precisamente esta última la que subraya la naturaleza heterogénea de la comunidad asiática asentada en EE.UU., que se caracteriza, según Lowe, por una gran capacidad de adaptación y reinención de acuerdo con el cambiante contexto socio-cultural en el que se enmarca.

El segundo subapartado de este primer capítulo sienta las bases de los conceptos de diáspora y multiculturalismo que estarán tan presentes a lo largo de mi tesis. Así pues, tras una pequeña introducción sobre estas nociones de acuerdo con los postulados de William Safran, Stuart Hall o Henry A. Giroux, entre otros, este apartado contextualiza la aplicabilidad de los conceptos de diáspora y multiculturalismo en el marco actual de la globalización y el transnacionalismo. Me apoyo para ello en las teorías sobre el “world of flows” (mundo fluido) de Arjun Appadurai, así como en el paradigma de “roots and routes” (raíces y rutas) de James Clifford. Ambos autores apuntan hacia una concepción de la identidad que, debido a las nuevas migraciones multidireccionales, trasciende lo territorial para complicar la relación entre comunidad y localización geográfica. En este contexto de comunidades “desterritorializadas”, como diría John Tomlinson, el multiculturalismo se encuentra con muchos detractores que consideran que la ideología de tolerancia hacia la diversidad cultural en la que se basa no es más que un síntoma del apetito de la sociedad de consumo por lo novedoso y lo exótico.

Finalmente, el último apartado de este primer capítulo versa sobre la comida en sus múltiples facetas, y será aquí donde se constata todavía más el carácter ecléctico del aparato teórico en el que se apoya esta tesis doctoral. En efecto, esta sección ofrece un repaso por el variado tapiz de teorías y puntos de vista desde los que el estudio de la comida, como elemento cultural, ha sido abordado: desde las aproximaciones más puramente antropológicas de Mary Douglas, hasta las teorizaciones de tipo sociológico de Deborah Lupton, pasando por los estudios sobre la comida y la memoria de David Sutton, el objetivo de este apartado es sacar a la luz el potencial simbólico de la comida para así afrontar su interpretación en textos autobiográficos y de ficción que describen la experiencia del inmigrante asiático y de su comunidad diaspórica. Cualquier introducción al tropo de la comida en la literatura de esta minoría étnica estaría incompleta sin un recorrido por el papel de la población asiático-americana en la industria alimentaria. Así pues, el capítulo teórico se cierra con una panorámica de las complejas circunstancias socio-políticas que rodean a este grupo dentro del mercado de la “comida étnica”.

Una vez establecido el marco teórico en el que esta tesis se sitúa, los demás capítulos llevan a cabo el análisis textual propiamente dicho. Para comenzar, el segundo capítulo pretende explorar el binomio “comida-memoria” en “Mrs. Sen’s” y *Hapa Girl*, de Lahiri y Chai, respectivamente. El estudio conjunto de estas dos obras desde el punto de vista culinario resulta especialmente interesante, puesto que los personajes de ambas narrativas presentan un comportamiento casi obsesivo con respecto a la comida y los recuerdos. El primer apartado de este capítulo explora la relación que los protagonistas, Mrs. Sen y Winberg, establecen con su identidad étnica y su pasado a través de las

memorias desencadenadas por ciertos sabores y olores. Mi acercamiento a esta cuestión está inspirado, entre otras, en las teorías de Sutton, que considera que el gusto y el olfato son los sentidos más enigmáticos y peculiares, dado que tienen el poder de retener nuestros recuerdos y evocarlos de manera caprichosa. El paisaje culinario de la memoria es uno de los temas centrales de las obras de Lahiri y Chai, cuyos escenarios recrean situaciones de desarraigo cultural y emocional que llevan a sus protagonistas a utilizar la comida como “medio de transporte” hacia el pasado. Acciones tan aparentemente triviales como trocear verduras con su *bonti* (el cuchillo típico bengalí), o comprar y cocinar pescado fresco se convierten en los pilares de la vida de Mrs. Sen en la diáspora, ya que estas prácticas culinarias representan su identidad y su legado cultural. Del mismo modo, Chai dedica parte de sus memorias a narrar la historia de su padre Winberg, cuya vida antes y después de emigrar ha dejado una importante huella en su bagaje emocional. Su complicada relación con su pasado hace que Winberg se embarque en una búsqueda ofuscada de los sabores que hacen de puente entre su vida en el Medio Oeste americano y su pasado en China y Taiwán, estableciendo conexiones mnemónicas y sensoriales que le llevan al borde de la locura. Es precisamente el componente irracional de la nostalgia, presente no solo en la obra de Chai, sino también en el relato de Lahiri, el que se erige como tema central del segundo apartado de este capítulo. Mientras que el comportamiento de Mrs. Sen con respecto al pescado la lleva a poner en peligro su propia vida, de una manera casi humorística, Chai describe la obsesión de su padre por los restaurantes chinos; una fijación compulsiva que le lleva a recorrer cientos de kilómetros en busca de “aquel sabor” que finalmente restaure sus memorias y cure sus heridas. Tanto Lahiri como Chai exploran los límites y

