Representations of Food and Abjection in Asian American Fictions

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his/her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Asian American literature constructs and negotiates Asian American cultural identities through a series of encounters with food tropes. By looking into images of food preparation, serving and consumption in Asian American fictions, I investigate the ways in which Asian American subjects respond to US racial views of Asian American ethnicity in relation to body, gender, sex and class. In particular, as it considers the ways in which these fictions handle dominant US culture, the thesis focuses on their response to this culture's longstanding tendency to regard Asian culinary habits and conventions as exotic and disgusting. I argue that Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject illuminates the complex ways in which Asian American literary culture negotiates US hegemonic representations of Asian culinary tradition. I suggest that the abjection of Asian foods, bodies and subjectivities works against the received modes of racial othering in US culture, allowing new identity formations to emerge. The Asian foods and immigrants that are deemed exotic and loathsome come to provide a discursive space through which Asian American writers can begin to unsettle the boundaries that maintain US white supremacy. The thesis looks into how the literary representations of food tropes by Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Ruth Ozeki, Monique Truong and David Wong Louie reinvigorate and challenge the varied exoticization and repulsion of Asian foods and subjectivities. Through intersectional readings of the alimentary scenes, and avoiding causational links between food and identity, I examine how these fictions delineate a metaphorical and metonymic process of incorporating and disavowing Asian American characters by interlinking food with a set of critical terrains such as gender, class, sex, colonialism, domesticity and nationhood. But these texts also share a central determination to interrogate how the abjection of Asian American food and subjectivities provides Asian American characters with suggestive material through which they seek to displace stable racial categories and challenge dominant reductive clichés about ethnic food. In this body of fictional work, the diverse presentations of the subjects' strategies of resistance and subversion further draw attention to the complicated workings of a set of Asian American cultural politics, including inter-generational reconciliation, feminist alliance, transnational feminism, queer diaspora, culinary authenticity and collective cultural memory.

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Introduction

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a leading text of the Asian American literary tradition, Kingston recollects a childhood memory of how her Chinese mother Brave Orchid fed her and her siblings with most unlikely creatures, including "racoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub." Brave Orchid's self-sufficient feeding clearly inspires a strong sense of filth and disgust in her young American-born children, who, as their mother dismembered the animals, "used to hide under their beds with [their] fingers in our ears to shut out the bird screams"[1] and who held bags of candy over their noses to mask the smell of the skunk. Over the mother's earnest urging that she and her siblings "eat," Kingston confesses that she would rather "live on plastic" than consume such foods, which she regards as an affront to American food standards.[2] Her rejection of maternal cooking thus seems inseparable from her affiliation with mainstream American culture. She rejects Orchid's offerings of "canned peaches, real peaches, beans wrapped in taro leaves, cookies, Thermos bottles." Instead, she is seen "sneaking hamburgers," a staple American food.[3] Like her siblings she prefers to hang around in coffee shops at the airport than wait with her elders for the arrival of her aunt. Her assimilation into the values of American consumerism seems inseparable from her mounting disgust with the wide repertoire and improvisations of her mother's Chinese food.

[1] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (London: Pan, 1977), p. 85.
[2] Kingston, p. 87.
[3] Kingston, p. 105.

Yet this recollection of Brave Orchid's cooking can also be read from another perspective. *The Woman Warrior,* while remembering the original feelings of disgust it inspired in Kingston, also associates her mother's eclectic powers of cooking and consumption with her ability to triumph over the "Sitting Ghost," the ancestral presence that looms over the family, as well as the white Americans who dominate the surrounding Californian society. As Kingston suggests, "my mother could contend against the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them."[4] In including American animals such as racoons and skunks in Brave Orchid's repertoire, *The Woman Warrior* also suggests that the Chinese mother, very much like those African American women under slavery who hunted squirrel and other wild animals as a way of supplementing their meagre diet, is adapting to her new American circumstances, displaying a toughness and resourcefulness that can withstand the Sinophobia of the New World.[5] In this light, for Brave Orchid, although the image of racoons and skunks is a designation formulated and deployed to belittle Chinese immigrants based on historic stereotypical myths of Chinese eating, it also offers the daughters a productive construction of Chinese American female identity, an alternative to US homogenisation and victimization that outlasts their initial feelings of disgust.

*The Woman Warrior'*s ambivalent recollection of maternal feeding, then, marks a process of repulsion for the American-born daughters, an attempt to differentiate something that is deemed repulsively other and to cast it out of their bodily boundary. Chinese maternity, through the accumulation of disgusting foods, is here paradoxically rejected yet absorbed into the identity construction of Brave Orchid's

[4] Kingston, p. 87.
[5] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 547.

daughter, who, in a later scene of reconciliation, in time also learns "how to kill food, how to skin and pluck it."[6] Kingston's dual presentation of this eating motif presents a series of puzzles: how does this scene's central idea --- its association of Chinese identity with culinary nausea and disgust --- become legible to Kingston and her readers alike, offering them a recognizable embodiment of Chinese cultural values that they might reject, valorise, remember and accept? Why and how do these signifiers of racial disgust --- all of which can be traced to nineteenth-century dominant US fears of "yellow peril" and undetected Chinese immigration --- continue to evoke Asian subjection and white supremacy in the Asian American literary imagination? How do *The Woman Warrior* and other key texts from the tradition expose and exploit the contradictory features of this association in contemporary Asian American literature?

Contemporary Asian American literature, like *The Woman Warrior* in particular, constantly invokes and unsettles the leading national US codes that determine which foods are undesirable and which are not. The economic, political and cultural constraints of racialization, inscribed in the language of food consumption, constantly suggest that the leading protagonists of this narrative tradition exist at a variance to American culinary norms. This literature's historic and imagined presentations of gustatory appetites, indigestion and aversion articulates a complicated process in which racial, gender, sexual and class positions undergo constant re-examination. The key works in this tradition also offer insights into the consequences of US institutional racialization, challenging the policing of the binaries between culture and nature, purity and pollution, and humans and animals. I suggest that the literature's common interest in the performance of Asian American characters in US networks of desire

[6] Kingston, p. 99.

and consumption has historically, repeatedly yet not uniformly followed the characteristic operation of the psychological phenomenon that Julia Kristeva famously termed abjection.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva defines the abject as both a state and a process. As a noun, *the abject* refers to the condition or position of that which is designated loathsome, while, as a verb, *abject* refers to the process by which this designation is made. Yet the process enshrined in the verbal form *abject* is also, for Kristeva, the means by which another kind of subject, "non-abject" in its functioning, is asserted. Only by establishing stable and conceptual borders, "jettisoning" that which is deemed Other, can the subject attain consciousness and define itself in the world. In this dissertation, I suggest that a series of Asian American novels not only dramatize this process of differentiation and self-definition. They also map it onto competing American and Asian codes and mythologies of food conventions and taboos. The fictions' collective alimentary investment in depicting scenes of realistic and symbolic jettisoning of Asian American characters into the other becomes key to grasping the economic, political and cultural displacements of the racialized subjects. This systematic abjection of the Asian American characters, often originating in tropes such as maternal feeding, cannibalistic eating, animalization and objectification, attempts to bind them with every string of exoticism and foreignness. The dynamic models of abjection that requires the presence and jettisoning of Asian American subjects point to the heavy American reliance on abjecting Asian American food and body to maintain its symbolic coherence and constitute pure and exclusive American subject formation.

It is important to note that such a negotiation of the abject, for Kristeva, does not lead toward a stable state of selfhood and subjectivity. That which is abject, while

being located on the border between self and other, also disrespects that border. Drawing on Mary Douglas's suggestion that a subject is built on its recognition and rejection of defilement and uncleanliness, Kristeva argues: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[7] In the French feminist's mind, therefore, it is this in-betweenness and ambiguousness of the borders that disrupts the border between self and other. In the following chapters, I trace the response Asian American novelists have made to this racist tradition, recapturing the narratives and voices of Asian American immigrants who have historically been subjected to these stereotypical myths and who have used them to refashion new identities even from the most marginal of positions. I contend that these novels, through their subtle and overt references and responses to Asian American as jettisoned others, form contested strategies against institutionalised repulsions that attest to a host of racial, sexual and class displacements. This exploration of the tenuous yet fraught struggle between foreignness and assimilation, and between visibility and invisibility, thus leads me to argue against stable historical references and to draw attention to the psychic and symbolic dimensions of the Asian American characters' affective culinary experiences and cultural practices.

Through readings of five contemporary Asian American fictions, this thesis uncovers a new aspect of the literary tradition, in which Asian American cultural identities are constructed and negotiated in the difficult process of assimilation unfolded by a series of encounters with food and abjection. I examine images of food preparation, serving and consumption to show how the Asian subjects respond to US

[7] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

racial ideologies and relate them to the intimate or inner workings of body, gender and class. My intersectional reading of food explores how Asian American literature has negotiated a US politics of eating in which certain cultural myths of Asian American food and immigrants feed an Orientalising appetite for alienation, exoticization, commodification and alienation. In particular, I show how these racial forms of othering are experienced by Asian American subjects who, in a variety of different contexts of domestic, public, transnational and colonial settings, undergo a metaphorical and metonymical process of incorporation and disavowal. I further argue that, underlying these negotiations of culinary and bodily hegemony, the affective powers that are often drawn from the ritualistic process of abjection unsettle the established boundaries that enact exclusionist whiteness. As we will see in these fictions, such affective powers, formed through culinary acts and their charged symbols, provide subordinate Asian subjects with sources of opposition to the constraints of the American identity hierarchy. The authors' topological language of alimentation alters the normative systems of eating and racial taxonomy, and more significantly, draws attention to the complex entanglements of a set of articulated concepts: inter-generational incorporation, (trans)national feminist alliance, queer diaspora, culinary authenticity and collective memories.

The thesis is a contribution to the emerging scholarship of Asian American literary food studies. Despite the fact that food has become an undeniably significant symbol and motif in Asian American literature, few scholars have conducted serious academic engagement with the topic.[8] Important exceptions to this tendency include

[8] We might attribute such absence of critical food studies in material and psychic lives of Asian American literary characters to Frank Chin's controversial definition of Asian American food writing as "food pornography." The Chinese American writer regards it as an exploited form of self-Orientalization that Asian Americans actively promote the "exotic" character of the cuisines as a means of livelihood. Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Cinaman and the Year of the Dragon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981).

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, who conducts pioneering research on food in Asian American literature in the first chapter of her *Reading Asian American Literature* (1993).[9] By paying attention to the contrast between the frugal eating habits of the first-generation immigrants and the more pleasure-driven eating of their descendants, Wong relates the food-related paradigms to the models of necessity and extravagance, the tropes that bespeak the inter-generational conflict and the immigrants' responses to the deprivations and hardships of the white-dominated society. Jennifer Ho's *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (2005), Wenying Xu's *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (2008) and Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Cultures* (2010) follow Wong's steps and delineate the complexities of identity formation in alimentary scenes.[10] Reading contemporary Asian American bildungsroman, Ho examines the intersections between food and identity development of the young protagonist. Xu's subsequent research broadens the critical scopes and interrogates how food negotiates Asian American identities in relation to gender, sex and class. Turning attention to the culinary experiences of South Asian immigrants in America, Mannur engages with particular issues of nostalgia, exoticism and palatability to discuss ways of constructing South Asian diasporic subjectivity. These previous contributions, though evolving in Mannur's work, adopt a broadly symbolic approach, understanding food in a representational manner and hence as only signifying a succession of social or cultural referents. This tendency, exemplified in Wong's assertion that "eating practices … can serve as elaborate mechanisms for encoding and expressing social

[9] Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[10] Jeffier Ann Ho, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawa i'i Press, 2008); Annita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

relationship,"[11] encourages these established works to view the food that appears in Asian-American literature somewhat cursorily and as a sign of various forms of wider identity and racial difference. Missing from the scholarship is a sense that the literary treatment of food is itself rich and transformative, a subject that matters before and beyond its external or referential connotations. Most existing methodologies, then, while aiming to grasp the embodied epiphenomenal role of food, have struggled to fully reflect the ways in which food in Asian American literature itself displays a critical, aesthetic and eco-political capacity to transform or recast the prevailing orthodoxies of race and identity that have been established in minority Asian and dominant US culture alike.

The thesis's exploration of multivalent food scenes seeks to deepen previous critical efforts to examine the relationship between food and identity. This contribution is partly owing to my utilization of abjection as a descriptive paradigm, in which we can understand the complex connections linking the bodily, psychic and social dimensions of food in identity formation. As a simultaneously biologically and culturally defined process, ingesting or loathing food, and their incarnated images, are very often deployed to signify fixed bodily boundaries. This notion can be reflected in the most frequently quoted dictum of eighteenth-century French gastronome Jean Anthelma Brillat-Savarin: "Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are."[12] Yet Kristeva unravels this prevailing belief in the causational relationship between food and identity. Her central suggestion, after all, is that, by rejecting food and other things we label abject, the foundation of an independent self is forged through a repeated act of self-repudiation and self-assertion, and is also at once threatened and

[11] Wong, p. 18.
[12] Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2009), trans. by M.F.K Fisher, p. 15.

compromised. As Kristeva puts it, "since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which I claim to establish *myself* … it is thus *they* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death."[13] What I find profitable in this formulation is that food's abjection crosses the boundary between self and other, blurring the line between subject and object; yet it also allows the subject to filter itself, defining itself as "I" against the "myself" that it renounces and rejects. Hence, the assertion of a self and a body relies very much on "what" we reject and we accept as being absorbed into that body.[14] My alimentary investment in reading body and racial politics not only departs from "what" one likes to eat or expel. It also depends heavily on "where" one eats or cooks and "where" food comes from; "when" the subject eats or cooks under specific social, political and cultural contexts; "how" one consumes or prepares food; "who" one eats food with and "who" one cooks food for. More specifically, the many "whys" of acceptance and rejection of food conjure up many traces of the themes that encompass terrains of gender, class, sex, history and nationhood --- to name a few, hunger, nostalgia, gluttony, devaluation, protest and proactive accommodation. Simply put, my aim to trace the roots of food shows why and how food studies really "matter" for Asian American literary studies, a term that is suggested by Judith Butler to signify the materialistic process of fixing bodily boundaries but is immediately dismissed by the abject conflations of food and body politics.[15]

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[13] Kristeva, p. 3.

[14] One significant theorization of the relationship between food and body can be found in Maggie Kilgour's *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy* of Metaphors *of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[15] In her *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Judith Butler has argued that in considering the body, we understand "the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but *as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter*. That matter is always materialized … has to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucauldian sense." The asserted Foucauldian control of the body, however,

“They Must Go”: Rats and Chinese Immigrants in US Culture

I begin with a brief and necessary reading of the rise of a close relationship forged between abject food and race in the nineteenth century. By tracing the popular myths of rat-eating habits among Chinese immigrants in newspapers, literatures and documents, I hope to examine how American cultural discourses constructed Chinese immigrants in terms suggestive of racial abjection. US cultural habits of classifying some food as loathsome and taboo, I suggest, here generated a narrative that spilt into contemporary political and cultural discussion and justified an emergent belief that Chinese people in general, and Coolie labourers in particular, were immoral and pathological. This distinct racist ideology, fuelling calls to defend moral and domestic standards and to purify the public realm, in turn worked to reinforce the dominant belief in the inherent civility of the white American diet as part of a contemporary consolidation and normalisation of American white supremacy. Yet this abjection of Chinese food and identity also suggested a capacity to confound and contest these assertions of supremacy. Hidden beneath the abjectness of rats and their racist association with Chinese cuisine was a challenge to the puritanical customs of contemporary American dining, and indeed to the belief in the purity of whiteness that it helped to uphold.

Historical scholarship on the development of Chinese food in America has established that a socio-historic categorization of Chinese immigrants as cruel consumers of inedible animals was deeply rooted in American rhetoric in the late

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is rejected in her brief reference to how abject functions in the gender subjectivity in the early pages of the book: “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ zones is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.” Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 69 & 3.

nineteenth-century and the early twentieth-century.[16] One newspaper caricature from 1877 exemplifies the stereotypical pattern. In 1877, only fourteen years after Abraham Lincoln had pointed toward future national reconciliation in his Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1863. US political cartoonist George Frederick Keller produced a variation on this new national holiday for the Californian newspaper *The San Francisco Wasp*.[17] Entitled "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving," his caricature depicts a scene of Thanksgiving dinner held to celebrate not only the ongoing reconciliation of North and South but also the growing multi-ethnic variety of American national culture. Keller brings a diverse cast of men around a single long table above a carpet that bears the inscription of "US." Each feast on a dish that stereotypically reflects his own national or racial background. Entrenching their separate ethnic identities, a German dines on sausages, and a Frenchman delights in frog legs and wine. Sitting next to these European diners, however, is Keller's Native American guest—a stereotypical Red Indian who, left without cutlery or even a chair, crouches down and gnaws away at a human hand. Beside him, an American of African descent gorges on a watermelon. Again, Brillat-Savarin's dictum "tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" encapsulates a direct and causational linkage between what the diners eat and their inner characters: the Indian is savage and the African is lazy and childish, while the French arrival to America is a strange gourmet and the German a gluttonous gourmand. This sharp contrast between the eating habits of different ethnic groups contributes to the picture's association of the national reconciliation of

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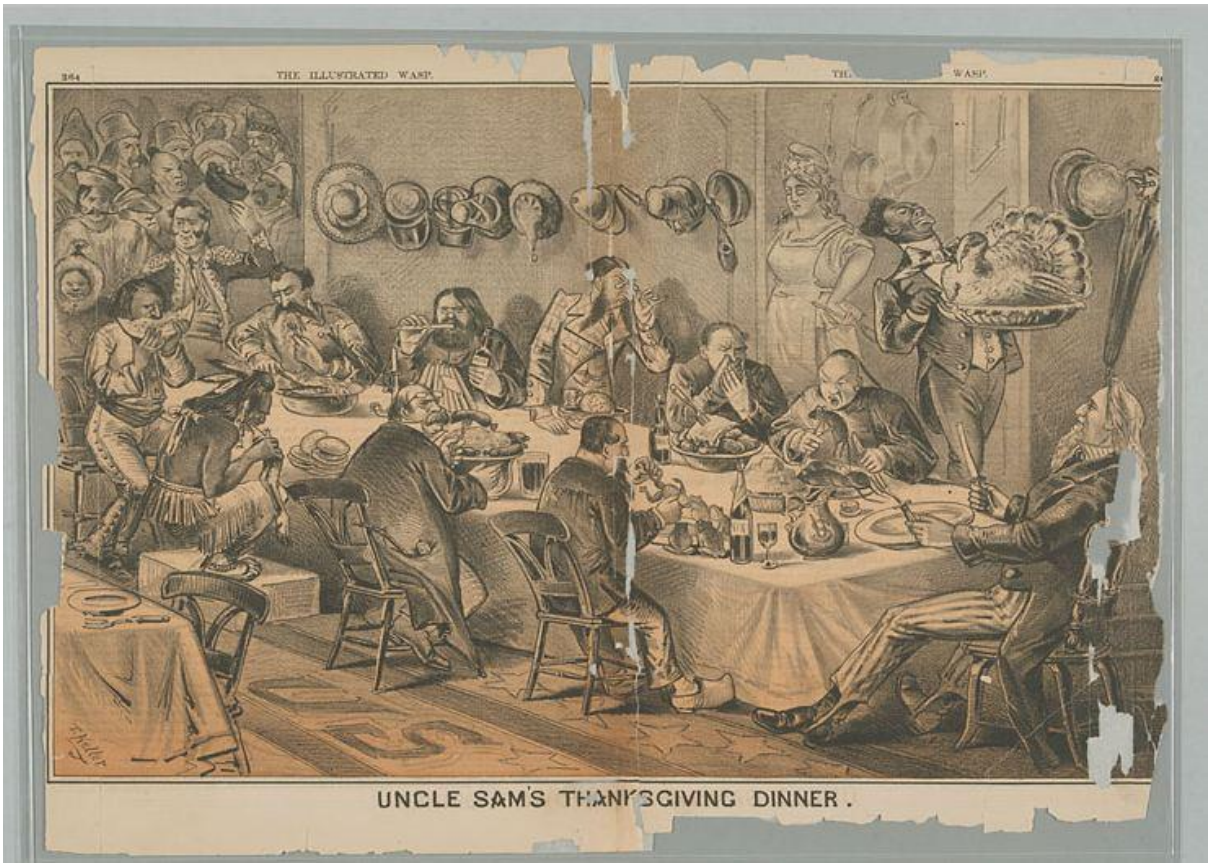
[16] A list of these works include J.A.G Roberts' *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), Jennifer 8 Lee's *Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Hachette, 2008), Andrew Coe's *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Yong Chen's *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of the Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[17] George Frederick Keller, "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving," *The San Francisco Wasp*, 1877 <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/11/23/americas-thanksgiving-celebration-1869/keller-thanksgiving/> [accessed 03 May 2014].

Thanksgiving with white unification at this period of Restoration, an era, which, as suggested by Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, was "increasingly influenced by Social Darwinism and found common ground … in a shared racism" between different white groups.[18] By portraying Native Americans' cannibalistic eating as foreign to the national diet, "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" contracts the boundaries of home and nation, configuring diverse eating as a way to maintain Amy Kaplan's notion of "manifest domesticity." Under the gaze of the Presidential patriarch, who sits comfortably at the head of the table and waits for his national dish to be served by an African American butler, a selective group of foodways and ethnicities that are deemed acceptable largely based on skin colour are in the process of being integrated into the American nationalist expansion of normative racial and cultural codes. As Kaplan suggests, such a cultural discourse of domesticity is closely linked with "racialized conceptions of the foreign," on which it depends to "erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home" and "conquer and tame the wild, the natural, and the alien."[19] By rendering other coloured races and their culinary habits as foreign to the nation and expelling them from within, therefore, this US politics of domesticity seems to provide a safe haven for its expanding notion of white supremacy.

[18] Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 131.
[19] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 25 & 26.



"Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner," *The San Francisco Wasp*

The real joke of the caricature, however, rests on the fact that the Native American cannibalistic eating has become so normalised and familiar that it seems less shocking than the Chinese eating of rats. Cannibalism remains a deep-seated taboo in Western culture, which, in Claude Levi-Strauss's words, "is of all savage practices the one we find the most horrible and disgusting."[20] Yet the European guests at the table seem indifferent to the fact that they are sharing a table with an indigenous diner who is gnawing on a human hand. Two Anglo-American diners, positioned in the centre of the picture, instead appear far more startled by the breaking of another taboo at the

[20] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 385.

hands of a very different ethnic subject in their midst.[21] Both express profound bewilderment as they gaze upon a Chinese man dining on a rat. In this satirical caricature, clearly designed to demonstrate both the dietary and racial superiority of European-Americans over other ethnic groups, these diners' differentiating repulsion towards eating rats positions Chinese cuisine as the most uninviting food to American palates during the peak of US anti-Chinese sentiment. Keller's postbellum cartoon clearly introduces a pattern of symbolism that surrounds and even constructs Chinese identity in US cultural productions from the Civil War period onwards. The different racist stereotypes competing for attention in Keller's cartoon certainly present a puzzle. Why does Keller reserve the normative judgment of disgust for the Chinese food and subject in his cartoon even in the midst of the violation of the far more universal taboo of cannibalism? In part, this can be explained by the particular background of the cartoon in which Chinese eating and race were criticized as a new filthy source to endanger the good order of locality and thus led to the legislation of Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Yet we also need to interrogate the complex reasons why and how US repulsion of nineteenth-century Chinese eating was differentiated from its attitudes towards Native and African American foodways, both of which suffered from horrendous racism but were on numerous occasions deemed acceptable to American palates.[22]

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[21] Eating human flesh, as William Arens and many others suggest, becomes a deep taboo in Western culture because it not only disrespects the widely accepted forms of eating practices but also reduces the supposedly sacred body to mere meat, creating ambiguities between animal and human, nature and culture. William Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropoghagy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979); Jennifer Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[22] Despite the initial anxieties about the influence of ethnic food on local environment and racial transformation, the white diners adopted a more assertive attitude towards the foreign food and accepted some staples because they believed, as highlighted in Thomas Jefferson's belief in the innate "real distinctions" between races, that Native and African Americans were placed in the bottom of racial hierarchy. While the British colonists' creation of Indian Pudding marked their confidence to conquer the native inhabitants, many African ingredients and dishes also appeared on American tables as a gesture to consolidate the whites' assertion in racial identities as determined by fixed biological

The particular mode of othering Chinese food that becomes apparent in Keller's cartoon is not unprecedented but draws on a long cultural tradition of taboo and transgression. His suggestion that Chinese diners enjoy eating rats among other "creeping" animals in particular suggests that their culture belongs outside the Mosaic dietary laws which are set out at length in *The Book of Leviticus* and which form a central source of culinary convention in Jewish and Christian culture alike. Ostensibly, as Mary Douglas has elaborated, because they are small yet walk on their hands and feet, rats are considered a "creeping" species in Leviticus, deemed impure for the purposes of religious sacrifice as well as for food.[23] Yet as Douglas also suggests, these Mosaic strictures in fact deem almost all land animals impure and unclean, and possess only an indirect relationship to natural patterns or with logical consistency. It is essential, argues the cultural anthropologist, to see the animal's impurity as culturally defined. One way to define the distinctive inedibility of rats can be developed from the species' feeding on almost everything indigestible including human waste and animal corpses, the very feature that Douglas recognizes to trigger uncleanness. She writes: "the listed uncleanness of Leviticus are not sin in general, they are a separate set of sins, they depend on physical contact only, and the central principle is that the contaminated body has contagious power, which entails that all its future physical contacts convey contamination."[24] Kristeva further argues that the quintessential experiences of abjection are rooted in bodily contact between a given

categories. This nativist racial perspective even developed to what Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Vincent Woodward argue is the edibility of African immigrants' bodies, showcasing the whites' absolute subjection of the racialized labours. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Vincent Woodward, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Jennifer Jensen Wallach, "Food and Race," in *The Routledge History of American Foodways* (London: Routledge, 2016), ed. by Michael D. Wise and Jennifer Jensen Wallach.

[23] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 140 & 141.

[24] Douglas, p. 145.

species and carrion, corpses, and waste: "If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wasters, is a border that has encroached upon everything."[25] In this light, rats, unlike domesticated animals such as chickens or cows, are dirty feeders. They are considered to possess a capacity to contaminate the individuals who touch or even eat them with their repugnant, disgraceful identity.

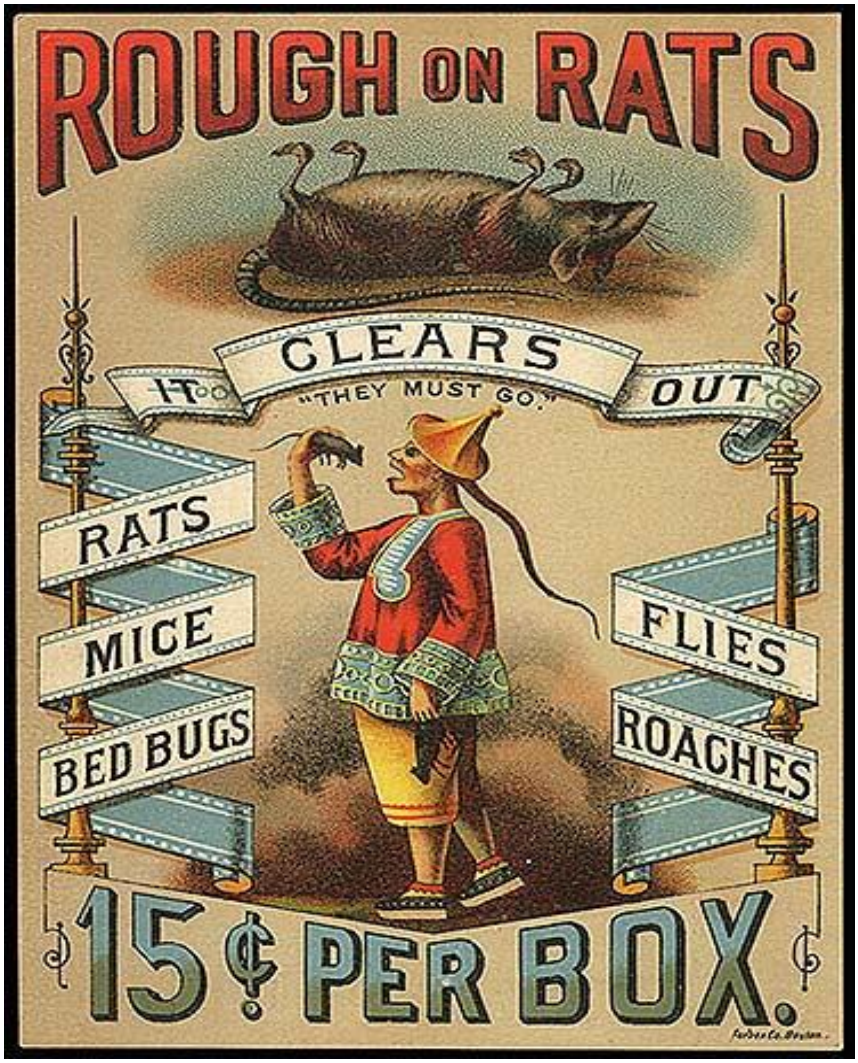
In this logic, when considering Keller's cartoon, a Chinese man eating a rat at an American table poses a greater threat than the African or the Indian cannibal because he is deemed not just barbaric but infectious, endangering the wholesomeness of American food from within.[26] A similar figuration becomes apparent in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Eight Cousins* (1874), in which the protagonist Rose assumes that her Chinese servant Fung See has gone to fetch food that she would not rather eat. Alcott writes: "Tumbling off his seat, he [See] waddled away as fast as his petticoats permitted, leaving Rose hoping that he had not gone to get a roasted rat, a stewed puppy, or any other foreign mess which civility would oblige her to eat."[27] Following the popular characterization of Chinese in literature as fundamentally un-American, undesirable, effeminate and low-class, Alcott's labelling of See as rat eaters internalizes the national response to the emergence of a filthy and contaminating Chinese community as taboo to American civilization. The fictional demonizing of Chinese immigrants on the grounds of them being rat eaters was accompanied by the accusation of Chinatown as a source of the epidemics that these rejected animals

[25] Kristeva, p. 3.
[26] It should be noted that the rhetorical yoking of rats to racial group reappeared in the anti-Semitic cultural discourses at the 1920s, an era in which Jewish immigrants were similarly regarded as a threat to European modernism. As Maud Ellmann records a highlight of the trope in one notorious Nazi Movie *Der Ewige Jude*, "We see a parallel in the itinerant routes of rats, which are the parasites and bacillus-carriers among animals; the Jews perform this role among mankind." Maud Ellmann, "Writing like a Rat," *Critical Quaterly*, 46.4 (2004), pp. 59-76 (p. 59).
[27] Louisa May Alcott, *Eight Cousins, or The Aunt-Hill* (Boston: Little Brown, 1927), p. 77.

might carry. One may even suggest that Keller drew the inspiration of the cartoon from the severe break-out of the smallpox that hit San Francisco one year before the cartoon's publication. Smallpox, according to the newly appointed city officer Dr Hohn Meares, was a "typical Oriental disease," and it originated among the 30,000 "unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen" living in the heart of the city, who infamously raised cats and rats for food.[28] Such portrayals of Chinese urban settlements as not just barbarous but infectious often led to calls to contain the danger they posed, thus internally policing national borders.

A similar rhetorical manoeuvre, again juxtaposing rats, diseases and Chinese immigrants, is dramatically illustrated on a trading card promoting a pest control product in 1897.[29] Abject eating, in this notoriously racist cartoon, offers a kind of solution to the infestation of vermin: a Chinese man opens his mouth ready to drop a live rat inside. A reiteration of "the Chinese must go," a leading slogan in the white labour movement of Gilded Age California, the advertising slogan "They Must Go" finds a convenient veil in the movement to maintain domestic cleanliness and hygiene. It functions as an imperative not only for the exterminations of the pest controller but also for the forced expatriations of nativist politics.

[28] Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 1.
[29] "Rough on Rats," <http://bottlesboozeandbackstories.blogspot.com/2017/07/ephriam-s-wells-was-rough-on-rats-and.html> [accessed 24 April 2018].



"Rough on Rats"

As such "Rough on Rats" shares Keller's and Alcott's focus on vermin as a metonym through which they cast Chinese food and Chinese identity as a taboo and a threat to American cultural norms. It was a metonym which suggested that, just as rats can live in the derelict and abandoned spaces of American cities, Chinese labourers existed in the barest of circumstances, living on the waste of others, and thus providing an unfair competition with white workers due to their ability to live on the most basic foods. This fear was articulated by a sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross in

his *The Changing Chinese* (1911), in which he claimed "the yellow man can best the white man because he can better endure spoiled food, poor clothing, foul air, noise, heat, dirt, discomfort and microbes."[30]

In the prevailing Social Darwinist views of the period, however, the very tenacity of the Chinese was also a form of corruption, itself threatening the robustness and vigorousness of the dominant American bloodstock. US culture's efforts to eradicate such perceived unfairness were made partly through the formation of a particularly effective synthesis in the "science" of eugenics, which began in the late nineteenth century and reached a peak in the 1920s. As David Palumbo-Liu argues, this rhetorical politics of racial exclusion was joined by a group of exclusionists, anti-miscegenation psychologists, sociologists and jurists, and often conceptualized the body of the nation as one in dire need of protection from infection of food and disease:

> A particular discursive formation evolved that blended science with politics, economics with sociology, national and international interests, within which the nation was imagined as a body that must, through fastidious hygienic measures, guard against what passes from the exterior, excise the cancerous cells that have already penetrated it, and prevent any reproductive act that would compromise the regeneration of its species in an increasingly massified and mobile world.[31]

Such Social Darwinist analysis, dedicated to improving the white population through controlled breeding, often sought to ensure the maintenance of advantageous heritable characteristics. "Fastidious hygienic measures," a critical element here, thus frequently focused on finding better means of destroying or otherwise stopping the object or othered identity seen to be spreading defilement. One way to see its

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[30] Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Changing Chinese: The Conflict of Oriental and Western Cultures in China* (New York: Century, 1911), p. 47.
[31] David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 24.

workings in US rat-phobia is through Douglas's development of the notion of taboo in a more secular ground in *Purity and Danger* (1966). Here Douglas explores taboo not only as a site to reflect on the cognitive discomfort caused by the ambiguousness of the object but also as a local or communal means of reducing the social and intellectual disorder produced by dirtiness and impurity. In Douglas's terms, US cultural encounters with images of defilement and impurity never involve a complete erasure of the taboo; rather, American culture shunts the taboo into a controlled category. Douglas argues that "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."[32] The trading card and Keller's cartoon establish order as they place images of filthy Chinese food under the gaze of Anglo-American audiences and urge them toward sharpened feelings of disgust towards it. Recurring images that wed rats and Chineseness together thus shape a new form of US racial xenophobia and an attendant call for a purified society from which such dangerous pollutions have been eradicated. This exclusionist ambition accounts for why, in Keller's cartoon, Uncle Sam is happy to observe various barbarous and rude eating while keeping safe distance from these ethnic diners; in return, he shows full confidence in his national dish and waits eagerly to dig into the upcoming turkey.

Underlying these cartoons are an apparent contradictions in US impulses to not only include "filthy" Chinese food into and exclude it from normative habits. They correspond with many Asian American studies scholars' belief that US historical and

[32] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

cultural inclusion of Asian immigrants for the national project of othering and subjection functions as an assertion of American citizenship. As Lisa Lowe puts it, Asian American immigrants "have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and the sustaining of America … [and] have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally 'foreign' origins antipathetic to the modern American society that 'discovers,' 'welcomes,' and 'domesticates' them."[33] The Orientalist perceptions typically reflected in US disgust of Chinese rat eating thus consolidate American racism, which, in Stuart Hall's terms, "operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories."[34] These categories between clean and dirty, edible and inedible around Chinese food are set to naturalize the difference between self and other; yet along with these fixed boundaries arise Asian American cultural productions which serves to defer and displace the temporality of assimilation. It is the "distance" of Asian foreign culture "from national culture," as Lowe continues to argue, that "constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation."[35] Here Lowe's emphasis on the distance between Asian culture and American dominant culture leaves spaces to consider how the cultural difference is politicized by the minority group to produce new opportunities to contest the effects of American racism.

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[33] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 5.
[34] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Sing Chen, pp. 442-451 (p. 445).
[35] Lowe, p. 6.

I am arguing that the unique position that Asian American culture claims within the US heteronormative politics of representation, showcased in analysis of Chinese "rat-eating" and in the Asian alimentary images we will encounter in the following thesis, facilitates an Asian-American anti-racist strategy of displacing stable political categories and inversing the discursive and affective powers of food and its symbolism into American orderly diets. This politics of difference and distance is significantly encapsulated in the dilemmas and complexities of abjection, and is exemplified in the association of rat-eating with uncountable Chinese arrivals. As David Sibley observes, rats have "a particular place in the racist bestiary because all are associated with residues --- food waste, human waste --- and in the case of rats there is an association with spaces which border civilized society, particular subterranean spaces like sewers, which also channel residues and from which rats occasionally emerge to transgress the boundaries of society."[36] In Sibley's observation, then, human encounters with rats produce an abject effect that fully corresponds with Kristeva's analysis. As mentioned before, it is through abjection that stable borders around one's subjectivity are established; but by definition, this process of constitution is never complete because, as Kristeva argues, "abjection is above all ambiguity." She continues: "while releasing the hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it --- on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger."[37] In this light, by loathing an item of food as "the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection,"[38] the American diners who wish to maintain heteronormative dietary and racial order become what Kristeva calls as the "deject," "the one by whom the abject exists." Instead of "getting his bearings, desiring,

[36] David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 28.
[37] Kristeva, p. 9.
[38] Kristeva, p. 2.

belonging, or refusing," a deject is asserted to "place (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself)." Yet abjection always confronts the deject subject who is "straying" on the ground of defilement and exclusion with what George Bataille has called "the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things."[39] Therefore, in this process of situating and reinforcing boundaries, "the deject never stops demarcating this universe whose fluid confines --- for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject --- constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh."[40]

Rats, in Kristeva's thinking, thus appear a form of abjection that calls the integrity and solidarity of a subject into question. The abjectness lies in rats' particular habit of living in close proximity to human beings. Not only do rats breed on human's garbage, they also follow human diets and prefer high-fat food to fruit and vegetables according to the observations of Robert Sullivan.[41] The dietary habit of rats casts lights on the ambiguities that lie in the residuals between human and non-human, familiar and foreign. The idea is then further developed by the analysis of Maud Ellmann, in which she describes in detail how rats defy the boundaries that work to police modernism and civilization:

> In fact, what bothers modernism about rats is their refusal to be kept in bounds, whether of number or locality: they multiply too fast, and spread too far. Literally gnawing through the walls of man-made structures, rats in modernism augur the collapse of boundaries, especially the boundaries of meaning … Associated with migration, it eats away the bounds of countries and cultural traditions with the rapacity of a multinational company … Within the multicultural city, rats continue to invade the heart of domesticity, blurring the distinction between inside and outside, tame and wild, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.[42]

[39] Georges Bataille, qtd in Kristeva, p. 56.
[40] Kristeva, p. 8.
[41] Robert Sallivan, *Rats: Observations on the History and Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabits* (New York: Bloomsbury), pp. 71 & 72.
[42] Ellmann, p. 62.

In this light, the Euro-American diners' application of rats to cleanse their palates no longer works to assert their American identity; instead, it foreshadows the failure of the ritual to cast the Chinese eating away. Ellmann continues, developing Kristeva's theory of abjection in this new direction: "The abject is that which a culture casts away (ab-jects) in order to determine what is not itself, through rituals such as burning, burial, and exorcism. The resilience of the rat, however, demonstrates the failure of these rituals, for the abject always pops back up again, adapting itself to each new persecution … The rat is a gnawing reminder of this inability [of excluding the abject]."[43]

In a way, Keller's "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" complicates the distracting effects of Chinese rat-eating by suggesting the pollution of American heteronormative appetites. After all, what Uncle Sam will soon eat, as the cartoon presents a satirizing version, is a large living bird served by the preening African American servant. This raw food, in addition, is very likely prepared by a woman in a cook's uniform standing numb in front of the kitchen lying in a hidden corner of the house. Through these food labourer's unknown works, Uncle Sam's perceived purist and orderly taste is under imminent threats and pollution. To some extent, the American presidential patriarch's inability to reject another abject food drives him to reinforce the boundaries set to police US culinary and cultural landscape. In effect, the cartoon answers to the anti-racial sentiment that *The San Francisco Wasp* held during that period of time.[44] It also provides grounds for Keller's advocates for caution against

[43] Ellmann, p. 62.
[44] *The Wasp*'s historian Richard Samuel West describes the anti-Chinese sentiment deployed in many cartoons published in the newspaper: "the Chinese had no friends among the San Francisco press. All of the magazines freely indulged in the worst forms of Sinophobia." Richard Samuel West, *The San Francisco Wasp: An Illustrated History* (Northampton: Periodyssey Press, 2004), p. 15.

ethnic foodways, which contaminates American orthodox way of eating and, predictably, of US citizenship and nationhood.

In addition, if Keller were given another chance to create the cartoon, the chances are very high that the Chinese immigrant would not be a foreign guest in Uncle Sam's household; instead, he could have taken the place of the African American servant and the female cook. After all, shortly after the 1860s, the Chinese Americans, who were conspicuously associated by Jacob A Riis with "stealth and secretiveness," replaced African Americans to become the largest group in the California service sector, claiming almost fifty percent of the servants pool.[45] Very much like how Uncle Sam historically managed the female cook and the African American servant to serve the feast, the actual Chinese cooks and servants also experienced a set of discriminating perceptions that kept them invisible and enslaved. The Chinese immigrants would also be readily labelled as the "unskilled offal of a millionaire industrial system," the famous metaphor that W.E.B Du Bois used to describe the African American counterparts.[46] Du Bois's relegation of the circumscribed labourers to "unskilled offal" consolidates the dominating position of the American employers in the circle of desire and consumption. As much as the word "offal" connotes off-down and corruption, offal's acclaimed similarity with the Chinese labours metaphorically relegates them to inedible food waste as an implication of their lack of values to American industrial modernity. However, as shown in the cartoon and throughout the thesis, US historic reliance on racialized labours to serve its economic and political ends confirms the abject and ambiguous potential of offal that unsettles

[45] Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 75; Daniel Sunderland, *Americans and their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rogue: Lousiana State University Press, 1981), pp. 56 & 57.
[46] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (Massachusetts: Courier Corporations, 1920), p. 67.

the boundary between animal entrails for food waste and human organs for survival. More importantly, it permits the invisible immigrants to work out a possible way to reverse the usual directionality of both the eating process and the employment system as a whole. In the case of "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner," Keller's heightened Orientalization of Chinese food and culture under Edward Said's term may be undermined by American heavy reliance of Chinese immigrants, thus posing an implicit challenge against the indoctrination of US ideology of domestic and socio-political management.