abismos de la nostalgia del inmigrante, que cae en la trampa de una mirada excesivamente idealizada hacia el pasado. Así pues, mi análisis de los desenlaces agrídulces que presentan estas dos obras se apoya, entre otras, en las teorías de Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan acerca del carácter evasivo de la autenticidad, así como de lo efímero del concepto del “hogar”.

Si el segundo capítulo se centraba principalmente en el ámbito del individuo, el tercero se encamina hacia una concepción social de lo culinario. Por consiguiente, el objeto de estudio en este caso serán las reuniones familiares de marcado carácter gastronómico descritas en las memorias de Narayan, Li y Nguyen, *Monsoon Diary*, *Daughter of Heaven* y *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, respectivamente. De acuerdo con autores como Sidney Mintz o Susan Kalcik, la comida constituye uno de los marcadores étnicos y culturales más significativos y duraderos; por ello, las escenas de comensalidad presentes en estas tres obras ilustran la conciencia de comunidad de sus personajes. Esto se estudia, en primer lugar, en la obra autobiográfica de Narayan, unas memorias en las que las implicaciones sociales de la comida ayudan a trazar el recorrido vital de su autora como un conjunto de acontecimientos culinarios que la unen a su comunidad india, tanto antes como después de emigrar a los EE.UU. Desde el ritual del *choru-unnaal* (la primera comida sólida del recién nacido) hasta la humilde cena en casa de un emigrante Keralite en Nueva York, pasando por los sabrosos viajes en el *Bombay Express*, la comida funciona en esta obra como el elemento unificador que crea y/o mantiene lazos culturales y afectivos. Como veremos en el segundo apartado del capítulo, las memorias de Li y Nguyen nos ofrecen también la oportunidad de detenernos en las representaciones literarias del ritual culinario del año nuevo lunar celebrado por las familias chinas y vietnamitas en EE.UU. Los

alimentos preparados y consumidos en el *Chunjié* o *Tet* (las celebraciones del año nuevo en China y Vietnam, respectivamente) contienen mensajes de prosperidad que palían el dolor asociado al pasado. El trasfondo de estas obras, ensombrecido por el trauma del exilio y la guerra, hace que este ritual culinario cobre una gran importancia simbólica y un poder curativo. Por un lado, como apunta Mary Lukanuski, el hecho de compartir con otros miembros de la comunidad diaspórica los sabores asociados a la vida antes del exilio o emigración ayuda a recrear un trasunto del hogar que la primera generación tuvo que dejar atrás. Por otro lado, como demuestro en mi tesis, estas ocasiones festivas se convierten también en un escenario en el que la memoria colectiva es transmitida a las generaciones más jóvenes como una suerte de legado cultural que recuerda a la noción de “postmemoria” propuesta por Marianne Hirsch.

La dimensión social de la comida en la literatura asiático-americana va más allá de la comensalidad armoniosa para actuar también como indicador de los conflictos que emergen entre diferentes generaciones de una misma comunidad étnica. Esta cuestión fue explorada por primera vez en 1993 por Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, en cuya obra pionera *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* sostiene que buena parte de la literatura asiático-americana se articula alrededor de metáforas culinarias que simbolizan la complicada relación entre los emigrantes nacidos en Asia y los descendientes de estos, nacidos en EE.UU. Wong asocia la primera generación con una filosofía de vida que ella denomina “Necessity” (necesidad) y que refleja las dificultades inherentes a la emigración, así como la discriminación racial que los emigrantes asiáticos se encuentran a su llegada al país de “acogida”. La dureza de estas circunstancias y la fortaleza del inmigrante suelen simbolizarse en la literatura asiático-americana

mediante imágenes hiperbólicas que representan a la primera generación como “big eaters” (omnívoros) dispuestos a digerir y extraer nutrientes de casi cualquier criatura. Esta orientación hacia la supervivencia choca frontalmente con el comportamiento más americanizado de la segunda generación, una cuestión a la que Wong se refiere como “Extravagance” (derroche, exceso). Su falta de empatía con la generación emigrante, así como sus deseos de ir más allá de las necesidades básicas y disfrutar de lo que la sociedad de consumo les ofrece, convierte a la generación nacida en EE.UU. en lo que Wong ha dado en llamar “finicky palates” (paladares exquisitos). Mi intención en este cuarto capítulo es comprobar si el paradigma de “Necessity vs. Extravagance” sigue siendo aplicable a obras publicadas con posterioridad al estudio de Wong. Para ello, me centraré en un abanico de textos que presentan el conflicto generacional en primer plano: *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* de Yamanaka, *Monkey King* de Chao, *Eating Chinese Food Naked* de Ng, *Daughter of Heaven* de Li, *Bento Box in the Heartland* de Furiya, y *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* de Nguyen. Las metáforas culinarias que trufan estos textos nos llevan a concluir que los desencuentros entre diferentes generaciones siguen tomando un cariz gastronómico puesto que continúan siendo narrativizados a través de las figuras del “big eater” y el “finicky palate”. Mientras que la actitud sacrificada y pragmática de la generación emigrante se representa en todas ellas mediante escenas de consumo escaso u omnívoro, la atracción hacia lo superfluo de la generación nacida en EE.UU. sigue estando ligada al tropo de las “golosinas”. Prueba de ello es la fascinación de personajes como Bich o Leslie por las aparentemente triviales “lunch bags” (bolsas de la merienda), las cuales constituyen, en estas y en muchas otras obras, un indicador de sus crisis de identidad.

Por último, el quinto capítulo de esta tesis doctoral explora las representaciones literarias de los viajes de ida y vuelta emprendidos por los emigrantes o refugiados asiáticos mediante un estudio pormenorizado de las imágenes culinarias alrededor de las cuales se estructuran estos desplazamientos. Así pues, inspirándome en la noción del “shock of arrival” de Meena Alexander, el primer apartado de este último capítulo de análisis explora el choque cultural que la/el protagonista experimenta a su llegada a los EE.UU. en *Among the White Moon Faces*, de Lim, y *Fasting, Feasting*, de Desai. La sociedad de consumo y sus efectos en los hábitos alimenticios de la población estadounidense constituyen una de las principales dificultades en el proceso de integración de los personajes en su nuevo entorno. La “hiperrealidad” y “superabundancia” de la que hablaba Jean Baudrillard en *Simulacra and Simulation* y *The Consumer Society* se ven reflejadas en las obras de Lim y Desai, cuyos relatos del “shock of arrival” tienen mucho que ver con el entorno del supermercado, la quintaesencia del capitalismo tardío y del consumo de masas. En el caso de *Among the White Moon Faces*, Shirley, una malaya-americana de ascendencia china, sufre un choque cultural a su llegada a Massachusetts que se ve agravado por los traumas que arrastra después de una infancia y juventud marcadas por los malos tratos, la pobreza y el abandono. Como se demuestra en este capítulo, el hambre que acompañó a Shirley durante el tiempo que pasó en Malasia la persigue también en su nueva vida en EE.UU., ya que la ruptura y desarraigo que siente se traducen en sensaciones conflictivas de hambre insaciable y desdén hacia la comida americana. De manera similar, Desai presenta en su novela a Arun, un estudiante indio cuya reticencia hacia la cultura estadounidense tiene mucho que ver con lo que Marc Augé denomina los

“hiperespacios” de consumo frenético. La plasticidad y artificialidad de la comida, así como los desórdenes alimenticios juegan un papel central en esta obra. En ella, el personaje principal no consigue acostumbrarse a las contradicciones de una sociedad que parece obsesionada por la abundancia de alimentos al mismo tiempo que promueve, en palabras de Joan Jacobs Brumberg y Ruth Striegel-Moore, la “obesofobia”. Tanto Lim como Desai hacen una reflexión acerca de los conceptos distorsionados de saciedad y hambre en el contexto de los EE.UU., donde el camino hacia la felicidad parece radicar no tanto en la satisfacción de las necesidades como en las necesidades en sí mismas.