Keller's presentation of the power dynamics in this imagined consumption of Thanksgiving dinner is a departure point for this thesis precisely because US nineteenth-century racism against Chinese immigrants that attests to repulsion against its deemed filth food and community is reinvigorated and expanded in the contemporary Asian American fictions and, more importantly, draws my attention to the duality of culinary acts and Asian American identity that are closely tied to critical terrains of race, gender, sex and class. Exploring the representations of Asian foodways captures how US mainstream culture achieves the national project of identity formation by expelling and ingesting Asian immigrants. In the meanwhile, such exploration illuminates the unrecognized power of the voiceless and racialized food diners and labourers in bringing disorder to the supposedly orderly US tastes and white supremacy. The intertwined relationship between food and identity provides justification for the application of abject as an apt model to chart Asian American identity. If Asian food, body and subjectivity is what must be jettisoned in order to constitute American dietary and racial order, it very often becomes a source of contamination. The positioning of Asian Americans as a site of national abjection

within American identity politics delineates both US (in)ability to establish the borders and affective performances of Asian American subjects.

Thesis Structure

It is the aim of the thesis to uncover how contemporary Asian American literature and culture grapple with US cultural discourse to abject Asian food and race, the trope that can not only be traced back to the roots of historical racism but also be encapsulated in immigrant life and thoughts. The examined literary texts make use of food tropes as thematic as well as representational entries to illustrate and creatively respond to American hegemonic containment of Asian daily practice and culture. Through their critiques of existing cultural codes of Asian food and eating, these literary attempts offer insights into how food scenes function as the discursive spaces to negotiate Asian American subjectivities, bodies and race. To present the multivalent representations of food and abjection, the thesis is divided into five chapters, each one of which conducts a reading of a particular theme in an Asian American fiction. I interlink the textual analysis with the historical and cultural ideologies consolidated in culinary acts to guard against any simplified and determinant link between food and identity. In my reading, food registers the critical terrains of gender, sexuality, class, colonialism and race. These various representations of food tropes articulate the authors' ambitions to explore and contest the consequences of US exclusionist politics that often deems Asian American identities as alien and homogenous ones.

The first chapter engages with the complex role of food in engendering and negotiating the intergenerational conflicts in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* one of

the classics in Asian American literature. In the novel, Tan's representations of Chinese manipulative motherhood often take in the form of the second-generation daughters' being forced fed with food of Chinese style and the mother's symbolic incorporation of their bodies. In response, the daughters' loathing of food and motherhood arguably evokes the bodily feeling and embodiment of the abject under Kristeva's term. Recognizing that cooking and sharing ethnic food is a sound territory for the celebration of ethnic identity and the maintenance of the immigrants' cultural capitals in their home country, I explore the ways in which Chinese eating for the daughters becomes a threat to their highly esteemed American character and value. In Tan's heightened description of the alimentary images, cruel slaughtering of impossible animals for food governs Chinese culinary landscape in American imagination and evokes abjection in Chinese food since it blurs the line between eating and cannibalism, culture and nature. Hence, my analysis delineates the varied logics of abjection, which enable American culture, in Kristeva's words, to "remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism" and Chinese American daughters to "release the hold of maternal entity."[47] With the daughters' attempts to repulse Chinese food for the affiliation with white culture as exclusive and superior, however, their subjectivity formation is inevitably impacted by the disruptive permeation of maternity, one that is facilitated by the cannibalistic maternal feeding as well as US continuous rejection of their assimilation into American citizenship.

While greater attentions have been attached to the figuration of food loathing in Asian American literature's popular mother-daughter tale, I turn my focus in the next chapter to examine the ways in which Gish Jen casts food and abjection into gender relations in her bildungsroman *Typical American*. With the rich influx of national

[47] Kristeva, pp. 12 & 13.

narratives inscribed in the adventures of the Chang family in the US during the era of the Cold War, the novel captures on how the Asian male immigrant's masculinity is closely bound with the American myth of self-made idealism, and facilitates ritualistic sexual subordination against Asian women in public spaces but cannot defend off the threats of empowering feminist alliance within the domestic sphere. By exploring how food plays a role in strengthening and impeding Asian American masculinity, I argue that Jen's conflation of food and gender questions the credibility of US hegemonic masculinity for Asian males and challenges the apparently seamless links between food, gender, home and nation. I uncover the divergent workings of the major character Ralph Chang's gluttonous eating to showcase food's capacity and inability to consolidate gender performativity under Judith Butler's term. Jen arguably delineates how the characters' objectification of Asian women's bodies as food for consumption and abjection plays a compensatory effect on emasculated Asian American masculinity. The familiar limits of women to domestic roles such as food preparation, however, grants the female subjects the ability to articulate viable alternatives to masculine and national models of domesticity, ones that bring forward the tropes of culinary strategy and feminine alliance.

Chapter Three continues the last chapter's focus on the role of food in (re)structuring gender and sexual order within the domestic space and expands the reading into the centrality of food, particularly meat, in grasping the psycho-development of transnational female subjects in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*. In the narration of how the capitalistic beef industry produces pathological consequences for Japanese and American women, the Japanese American author delineates the culturally-sanctioned association between meat and men in subordination of women's bodies, as well as the female subjects' resistance against corrupting gender hierarchy

and globalized capitalism via their efforts to restore bodily control. By engaging with how Ozeki uses food and eating to mark women's bodies as edible and abject, I argue that meat consumption becomes an ideal site to register the production of abject and expose the violence of gender subordination; in the meanwhile, the liminal position of women's bodies in the network of consumption and desire enables them to disturb the intrinsic appetites of eating and sexuality, and to redefine boundaries set to maintain American exclusion of deformed racial bodies. Building upon the US long-standing ideology of animalizing women as edible and commodified, my reading shows how the patriarchal ideals adhering to meat consumption work with the female subjects' eating disorder and fertility to uncover Ozeki's central concern of food industry's chemical corruption and gendered abjection of their bodies. The female characters respond to the normative definition of reproductive and ordered female bodies by making use of the abject embodiments of individual anorexia nervosa and collective mothering, both tropes that explain how food and abject can evoke complex and renewed relations with women, body, reproduction and capitalized industry.

In addition to the workings of abject in constituting the subject pertaining to gender and sexuality identity, many have suggested the role of abjection in interpreting the social formation. Among them, Ann McClintock famously regards "the paradox of abjection as a formative aspect of modern industrial imperialism," in which abject people and locations are policed with vigour to inhabit the cult of domesticity and empire. In this process, however, "the abject returns to haunt modernity as its constitutive, inner repudiation."[48] Bearing McClintock's attempts to resituate low-class subjects vis-à-vis dominant mode of social classification in mind, Chapter Four

[48] Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London, Routledge, 1995), p. 72.

focuses on how Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong (re)constructs the historical and imagined critique of the abject positioning of the Asian domestic labourers in the colonial as well as liberal households in her debut novel *The Book of Salt*. Through a reading of the intersecting relationship between food, body, labour and sex, I consider the subversive potentials of cooking and eating in defying the mimetic patterns of bourgeois intimacy that reinvigorates the historical figuration of Asian kitchen labours midway between slavery and freed labour, alienation and inclusion. My interrogation of the ways in which the white employers practice their oppression points to the workings of the quest for haute cuisine's authenticity in alienating the labours from the Vietnamese labourers' bodies. The protagonist Thinh Binh's work in the abject kitchens, however, expresses a subversive linguistic and culinary autonomy that highlights his resistance against the bourgeois controls. I further explore how food consumption and sharing give birth to homosexual diasporic desire, tending to the role of food in forming queer alliances to contest and transform the usual directionality of bourgeois desires.

My optimism for finding enabling narratives to tackle the institutional abjection of Asian cooks is further developed in the final chapter, which turns its attention to how Asian American subjects take advantage of the notion of culinary authenticity as creative strategies. In the critically unknown novel *The Barbarians are Coming*, Chinese American author David Wong Louie questions the ability of US acquiring cultural capital out of observing and consuming Asian American foodways. By interrogating the intersection of culinary authenticity with terrains of race, sex and class, Chapter Five looks into how the American patrons' pursuit of "authentic" Chinese food relies on the normative definition of purity to register class stratification and sexual manipulation. Beyond this, through a reading of the cultural myth behind

the culinary fusion of egg foo yung, I argue that the novel achieves the liberating potentials of culinary authenticity to help construct the varieties of Chinese American subjectivities. My reading suggests that underlying the protagonist's parody of cooking authentic Chinese food on the cooking show are a surprising demonstration of linguistic autonomy and repudiation of Chinese cultural memories, the notions that empower the formation of hyphenated Chinese American identity and advance the critiques of American racial politics.

Ultimately, the wide-ranging contexts and themes evoked by each chapter speak to the ways in which the culinary is a central symbol that structures the cultural imagination of Asian Americans. To place food at the centre of the literary critical reading helps one grasp the complex constitution of US racism as well as the divergent models of negotiating Asian American subjectivities. My use of abject in the analysis seeks to defy any simplified and dualist explanation of Asian American subjects' exclusion from and inclusion into American homogeneous patterns of defining and managing race. As we will see, in these selected fictions, the culinary tropes that reduce the ethnic subjects into repulsive as well as edible often undo their own logics. In the process of food preparation, serving and consumption, the consistent racial encounters facilitate the transgressions of abject subjects beyond racial, gender, sexual and class-based limits. These varied transgressions give birth to individual and collective Asian American identities that mediate disparate and unequal cultural codes attached to Asian American immigrants.

Chapter One The Pleasure and Pain of Eating: Abjection and Incorporation of Mothers and Daughters in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

In her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan strongly suggests that the second-generation Chinese-American daughters can only come to terms with their complex and hyphenated identity once they have reconciled themselves to their mother's spirit and the Chinese ethnic roots it represents. What Bella Adams has called, in a slightly different context, "intergenerational interchangeability" [1] indeed seems crucial to the emotional and social growth of American daughters and Chinese mothers alike. Previous criticism of the novel, has, perhaps surprisingly, been influenced by what Adams has identified as the "sweet" reading of such intergenerational interchangeability.[2] Nicci Gerrard, for example, suggests that the sixteen mother-and-daughter stories that comprise the novel naturally "draw" female readers "in close," allowing Tan to lead "from loss to gain, desire to fulfilment, loneliness to community. … It has a happy sad ending, … [a] kind of sweet melancholy."[3] Such a "sweet" vision of community is born out of the "oneness" at the end of the novel, when Jing-mei finally meets with her Chinese sisters. A camera captures their reunion, catching what Geoff Dyer would call an "ongoing moment,"[4] in which Jing-mei regains a lost intimacy not only with her Chinese siblings but also with their

[1] I borrow the word from Bella Adams essay "Identity-in-difference," where she argues for the important role of intergenerational relationships not only between the mother and daughter, but also between the novel and the world. It is also the essay which evokes my idea of the unjustifiable aspect in the sweet reading of Amy Tan's intergenerational sameness later elaborated in my analysis. Bella Adams, "Identity-in-difference: Re-generating Debate about Intergenerational Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 39.2 (2006), pp. 79-94.
[2] Adams, p. 79.
[3] Nicci Gerrard, "Sexual Reading," *Observer Review*, 27 September 1988, p. 2.
[4] By looking to the certain subjects (the benches, roads, doors, etc) common to the photographers, Geoff Dyer sets out to decode photographs as a new knowledge, presented to audiences by historians or writers. Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (London: Abacus, 2005), pp. 1-9.

mother; as Tan puts it in a deceptively simple construction, "Together we look like our mother."[5] Indeed Bella Adams, the source of the key term "intergenerational interchangeability," leads the way in emphasising that this concluding vision achieves a settled "harmony," offering readers the satisfactions of "emotional closure."[6] Patricia Gately adds to this consensus, insisting that such harmony promises "peace, understanding, comfort, union, and wholeness."[7]

Such harmony, however, cannot mask the unsweet conflicts that exist between these mothers and daughters. When Ying-ying St. Clair speaks her lamentations over her feeble and silenced daughter Lena St. Clair towards the end of the novel, she offers a communal voice for all Chinese mothers seeking to save their daughters from the seemingly irresistible corruptions of American commodity culture and patriarchy. She says:

> She [Lena] and I shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore … my fierceness [of tiger] can come back. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is a way a mother loves her daughter.[8]

Notably, Ying-ying's belief in her ability to save her daughter originates a set of assumed similarities between the mother and the daughter. Yet this intergenerational reconciliation is asserted to be a violent process. To portray her daughter's emotional distance from her mother, Ying-ying St. Clair sees her daughter as "a slippery fish," a food that is ready to be consumed by the powerful mother. After realizing the urgency

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[5] Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (London: Random House, 1989), p. 288.
[6] Adams, p. 79.
[7] Patricia Gately, "Ten Thousand Different Ways: Inventing Mothers, Inventing Hope," *Paintbrush: A Journal of Multicultural Literature*, 12 Autumn 1995, p. 53.
[8] Tan, pp. 242 & 252.

of her need to save her daughter from submitting to her new American patriarch, Ying-ying employs a figurative act of eating as if to force her daughter back to her Chinese roots. As we will see, this conjuring of food --- which penetrates Lena's skin and sets what Tan calls "her tiger spirit" loose --- completes an act of ancestral incorporation that is characteristic of the mother-daughter relationship as a whole.[9] Yet the incorporation is not as smooth as the mother expects. Her daughter will "fight" her in order to survive from being figuratively eaten and controlled by her mother.

In the following chapter I argue that, a series of unsweet and violent conflicts underpins the different forms of mother-and-daughter relationship imagined in *The Joy Luck Club*, and that such violence significantly originates the act of the mothers' manipulative disruption of their daughters' identity. The disruption often takes the form of their being forced fed with abject Chinese food and their mothers' attempt to incorporate the daughters. The daughters' loathsome Chinese food taboos and maternal body evokes many themes found in Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas and Jacques Lacan, which provide useful explanations towards food and individual. Most notable of these is the possibility of understanding the abjectness of Chinese food and maternal body as an obstacle preventing the American daughters from forming a healthy subjectivity. In order to fight their strong maternal presence, many solutions have been figured out by the American daughters. They choose not to inherit their

[9] I need to explain the close relationship between incorporation and body, which serves as a foundation to regard incorporation between mother and daughter as a source of engendering abject feelings in this chapter. Naturally, incorporation can be regarded as a form of eating and digestion from a psychoanalytic perspective. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, incorporation derives from the Latin word *incorporate*, which means "to form into a body". Therefore, it is a way of direct digestion of the outside world into the inner body. Maggie Kilgour strengthens the argument. In her mind, "incorporation is a process with embodiment and the bringing of bodies together." The concept of body, as she illustrates, is a symbol of wholeness and unity where the boundaries between body and food clearly defines self from the other. Kilgour, pp. 6 & 7.

mother's Chinese feast in the joy luck club, nor do they wish to accept their mother's maternal body. Given these solutions have been argued by psychoanalytic work as effective ways to rebel against the maternity, why do they fall into the concluding "intergenerational interchangibility"? In order to explain the puzzlement for American daughters and for the readers, the chapter aims to look into the abjection of Chinese food and maternal body and into the problematic paternal and semiotic order in Tan's novel. The chapter not only argues that the daughters finally reconcile themselves to Chinese maternity as they become disillusioned with the American Dream; it also reflects on the theme of ethnic abjection, and of Chinese food taboos in particular to consider how it has functioned in US multicultural society.

Rejecting the Joy Luck Club

The novel's opening scene, which brings together all four pairs of mothers and daughters, foregrounds the central theme of the complex battle between Chinese mothers and American daughters. Readers are granted with opportunities to be fully aware of such conflicts from the very first few pages. As revealed in the catalogue, the structure of *The Joy Luck Club* imitates the mah-jong game, which requires four players to play four hands each. Comparably, the novel is divided into four main parts, each of which is split into four separate stories told by a different narrator. This competitive character of the structure becomes clearer in Tan's division of the Chinese mothers and American-born daughters into two separate columns in the next page. For Chinese mothers, furthermore, the American daughters' brutal rejections stem not from an ignorance of maternal love but a refusal to keep the joy luck club alive and pass on their Chinese ethnic roots. As Jing-mei Woo reflects in the novel's opening scene:

> They [Chinese mothers] are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation.[10]

It seems that running away from the chaotic Chinese mothers and ethnicity and into the shelter of the reasonable and orderly American characters in their heart is an underlying impulse for all the American daughters in their youth and adulthood. On various occasions, American daughters distance themselves from their ethnic roots due to the identity confusion initiated by their strong, manipulative and unsympathetic mothers. They try in many ways to revolt--Waverley runs away from home in protest, for example, and Jing-mei embarrasses her mother in public. Yet many of these efforts are in vain. Lindo Jong simply ignores her daughter's violent behaviour; instead, her unsensational attitude in treating her daughter leaves her daughter incapable of continuing her chess talent. Likewise, Su-yuan's disappointment in Jing-mei does not liberate her from the boredom of piano practice. Jing-mei's life soon abounds with the pressure of failing others' expectations. However, the communal horror that Chinese mothers show in the above quote proves that the American daughters successfully identify an effective way to constrain the seemingly strong maternal influence. Their fear reflects the important role of the joy luck club in maternity, and the club features the communal enjoyment of Chinese food, the sharing of stories and the mothers' playing of mah-jong games. One simple question should then be raised: Why does the daughters' rejection of the joy luck club work in impeding strong maternity? Starting by explaining Kristeva's theory of abject, from

[10] Tan, p. 41.

an alternative perspective of maternity, food and subjectivity, this section will focus on the important role of Chinese food in maintaining Chinese ethnicity and, by contrast, in shattering maternity effectively by their daughters.

Before we delve into the details of the novel, it is worthwhile to examine the natural relationship between food and the individual's subjectivity briefly, which is perceived insightfully by the psychological approach. Notably, lots of psychoanalytic literatures attempt to discuss the complex relations with a special attention to the close kinship between mother's milk (the first food an infant gets) and child's subjectivity. They assert that the mother's milk plays an important role via the developmental experiences of individuals from its infancy. Jing-mei echoes very much the popular belief in the link between food and mother's love: "That's the way Chinese mothers show they love their children, not through hugs and kisses but with stern offerings of steamed dumplings, duck's gizzards, and crab."[11] Although Chinese cooking practices, including the brutal killing of animals and the eating of live animals, inspires feelings of disgust in the American daughters--feelings which I will discuss in the next section--Jing-mei continues to maintain that mothers provide food as a currency of love as well as nutrients. While Su-yuan Woo describes her feeding Jing-mei with "nutritious things," Waverley Jong records that she is fed with her mother extravagant offering of "three five-course meals every days, beginning with a soup full of mysterious things [she] didn't want to know the names of."[12] This maternal love, moreover, begins with the mother's milk-breast and builds up the infant's dependence on the maternal body. In her analysis of psychoanalytic writings, especially of those from Kristeva, Kelly Oliver has pointed to the importance of the

[11] Tan, p. 202.
[12] Tan, pp. 32 & 89.

fact that "the first food that most of us receive comes from our mother's bodies," indicating that our first relationship with another person is founded on "a bodily relationship whereby one body feeds another."[13] The maternal body, Oliver suggests, can "give or withhold everything that sustains, nourishes, fulfils, completes [the infant's subject development]."[14] Kristeva herself indeed suggests that the breast milk for the infant poses an early and formative unity with the mother. For her, to some extent, "the infant *becomes* the breast through its incorporation."[15] The infant enjoys the mother-child symbiosis in what Kristeva goes on to call the "semiotic" space, in which it does not experience the demarcations between inside and outside, self and other.

Yet in becoming a subject, a child must break away from the maternal body (and the maternal breast feeding in the very early stage) in order to speak for its needs and complete its identity. The infant's linguistic incomprehension makes such independence difficult to attain. At this moment, Kristeva suggests the notion of abjection in order to explain how an infant finally succeeds in separating itself from the maternal body. Her assertion that the abject is something located on the border but also disrespects the border captures the ambiguousness of the borders that define the one between the mother's body and the infant's. The maternal milk and the food which infants are fed with after weaning calls into question the ambiguous border, and the infant's subjectivity thus seems impossible to achieve. Then how can an

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[13] Kelly Oliver, "Nourishing the Speaking Subject: a Psychoanalytic Approach to Abominable Food and Women," in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), ed. by Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke, pp. 68-84 (p. 68); My understanding of Julia Kristeva comes largely from this essay on food under Kristeva's eyes from Oliver's *Reading Kristeva*. Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

[14] Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption, and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fictio*n (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 21.

[15] Oliver, p. 69.

infant build up its own identity if its life is dependent on the food offered by her mother or her mother's body? Kristeva then provides a solution for the puzzled infant. It can separate itself from the mother by abjecting the maternal body. "The earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her" can only by achieved in "repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting."[16] In other words, a child's completing its independence is found on the abject separation of one body from another.

Surely, abjecting the maternal body is never an easy task for a child who has no capability of speaking. Luckily, Kristeva provides the children with a seemingly easy solution, food loathing. In her mind, "food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection."[17] The inherent link between food and body can prove Kristeva's claim. Food is taken into the body and thus becomes part of the body. Therefore, the infant's establishment of its subjectivity starts with the rejection of food offered by the mothers. Such belief is being practiced by the young American immigrants in the novel as argued below, not only in their rejection of Chinese eating in the joy luck club but also in the fight against the food taboos which will be elaborated in the next section.