Para cerrar la estructura circular que este último capítulo de análisis plantea, el segundo apartado del mismo se centra en la representación literaria del retorno del emigrante a su tierra natal. Mediante el estudio de este tema en “It’s Possible”, de Chin, y *Catfish and Mandala*, de Pham, se pone de relieve el carácter transnacional de algunos segmentos de la comunidad asiático-americana, cuyas relaciones con sus países de origen se mantienen vivas gracias a los avances en las comunicaciones y el transporte. Sin embargo, como ilustran las obras de Chin y Pham, esta creciente movilidad entre continentes no siempre asegura un retorno satisfactorio, puesto que, de acuerdo con Salman Rushdie, los lugares a donde los emigrantes desean volver no son más que “imaginary homelands” (hogares imaginarios) que pertenecen a un pasado reinventado. Este desajuste entre los recuerdos y la realidad hacen que el viaje de vuelta a China y Vietnam de los protagonistas de las obras de Chin y Pham, respectivamente, se convierta en una sucesión de desilusiones y descubrimientos amargos que ambas narrativas captan en una serie de imágenes de indigestión. De este modo, este último apartado propone un análisis de los festines frustrados y las digestiones

difíciles que simbolizan el “shock de retorno” de los protagonistas de ambos textos.

En definitiva, con esta tesis doctoral me he propuesto poner de manifiesto el potencial interpretativo de las imágenes culinarias en la literatura asiático-americana en relación con cuestiones como la identidad diaspórica, la memoria individual y colectiva, los conflictos intergeneracionales o los choques culturales. Durante mi periplo a través de la realidad y la ficción de esta comunidad étnica, he podido comprobar que, tal y como apunto en la conclusión, el estudio del tropo de la comida en la literatura asiático-americana siempre será un “banquete inacabado”. Como sucede con los sabores y los aromas, cuya diversidad parece no tener límites, la versatilidad y capacidad de reinención de las metáforas culinarias ofrece un mosaico de posibilidades tan amplio en esta tradición literaria que siempre será una fuente inagotable de “diasporic tastecapes”.

Os sabores da diáspora: comida e identidade na literatura asiático-americana

Esta tese de doutoramento busca afondar no mundo culinario representado nunha selección de obras literarias escritas por autores asiático-americanos, entre os que se encontran Jhumpa Lahiri, May-lee Chai, Shoba Narayan, Leslie Li, Bich Minh Nguyen, Linda Furiya, Mei Ng, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Patricia Chao, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Anita Desai, Sara Chin e Andrew X. Pham. Mediante a análise destas obras en conxunto tratarei de probar que a complexa relación que os emigrantes asiáticos manteñen coa comida no imaxinario colectivo americano ten traspasado os límites entre a realidade e a ficción, alcanzando novos horizontes simbólicos nesta tradición literaria. Considero que a ensarillada rede de metáforas culinarias que se espallan nestes textos, cuxa presenza vai frecuentemente asociada a conflitos de tipo cultural, étnico ou racial, ofrece a posibilidade de explorar as historias reais e imaxinarias derivadas das experiencias desta minoría étnica, a miúdo racializada a través dos seus hábitos alimenticios. Así pois, o obxectivo deste traballo é contribuír ao aínda incipiente estudo do tropo da comida no contexto literario asiático-americano mediante unha aproximación que combina teorizacións previas con novos puntos de partida que achegan estas “metáforas comestibles” a cuestións derivadas da natureza transnacional desta comunidade.

As obras seleccionadas para este traballo de investigación non pretenden erixirse como representantes de toda a literatura asiático-americana, senón que a miña elección baseouse en criterios temáticos e de interpretabilidade. É dicir, para demostrar a panoplia de significados e connotacións que o tropo da comida

entraña, escollín unha selección de textos que presentan una ampla variedade temática. Desta maneira, como veremos a continuación, a análise do compoñente culinario nas obras dos autores arriba mencionados vai desde o más íntimo e persoal, como son os sabores, a memoria e os sentimentos, ata as súas implicacións socio-culturais para a comunidade inmigrante.

O carácter ineludible e cotián da comida, así como o seu potencial simbólico na literatura fan necesaria a diversidade de puntos de vista para o seu estudo en profundidade. É por iso polo que o aparato teórico no que se apoia a miña análise é eminentemente ecléctico. Isto pode observarse no primeiro capítulo da tese doutoral, o cal expón en tres apartados diferentes, aínda que intimamente relacionados entre si, os fundamentos teóricos sobre os que se alicerza a miña investigación. O primeiro destes apartados ofrece un achegamento ás nocións de etnicidade e raza mediante a comparación e contraste das teorías de Ronald Cohen, Frederik Barth ou Anthony P. Cohen, entre outros. Tendo en conta que o obxecto de estudo desta tese de doutoramento é a comunidade asiático-americana, as aclaracións conceptuais iniciais dan paso ao tratamento da situación das minorías étnicas no contexto socio-político dos Estados Unidos de América. Cuestións como a integración da poboación inmigrante, a alteridade, as categorías raciais e a supremacía branca obsérvanse neste apartado desde a perspectiva de autores como Werner Sollors, Alan Wald, ou Michael Omi e Howard Winant. Ademais, como non podía ser doutro xeito, nesta primeira sección inclúo unha panorámica da historia da emigración asiática a EE.UU., baseándome nos estudos dun amplo elenco de críticos entre os que destacan Ronald Takaki, Sucheng Chan, Yen Le Espiritu, ou Lisa Lowe. É precisamente esta última a que subliña a natureza heteroxénea da

comunidade asiática asentada en EE.UU., que se caracteriza, segundo Lowe, por unha grande capacidade de adaptación e reinvención de acordo co cambiante contexto socio-cultural no que se enmarca.

O segundo subapartado deste primeiro capítulo senta as bases dos conceptos de diáspora e multiculturalismo que estarán tan presentes ao longo da miña tese. Así pois, tras una pequena introdución sobre estas nocións de acordo cos postulados de William Safran, Stuart Hall ou Henry A. Giroux, entre outros, este apartado contextualiza a aplicabilidade dos conceptos de diáspora e multiculturalismo no marco actual da globalización e o transnacionalismo. Apóioime para isto nas teorías sobre o “world of flows” (mundo fluído) de Arjun Appadurai, así como no paradigma de “roots and routes” (raíces e rutas) de James Clifford. Ambos autores apuntan cara a unha concepción da identidade que, debido ás novas migracións multidireccionais, transcende o territorial para complicar a relación entre comunidade e localización xeográfica. Neste contexto de comunidades “desterritorializadas”, como diría John Tomlinson, o multiculturalismo encóntrase con moitos detractores que consideran que a ideoloxía de tolerancia cara á diversidade cultural na que se basea non é máis ca un síntoma do apetito da sociedade de consumo polo novo e o exótico.

Finalmente, o último apartado deste primeiro capítulo versa sobre a comida nas súas múltiples facetas, e será aquí onde se constate aínda máis o carácter ecléctico do aparato teórico no que se apoia esta tese de doutoramento. En efecto, esta sección ofrece un repaso polo variado tapiz de teorías e puntos de vista desde os que o estudo da comida, como elemento cultural, ten sido abordado: desde as aproximacións máis puramente antropolóxicas de Mary Douglas, ata as teorizacións de tipo sociolóxico de Deborah Lupton, pasando

polos estudos sobre a comida e a memoria de David Sutton, o obxectivo deste apartado é sacar á luz o potencial simbólico da comida para así afrontar a súa interpretación en textos autobiográficos e de ficción que describen a experiencia do inmigrante asiático e da súa comunidade diaspórica. Calquera introdución ao tropo da comida na literatura desta minoría étnica estaría incompleta sen un percorrido polo papel da poboación asiático-americana na industria alimentaria. Así pois, o capítulo teórico péchase cunha panorámica das complexas circunstancias socio-políticas que rodean este grupo dentro do mercado da “comida étnica”.