In Tan's description, Chinese food is a sound territory for the celebration of maternity and their ethnic roots. Significantly, Tan presents the first generation immigrants' enjoyment in the joy luck club as being distinctively Chinese, endowing them with a therapeutic power for the mothers and fathers who feel marginalised within US society. These affirmations focus on a detailed scene of how the ethnic group share and consume Chinese food:

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[16] Kristeva, p. 13.
[17] Kristeva, p. 2.

> My father is digging into the chow mein, which still sits in an oversize aluminium pan surrounded by little plastic packets of soy sauce. Auntie An-mei must have bought this on Clement Street. The wonton soup smells wonderful with delicate sprigs of cilantro floating on top. I'm drawn first to a large platter of *chaswei*, sweet barbecued pork cut into coin-sized slices, and then to a whole assortment of what I've always called finger goodies --- thin-skinned pastries filled with chopped pork, beef, shrimp, and unknown stuffing that my mother used to describe as "nutritious things."[18]

In the consumption of the authentic Chinese food and the preservation of the traditional food on the menu, the members are asserting pride in their Chinese ethnicity. The delicious smells of *chow mein*, *chaswei* and "finger goodies" evoke the eaters' memory of the past China, reaffirming the mysterious relation between memory and the emotional dimension of food.[19] As immigrants who are physically and temporally separated from their homeland, the culinary nostalgia offers "both intellectual and emotion anchor," giving them a "sense of rootedness" when they feel politically and culturally powerless facing the competition between the constitutional "we" and the ethnic "we."[20]

No sooner does Tan present such harmony, however, than she disrupts it. The Chinese feast begins to unsettle Donna Gabaccia's suggestion that food typically gives such immigrants security, allowing them "to maintain their familiar foodways because food initiates and maintains traditional relationships, expresses the extent of social distance between people, demonstrats status and prestige, reward and punished children's behaviour, and treats illness."[21] In Jing-mei's mind, the joy luck club is no more than a showcase of American-style Chinese take-away food. Rather than

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[18] Tan, pp. 31 & 32.
[19] The connection between food and memory is famously brought forward by Marcel Proust in *Search of Lost Time*, in which he records how eating a crumb of a madeleine biscuit transports him back to the world of his childhood through its taste and odour. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (London: Penguin, 2003).
[20] Anita Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism and Diaspora," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, 32.4 (2007), pp. 11-31 (p. 11).
[21] Donna R. Gabaccia, *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1998), p. 51.

understanding food as a fixed source of ancestral authenticity, Jing-mei names the distinctive and extravagant Chinese food item with "finger goodies"[22] with an explicit character of convenient and easy-reached American fast food in her mind.[23] In other words, within reach of fingers, the Chinese food cooked by her beloved mother and aunties has been dismissed and acculturated into the production of the American junk food industry. As summed up by Deborah Lupton, the cultural embodiment of fast food does great damage to the Chinese mother's care for the children, since its consumption is associated with "being with friends and being away from parents or home."[24] Very probably the devaluation is much worsened for the Chinese mothers when they learn that Chinese food is no longer the one which they may memorize in past China due to the popularity of Chinese fast-food in America.[25]

The central role the sharing of food holds in the mother's pride in their past survival is also dismissed by Jing-mei and other daughters. Borrowing the memory of Su-yuan and the narration of Jing-mei, Tan illustrates the working mechanism in detail. The maternal sphere of community not only enables one of its principal originators, Su-yuan, to find relief from the physical and psychological dilemma of the war but also facilitates the matriarch's consolidation of their ethnic identity in America. As Su-yuan explains the reasons behind the club's name, she compares the

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[22] Very possibly, Jing-mei Woo gets such name from the fish fingers served in McDonalds. Therefore, it is worthwhile to think of how the Chinese American children have been affected by the so-called "McDonalds language," which is illustrated in Eric Scholosser's popular book *Fast Food Nation* (2002). From this light, Tan's linguistic application in describing a Chinese American daughter as a "Coca-cola daughter" is another case of the strong influence of the American fast food industry. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 31; Tan, p. 17.

[23] Pearl, one of Amy Tan's heroine in her second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, illustrates American daughters' likening to the feature of American fast food. For her, the cooking of Chinese food is "boring" and causes "a lot of trouble." Therefore, she "would rather eat McDonald hamburgers instead." Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 137.

[24] Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self*, (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 58.

[25] The American ways of consumption of Chinese food, according to Chinese food historian J.A.G Roberts, features the transformation from the communal feast in the restaurants to the take-away Chinese food. In order to adapt to the American market, many Chinese restaurants resemble the self-service outlets. Roberts, pp. 161-203.

"move"[26] to America to a move towards "hope", which was "our only joy" in Kweilin, a refugee camp whose members had to keep running away from the Japanese bombing.[27] Under the tremendous pressure of war and other risks, the club members attempted to provide a detached celebration to get away from the fear and despair of the conflict, or, in Su-yuan's words, to "prolong what was already unbearable."[28] Like its Chinese origin, the joy luck club in the American version facilitates the members' dissociation with their dark past; as claimed by Su-yuan, "the women of these families [and the other three families in the novel as well] had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English."[29] Therefore, the American version can be regarded as a renewed kind of survival mentality for the Chinese mothers, all of whom wish to share their tragic stories not only with the members but also with their daughters.

In addition to its function of helping the Chinese mothers detach from the dark past, the joy luck club is deeply related with the class showcase underlying in the celebratory and ceremonial foods in the party. The excess and extravagance of the scene reveals food's traditional power, within Chinese culture, to convey class distinction:

> Each week one of us would host a party to raise money and to raise our spirits. The hostess had to serve special *dyansyin* foods to bring good fortune of all kinds -- dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful, sweet life.[30]

In the city where "people were starving, eating rats and, later, the garbage that the poorest rats used to feed on," the celebrations of Su-yuan and her peers in the joy luck

[26] Tan, p. 23
[27] Tan, p. 25
[28] Tan, p. 24
[29] Tan, p. 20
[30] Tan, p. 23

club present a tremendous luxury, the result of their class privilege and thus authority over others.[31] As a matter of fact, foodways have been utilized by them as a refuge not only from the Japanese invasion's cruelty but also what Fickle calls its "epistemological violence." Fickle continues:

> For in this "city of left-overs," there are no longer any meaningful social or even ontological distinctions that remain stable: officers sound like peasants, peasants sound like pigs, and all three are packed cheek by jowl with the faceless hordes of refugees made up of both "rich and poor, Shanghainese, Cantonese, northerners, and not just Chinese, but foreigners and missionaries of every religion." [32]

Central to the power of this banquet, then, is its capacity to allow the protagonist to demonstrate her class distinction over others.[33] In the American version of the club, however, the capital advantage of food is no longer a class one but an ethnic one. Not only does Su-yuan as well as the Chinese mothers in the joy luck club claim the superiority of Chinese food on the table; Tan also realizes such ethnic prestige on the table of mah-jong over the Jewish counterparts as well as their acclaimed winning strategy of investment in the American stock market. The Chinese mothers look down on the Jewish mah-jong due to the latter's lack of strategy to play. The similar attitudes have been used to describe the American stock market by the mothers, who claim "there is no skill in that."[34]

To some extent, the daughters' Chinese food avoidance and acculturation in the joy luck club as elaborated throughout the chapter amounts to a strategy for "demarcating communities, establishing who belongs and who does not, who is friend and who is

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[31] Tan, p. 24
[32] Tara Fickle, "American Rules and Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," *Melus: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.,* 39.9 (2014), pp. 68-88 (p. 52).
[33] It is worth noting that the class analysis of the Asian American literature remains somewhat a blank sheet since "few works in Asian American literature focus primarily on class, class formation within the Asian American community is very much a reality, and yet Asian American studies rarely engages it an issue." Kwong quoted in Xu, p. 63
[34] Tan, p. 30.

foe."[35] In other words, the daughters' denial of the enjoyment of food points to a rejection of the maternal, a rejection which then extends itself and triggers more harm to the survival of Chinese American community already vulnerable to the attacks of American racism. The joy luck club feast appears to the American daughters violent and inhuman. Its disturbing portrayal starts with the members' clothing, which is a distinctive "aesthetic cultural pattern of self-identification" for the Chinese Americans.[36] Due to the contrasting customs of clothing, the joy luck club turns out to be "a shameful Chinese custom" in the young Jing-mei's heart, and it even reminds her of "a secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war."[37] The association of the club with a US history of racist ceremony and violence partly destroys all prospect of associating it with maternal protection, in turn dismantling all idealised images of Chinese American community. Jing-mei's disagreement with the Chinese ritual in the feast continues with the unpleasant eating etiquette of the club members, who have been exoticized as the "starving" masses in the American society with rich economic resources.[38]

Jing-mei's revolt against the traditional Chinese American community culminates in another scene in which a child rejects her mother alongside all of the other originators of the American joy luck club. In this moment, Tan predicts that the club may not exist anymore. The club does not have the fresh blood to prosper since all the

[35] Martin Jones, *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), p. 163.
[36] In George A. De Vos's mind, the establishment of the ethnic group is partly based on what he calls the "aesthetic cultural pattern," which also links the taste of food with the style of clothing. Therefore, in enjoying the Chinese food and dressing up in Chinese clothing, the members are claiming "authentic" ethnic culture, which contributes to the ethnic persistence. George A. De Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation, The Role of Ethnicity in Social History," in *Ethnic Identity: Problems and Prospects for the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), ed. by George A. De Vos, Takeyuki Tsuda and Lola Romanucci-Ross, pp. 1- 36 (p. 9).
[37] Tan, p. 28.
[38] Tan, p. 32.

members are "in their sixties and seventies."[39] The death of the joy luck club has been determined in advance when the joy luck aunties and the protagonist herself realize that the American-born daughters and sons are ill equipped to venerate the mother's history. In the end of the first section of the novel, Jing-mei is given the task of telling her long-lost step-sisters stories about her deceased mother's life. While pushing Jing-mei to speak for her mother's Chinese traits ("her kindness", "her smartness", "her dutiful nature to family"), desires ("her hopes, things that matter to her") and food ("the excellent dishes she cooked"),[40] they come to realize their ignorance of their daughters and are "frightened" since "joy luck" does not exist to "those American-born minds."[41] What remains unclear to the daughters, however, is that American racism and their own lingering rejection of the Chinese mothers prevent them, as second-generation immigrants, from claiming any kind of supportive or nurturing Chinese identity.

At this point, the American daughters seem satisfied with their fruitful rejection of the joy luck club. Food loathing under Kristeva's term seems to allow them to sever themselves from the maternal and Chinese identity they claim to abhor. This accounts for their continuing rejection of Chinese food taboos later in the novel. Yet what remains unknown to them is that, as Kristeva also suggests, these feelings of abjection never amount to a complete exclusion. Kristeva quotes Georges Bataille in her book: "Abjection […] is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act so excluding abject things," and Tan seems to reassert Kristeva's belief in her novel.[42] As I will suggest in the next section, even though American daughters

[39] Tan, p. 27.
[40] Tan, p. 40.
[41] Tan, p. 41.
[42] Kristeva, p. 56.

are firm enough to reject the food taboos by treating them as abject, the ambiguousness of this treatment points to their inability to complete their subject formation.

Consuming Animals: From Gross to Abject

In Tan's only autobiography *The Opposite of Fate* (2003), the Chinese American writer includes a short piece named "Fish Cheek," in which she records her experience in a family dinner with an American minister's family when she was fourteen. She writes:

> Dinner threw me deeper into despair. My relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table, dipping into the dozen or so plates of food. Robert and his family waited patiently for platters to be passed to them. My relatives murmured with pleasure when my mother brought out the whole steamed fish. Robert grimaced. Then my father poked his chop-sticks just below the fish eye and plucked out the soft meat. "Amy, your favourite," he said, offering me the tender fish cheek. I wanted to disappear.[43]

The American-born Chinese immigrant's shame and disgust towards Chinese cooking that is sharply against the American normative way of eating construct the culinary landscape not only in the childhood experience of the young Tan but also in this well-received novel as well. Very similar to the above scene, a typical Chinese feast for the celebration of Chinese New Year impresses with its prolonged depiction of loathsome Chinese eating, the detail of which is only rarely offered in the novel. [44] Notably, the

[43] Amy Tan, *The Opposite of Fate* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 126.
[44] The regretfully few culinary scenes may lead to the scholars' limited attention on food in the novel. Apart from Sau-ling Wong's explanation on the food scenes as I will explore below, other book-length criticisms such as Lorna Piatti-Farnell's *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction* and Y.H. Chang's *The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers* have explored the food scenes in the novel; however, none of them employs the theoretical methods to analyse the insightful meanings behind food in the novel. Other critics include Pi-Li Hsiao and Angelica Michelis put their great emphasis on food in the novel but still not bring the readers' attention to most details of food elaborated in my chapter. Lorna Piatti-Farnell, *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Y.H. Chang, *How what You Eat Defines who You are: The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Pi-Li Hsiao, "Food

feast crosses the national and ethnic boundary with the attendance of newly wedded American son-in-law Rich and some Chinese American grandchildren. Although Waverley Jong, one of the American daughters, states that "crab isn't Chinese," the new-comers are surely not well aware of how to eat the crabs. Chances are very high that the guests will agree with Jing-mei when she tells them that Americans regard crabs as domestic animals, pets not suitable for cooking. To make things worse, the Chinese mother not only cooks but then teaches them how to eat its best part:

> And then she [Lindo Jong] turned to Rich and said with much authority, "Why are you not eating the best part?"
>
> And I [Jing-mei Woo] saw Rich smiling back, with amusement, and not humility, showing in his face. He had the same coring as the crab on his plate: reddish hair, pale cream skin, and large dots of orange freckles. While he smirked, Auntie Lindo demonstrated the proper technique, poking her chopstick into the orange spongy part: "You have to dig in here, get this out. The brain is most tastiest, you try."
>
> Waverly and Rich grimace at each other, united in disgust. I heard Vincent and Lisa whisper to each other, "Gross," and then they snickered too.[45]

The Chinese mother's imparting of Chinese culinary knowledge typically points to the physical and psychological filth towards the obvious food taboos. The physical and uncanny resemblance between the crab's brain and that of Rich returns our attention to Kristeva's description of food loathing. Kristeva applies the analogy of the skin on the surface of milk to explain the working mechanism of abjection. She writes that the "gagging sensation … and spasms in the stomach, the belly," are born "when the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk."[46] Aligning her argument with Mary Douglas's theory of defilement and filth,[47] Kristeva attaches

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Imagery in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club and The Kitchen God's Wife," *Feng Chia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1 (2000), pp. 205-227; Angelica Michelis, "Foreign Recipes: Mothers, Daughters and Food in Like Water For Chocolate, *The Joy Luck Club* and A Chorus of Mushrooms," *Crossroads. A Journal of English Studies*, 4.1 (2014), pp. 16-33.

[45] Tan, p. 203.

[46] Kristeva, pp. 2 & 3.

[47] For Kristeva and Douglas, filth is not thought as filth in the food's own quality but in its inability to obey the boundary. For Douglas, "all margins are dangerous … Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faces or tears by simply issuing forth have

great importance to the skin on the milk, suggesting it is abject because it is neither liquid nor solid but exists in the indeterminable space between both.[48] As such Kristeva suggests here that, when a food breaches the categories between humans and animals which this scene represents and the novel recurs, the abject is formed.

This imagery of abject becomes evident pages before the crab feast when Su-yuan's steam of the living crabs evokes Jing-mei's childhood memory of her mothers' cooking crabs which she treats as her new playmate. Significantly, she equals the imaginary scream of the crab with her own scream for help to break out from the maternal cruelty: "To this day, I remember that crab screaming as he thrust one bright red claw out over the side of the bubbling pot. It must have been my own voice, because now I know, of course, that crabs have no vocal cords."[49] The young daughter's disgust towards Chinese cooking that challenges the boundary between human and animal reappears when Tan attributes two long paragraphs to the detailed depiction of a fishmonger and café in San Francisco's Chinatown:

> Farther down the street was Ping Yuen Fish Market. The front window displayed a tank crowded with doomed fish and turtles struggling to gain footing on the slimy green-tiled sides. A hand-written sign informed tourists, "Within this store, is all for food, not for pet." Inside, the butchers with their blood-stained white smocks deftly gutted the fish while customers cried out their orders and shouted, "Give me your freshest," to which the butchers always protested, "All for freshest." On less crowded market days, we would inspect the crates of live frogs and crabs which we were warned not to poke, boxes of dried cuttlefish, and row upon row of iced pawns, squid and slippery fish. The sanddabs made me shiver each time; their eyes lay on one flattened side and reminded me of my mother's story of a careless girl who ran into a crowded street and was crushed by a cab. "Was smash flat," reported my mother.
>
> At the corner of the alley was Hong Sing's, a four-table café with a recessed stairwell in front that led to a door marked "Trademen." My brothers and I believed the bad people emerged from this door at night. Tourists never went to Hong Sing's, since the menu was printed only in Chinese. A Caucasian man with a big camera once posed me and my playmates in front of the restaurant. He had us

traversed the boundary of the body … The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins." Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 150.

[48] In Kristeva's mind, abject is engendered because it is neither an object nor a subject; instead, it claims the middle ground between the subject and the object. She writes: "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire." Kristeva, p. 1.

[49] Tan, p. 201.

> move to the side of the picture window so the photo would capture the roasted duck with its head dangling from a juice-covered rope. After he took the picture, I told him he should go into Hong Sing's and eat dinner. When he smiled and asked what they served, I shouted, "Guts and duck's feet and octopus gizzards!" Then I ran off with my friends, shrieking with laughter as we scampered across the alley and hid in the entryway grotto of the China Gem Company, my heart pounding with hope that he would chase us.[50]

Slaughtering the animals on-site, killing the presumed "pets," and displaying their corpses for window-shopping: all of these actions here seem to typify Chinese food in general in the mind of the young protagonist. As Sau-ling Wong argues in her pioneering food studies essay, the literary representations of "grim eating and unsentimental killing for food" constitute the recurring images in Asian American literature, and *The Joy Luck Club* in this instance proves no exception to the rule.[51] Wong insightfully links the cruel image of eating unlikely animals to "quasi-cannibalism," a notion that cruelly violates humanity and contemporary social orders. He is particularly interested in observing the deep meaning for the grim eating literally pertaining the mother-and-daughter dyad as practised by many Asian American writers. For Wong, the bond carries through "the twisted logic of Necessity," which points to the inextricable mix between love and violence through alimentary images.[52] Although such a mix may produces a compelling psychoanalytic reading of food, Wong turns her attention to the reading against the model minority thesis since such reading will help "invoke the American immigrant myth" and "search traditional Asian cultures."[53] Unfortunately, however, Wong turns her back on the anthropological and psychoanalytic reading of Chinese eating habits. He claims that such reading is not rewarding since they are too closely tied to "actual,

[50] Tan, pp. 90-1.
[51] Wong, p. 34.
[52] Wong, p. 34.
[53] Wong, p. 37.

specific 'exotic' cultural practices."[54] However, as I will argue below, quasi-cannibalism can open up the space for us to delve deep into the ethnic abject behind the Chinese alimentary images in the western semiotics.

Clearly Wong's claim of quasi-cannibalism is built upon the similarities between animal and human flesh, and echoes the western world's long history of rendering consumption of animals as barbaric and inhuman acts. Ancient Greek writer Plutarch wrote an essay entitled "Flesh-eating" in which he articulates concerns of relating meat with embalmed human flesh.[55] Since meat is by nature the product of dead animals, it reminds people frequently of violence, aggression, the spilling of blood and pain. In other words, it constantly trembles on the border between clean / dirty and purity / contamination, which Kristeva sees the production of abject as above mentioned.

To some extent, production of meat nowadays builds up a more solid border. The industrial production of meat facilitates a cultural attempt to alienate animal flesh from thoughts of eating and interacting with live animals. It results in the production of meat under what Carol J. Adams calls "the mass term", the cultural hegemony that is achieved in the eating of animals and encourages the consumers to "forget the pig [or a cow, a chicken, a crab] is an animal."[56] Through butchering, animals become "the absent referent", in which "animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist."[57] As observed by Adams, the animals' reference is achieved through the masked language. The word "meat" masks the death of animals. The mask of language, to some extent, symbolises the desire to separate the concept of

[54] Wong, p. 37.
[55] Lupton, p. 117.
[56] Carol J. Adams, "Eating Animals," in *Eating Culture* (New Jersey: State University of New York Press 1998), ed. by Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, pp. 60-75 (p. 54).
[57] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 51.

meat from thoughts about animals. To dissociate eating the animal corpses with the barbarian cannibal behaviour, the words to designate the remains of the eaten such as beef and lamb have been invented and dominate other languages.[58] For example, *sheepmeat* turns into mutton while *cowmeat* undergoes numerous changes into beef and turns into the form of hamburger. The establishment of the industrial abattoirs also follows the similar pattern. Instead of using the alternative term "slaughterhouse," the very term "abattoir," derived from the French verb *abattre*, or "to cause to fall," which was commonly used in relation to tree-felling, attempts to obscure the violent nature of the slaughter.[59]

By contrast, Tan's novel reminds the "predominantly white and female [American] readers" frequently of such violence.[60] It orients attention towards the blood-stained smacks on the butchers as well as the temporary liveliness and doomed death of the living animals on the food stalls. Tan's semiotics of the disgust Chinese way of cooking extends to their way of eating in Ying-ying's childhood memory. She speaks of the adults' eating living animals:

> I [Ying-ying] raced to the pavilion and found aunts and uncles laughing as they used chopsticks to pick up dancing shrimp, still squirming in their shells, their tiny legs bristling. So this was what the mesh cage beneath the water had contained, freshwater shrimp, which my father was now dipping into a spicy bean-curd sauce and popping into his mouth with two bites and a swallow.[61]

The savage eating of living animals contradicts the pioneering anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' famous belief in humans' cooking as a moral process. In his mind, cooking transfers raw matter from "nature" to the state of "culture". Treating food

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[58] Adams, p. 74-93.
[59] The development of the abattoir features the movement from the centre of towns to the outskirts of towns, in order to make slaughtering become an invisible activity. Noilie Vialles, *Animal to Edible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 5 & 22-3.
[60] Sau-ling Wong, "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," In *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 83-110 (p. 88).
[61] Tan, p. 75.

practices as a system of language, the anthropologist identifies “nature”, “culture” and “rotted” as the culinary triangle. Culture is regarded as the complex of those food practices, which distinguish humans from the primitive human beings or the animals.[62] The Chinese eating, then, has been regarded as non-human and natural practices, situating itself on the outside of the human civilization.