Unha vez establecido o marco teórico no que esta tese se sitúa, os demais capítulos levan a cabo a análise textual propiamente dita. Para comezar, o segundo capítulo pretende explorar o binomio “comida-memoria” en “Mrs. Sen’s” e *Hapa Girl*, de Lahiri e Chai, respectivamente. O estudo conxunto destas dúas obras desde o punto de vista culinario resulta especialmente interesante, posto que os personaxes de ambas narrativas presentan un comportamento case obsesivo con respecto á comida e ás lembranzas. O primeiro apartado deste capítulo explora a relación que os protagonistas, Mrs. Sen e Winberg, establecen coa súa identidade étnica e o seu pasado a través das memorias desencadeadas por certos sabores e olores. O meu acercamento a esta cuestión está inspirado, entre outras, nas teorías de Sutton, quen considera que o gusto e o olfacto son os sentidos máis enigmáticos e peculiares, dado que teñen o poder de reter os nosos recordos e evocalos de maneira caprichosa. A paisaxe culinaria da memoria é un dos temas centrais das obras de Lahiri e Chai, cuxos escenarios recrean situacións de desarraigo cultural e emocional que levan aos seus protagonistas a utilizaren a comida como “medio de transporte” cara ao pasado. Accións tan

aparentemente triviais como tallar verduras co seu *bonti* (o coitelo típico bengalí), ou mercar e cociñar peixe fresco convértense nos piares da vida de Mrs. Sen na diáspora, xa que estas prácticas culinarias representan a súa identidade e o seu legado cultural. Do mesmo modo, Chai dedica parte das súas memorias a narrar a historia de seu pai Winberg; a súa vida antes e despois de emigrar deixou unha importante pegada na súa bagaxe emocional. A complicada relación co seu pasado fai que Winberg se embarque nunha procura ofuscada dos sabores que fan de ponte entre a súa vida no Medio Oeste americano e o seu pasado en China e Taiwán, establecendo conexións mnemónicas e sensoriais que o levan ao borde da loucura. É precisamente a compoñente irracional da saudade, presente non só na obra de Chai, senón tamén no relato de Lahiri, a que se erixe como tema central do segundo apartado deste capítulo. Mentres que o comportamento de Mrs. Sen con respecto ao peixe a leva a pór en perigo a súa propia vida, dunha maneira case humorística, Chai describe a obsesión de seu pai polos restaurantes chineses; unha fixación compulsiva que o leva a percorrer centos de quilómetros na procura de “aquele sabor” que finalmente restaure as súas memorias e cure as súas feridas. Tanto Lahiri como Chai exploran os límites e abismos da morriña do inmigrante, que cae na trampa dunha mirada excesivamente idealizada cara ao pasado. Xa que logo, a miña análise dos desenlaces agrídoces que presentan estas dúas obras apóiase, entre outras, nas teorías de Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan acerca do carácter evasivo da autenticidade, así como do efémero do concepto de “fogar”.

Se o segundo capítulo se centraba principalmente no ámbito do individuo, o terceiro encamiñase cara a unha concepción social do culinario. Por conseguinte, o obxecto de estudo neste caso serán as reunións familiares de marcado carácter

gastronómico descritas nas memorias de Narayan, Li e Nguyen, *Monsoon Diary*, *Daughter of Heaven* e *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, respectivamente. De acordo con autores como Sidney Mintz ou Susan Kalcik, a comida constitúe un dos marcadores étnicos e culturais máis significativos e duradeiros; por iso, as escenas de comensalidade presentes nestas tres obras ilustran a conciencia de comunidade dos seus personaxes. Isto estúdase, en primeiro lugar, na obra autobiográfica de Narayan, unhas memorias nas que as implicacións sociais da comida axudan a trazar o percorrido vital da súa autora como un conxunto de acontecementos culinarios que a unen á súa comunidade india, tanto antes como despois de emigrar aos EE.UU. Desde o ritual do *choru-unna* (a primeira comida sólida do bebé) ata a humilde cea na casa dun emigrante Keralite en Nova York, pasando polas saborosas viaxes no *Bombay Express*, a comida funciona nesta obra como o elemento unificador que crea e/ou mantén lazos culturais e afectivos. Como veremos no segundo apartado do capítulo, as memorias de Li e Nguyen ofrécennos tamén a oportunidade de detérmonos nas representacións literarias do ritual culinario do ano novo lunar celebrado polas familias chinesas e vietnamitas en EE.UU. Os alimentos preparados e consumidos no *Chunjié* ou *Tet* (as celebracións do ano novo en China e Vietnam, respectivamente) conteñen mensaxes de prosperidade que palían a dor asociada ao pasado. O trasfondo destas obras, ensombrecido polo trauma do exilio e a guerra, fai que este ritual culinario adquira unha gran importancia simbólica e un poder curativo. Por un lado, como apunta Mary Lukanuski, o feito de compartir con outros membros da comunidade diaspórica os sabores asociados á vida antes do exilio ou emigración axuda a recrear un trasunto do fogar que a primeira xeración tivo que deixar atrás. Por outro lado, como demostro na miña tese, estas ocasións festivas convértense