In this light, Tan’s uncanny return to the Chinese primitiveness both in their eating and cooking contradicts the semiotics long held by the western thoughts by bringing the meat back into the form of living animals. On the surface, the exploration of the cultural history of animal consumption provides justification for the American daughters’ loathing towards the Chinese ways of eating. Their clear division of the food status as either disgusting or delectable necessitates their need to stand with the American social orders to depart from the Chinese food taboos of eating animals. The stigmatization of Chinese food as filth is something that stays outside the civilized social order. As mentioned in the Introduction, Mary Douglas argues that this designation of food taboo guarantees the maintenance of social order. In Douglas’s words, it is “by separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions” of food taboos that “an inherently untidy experience” of eating can be disciplined and imposed with an orderly system.[63] Significantly, for many scholars researching on American race relations, food is a powerful weapon to serve as a cultural signifier. It fits whites’ appetite to view Chinese ethnic food as primitive and savage Other in the United States, constructing an effective semiotics of multicultural salad-bowl America. Using food metaphors to depict the role of ethnicity in whites’ imagination,

[62] In discussing the difference between the roasted food and the boiled food, Levi-Strauss regards boiled food as a cultural object since humans distance themselves from the direct contact with fire and try to meditate the relations between them and the world through water. Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Culinary Triangle,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, pp. 20-27.
[63] Douglas, p. 5.

bell hooks points out in her famous essay "Eating the Other" that "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture."[64] She further argues that imbibing what others eat (in this context, allowing Chinese Americans to practice their own eating in this chapter's context) is to ingest that other. [65] The Caucasian American in this scene clearly takes a photograph "that would capture the roasted duck with its head dangling from a juice-covered rope," showing his fascination and desire towards the ingestion of the Other.[66] By telling him about the unclean food items for sale in the Chinese cafeteria, Waverley joins the American group to consume the Chinese ethnic inferiority. In other words, the American daughters' loathing of Chinese food does not stop at the simple rejection of the Chinese culture and ethnic roots; they believe that their hatred of Chinese food strengthens their affiliation with a white majority US culture they for now regard as exclusive and superior.

If we read the daughters' ritualistic act of food loathing from another perspective, their inability to exclude abject food and race is soon complicated in the novel. Even though the young Waverley loathes the Chinese eating in Chinatown, she grows up with "three five-course meals every day, beginning with a soup full of mysterious things [she] didn't want to know the names of."[67] Likewise, Waverley's and Rich's filthiness towards crab eating in the opening of the section turns out to be in vain. They finish eating crabs and leave behind a table full of "crab carcasses." [68] A crab shell is even placed between Waverley and Rich as an ashtray for their cigarettes. To

[64] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Eating Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), ed. by Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, pp. 181-200 (p. 181).
[65] bell hooks claims in the end of the essay that "the overriding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate --- that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten." hooks, p. 200.
[66] Tan, p. 91.
[67] Tan, p. 89.
[68] Tan, p. 206.

some extent, they have unconsciously joined the group of cruel eaters of the animals, which partly indicates the nature of abject as above mentioned.

To make things worse, the destruction of such abject food to the subject formation of one individual has been complicated in Ying-ying's childhood memory, which remains unknown to the American daughters. In the mysterious narration of "The Moon Lady," the four-year-old protagonist runs into another scene in which fishermen kill river animals for food:

> I turned around and a sullen woman was now squatting in front of the bucket of fish. I watched as she took out a sharp, thin knife and began to slice open the fish bellies, pulling out the red slippery insides and throwing them over her shoulder into the lake. I saw her scrape off the fish scales, which flew in the air like shards of glass. And then there were two chickens that no longer gurgled after their heads were chopped off. And a big snapping turtle that stretched out its neck to bite a stick, and --- whuck! --- off fell its head. And dark masses of thin freshwater eels, swimming furiously in a pot. Then the woman carried everything, without a word, into the kitchen. And there was nothing else to see.
>
> It was not until then, too late, that I saw my new clothes --- and the spots of bloods, flecks of fish scales, bits of feather and mud. What a strange mind I had! In my panic, in hearing waking voices toward the front of the boat, I quickly dipped my hands in the bowl of turtle's blood and smeared this on my sleeves, and on the front of my pants and jacket. And this is what I truly thought: that I could cover these spots by painting all my clothes crimson red, and that if I stood perfectly still no one would notice this change.[69]

The sensational paragraph foregrounds many of the abject effects that Kristeva envisions, including the human's interaction with the animal's blood and fish. In "Semiotics of Biblical Abomination," Kristeva argues that biblical prohibitions follow similar logic of separation. When she touches upon the food taboos, one of the three categories of abomination, Kristeva maintains that these designate the semantic area of those foods that "imply the pure / impure distinction." For example, the blood of animals is not appropriate to be eaten since it suggests to the eaters their animal instincts and reminds them of forbidden cannibalism. To mix blood and animal flesh together is to mix death and birth, violence and food, fuelling feelings of abjection.

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[69] Tan, p. 76.

Many river animals are also impure since they suggest a movement between land and sea as well as a worrying proximity to humanity that further suggest admixture and confusion.[70] In this light, Tan can be regarded to complicate Kristeva's thought on food taboos since Ying-ying meets with a lot of trouble after she mistakenly mixes animal blood with her body. She is found not as a human being any more but as "an apparition covered with blood." Her bodily abjectness finally turns out to be her lost identity in the society, which leads to her traumatic life afterwards.

From this perspective, it is important to see the harm of the daughters' rejection of recognizing their mothers' past. Without knowing Ying-ying's tragic story as described below, they cannot hold themselves against the revulsion and fascination of the abject. It reminds us to see the important role of learning the mothers' Chinese narratives for Chinese daughters. The importance lies not only in the sustenance of the Chinese ethnic roots in the joy luck club but also in how they attempt to educate the daughters. Ying-ying says: "All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved."[71] Therefore, learning a mother's past is considered to be an important way for the daughters to survive in the American society. The daughters' rejection of learning their mothers' story, to some extent, has trapped them in the ethnic abject under white dominant US culture.

By exploring Chinese grim and cruel eating as a literary representation, Tan implies that American daughters' abjection of their mothers and ethnic food is in fact an abjection to their own subjectivity meant to consolidate their American identity. Notably, the threats remain unconscious for all the young immigrants in the novel,

[70] Kristeva, pp. 90-112; Oliver, p. 73.
[71] Tan, p. 251.

and the unawareness proves to be at stake for their subjectivity. As indicated above, the danger may lie in their whole-hearted trust in claiming their identity in the American food and western civilization, and by extension, the classic American promises to grant equal opportunities to every citizen as elaborated later in the chapter. However, one thing is clear to all the young immigrants: what constrains their identities in US society distinctively is their mother, and their revulsion should not stop in the food loathing but aim directly towards the maternal body, where their subjectivity desires to break out.

The Acceptance of Abject Maternity

Clearly, Jing-mei Woo, who initiates the rejection of the joy luck club and claims resolution such as "I won't let her change me," undergoes a tremendous transformation towards the end of the novel.[72] As one of the daughters who are ignorant of their mother's personalities at first, Jing-mei, through her recollection of her past stories with her mother, finally "becomes Chinese" and reconciles herself to her mother's insistence that "Once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese."[73] Significantly, the other three daughters follow a similar pattern to assert their selfhood by reconciling with maternity and the ethnic roots it betokens. The pattern surely is a direct contrast to Kristeva's belief in how an individual can adapt himself to the society as above mentioned. While the last section explains why abject food taboos fail to consolidate the daughters' identity in America, I will attribute the underlying reasons to the emasculation of paternity and the destruction of American racism, which hinder the daughters' process of asserting their selfhood.

[72] Tan, p. 134.
[73] Tan, p. 267.

As explained throughout the chapter, a maternal disruption of identity formation distances the American daughters from their actual mothers, who they come to regard as thwarting their development of a fullblown American character and forcing them to believe in the superstitious and irrational Chinese myths and philosophies. These connotations, throughout *The Joy Luck Club*, extend into the earliest memories of each American daughter in the second section of the novel. Here Lena St. Clair's memory in "The Voice from the Wall" is a certain highlight in explaining the mechanism since Lena's troubled identity is evoked by the abject maternal body, which points to Kristeva's belief in signalling the maternal manipulation of child's subjectivity.

Lena's troubled identity starts with her mother's special interest in telling her the ghost story which features death and cannibal eating after she attempts to reveal the secret her mother keeps in the basement:

> It was only after I stopped screaming --- I had seen the blood of my nose on my mother's shoulder --- only then did my mother tell me about the bad man who lived in the basement and why I should never open the door again. He had lived there for thousands of years, she said, and was so evil and hungry that had my mother not rescued me so quickly, this bad man would have planted five babies in me and then eaten us all in a six-course meal, tossing our bones on the dirty floor.[74]

The ghost story must have left a mounting psychological pressure on the American girl since Lena begins to "see terrible things" after this.[75] The cannibalistic deeds of the ghost depicted by a Chinese mother pose a disruption of the girl's American identity. Historically, the word "cannibal" is indelibly associated with the notions of Americanness since its entry to the Western lexicon. As suggested by Jeff Bergland, the word is a referent used by Columbus to bastardize the Carib Indians rather than an original lexicon for anthropophagy. The notion of cannibalism "predicted on false

[74] Tan, p. 103.
[75] Tan, p. 103.

evidence, fanciful imagining, or ideologically inflected logic" is employed by the West to justify its othering and exploitation of Native Americans.[76] In *The Joy Luck Club*, however, the abjectness of cannibalism deeply disrupts Lena's subject formation that is presumably established upon her identification with American characters. As many critics have argued, cannibalism is indeed abject, since it attacks the boundary between the subject and the object, the familiar and the unfamiliar. After all, cannibalism itself is a process of incorporation, which forces *me* (the well-being subject) into the body of *you* (the cannibal other);[77] moreover, Graham Huggan reminds us that the threat of mixing ghosts and cannibalism evokes a sense of the uncanny made popular by Sigmund Freud's meditation on the subjectivity.[78] In the Freudian sense, ghosts are uncanny in that they register the familiar: they belong, as Freud puts in his seminal essay "The Uncanny" (1919), to "that class of the terrifying which leads us back to something long known to us."[79]

While young Lena has already been psychologically terrified by the ghost story, her identity is further traumatized by her mother since Ying-ying herself is "a living ghost" controlled by the "unspoken terror."[80] Unaware of what unspoken terror is, Lena finds herself in a process of incorporation, where her subjectivity is found to be devoured by the uncanny ghost story and the maternal body. In particular, Lena starts to "see terrible things," particularly, with "Chinese eyes, the part she gets from her

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[76] Jeff Berglund, *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2006), p. 1.
[77] Maggie Kilgour observes the opposition contained in cannibalism as the one which the subject treats the inside as superior while the outside as "secondary, extraneous, and yet ultimately threatening". Kilgour, pp. 4-5.
[78] Graham Huggan, "Ghost Stories, Bone Flutes, Cannibal Countermemory," in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Francis Barker. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 126-141 (p. 128).
[79] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," In *Collected Papers* (New York: Basic Books. 1959), ed. by Earnest Jones, pp. 368-407 (pp. 369-70).
[80] Tan, p. 113.

mother."[81] The transformation indicates the collapse of Lena's boundary in alienating her body from her mother. Sharing the same eyes to take similar viewpoints toward the surrounding like her mother, Lena becomes part of Ying-ying.[82] In this light, Tan complicates Kristeva's belief in the abject body. For Kristeva, as a way to achieve the abject, the other (the other's body) that we reject and at the same time with whom we identify is what fascinates us and shatters out limits and our borders. Distancing but also sharing part of the maternal body, Lena is now a stranger to herself since "the foreigner is within us."[83] Lena is not approached by her mother's ghost stories anymore; instead, she starts to come up with dreams featuring a mother's murder of her own daughter. After Ying-ying gets worried about the house's structure and moves Lena's bed against the wall, Lena starts to hear voices coming from the wall:

> Then I heard scraping sounds, slamming, pushing and shouts and then whack! whack! whack! Someone was killing. Someone was being killed. Screams and shouts, a mother had a sword above a girl's head and was starting to slice her life away, first a braid, then her scalp, an eyebrow, a toe, a thumb, the point of her cheek, the slant of her nose, until there was nothing left, no sounds.[84]

The cruel description can point to the permeation of abject maternity in Lena's subject formation. The mother in Lena's dream can be easily regarded as Ying-ying in Lena's imagination. Thus, it further affirms the intrusive role of the mother on her psychic development.

While Lena's story is symbolic enough to trigger our psychoanalysis reading, other American daughters' memories act in a more realistic way. Yet all conform to a rewarding reading of their subject formation. For example, Waverley Jong's story "Rules of the Game" opens up with her mother Lindo's discussion of "the art of

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[81] Tan, p. 103.
[82] It is notably not a complete incorporation since Ying-ying only gives her "the eyes" rather than "the eyelids". Tan, p. 104.
[83] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 192.
[84] Tan, p. 110.

invisible strength." As she equates strong maternal power with "the strongest wind" in a chess game, Waverley, together with her older brothers and the other three daughters in the book, grows up under the yoke of her mother's manipulative and overwhelming expectations and ambitions. Such expectations originate the Chinese mothers' good wishes for the daughters not to duplicate their own sad and restricted life back in China. In the opening vignette, Tan depicts the mothers' kind wishes towards their children: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's bench. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!"[85] In return, the joy luck mothers hold strong wishes to be loved, obeyed and respected by their daughters. Waverley's confusion over her identity becomes most evident when she realizes that she cannot escape from her mother's cooking, which evokes a natural link between cooking and maternity as explained above. The rebellion reaches its peak when Waverley runs away from home and her mother, who prides herself on her chess-playing abilities and likes to show off the rewards of Chinese prodigy education. Easily treated as a gesture to defy the powerful maternal manipulation, her escape brings violent and painful consequences. Having nowhere else to go, she returns home, cold and unwelcome, with her mother refusing to nourish her daughter, and her father dominated by his wife's orders and painfully keeping silent.[86] As a result, Waverley turns to help for her talent in chess gameplay in order to forget her misery.

[85] Tan, p. 17.
[86] Tan, p. 100.

Reflections on the chessboard, in her later narration "Four Directions", lead Waverley to experience the suffering and pain of escaping the maternal figure. As Fickle suggests, chess here provides "a crucial site where Chinese character and American circumstances collide in the body of the Asian American chess prodigy."[87] Waverley attributes her success in chess to her "foresight" as well as her "mathematical understanding of all possible moves and patience."[88] Yet the young protagonist seems unaware that such tactics have not been developed independently or in isolation from her mother but very much reflect the latter's influence as the "strongest wind" in her daughter's life.[89] Rather than acknowledge this formative influence, Waverley regards her mother's continuing involvement in her life as a distraction, and ridicules her mother's lack of knowledge about chess's US rules and regulations. Against her Chinese heritage embodied by her mother, her promise to become a future grand master inducts her into a dominant American myth, summarized by Suyuan Woo, in which she believes that in this country "you could be anything you wanted to be."[90]

These hopes, however, soon prove unfounded. In fact Waverley soon seems a subject of what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism," deluded by her faith in American promises of opportunity and advancement. As Berlant puts it, "cruel optimism" becomes apparent whenever you find that "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,"[91] a predicament based on the condition of a person's "maintaining an attempt to [reach] a problematic object in advance of its

[87] Fickle, p. 80.
[88] Tan, p. 94.
[89] Tan complicates the scene later in Waverley's success in her first tournament, where she largely depends on the strength of invisible wind to win. Tan, p. 96.
[90] Tan, p. 132.
[91] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

loss."[92] Tan complicates the pain suffered from such optimism later in the novel. Waverley's chess career falters, and, after giving up the game for months, she seems unable to regain her lost form. Compounded by her miserable first marriage with a Caucasian man, she feels greatly alienated and devalued in her talent of winning games and her ability to keep a whole family. After her fiancée's unpleasant feasting experiences with the Chinese family, she feels quite certain that her sad fate will repeat again. Notably, she feels confused about her emotion and identity: "I … I just don't know what's inside me right now."[93] Other American daughters in the novel suffer similar fates and disappointments, yet seem similarly to be unable to attribute this downfall to the failure of American promises of opportunity.[94] Instead of recognising one of the problematic objects for cruel optimism as identified by Berlant, they unconsciously yet unanimously displace their rage at their various failures onto their mother and the oppressive Chinese heritage she embodies. Waverley attributes her failures in chess to her mother's technique of "hitting a nerve," later blaming her for "poisoning" her marriage.[95] She regards her mother as a figure who has twisted, catastrophically, her attitude towards the American world. Tan depicts Waverley's tormented relationship with her mother in the scene which bears an important reference to the mirror:

> And looking at the coat in the mirror, I couldn't fend off the strength of her will anymore, her ability to make me see black where there was once white, white where there was once black … My mother was doing it again, making me see black where I once saw white.[96]

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[92] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *Differences*, 17.3 (2006), pp. 20-36 (p. 21).
[93] Tan, p. 182.
[94] In the novel, Tan suggests that the daughters' miserable familial and social dilemma originates the racial and cultural pressure imposed by the American society. Apart from Waverley Jong, Jing-mei Woo is found to be heavily burdened by her aspirations to be successful by the social standard, another manifestation of typical social Darwinism in the West.
[95] Tan, pp. 170 & 174.
[96] Tan, pp. 169 & 180.

Waverley's accusation complicates Jacques Lacan's interpretations of the mirror stage at which a child begins as a separate subject, an intellectual concept of great significance for Kristeva. This stage, for Lacan, occurs at the moment the child realizes that his reflection in the mirror is not real but a two-dimensional image. At this stage the infant comes to sense that its body is in some way broken or "fragmented," thus stepping on the road to become a powerful "Ideal-ich."[97] But Lacan adds that, because at that moment it can only be found in the mirror, the ideal self in the child's mind dwells in "the absent world of signifiers, constituted by the Other, over which we have no control."[98] Following the mirror stage, the mother takes the place of the image as Other, and the child realizes the mother can go away.

This noted Lacanian concept seems to shape the form Jing-mei's crisis takes in "Two Kinds." Here Jing-mei rises against Su-yuan's will by confronting her reflection in the mirror. In realizing that she is failing her mother's expectation over and over again, she attempts to relieve her despair, and this is the moment she sees her ideal self in the mirror, an "angry and powerful" image.[99] Jing-mei thus starts breaking away from maternal authority, and makes clear that her "true self has finally emerged" after she has grown brave enough to declare "no" to her mother as well as to the seemingly irrational Chinese heritage she embodies.[100] Yet these efforts to reject the mother never seem complete. Now Waverley instead seems to be thrust into a world in which the maternal figure nonetheless intrudes upon the symbolic order, twisting the truths within it.

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[97] It should be noted that the "Ideal-ich" in Lacan's opinion is more than a fantasy, an unreal image that seems real. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2001), ed. by Vincent B. Leitch, pp. 1285-90.
[98] Allen Thiher, *The Power of Tautology: The Roots of Literary Theory* (London: Associated University Press, 1997), p. 138.
[99] Tan, p. 134.
[100] Tan, p. 141.

Her feeling of abjection emerges again in another mirror scene when Lindo is seated before the mirror with Waverley and Mr. Rory (the hairdresser) in the hair salon. Sitting silently, Lindo listens to the two scrutinizing her hairstyle. The scene transforms as Mr. Rory exclaims at the uncanny resemblance between the mother and daughter he finds in the mirror. Lindo notes Waverley's discomfort: "'The same cheeks,' [Waverley] says. She points to mine and then pokes her cheeks. She sucks them outside in to look like a starved person."[101] On one level, Waverley's response can seem a simple instance of matrophobia, the fear younger women may feel of "becoming a mother."[102] Yet Waverley, in common with the other American daughters brought together in *The Joy Luck Club*, soon expresses feelings that range beyond this common disposition. Her mother not only represents the tribulations and sacrifices involved in the next approaching phase of adulthood. In her emaciated cheeks, suggestive of starvation, she also evokes the racist stereotype often attached to the first Chinese American immigrants, who were and are colonially depicted as starving and malnourished masses. As Su puts it, since their early arrival, Chinese American immigrants were perceived as "nothing more than starving masses, beasts of burden and depraved heathens."[103] Such stereotypes alongside economic exploitation presented Chinese coolie labourers as "leeches," "hordes of rats," animals at once parasitic and of insatiable greed.[104] In other words, what she fears

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[101] Tan, p. 256.
[102] My knowledge of matrophobia comes from Deborah D. Rogers' introduction "Towards theorizing Matrophobia," which is a comprehensive summary of the feminist and psychoanalytic theorizing of matrophobia. Marina Heung should be also given credits for bringing matrophobia's idea to me in her essay, but she regretfully stops on the simple depiction of the theme and turns her vision to Lindo's double vision. See Deborah D. Rogers, *The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy: Sacrificing Mothers in the Novel and in Popular Culture* (London: Peter Lang Publishing 2007), pp. 1-14; Marina Heung, "Daughter Text/Mother Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," *Feminist Studies*, 19.3 (1993), pp. 596-616.
[103] Yuanchang Su, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1991), p. 45.
[104] Mary Bosworth and Jeanne Flavin, *Race, Gender, and Punishment: From Colonialism to the War on Terror* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 121.

does not stop at becoming her mother. Her fear is of being misrecognized as a Chinese citizen under the yoke of an existing racist stereotype, which will hinder her assimilation into the symbolic order.

What happens next when the child realizes her separation from her mother in the mirror stage? Lacan explains such separation happens in the oedipal situation. It is also the stage, according to Oliver, that "bridges the alienation from its mother that the child feels after the mirror stage and reinforces a permanent separation from her". She continues: "The intervention of the father forces the dissolution of the imaginary unity with, and gratification from, the mother."[105] Waverley's dissolution with her mother, however, doesn't engender identification with her father. The father figures in the novel lack power over their families and seem even weaker in the wider US society. Jingmei Woo, for example, regards her father as someone who keeps "politely indifferent" to everything around him; Lena sees her father's inability to change her mother's mysterious and frightening supervision.[106] Similarly, it is Lindo Jong who not only initiates her own marriage with her husband but also names her three children. Lindo explains that she names her daughter Waverley because of her eagerness to remind her daughter that she naturally belongs to the streets of Chinatown, deepening her complex sense of Chinese ethnic roots in the turmoil of American cultural coercion. Different from Waverley's elder brothers' names, which indicate good wills of making money, Waverley is named after the street she were born. In Lindo's words, "I wanted you to think, This is where I belong."[107] Therefore, chances are high that the first signified word that infantile Waverley comprehends is

[105] Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 21.
[106] Tan, p. 27.
[107] It is insightful to see Lindo gives all three English names to her children, which poses an insightful opinion towards the mother's mixed viewpoints toward American assimilation. Tan, p. 264-5.

also given by her mother, confirming the failure of her Lacanian paternal function. Throughout Waverley's narration, her father seems not to have any role in her childhood education and in her second marriage with Ted. In other words, the Chinese father, emasculated and disempowered by abject maternity, is no longer a strong law-giver who can counterbalance a strong mother.

Yet it soon seems that the patriarchal order of dominant US culture is similarly hollow. The American daughters of *The Joy Luck Club* fail in their attempts to form an alternative identity within the symbolic order of the American patriarchy. Their collective rejection of Chinese ethnicity, in each case, prefigures their failure to claim a powerful identity for themselves within US society. Lindo makes a keen observation of the Chinese immigrants' image in American's eyes: "I use my American face. That's the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand."[108] What remains unclear to Waverley and the other American daughters is the fact that the racial boundary set for the first-generation immigrants applies to them as well. As someone who claims the middle-class life in the United States, Mrs. Jordan, Rose Hsu Jordan's future mother-in-law, "warmly" greets his son Ted's "oriental" girlfriend, and a painful conversation ensues:

> And then she spoke quietly about Ted's future, his need to concentrate on his medical studies, why it would be years before he could even think about marriage. She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against marriage. She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against minorities; she and her husband, who owned a chain of office-supply stores, personally knew many fine people who were Oriental, Spanish, and even black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard, by patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world was, how unpopular the Vietnam War was.
>
> "Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese," I said softly, even though I was on the verge of shouting. "And I have no intention of marrying your son."[109]

[108] Tan, p. 255.
[109] Tan, p. 118.

To Mrs. Jordan, then, Rose is immediately deprived of the American identity to which *The Joy Luck Club*'s American daughters all aspire. The racist account of the Chinese immigrant's social status not only prefigures the tragic turn of Rose's future marriage; it also reveals that the symbolic order that the daughters pursue is in fact in a state of chaos and bankruptcy. Even the immense cultural capital accumulated through an elite education at UC Berkley cannot protect Rose from the damaging social impact of her yellow skin. Within her mindset as an American daughter her inability to reconnect the presumed signifier (qualified educational background) with the signified (social well-being and respectful position) proves puzzling, but it is, ironically, resolved by Lindo, a Chinese mother who lacks all such cultural capital:

> She [Lindo] scanned the pages [rules of the chessgame] quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to search deliberately for nothing in particular.
>
> "This American rules," she concluded at last. "Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find out yourself." She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.[110]

Lindo's illiteracy in reading the rules in English, which is always dismissed by the American daughters, drives her to see the "symbols" without knowledge of words, totally breaking the inherent connection between the signified and the signifier. Yet it soon transpires that this break ultimately allows her to see through the mythology of American assimilation. Under this mythology, regardless of where the immigrant was born (in Mrs. Jones's word, no matter whether Rose is born Oriental, Spanish or even black), he or she is meant to accept racial assimilation without questioning the rules and instead, as the novel frequently suggests, accepting the fiction of the American opportunity submissively. Wider patterns in the novel, however, soon confirm that the American daughters' effort to form their own identity by these means is doomed,

[110] Tan, p. 94.

depending as it does on a false assumption that they can find a rational symbolic order to build a unified self.

In this context, Lindo's observations about the unjust nature of assimilation offer the American daughters the possibility of developing a strategy to withstand and survive their unforeseen setbacks. A hyphenated identity formerly scorned by the American daughters now seems to offer the best path for negotiating the embarrassments and cruel optimisms of postmodern US life: "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character."[111] At this point, the essentialist distinction between being an American and being Chinese is dismissed. Many critics simply follow the American daughters' perception as to American superiority and Chinese backwardness. Old China seems to Wong, for example, a country where "individuals' lives are deprived of choice, shaped by tradition and buffeted by inexorable 'natural' circumstances," whereas in contemporary America "one can exercise decision making and control over one's life."[112] Yet as the novel itself makes clear, having too many choices soon oppresses the prospects of character development. As Rose Jordan points out, when looking back over her collapsing marriage, such American choices impose a burden of their own:

> Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, The American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.[113]

[111] Tan, p. 254.
[112] Wong, "'Sugar Sisterhood,'" p. 60.
[113] Tan, p. 191.

To some extent, returning to the maternity and the Chinese community with limited choice seems to play a great advantage over the burden of choices that becomes synonymous with American freedom.

As the daughters realize the disillusionment of symbolic order, their abjection of maternal food ends with their loyal afflictions with the maternal bodies in *The Joy Luck Club*. Jing-mei Woo fulfils her reconciliation with the maternal body on her trip back to China, the one which aims to "revive [her mother] from the dead."[114] The heroine succeeds in completing the task by transforming herself to another Su-yuan. The daughter believes that her blood is running on a new and Chinese course when crossing the China border. In the photo shoot with her long lost sisters, she finds that she inherits her mother's "same eyes, same mouth."[115] The other three daughters also follow the similar pattern, and they attempt to embody with their mothers' personality. As Rose Hsu Jordan learns to "shout" for her rights in an unsuccessful marriage, her newfound boldness recalls the confidence that her mother asserted back in China in her step-father's house.[116] In a similar way, as Lena St. Clair starts to question the balance sheet shared with her husband Harold, her growing self-consciousness appears and is fully embodied with "Chi" or the nature of the "tiger," a trope Tan continually associates with the nature of Lena's mother. Although Waverley Jong keeps rebelling against the Lindo's manipulation over her personality, she and her husband complete their honeymoon journey with her mother: "The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving from West to reach the East."[117] In this light, the American

[114] Tan, p. 269.
[115] Tan, p. 288.
[116] Tan, p. 204.
[117] Tan, p. 184.

daughters go through a journey from abjecting the maternal link to a state of recognition with their mothers.

Conclusion

Although *The Joy Luck Club* ends with a celebration of what Adams called "intergenerational interchangeablity," its process remains full of threats and risks, and most of these remain linked in their minds to their mother's desire to incorporate their identity. They soon locate two main targets for them to rebel against: Chinese food practices, and the strong maternal body from whom they must break away if they are to gain independence. At first, their rejection of the joy luck club seems to work well, yet their combined abjection of Chinese food taboos and the maternal body later proves in vain. The novel suggests that it leads them into the particular trap of American racist ideology that is shaped by the "cruel optimism" of a promised but unreachable American Dream. Eating in *The Joy Luck Club*, therefore, involves a mixture of pleasure and pain. On the one hand, Chinese eating, both in a realistic way (social behaviour of eating) and a figurative way (bodily incorporation), is a cruel intrusion to the daughters' asserted American identity. On the other hand, loathing and rejecting Chinese food helps demarcate their Chinese ethnicity. Yet this abjection provides chances to look into the failure of American myths and draw the daughters to consolidate their ethnic identification with the mothers. Their consumption of Chinese food finally completes the daughters' embrace with their self-asserted hyphenated identity.

Throughout this chapter, then, I have argued that the Chinese mothers' state of abjection finally proves lethal to the subject formation of their daughters, the bearers

of the abjection. My reading further confirms that the often culturally tabooed condition of an excessive, rejected being remains a challenge to the body that expels it. Food, as a significant signifier of cultural taboo, proves able to provide the abject immigrants and race to have a discursive space to defy the political and cultural border and to keep challenging the American mainstream culture. In this light, *The Joy Luck Club* arguably completes a process of ethnic abjection, a term that is employed by Rey Chow to suggest the often denied power of ethnic hybridity and extends to signify the livelihood of Asian American hyphenated identity in the novel.[118] In performing their hyphenated ethnic identity endowed by their maternal bodies, the American daughters have become an abjection, an abjection in human form and lurking to unsettle the American dominant culture and patriarchy. As we can envision from Ted's response to Rose Hsu Jordan's determination to stay in their house instead of moving out as Ted wishes after divorce, American patriarchy to some extent has been unsettled. A symbol of patriarchy, Ted is "confused, then scared."[119] This disturbance of patriarchal orders, facilitated by the empowerment of abject female subjectivity, then, leaves spaces for us to consider the multi-dimensional ways in which Asian women respond to the culturally assigned roles of them as sexualized and racial others, which I will discuss in the next two chapters.

[118] Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) pp. 147-52.
[119] Tan, p. 196.

Chapter Two "Fish Skull? No Way!" Food and Chinese American Masculinity in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

At the conclusion of *Typical American*, Chinese American writer Gish Jen's debut novel, the protagonist Ralph Chang discovers that he is unable to achieve his bourgeois aspirations. Jen offers a sobering summation of the limits of America's classic self-making narrative:

> What escape was possible? It seemed to him at that moment, as he stood waiting and waiting, trapped in his coat, that a man was as doomed here as he was in China. *Kan bu jian*. *Ting bu jian*. He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America. Ralph swallowed.[1]

Ralph's recognition that "America was no America" contradicts his earlier faith in the New World where "every dream could come dreamily true."[2] Individualism and class mobility both seem redundant at this climactic moment, and, significantly, Ralph makes clear that his manhood epitomizes the limits of individual ambition in the American society.

Exploring the limits of American society and culture accounts for one of Jen's own ambitions in constructing the novel. As she suggested in a conversation with Martha Satz at the time of her novel's publication, "*Typical American* will be viewed not only as an immigrant story but as a story for all Americans, to make us think about what our myths and realities are. We are not a country that likes to think in terms of limits."[3] The critique of American characters mirrors her own identification as an

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[1] Gish Jen, *Typical American* (London: Granta Publications, 1991), pp. 295-6.
[2] Jen, p. 158.
[3] Gish Jen and Martha Satz, "Writing About the Things that are Dangerous: A Conversation With Gish Jen," *Southwest Review*, 78.1 (1993), pp. 132-40 (p. 134).

American writer rather than a Chinese American writer.[4] Partly because Jen attended schools and communities with few other Asian Americans, her concern about immigrants differ from those of other Asian American writers, and not least in her frequent attempts to inhabit the consciousness of characters from other ethnic backgrounds. Her second novel *Mona in a Promised Land* (1996), for example, highlights such concern and depicts the complex psychological mechanism of hybrid ethnic identity of Mona as a Chinese American girl converting to Judaism in the suburban 1970s New York.[5] Other characterizations likewise feed Jen's universal critique of the limits immigrants face when they seek to refashion for themselves a new and more "American" identity.

In *Typical American*, as we will see, such limits become clear following Ralph's repeated observation that English vocabularies cannot easily distinguish between effort and result.[6] They also surface as the novel delineates the limits of American self-making idealism, cynically placing its protagonist on what it calls "the Franklin-cum-Gatsby schedule."[7] At first less cynical than the narrative he inhabits, Ralph starts his journey by striving to follow in the footsteps of the American founding fathers, hoping to become "a thinker, or a doer, or an engineer, or an imagineer like his self-made millionaire friend Grover Ding."[8] But his aspiration leads only to a

[4] Don Lee, "About Gish Jen," *Ploughshares*, 82.3 (2000), < https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2000/about-gish-jen-profile > [accessed 16 October 2015].
[5] Gish Jen, *Mona in a Promised Land* (New York: Vintage, 1997).
[6] In the very beginning of the book, Ralph makes clear such limits of English expression, which is not the case for Chinese language: "What's taken for granted in English, though, is spelled out in Chinese; there's even a verb construction for the purpose. *Ting de jian* in Mandarin means, one listens and hears. *Ting bu jian* means, one listens but fails to hear … Everywhere there are limits." Jen, p. 4.
[7] A. Robert Lee, "Eat a Bowl of Tea: Asian America in the Novels of Gish Jen, Cynthia Kadohata, Kim Ronyoung, Jessica Hagedorn, and Tran Van Dinh," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 24 (1994), pp. 263-280 (p. 272).
[8] Jen, p. 3.

Gatsbyesque conclusion: his expensive dog leaps up at him as he drives his even more expensive car, and his sister nearly dies as a result of the collision that ensues.

Now Ralph, forced to acknowledge his aspiration's limits as a result of this traumatic accident, seeks to claim a sense of distorted American manhood, employing incessant masculine pronouns, and realising that "A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so." Interestingly, the place where Ralph confesses such limits becomes the site from which women's stories can emerge. The novel's final image, depicting Theresa and Old Chao waving to Helen to join them in a wading pool, immediately follows Ralph's "bleak" realization. On this occasion, Ralph feels saddened by his invisibility in the family reunion. His supposedly strong patriarchal role within the household here seems curtailed by the fact that Theresa dares to wear a bathing suit and is accompanied by Old Chao, who is involved in an extramarital affair with her sister. Upon *Typical American*'s conclusion, we thus witness an apparent deterioration of Asian American manhood, the empowerment of Asian American women, and the exclusionist culture imposed by the dominant culture, what Viet Thanh Nguyen describes as "the deeply related threats" Asian male immigrants "face in domestic and literary spaces."[9]

In the following chapter I aim to look into how food functions as an important trope in Jen's fictional enterprise of pondering such threats in *Typical American*. More specifically, the act of eating and cooking food in a realistic and figurative sense successfully helps her to fulfil the dual task of signifying not only the protagonist's economic status but also his conflicted ways of understanding his own gender relations. In order to perform his proper American masculinity, fulfilling Judith

[9] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "The Remasculinization of Chinese America: Race, Violence, and the Novel," *American Literary History*, 12.1/2 (2000), pp. 130-57 (p. 145).

Butler's belief that gender identity is "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo," Ralph stuffs himself with food manfully.[10] The more he eats, he believes, the more he behaves as a "typical American" male and the less he considers himself an emasculated Chinese male. With the aid of Grover Ding, the dining table becomes a site on which Ralph practices and performs his masculinity, culturally presenting his pursuit of aggression and domination against the family wishes and over the women's bodies. Yet such a mode of gender performativity proves detrimental to Ralph's masculinity owing to his incomplete knowledge of American food and mistaken understanding of self-making idealism. His blind pursuit of the image of a self-making man culminates in his ownership of a fried-chicken restaurant, which later traps the Chang family in a financial dilemma. The feminine power within the Chang household challenges Ralph's fragile masculinity as well. Helen and Theresa form sibling alliances against Ralph's male discrimination, utilizing food as a weapon to transgress the prescribed gender roles. Their witty strategy of feminine interruption also proves effective to curtail masculine cruelty and empower feminine management. While I continue exploring how ethnic abjection of food poses confusion to the immigrants' identity, the chapter opens up a space to investigate the troubling Asian American masculinity and the gendered critique of food in the context of American Cold War.

Gender Performativity in "Manful" Eating

When Pinkus refuses to help Ralph Chang in legitimizing his stay in the United States, *Typical American*'s protagonist confronts the most difficult situation of his

[10] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), pp. 519-31 (p. 520).

life. Deprived of the lawful right to stay in the country, the young immigrant can neither study nor work. To make things worse, the lovemaking noises emanating from his landlady's bedroom wake Ralph up and remind him of his own physical, sexual and emotional hunger. Interestingly, he leaves the apartment and walks into a grocery store where he hopes to buy rice, a staple of Chinese cuisine, even though there is no place to cook in the shabby basement. Before Ralph can make his purchases, "the smell of hot dogs" entices him to leave the store, abandon his culinary plan, and consume the American fast food.[11] Here Jen depicts how the American hot dog stimulates the protagonist's appetite in detail:

> Hot dogs! A step.
> Ketchup. Another step. Relish. Pickle slices. Even the paper boat began to seem appetizing, glistening in his mind with left-over condiment and grease. Then he was there, fumbling in his pockets for change. Everything, he told the man, yes. The first he gulped down; the second, savored. Sweet, salty, juicy, soft, warm. Squish of the frank. Tang of the sauerkraut. Bun --- here juice-soaked, here toast-rough. His stomach gurgled. Twenty cents each, he couldn't afford it. Still he had another. Another.[12]

Ralph gorges on the frankfurter, adding every garnish and sauce available before "swallowing" it all "manfully." Excessive eating and its perceived association with masculine qualities bring about a transformation in his view of himself. Not long afterwards, "catching a chance glimpse of himself in a mirror," he finds himself looking upon "a figure of some dignity."[13] Here Jen articulates the relations between food and gender constructions. Though bearing the strong pressure from his gender emasculation and immigrant laws, Ralph feels enormously empowered in his masculinity by his perceived "American" way of eating, featuring gluttonous and extravagant consumption of American food. By rejecting the moderate portions of

[11] Jen, p. 44.
[12] Jen, p. 45.
[13] Jen, p. 45.

traditional Chinese culinary culture, and by excessively incorporating unhealthy American food staple into his body, Ralph instantiates a culinary manifestation of what Butler calls "gender performativity," enacting a new identity through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" that seeks to "police the social appearance of gender" in order to construct a "natural" and "essential" masculine identity.[14]

Ralph's self-transformation via the consumption of American hotdogs notably alludes to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Famously soon after his arrival in New York, the unnamed narrator of Ellison's novel overcomes his fear of being exposed as a newcomer from the South by publicly embracing his identity, an identity that surges with "homsesickness" and "an intense feeling of freedom" produced by eating yams on Lenox Avenue.[15] Street food in the form of the hotdog provides Jen's protagonist with a similar opportunity to announce his identity to the world. Eating a hotdog in public, for *Typical American*, at first consolidates Ralph's identification as an American male. Jen's modelling of Ralph's eating further echoes the rich symbolism food acquires in Ellison's portrayal. In *Invisible Man*, after all, the yam stimulates the narrator to remember the joy associated with the particular baking odors and tastes of his birthplace. Culinary nostalgia shapes his identity, inspiring his well-known act of self-description: "I yam what I am."[16] Yet yams, like okra and watermelons, were introduced to America by way of trans-Atlantic America and were among the cheapest and commonest foods fed to slaves. In this light, yams not only symbolize a personal ambition to affirm regional pride on the grounds of individual

[14] In her *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler asserts that there is no "natural" sex without any traces of cultural inscriptions. In her mind, gender is then not something one is, it is something one does through a sequence of acts. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 45.
[15] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 1952), p. 214.
[16] Ellison, p. 215.

identity; they are also magnetized by formatively cultural and historical meanings situating the narrator in a long American history of racial control and domination. This latter function is further proven in the narrator's depictions of US stigmatization of chitterlings and hog maw, the foods that the narrator uses to advance upon Dr Bledsoe. As he comments: "You could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked … Simply by walking up and shaking a set of chitterlings or a well-boiled hog maw at them during the clear light of the day! What consternation it would cause!"[17] Ralph's hope of pursuing his own version of American identity and masculinity by eating hotdog is similarly freighted with historical paradoxes and tensions. During the first few decades of its introduction from Germany, the frankfurter was often cautioned owing to its production in vitro. In a newspaper commentary, H. L. Mencken calls this ethnic food staple as "the reduction ad absurdum of American eating … a cartridge filled with the sweepings of the abattoirs."[18] The disgust elicited by the residual and artificial meat reappears in George Orwell's novel *Coming Up for Air* (1939), which casts the frankfurter as an indicator of industrial perversion of nature. The English novelist describes the experience of biting into his first frankfurter: "when you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, that's what you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth bursting in your mouth."[19] Hence Jen's literary allusion predicts the disturbance of Ralph's asserted retrieve of the appropriated mode of masculinity by the filthiness and abjectness connoted in hotdog eating. Worse still, the protagonist's eating hotdog recalls US historical association of Chinese immigrants

[17] Ellison, p. 214.
[18] H. L. Mencken, "Victualry as a Fine Art," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 June 1926, 69, <https://chicagotribune.newspapers.com/image/355048432/?terms=Victualry%2Bas%2Ba%2BFine%2BArt> [accessed 26 November 2016].
[19] George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (New York: Harcourt, 1999), p.28.

with eaters of disgust food and marks him as a perpetual foreigner subject to Western scrutiny and loathing.