tamén nun escenario no que a memoria colectiva é transmitida ás xeracións máis novas coma unha sorte de legado cultural que recorda a noción de “postmemoria” proposta por Marianne Hirsch.

A dimensión social da comida na literatura asiático-americana vai máis alá da comensalidade harmoniosa para actuar tamén como indicador dos conflitos que emerxen entre diferentes xeracións dunha mesma comunidade étnica. Esta cuestión foi explorada por primeira vez en 1993 por Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, en cuxa obra pioneira *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* sostén que boa parte da literatura asiático-americana se articula arredor de metáforas culinarias que simbolizan a complicada relación entre os emigrantes nados en Asia e os descendentes destes, nados en EE.UU. Wong asocia a primeira xeración cunha filosofía de vida que ela denomina “Necessity” (necesidade) e que reflicte as dificultades inherentes á emigración, así como a discriminación racial que os emigrantes asiáticos se encontran á súa chegada ao país de “acollida”. A dureza destas circunstancias e a fortaleza do inmigrante adoitan simbolizarse na literatura asiático-americana mediante imaxes hiperbólicas que representan a primeira xeración como “big eaters” (omnívoros) dispostos a dixerir e extraer nutrientes de case calquera criatura. Esta orientación cara á supervivencia choca de fronte co comportamento máis americanizado da segunda xeración, unha cuestión á que Wong se refire como “Extravagance” (derroche, exceso). A súa falta de empatía coa xeración emigrante, así como os seus desexos de ir máis alá das necesidades básicas e gozar do que a sociedade de consumo lles ofrece, converte a xeración nacida en EE.UU. no que Wong deu en chamar “finicky palates” (padais exquisitos). A miña intención neste cuarto capítulo é comprobar se o paradigma de “Necessity vs. Extravagance” segue a

ser aplicable a obras publicadas con posterioridade ao estudo de Wong. Para iso, centrareime nun abano de textos que presentan o conflito xeracional en primeiro plano: *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* de Yamanaka, *Monkey King* de Chao, *Eating Chinese Food Naked* de Ng, *Daughter of Heaven* de Li, *Bento Box in the Heartland* de Furiya, e *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* de Nguyen. As metáforas culinarias que trufan estes textos lévannos a concluír que os desencontros entre diferentes xeracións seguen tomando un cariz gastronómico posto que continúan sendo narrativizados a través das figuras do “big eater” e o “finicky palate”. Mentres que a actitude sacrificada e pragmática da xeración emigrante se representa en todas elas mediante escenas de consumo escaso ou omnívoro, a atracción cara ao superfluo da xeración nacida en EE.UU. segue estando ligada ao tropo das “lambetadas”. Proba diso é a fascinación de personaxes como Bich ou Leslie polas aparentemente triviais “lunch bags” (bolsas da merenda), as cales constitúen, nestas e en moitas outras obras, un indicador das súas crises de identidade.