Ralph's decision to eat the hotdog on the American street is also a way of repudiating the primary ideals of Confucianism as well as the myth of self-making which he held in the early days of arriving in America. Here Jen explicitly grants readers with opportunities to observe young Ralph Chang as a student for whom Chinese and American cultural values often seem to merge together.[20] This merging is perhaps most evident in the early chapters of the novel, where young Ralph writes a list of "aims" for his supposedly short stay in the United States. Interestingly, his main goal of studying hard and securing the doctoral degree his father had always sought for him is only briefly mentioned by Jen while a list of subsidiary aims are recorded in detail:

> 1. I will cultivate virtue. (A true scholar being a good scholar; as the saying went, there was no carving the rotten wood.)
> 2. I will bring honor to the family.
>
> What else?
>
> 3. I will do five minutes of calisthenics daily.
> 4. I will eat only what I like, instead of eating everything.
> 5. I will on no account keep eating after everyone else has stopped.
> 6. I will on no account have anything to do with girls.[21]

By listing his resolutions above, Ralph endeavors to illustrate his ideal mode of masculinity, a mode which notably conforms to the Confucian model for men known as *junzi*. The Confucius classic *The Analects* (475 BC–221 BC) claims that *junzi* must master skills of *wen* (the skills of liberal arts such as literature and music) and *zhi*

[20] The novel differs from the narrative formation of the canonical Asian American novels, withholding the account of painful coolie labour often provided in the work of Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin. Whereas Chin and Kingston often emphasize the centuries-old presence of Asian labour and implicitly argue for the subsequent immigrant's justified citizenship in America under the discriminatory policy to designate Asians as foreigners, Jen emphasizes how culturally alike Asians are to typical Americans.

[21] Jen, p. 6.

(wisdom and morality).[22] In addition, Ralph later places a great deal of emphasis on the need to avoid women. Cautionary Chinese folktales such as *The Story of Westwing* seem to have persuaded him that girls are little more than obstacles who can prevent even the most intelligent scholars from obtaining their degrees.[23] Ralph thus begins *Typical American* in a Puritanical mode, restraining his passions and desire as he cultivates a conservative mode of Chinese masculine identity.

It is thus surprising to note that, as Rachel C. Lee explains, Ralph's initial restraint, Chinese and conservatives, are so similar to the approach to life advocated in Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793). Very much like Franklin's thirteen "Virtues" to attain moral perfection and "habitude," Ralph's first list of aims thus transpires as being quintessentially Chinese even as they echo Franklin's project. Ralph's reiteration of Confucian principles of moderation and forbearance begin to dovetail, interestingly, with canonical US notions of Puritan disavowal. The protagonist twice mentions his resolutions to refrain from overeating, echoing Franklin's first priority --- "Temperance. Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to elevation."[24]

Together with the restraining of his sexual desires, Ralph's commitment to moderate eating thus at first seems a legacy of China which helps him fulfil his ultimate goal to become a self-made American. It is certainly true that, as Michael S. Kimmel suggests, the exercising of self-control has long been central to the

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[22] Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 44-5.
[23] In the story, the scholar Zhang is successful in resisting the sexual temptation from Ying-ying after he sits in the examination. The story had been a lesson that almost every Chinese scholar learned in feudal China.
[24] Rachel C. Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 46-7; Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm> [accessed 11 November 2015].

construction of American masculinity.[25] Stemming from experiencing the world as disordered and undisciplined, the drive for control over a man's personal life style is a prerequisite for the self-making idealism, which is exemplified in Sylvester Graham's prescriptions of sexual and dietary temperance to ensure the disciplined life of young men in his *A Lecture to Young Men* (1834).[26] Ralph's resolution therefore answers to the leading traditions of American self-making idealism even as it continues to draw on Confucian philosophy.

Ralph's experience in America, however, proves that he stops in distilling his resolution into a simple list by his literary imitation but seldom practises them. Alongside the lapses into sexual desire which I discuss later in this chapter, the protagonist's failure to achieve an at once Confucian and Franklinian ideal of purity is foreshadowed not only in his gluttony in the opening quote of the section, but also in his luxurious eating with Grover Ding in the restaurant. In Jen's literary portrait, Grover Ding appears as a spiritual saviour to assist the protagonist in his efforts to recommit himself to his desire for boundless individualism and manhood. Shortly before he meets with Grover, Ralph is introduced to the script of self-making by an undergraduate advisor, Professor Pierce. The professor gives the protagonist "a divine gift," Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 self-help classic *The Power of Positive Thinking*.[27] Peale's book, as *Typical American* reveals, is a classic in the cultural production of American self-making ideals. It offers advice on how to condition oneself for success and a happy life through thinking the right kinds of thoughts, making connections between self-making and growing individual morality.[28] By

[25] Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 31-5.
[26] Sylvester Graham, *A Lecture to Young Men* (Provindence: Weeden and Cory, 1834), pp. 33-4.
[27] Jen, p. 87.
[28] Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1963).

reading the popular book, Ralph first learns of the limitless self: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."[29]

Significantly, it is also the first time that Ralph can connect his limitless individualism with the reinforcement of his masculinity. Shortly after his declaration, Gish Jen, however, implies the limits of such boundless thought:

> [Ralph] stared up into the multicolored air, and knew: he wanted to be like that man-god. More realistically, he pictured a kind of assistant to the man-god, say a half step from an apostle. He pictured himself able to do what he would …
>
> So it was that when Helen broached the subject of going to Janis's for sure (his older sister, marriage, their obligation and so on), he thought, Old Chao's house? Sure!
>
> The day of the dinner, though, he got stung by a bee … right between the eyes. How was it possible? He was an imagineer! Yet when he held his hand to his face, the skin was pounding hot. He could hardly see.[30]

Here Jen foreshadows Ralph's eventual failure once again by foregrounding the limits of the imagineer in the American nature and society of the "multicolored" 60s. After all, the 1960s America, *Typical American*'s setting, was not noted for the rise of rugged individualism. As William H. Whyte predicted in his influential *The Organization Man* (1956), the post-war period was instead a time in which such "individualism" occurred interestingly within the context of "corporate life."[31] The widespread conservative belief that counterculture was effectively feminising young men added to the perception that this was a period of challenge and crisis for traditionalist modes of American masculinity.[32]

Shortly after the author introduces bees to interrupt Ralph's self-definition in a figurative stand, she continues to probe the irony behind the self-making manhood in

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[29] Jen, p. 88.
[30] Jen, pp. 88-9.
[31] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Simon & Schuster 1956),11
[32] My knowledge of the situation of American masculinity in the Cold War is largely from Michael S. Kimmel's chapter "'Temporary about Myself': White-collar Conformists and Suburban Playboys, 1945-1960." Kimmel, pp. 147-69.

Ralph's relations with Grover Ding in a more realistic way. For all the Chinese immigrants in the novel, Grover is regarded to be an Asian descendant fully away from his Chinese essence. Old Chao's wife Janis introduces Grover to the readers: "[Grover speaks] English. This is America. His family has been here for so many generations, I don't think he even knows what province he's from. And what does it matter anymore?"[33] Grover's deeds later prove Janie's belief in the lunch set for the matchmaking between Ralph's sister Theresa and him. Grover disregards the Chinese value of family talking, abstains from eating traditional Chinese dishes and spends most of the time on the telephone dealing with businessmen. Yet he also remains in high spirits, trying out Old Chao's newly purchased automobile, in which he and Ralph drive against the owner's opposition to one of his diners to enjoy American dishes, manhood and "adventure" as Ralph believes.

Significantly, Grover starts to show Ralph the magic of self-making manhood by drawing his attention to the centrality of excess in American life. He tempts him with lavish and calorific American foods, and the prospect of unrestrained sexual adventure, both in direct opposition to the resolutions Ralph had held on arrival in the United States. After Ralph politely orders a hamburger, Grover "reaches across the table and removes the top half of its bun. 'Nobody,' he said, 'eats a burger naked.' He piled on top ketchup, mustard, relish, a tomato slice from his own cheeseburger super deluxe, a few rings of onion, five French fries."[34] For the remainder of the meal, Ralph follows Grover's lead and orders more food to the point of physical discomfort. Against his original aspiration for self-restraint in eating, Ralph now takes joy in

[33] Jen, p. 86.
[34] Jen, p. 102.

joining his new friend, seeking to replace his Chinese ethnicity with a so-called American "self-made doer type."[35]

Grover's claim that "nobody eats a burger naked" reflects the central role that this food played in the movement toward increasingly abundant and excessive "convenience" foods in 1950s US. Introduced from Germany as a street food, hamburger became popular in America after the 1920s, when the White Castle System industrialized the production of hamburgers and facilitated their presence in the American daily diet. Yet it was never more than a bun and a slice of beef steak. In the aftermath of World War Two, the explosion of prosperity and modernity led to the popularity of deluxe McDonald hamburgers with different fixings such as cheese, bacon, lettuce and tomatoes. According to the food historian Josh Ozersky, the popularity of such expanded and deluxe hamburgers reflects "what people liked, or didn't like, about America":

> Hamburgers by the 1960s were firmly connected with youth culture, postwar abundance, and eventually, big business … It was the perfect food to eat while driving, merrily dialing the steering wheel with one hand while holding the burger in the other, eyes firmly focused on the road to come. It was the perfect food for the atom-age family, each with its own separate sphere and interests but all united in unstated consensus; at a hamburger supper, each member of the family might eat his or her identical meal, each with its own meat, its own starch, and its own customized condiments, all contained within easy reach of a single grasping hand.[36]

The rise of the deluxe hamburgers thus reflected the emergence of material abundance as well as the rise of car culture in post-war US society. But Grover and Ralph's way of consuming them also associates these foods with a contemporary tendency toward overconsumption: a habit of treating the new abundance as excess. They overconsume the all-American food, convinced that their gluttony consolidates their American character.

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[35] Jen, p. 106.
[36] Josh Ozersky, *The Hamburger: a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 85-7.

Such belief in fact has been practiced by other immigrants as well. Fourth of July Hot Dog-eating Contests, America's well-known competitive eating event, started with four immigrants' competition to judge who was most patriotic on Fourth of July, 1916. The unique food and time of the competitive eating sport seem to be an event in celebration of American material prosperity and pleasant inclusion policy. Yet gluttony itself not only disregards traditional Christian injunction against excessive eating; more significantly, it acts against mutual Chinese and American traditions emphasizing the need for manners, propriety and moderation.

To make things worse, their consumption of large amounts of food unconsciously consolidates their minority status rather than their American characters once again. In her analysis of extreme eating events, Vivian Nun Halloran suggests that such rebellious eating speaks to the "social anxiety and guilt regarding what we actually eat versus the diets we think we should be following."[37] Kristeva's abjection could be produced again when one (the American readers) witnesses Ralph and Grover eat to their physical discomfort. Kristeva suggests that people may experience food loathing merely by seeing a detested food item or just by watching others consume. She identifies such physical manifestations of food loathing as abjection, the "sight-clouding dizziness, nausea."[38] Instead of keeping negative points of view towards abjection, she celebrates the "spasms and vomits that protect me" and the "repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck."[39] Kristeva's diction suggests that the physical experience of the abject can be enjoyed as the kind of sensual pleasure that results from its being under control of the subject. Thus, as they witnesses Ralph's

[37] Vivian Nun Halloran, "Biting Reality: Extreme Eating and the Fascination with the Gustatory Abject," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4.1 (2004), pp. 27-42 (pp. 27-8).
[38] Kristeva, p. 3.
[39] Kristeva, p. 2.

overeating, *Typical American*'s readers can recognize anew the necessity of maintaining a healthy diet. The need for restraint and moderation is underlined in the readers' encounter with Ralph's vomit. This readerly dialogue itself ensures that Ralph's mimicry of American eating habits fails to meet its intended purpose. Far from assimilating him into the world of US self-making manhood, the excessive eating clinches his identity as racial inferior, confirming that his dietary habit is a target for the dominant culture's loathing and ridicule.

Ralph is clearly unaware of the destructive power of gluttony brought to his ethnic identity and manhood; instead he believes that gluttonous eating inspires him to be a self-made man as Grover, and it starts with the traditional claim of patriarchy position in the household. Once he returns to the home completely under the care of Helen and Theresa, the protagonist articulates his desire of disobeying the women in the household: "He knew what he should have said instead. He should have said, with sonorous finality, I'm the father in this family. For he was the father, and could do whatever he liked ---- to remind himself of which, he ripped his soft, grey desk blotter in half and wrote, in larger red letters, ACTUALIZE."[40] Contrary to his desire for social recognition and moral purification in the scripts of American self-making manhood, Ralph's misleading gender performativity in his "manful" eating singles out the protagonist as an ethnic minority. Yet he soon joins with Grover to actualize their supreme patriarchy by abusing women sexually, especially in their acts of eating.

Eating Food, Eating Women

[40] Jen, p. 113.

Straight after Ralph's excessive eating, Jen's narrative casts the nameless restaurant waitress as the final course of their extravagant dinner. Here Grover shows to his disciple how to be a food consumer as well as a sexual one. Although Ralph does not take part in teasing the waitress, he joins to "discover" women's bodies and watches the waitress being manipulated by Grover. As Jen depicts the scene:

> The waitress reappeared. "Ah," said Grover. "We were just saying how we were getting comfortable, you'd better watch out."
> "Were you?" To Ralph's surprise, she did not blush.
> Grover caressed her earlobe. "Nice earring you've got there."
> She giggled. He pulled her to him.
> "What do you say?" Grover winked at Ralph again. "To the kitchen?" Hands on the waitress's hips, he began to walk her like a puppet in front of him.
> "Ah," said Ralph. Then suddenly polite, "Nononono."[41]

Grover's promise of a limitless self under the scripts of self-making idealism successfully overthrows Ralph's original aims for sexual restraint and instead stimulates his desire to manipulate women later on. His economic success helps him to claim sexual control over the white waitress, indicating his potential to enter into heteronormative US middle-class life and leave the ethnic family behind. Grover's sexual enjoyment further inspires Ralph to undertake a series of controlling and unpleasant sexual acts with his wife Helen, claiming a patriarchal mastery over the household. From this moment, Jen's hero follows Grover, cultivating his American manhood not only thorough gustatory excess but also the sexual subordination of women.

In Jen's narration, Ralph's desire to subordinate women is not achieved in a single day; instead, it is stimulated by his degenerating experience of masculine emasculation and social marginalization before constructing his own family. The negative experience starts from the hero's sexual attraction to the American

[41] Jen, pp. 103-4.

department secretary Cammy only days after he lands on the American soil. Jen depicts their first and only touch shortly before their relationship terminates suddenly:

> "Cold?" he asked finally; and when she didn't answer, he stretched his free arm around her, gingerly. Was this how women cried, their whole bodies trembling? He folded her toward him carefully, half expecting her to object. She dropped her wet face to his shoulder. Her breasts against his chest were nothing like earthworks at all.
>
> America!
>
> Crushing his hat between his knees, he gently kissed the top of her sweet-smelling head.[42]

Ralph's sexual nervousness significantly accompanies his whole-hearted affirmation of America. Yet for many Asian American writers as well as critics, Asian males' sexual interest in the white woman manifests their desire to be constructed as Americans. In his autobiographical memoir *American in Disguise* (1971), Daniel Okimoto records the attraction of white women for Asian men: "In this white dominated society, it was perhaps natural that white girls seemed attractive personally as well as physically. They were in a sense symbols of the social success I was conditioned to seek, all the more appealing, perhaps, because of the subtly imposed feelings of self-derogation associated with being a member of a racial minority."[43] The Asian American literary critic Patricia Chu sums up the trope and concludes that the white women "stand for an 'other' linked not only with authorship and entry into the American middle class but with escape from the ethnic family, the ethnic community, the duties and the burdens of the Asian and Asian American past."[44] From this perspective, Ralph most likely regards his relationship with Cammy as an ultimate solution for his disenfranchisement in the American society in the process of resolving his loneliness with few social life and his confusions with broken English.

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[42] Jen, pp. 19-20.
[43] Daniel Okimoto, *American in Disguise* (New York: Walker & Weatherhill, 1971), pp. 200-1.
[44] Patricia Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) p. 42.

Both Okimoto's and Chu's assertion in Asian males' recognition is complicated in Jen's detailed depiction of Ralph's erotic touch with Cammy. His sexual impulse, feeling "her breasts against his chest," instead almost evokes what Kolodny has referred to as "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine."[45] Reminiscent of colonial American constructions of the continent as a "virgin land" awaiting penetration and conquest, his timid touch of Cammy's breast and gentle kiss on her head play with frontier mythologies of intruding upon a strange land, which points to the production of self-made manhood always made for the action and the bustling scenes of moving life.

However, it does not necessarily account for Ralph's possession of brave and courageous manhood. The contrasting imageries of female's breasts in Jen's literary imagination adds to the complexity of the showcase of manhood itself. Critics tend to believe in the blurring distinction between the pioneering spirit of exploration and the immigrants' psychology of seeking shelter. Kolodny articulates such dual meanings of breasts to the immigrants who feel exciting and insecure --- "the initial impulse to experience the New World landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal 'garden,' receiving and nurturing human children."[46] Ralph indeed appears as a child under the care of Cammy in the early chapters of the novel. The protagonist's American name is given by the secretary. He picks up the first few lessons of American customs from Cammy as well. In this light, the impulse suggests a kind of emasculation: a sense that his masculinity is fragile and in need of protection, which continues throughout the novel. Thus Ralph's paradoxical

[45] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land:Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 4.
[46] Kolodny, p. 5.

personality is partly evident in Jen's dual description of the hero's sexual experience. While he attempts to conquer American females to showcase his courageous American masculinity, he may end up with emasculating horror of the unknown, expecting American mothers to save him.

Unfortunately, as the novel unfolds, no American mothers appear; instead, it becomes increasingly clear that Jen has joined other Asian American writers such as Frank Chin and Gus Lee in suggesting the emasculation of her protagonist and in linking this emasculation to the painful and exploited history of Asian labor in the United States. After his unsuccessful romantic pursuit towards Cammy, Ralph's failure to apply for a visa extension makes him an illegal immigrant, a state that terminates his doctoral studies and leaves him with very limited future employment prospects. As a result, Ralph has to "be Chinese" again, working in a Chinese restaurant to do "what others wouldn't."[47] His first job is to slaughter and clean up thousands of chickens in the restaurant basement:

> He would kill and clean and pluck hours upon hours of chickens … The first week he vomited daily from the stench of the feces and offal and rotting meat. But the second week he only blanched, and by the third he worked as though indigenous to this world. Instinct --- first the most sickly or troublesome of the birds. A practiced look through the ranks; he'd snap the victim's neck, bare its jugular, slit it. Into the barrel, still kicking, to drain. Later, a roll in hot water, to loosen the feathers. Then he would pluck and dress the body, working with such speed and authority that his boss no longer came muttering down the stairs, but only shouting from the landing for a count.[48]

Following his fleeting sexual encounter full of frontier connotations, then, Ralph is abruptly plunged into a miserable "non-life" which mirrors the lives of many early Chinese American immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Donald Takaki records that, during this period, 58 percent of Chinese labours in the American society worked in restaurants and laundry industry, compared to only 5

[47] Jen, p. 34.
[48] Jen, pp. 34-5.

percent for native-born whites and 10 percent for foreign whites. Together with the low payment, the long working hours and the harsh working environment, the feminine nature of the service sector prevented white men from working in the industry. [49] Deprived of lawful rights and forced to stay downstairs, Ralph has to withstand the disenfranchisement, invisibility and feminization in the American society like many Asian immigrants due to the exclusionist American history and discriminative immigration law practices. Notably, the Asian immigrants' employments within restaurants are made "one of the few options available" and predetermine the Asian American's vital relationship with food.[50]

The close kinship between Asian American immigrants and the food industry thus shapes Jen's narration of Ralph's experiences with food in his butchering and processing the animal flesh for American customers. His clothes stained by animal blood, Ralph trains up to become a professional butcher. Despite the fact that many American workers still chose to work in the butchering industry, Chinese Americans were reported to step into the industry from the beginning of the twentieth century. However, most of them could not escape the discriminatory treatment beside the butchering assembly line. Mary Yu Danico records that the first 200 Chinese had to work for sixteen hours per day against the ten hours of the whites. The Chinese handled about 75 percent of the pork but were paid 24 to 50 percent of the wage.[51]

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[49] In 1888, a writer for US family magazine *The Cosmopolitan* described laundry work as a "woman's occupation [and men did not] step into it for fear of losing their social standing." Nevertheless, American society believed that Asian males perfectly fit the work. As Takaki records an opinion at that period of time: "The Chinks are all right if they remain in their place. I don't mind their working in the laundry business, but they should not go any higher than that. After that, there aren't even enough jobs for us whites, without them butting in." Michael Park, "Asian American Masculinity Eclipsed: A Legal and Historical Perspective of Emasculation through U.S. Immigrant Practice," *The Modern American*, 8.1 (2013), pp. 5-17 (p. 11); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), pp. 239-41.