Por último, o quinto capítulo desta tese doutoral explora as representacións literarias das viaxes de ida e volta emprendidas polos emigrantes ou refuxiados asiáticos mediante un estudo pormenorizado das imaxes culinarias arredor das cales se estruturan estes desprazamentos. Así pois, inspirándome na noción do “shock of arrival” de Meena Alexander, o primeiro apartado deste derradeiro capítulo de análise explora o choque cultural que a/o protagonista experimenta á súa chegada aos EE.UU. en *Among the White Moon Faces*, de Lim, e *Fasting, Feasting*, de Desai. A sociedade de consumo e os seus efectos nos hábitos alimenticios da poboación estadounidense constitúen unha das principais dificultades no proceso de integración dos personaxes no seu novo entorno. A

“hiperrealidade” e “superabundancia” da que falaba Jean Baudrillard en *Simulacra and Simulation* e *The Consumer Society* vense reflectidas nas obras de Lim e Desai, cuxos relatos do “shock of arrival” teñen moito que ver co entorno do supermercado, a quintaesencia do capitalismo tardío e do consumo de masas. No caso de *Among the White Moon Faces*, Shirley, unha malaisiana-americana de ascendencia chinesa, sofre un choque cultural á súa chegada a Massachusetts que se ve agravado polos traumas que arrastra despois dunha infancia e xuventude marcadas polos malos tratos, a pobreza e o abandono. Como se demostra neste capítulo, a fame que acompañou a Shirley durante o tempo que pasou en Malaisia perséguea tamén na súa nova vida en EE.UU., xa que a ruptura e desarraigo que sente tradúcese en sensacións conflitivas de fame insaciable e desdén cara á comida americana. De maneira similar, Desai presenta na súa novela a Arun, un estudante indio do que a reticencia cara á cultura estadounidense ten moito que ver co que Marc Augé denomina os “hiperespazos” de consumo frenético. A plasticidade e artificialidade da comida, así como as desordes alimenticias xogan un papel central nesta obra. Nela, o personaxe principal non consegue afacerse ás contradicións dunha sociedade que parece obsesionada pola abundancia de alimentos ao mesmo tempo que promove, en palabras de Joan Jacobs Brumberg e Ruth Striegel-Moore, a “obesofobia”. Tanto Lim como Desai fan unha reflexión acerca dos conceptos distorsionados de saciedade e fame no contexto dos EE.UU., onde o camiño cara á felicidade parece radicar non tanto na satisfacción das necesidades como nas necesidades en si mesmas.

Para cerrar a estrutura circular que neste derradeiro capítulo de análise se establece, o segundo apartado do mesmo céntrase na representación literaria do

retorno do emigrante á súa terra natal. Mediante o estudo deste tema en “It’s Possible”, de Chin, e *Catfish and Mandala*, de Pham, ponse de relevo o carácter transnacional de algúns segmentos da comunidade asiático-americana, da que as relacións cos seus países de orixe se manteñen vivas grazas aos avances nas comunicacións e ao transporte. Porén, como ilustran as obras de Chin e Pham, esta crecente mobilidade entre continentes non sempre asegura un retorno satisfactorio, posto que, de acordo con Salman Rushdie, os lugares a onde os emigrantes desexan volver non son máis que “imaginary homelands” (fogares imaxinarios) que pertencen a un pasado reinventado. Este desaxuste entre as lembranzas e a realidade fai que a viaxe de volta a China e Vietnam dos protagonistas das obras de Chin e Pham, respectivamente, se converta nunha sucesión de desilusións e descubrimentos amargos que ambas narrativas captan nunha serie de imaxes de indigestión. Deste modo, este último apartado propón unha análise dos festíns frustrados e as dixestións difíciles que simbolizan o “shock de retorno” dos protagonistas de ambos os dous textos.

En definitiva, con esta tese de doutoramento propúxenme pór de manifesto o potencial interpretativo das imaxes culinarias na literatura asiático-americana en relación con cuestións como a identidade diaspórica, a memoria individual e colectiva, os conflitos interxeracionais ou os choques culturais. Durante o meu periplo a través da realidade e a ficción desta comunidade étnica, puíden comprobar que, tal e como apunto na conclusión, o estudo do tropo da comida na literatura asiático-americana sempre será un “banquete inacabado”. Como sucede cos sabores e os aromas, dos que a diversidade parece non ter límites, a versatilidade e capacidade de reinvencción das metáforas culinarias ofrece un

mosaico de possibilidades tan amplo nesta tradição literaria que sempre será unha fonte inesgotable de “diasporic tastecapes”.