[50] Xu, p. 12.

[51] Mary Yu Danico, *Asian American Society: An Encyclopaedia* (London, SAGE Publications, 2014), p. 1265.

Ralph's misfortune in the abattoir thus seems haunted by a Coolie history of labour exploitation stretching from the construction of the transcontinental railroads to the urban service sector of the modern era.

With the freezing of the rabbits and the squealing of the pigs, Jen brings the victimization of domestic animals to the fore of Ralph's savage work, evoking what Marian Scholtmeijer believes to be the strange but certain link between "dispossessed people" and "victimized animals." With her focus mainly in the urban experience, Scholtmeijer astutely observes that "the animal victims serve to articulate a deeply experienced feeling of dislocation in the urban person in fiction" although animals do not belong to the cities, either physically or conceptually.[52] The slaughterhouse is indeed, as Carol J. Adams has suggested, one of the few institutions in the urban area in which large numbers of animals are to be found. After emphasizing the absence of animals from urban life, both practically and linguistically, Adams argues for the metaphoric correspondence between the 'disassembly line' in the slaughterhouse and the disintegration of the worker's sense of self:

> One of the basic things that must happen on the disassembly line is that the animal must be treated as an inert object, not as a living, breathing being. Similarly the worker on the assembly line becomes treated as an inert, unthinking object, whose creative, bodily, emotional needs are ignored.[53]

The loss of a sense of self, brought into focus by Ralph's killing scene in the slaughterhouse, is relevant not only to what Adams sees as the immoral aspect of late capitalism but also to the immigrant's fragmentation of his own body in Jen's articulation. Shut down in the basement, Ralph finds himself completely isolated from the outside world. In another allusion to *Invisible Man*, he loses the ability to tell the

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[52] Marian Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 145.
[53] Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, p. 64.

time of the day. Nor does he dare to communicate with Pinkus about his visa issues anymore. In this case, Scholtmeijer's argument concerning the value of victimized animals in the urban area can be justified in arguing for the value of Ralph's working in the slaughterhouse. That dissonance which marks the animals as a stranger to the American mainstream permits Jen to express the substantial human sense of being disowned by the American discriminative culture. Ralph's being locked up in the slaughterhouse, then, further illustrates the protagonist's loss of "human exceptionalism" under Kay Anderson's term and his tragic fate of being animalized. The metaphorical treatment of Ralph as a slaughtered animal enables institutional abuses because "it sets up a dichotomy between human beings who have representational subjectivity and animals who lack it."[54] By creating the animality imposed upon the Chinese male as a position of non-subjectivity and beyond recognition, the American culture figures the Chinese male subject in a socially sanctioned abjection, which is the sine quo non of the forms of racial and sexual domination revolving around literal and figurative animals.

Even after Ralph gains legitimate citizenship in the country, reunites with his sister, gets married with Helen and finally obtains his PhD degree, his ultimate wish of being a typical American proves to be in vain as a result of Jen's continuous questioning of US myth of a raceless society. As the Chang's family later follow Ralph's model and pursue being typically American via their imitation of mainstream life style, they and the readers are always reminded of their estrangement from the typical. In the case of their watching baseball as family entertainment, Ralph, Helen and Theresa join labelling themselves as "The Chinese Yankees," which indicates their paradoxical

[54] Colleen Glenney Boggs, "American Bestiality: Sex, Anmials, and the Construction of Subjectivity," *Cultural Critique*, 76.3 (2010), pp. 98-125, (p.99).

affiliation and disaffiliation not only to the national pastime but also to an American character. Their clear departure from dominant core values largely results from American mistreatment of racial minorities as well:

> Theresa explained how the Yankees had lost the Series to the Dodgers the year before; they rooted for a comeback. "Let's go Chang-kees!" This was in the privacy of their apartment, in front of their newly bought used Zenith TV; the one time they went to an actual game, people had called them names and told them to go back to their laundry. They in turn had sat impassive as the scoreboard … Anyway, they preferred to stay home and watch. "More comfortable." "More convenient." "Can see better," they agreed.[55]

Racial hostility in the ballpark shows that the Chang family, despite being full US citizens, remain unable to identify with American culture. They are still identified as newcomers, told to go back to their laundry, evoking a Chinese immigrant's history of coolie labour and democratic invisibility. Significantly, the family respond to such hostility by withdrawing to their home, the ownership of which is highly valued by Ralph as a mark of American social recognition. The symbolic meaning of home ownership becomes clearer when the Chang family purchase their first house in America. Ralph characteristically emphasizes the American settings of the house: "It was the great blue American sky, beguiling the grass upward. It was the soil, so fresh, so robust, so much better quality than Chinese soil." At this moment, the ownership of a house in the American neighbourhood highlights the economic success of Ralph's career as a scholar, creating impressions of "a top-quality family" out of "a top-quality house."[56]

Very similar to what the family suffer from in the ballpark, their positive perception of bourgeois materialistic life cannot mask American racial bias in the neighbourhood. Such nativism becomes apparent as their neighbour Arthur Smith labels the newcomers as a race that lacks the American knowledge of tending their

[55] Jen, pp. 127-8.
[56] Jen, p. 159.

suburban lawn. Worse still, he keeps a gun at hand, anticipating aggression from the family. In this light, the private home in the Changs' minds turns out to be a safe domestic space not from poverty or distant ghettos but from the neighbourhood in which it sits, a sanctuary from the street itself in which Chinese immigrants can celebrate their unique ethnic label of "The Chinese Yankees." From this perspective, juxtaposed with the implicit emasculation in his sexual relations with white women, the socially sanctioned abjection of Ralph's body poses explicit violence, revolving around a group of figurative animal corpses. Ralph's tragic experience does not get eased by his promoting life; instead, Jen's narrative of his home-making further indicates trends of racializing Chinese American immigrants as alien to the national body.

The abjection Ralph suffers at the hands of the discriminatory culture helps to explain his efforts to abject women later in the novel and serve as "a response to their own abjection as racialized others in the eyes of mainstream Americans."[57] Such sexual manipulation of women strengthens Ralph's ideal masculinity enlightened by Grover's promises of rugged individualism as mentioned above, based largely on the models of American hegemonic masculinity. R. W. Connell attributes hegemonic masculinity to "the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life… which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."[58] As Jachinson Chan remarks:

> Men of color, who are excluded from the hegemonic model of masculinity, may unwittingly buy into this notion of [masculinity]. In spite of exclusions based on race, men of color can still benefit from patriarchal dividends and they may demonstrate a longing for inclusion to a hegemonic masculine identity. The seduction of a hegemonic masculinity can be a powerful force that lures men of

[57] Chu, p. 11.
[58] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 77.

> color from a place of complicity to an aggressive pursuit of being a part of an elite group.[59]

For Ralph, the prospect of homosocial bonding with Grover provides a promising opportunity to join "a part of an elite group," who take pride in their supreme patriarchy over subordinated women. At this moment, food is utilized again as an important signifier in realizing such acts by the male heroes in the novel. In a scene when Grover violates Theresa sexually, Jen writes:

> From her [Theresa's] plate he [Grover] picked up the oil stick she hadn't eaten yet, dipped it in the soybean milk. "Delicious," he said, taking a bite. He dipped the oil stick in again. It dipped onto the boomerang table cloth. Then he kissed her on the mouth. Or was it a kiss? Theresa almost did not know; only later did she recollect that what he had actually done was run his tongue over her lips --- he'd lick her … She had kept hold of herself, saving face … He took another leisurely bite of the oil stick before proffering it to her.[60]

After enjoying the sensual pleasure of eating, Grover clearly treats Theresa as his food and "licks" her. In Grover's metaphorical eating, then, Theresa loses the living referent as a human being and thus becomes "an absent referent" under Carol J. Adams's term.[61] Like those animals made absent through language that renames dead bodies, Theresa is posited by institutionalized patriarchy as a food object that is subject to male fragmentation and consumption.

Straight after Grover's sexual harassment, Ralph employs a similar strategy to mock her affair with Old Chao. After sucking the cheek out of a steamed fish head, Ralph "positioned the fish skull so that it faced his sister, opening and shutting its jaw," using the skull to "kiss" Theresa, whom he calls as "a rotten egg" ("a woman of no virtue"). In addition, he assumes the persona of his sister, pretending that the fish head is her lover Old Chao: "Ralph cradled the fish head with his two hands, stroking

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[59] Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: from Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 10.
[60] Jen, p. 206.
[61] Adams, pp. 50-73.

it with his thumbs. 'O love, love.' He kissed it. 'Love! O love!'"[62] By equating Theresa with rotten food and with a fish head not to be consumed, her body is constructed as a source of pollution with the capacity to violate the standard dietary and social norms. Through this figurative crossing of the boundary between human and an undesired animal corpse, Theresa seems to lose her control over her own body, triggering her degradation as a human being. Ralph's manipulative treatment of his sister's body, then, speaks to a process of othering, in which his self-indulgent consumption of food and sex overcomes the female's forbidden animality and reaffirms his masculine identity.

But Ralph remains unsatisfied by his theatrical attacks on Theresa; he wants to "actualize" his patriarchal dreams by manipulating women's real bodies. Helen's body becomes the site where Ralph and Grover bond together and seek to claim their supreme masculinity. Both men require Helen to submit to their prescribed masculine rule. Ralph claims his "manly tyranny" by teaching Helen the breathing technique in order to make their sexual life more pleasant:

> "*This way*," Ralph demonstrated, inhaling, exhaling. "*Even. Do you see? You should breathe this way*."
> Helen mimicked him, timidly. "*That one right?*"
> "*Right,*" pronounced Ralph. "*Again.*"
> Helen did it again.
> "*Again,*" he commanded. "*Again.*"
> Helen thought a moment, then experimentally let her breath catch.
> "*No,*" said Ralph. "*That wasn't right.*"
> "*Show me once more?*" She tilted her head, and was pleased to see the pleasure with which Ralph authoritatively obliged.
> So it went, back and forth, Ralph playing at husband, Helen at wife.[63]

Jen here makes Ralph's male privilege explicit as he circumscribes Helen's breathing as part of effort to compel her to act out the role of obedient wife. Grover, likewise, seeks to exert control over the Chinese wife's body, highlighted in Jen's entitling

[62] Jen, pp. 107-8.
[63] Jen, p. 71.

Grover's story of seduction "Helen, breathing."[64] Here Grover articulates a narrative of a marital situation that serves his own interest: "You married because he was your friend's brother. A friend of your family's … It was the right thing to do … You did not think, This is America, I can marry who I want … You did not think. I'll choose. I'll pick." [65] Helen attempts to halt the story, repeatedly commanding "Stop," but Grover simply continues his narrative while undressing her.

Through their communal acts of consuming women in linguistic and physical terms, the hierarchies between Grover as an insider in America and Ralph as an outsider seems to be erased by asserting all men's similar privileges over another subordinated group --- women. As a victim of emasculated masculinity in the American discriminatory culture, Ralph seeks to act out a compensatory performance in which he will finally gain acceptance as an American as a result of a cruel manipulation of female bodies that he has learned through his bond with Grover. While American abjection of Ralph's body and alienation of the Chang family already poses great damage to the protagonist's ultimate wish to be accepted as typical American, this group of women exhibit revulsion against the enactment of such male priviledge by unexpectedly utilizing food to wield feminine power.

Cooking and Feminist Resistance in *Typical American*

While the American myth of self-made manhood continues to blind Ralph Chang, luring him into mistake after mistake, his wife Helen, on the contrary, is portrayed as a female who strives to "make herself at home in her exile as she could."[66] In order to fulfil this aspiration, Helen undergoes a dramatic transformation. Instead of waiting

[64] Jen, p. 213.
[65] Jen, p. 223.
[66] Jen, p. 63.

for being served by servants in her Chinese wealthy aristocratic family, she starts to take care of quotidian life in an utmost active manner from the first day she steps on the soil of America. Jen depicts Helen's changes in detail:

> How much, how fast she [Helen] was changing! … It was as if, she'd resigned herself to her new world, something had taken her over --- a drive to make it hers. She made her own Chinese pancakes now. She made her own red bean paste, boiling and mashing and frying the beans, then using them to fill buns, which she made also. She made curtains; she made bedspreads; she rewired Ralph's old lamp. She couldn't help but feel proud. Too proud, really --- she tried to bind that feeling up --- recognizing still, though, that in her own way she was becoming private strength itself.[67]

Significantly, the female protagonist's drive to resign herself to the new world manifests itself through her traditional feminine culinary acts in part. In Helen's mind, the growing knowledge of cooking and housekeeping brings her a new sense of pride and strength: "Having never done things before, she was entranced by these small satisfactions."[68] In this light, Helen's assertion of her individuality in America gets strengthened through a series of women's culinary acts within the private household.

Towards the end of the novel, moreover, Helen's culinary creativity goes beyond the boundary of the private family unit. As Ralph's business faces an ever greater cost burden, his wife volunteers to leave the kitchen and work as a cashier in Ralph's fried chicken restaurant. Jen's deliberate narration of the heroine's first work experience arguably indicates her transgression of the prescribed gender role that calls for women to maintain as housekeepers, especially during the Cold War era in which *Typical American* is set. In her ground-breaking *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan famously records the feminine fulfilment of suburban housewives as the core of post-war American culture: "[Women] glorified in their role as women, and wrote proudly

[67] Jen, p. 76.
[68] Jen, p. 76.

on the census blank: 'Occupation: Housewife'."[69] Although Helen "envisions a wall between her home and the world" set by her husband and American patriarchal rules,[70] her unwavering public involvement in a food industry "with no lady at all" bespeaks her determination to break the constraints of the old sphere of female existence.[71] Such constraints, however, prove difficult to overcome in an era which features "male labour as the norm and female labour as an aberration."[72] Once Helen sits in the check-out area, she is often sexually harassed by the male customers, who keep guessing Helen's birth country and mentioning their previous relationship with Asian women. Their attempt to continue manipulative sexual subordination during American wartime occupation of Asian countries, however, is intelligently tackled by the heroine who wears a larger apron to disguise her sexuality.[73] Therefore, Helen succeeds in challenging the gender ideologies through taking up a public culinary role and coping with gender and racial discrimination.

This quoted paragraph also invites us to re-examine the pro-white and pro-feminist discussion of women's domestic engagement with food as oppressive and undervalued. Food, as tools of male privilege and female subservience as showcased by Ralph's and Grover's acts, is presumably linked with female victimization and their loss of individuality in the household. In her "Follow the Food," Barbara Harper

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[69] Apart from Friedan's work on clarifying "the problem that has no name" that women suffered from in post-war America, there are a lot of cultural productions that account for the lock-up of women in domestic space. As early as 1956, *Life* magazine expressed excitement of women's returning to home in a special issue on American women. *Time* magazine followed, hailing the suburban housewife as "keeper of the American Dream." Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 14 & 16; Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future* (Boston: Twayne, 1993), p. x.

[70] It should be noted that Ralph's response to her wife's proposal echoes American societal call for women to stay home. For him, working outside the family sphere means working for strangers, which points to a patriarchal view to see wives as their own property. Jen, pp. 137-8 & 241.

[71] Jen, p. 240.

[72] Nancy Maclean, "Postwar Women's History: The 'Second Wave' or the End of the Family Wage?" in *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), ed. by Jean-Chrisophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, pp. 235-59 (p. 238).

[73] Jen, p. 241.

sums up the prevailing scholar's treatment of such topic: "[feminist scholars'] investigations have focused on eating disorders and the victimization of females, especially young girls, reflecting an intellectual framework that sees food and its preparation as fraught with conflict, coercion and frustration."[74] The negative connotations of food and women thus become the very reason why contemporary feminists shy away from active comments on kitchen and cooking. As Helen's domestic and public engagement with food suggests, however, *Typical American* is in a dialogue with the logic that seamlessly aligns a nationalistic project of gendered citizenship with culinary practices. With a particular attention to cooking as crucial signification of feminine empowerment, this section aims to look into the feminist strategy that Helen and her sibling counterpart Theresa adopt in revulsion against the abjection doubly imposed by racial alienation and male subordination. These diverse ways of resistance turn the Chang home into a productive space, altering the very nature of masculine inscriptions into the domestic order.

The duality of metaphors in food operation is arguably evident throughout Jen's narrative of the Chang family members' subjectivity formation. For instance, in the early part of the novel, Helen plays a key role in helping Ralph depart from animalization and disownment as an underground butcher. In their first meeting, Helen impresses her future husband with familiar aromas of China surrounding her body through the heroine's strict maintenance of Chinese way of life. Jen depicts her insistence on eating authentic Chinese food: "[Helen] learned to cook, so that she'd have Chinese food to eat. When she could not have Chinese food, she did not eat."[75] To some extent, her dietary habit of keeping to Chinese food facilitates the quick

[74] Barbara Harper, "Follow the Food," *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking* (Beacon Press, 1998), ed. by Arlene Voski Avakian, pp. 65-82 (p. 68).
[75] Jen, p. 62.

acquisition of Chinese cooking, on which she relies to feed Ralph as an illegal immigrant desperately in need of not only physical but also spiritual nutrition. On the surface, Helen's deliberate cooking for Ralph seems to accommodate the hero's needs to assert male superiority through the instruction of her cooking:

> Oxtail soup, she [Helen] made him [Ralph], steamed fish with scallions. Now that there were no servants, Helen was learning to cook. Would he taste-test for her?
> He would, although, paradoxically, it inflamed more than abated his homesickness to try a mouthful of a dish and pronounce, after some prodding, that it was too salty, too sweet, too spicy-hot. Her cooking was so agonizingly close to that of his family's old cook that his stomach fairly ached with the resemblance, even as his mouth thrilled. More ginger, he coached. Less vinegar. More soy sauce.
> One day, she had her crystal chicken just right, and her red-cooked carp too. Ralph proposed with a family ring Theresa had brought over, a single piece of spinach-green jade set in the white gold.[76]

The detailed narration of the Chang's family dinner before the marriage features a process of adjustment in which Ralph reshapes Helen's cooking to his own satisfaction. The protagonist typically compares her food with the one cooked by his family's old servants, thereby attempting to reclaim a superior identity from the past and present himself as a young master at the head of his new American family. From this perspective, Jen's narration reminds us of the special role of immigrants' maintenance of their familiar foodways. Donna Gabbacia claims that immigrants seek to do that because "food initiates and maintains traditional relationships, expresses the extent of social distance between people, demonstrates status and prestige, rewards and punishes children's behavior, and treats illness."[77] Thus Ralph intends to displace his Chinese social prestige to superior patriarchal position within the household, which could be regarded as compensation to the immigrant's loss of social status in America as above mentioned.

[76] Jen, p. 57.
[77] Gabbacia, p. 51.

Nevertheless, Jen's narrative proves to contradict Ralph's wishes to claim patriarchy over the Chang family, even in such culinary scenes in which Helen seems to takes up the role of a subordinate wife. Yet Jen makes clear that Helen is never a listener as Ralph imagines; instead, the heroine makes the household through her attentiveness to others: "Attentive. She sensed when a guest needed more tea before the guest did, expressed herself by filling his cup, thought in terms of matching, balancing, connecting, completing. In terms, that is, of family, which wasn't so much an idea for her, as an aesthetic."[78] Although Jen's description continues to consolidate women's presumably domestic role to care for their husbands and guests, Helen's attentiveness takes a new form and arguably attempts to match, balance and connect the gender relationship within the Chang family. The refreshed meaning of attentiveness is reflected in Ralph's instruction over Helen's breathing in their sexual acts as mentioned in the last section. To some extent, the wife's active participation in playing an obedient wife guarantees the continuity of the Chang family, which is largely based on the female members' accommodation of Ralph's patriarchal needs.

Helen's aesthetics of completing also takes a concrete form through her active participation in homemaking and maintaining the structure of the house. While home ownership is regarded by the Changs as one yardstick by which to measure the success of assimilation as mentioned above, the structure of the house serves as an important but implicit reference for the stability of the family. The break-down of the heating accompanies the strife between Ralph and Helen over the wife's disobedience against the husband's instruction on breathing. Such a narrative pattern later reappears when Ralph's Chicken Palace begins to crack and marks a hit against the family's economic security. When the family's first apartment suffers from poor plumbing and

[78] Jen, p. 56.

widening cracks on the roof, Ralph does nothing but rages at the landlord's refusal to fix the problems. By contrast, Helen "hires a plumber, scrapes the loose paint so it wouldn't hang, walks Ralph's file cabinet into the back bedroom to hide the crack."[79] The wife also picks up techniques on apartment decoration and successfully installs a wall-unit bookcase in order to make the poor apartment their home. It is important to note that Helen's ability of acquiring knowledges from English instruction manual proves essential not only to the fixation of the apartment's heating system but also to provide "the insights into American home life," on which the Chang family rely to critique American characters in private. In their ridiculing imitation of the landlord Pete's behaviour, Ralph is found to stay unaware of the specificities of negative American behaviour. While he keeps blaming Pete's refusal to fix the apartment as "Typical American no-good" from a generalized tone, Helen and Theresa manage to specify the scripts of American characters such as "typical American don't-know-how-to-get-along" and "typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-things."[80] As Jen indicates later, the women's summation is acquired via Helen's daily reading of news on degradation of American spirits. Therefore, Helen plays a fundamental role in the family's construction of Asian American cultural identity, which is characterized by the female members' efforts to maintain survival in American society and to depart from a complete submission to American characters.

Notably, Helen's female counterpart Theresa adopts a similar strategy to defend the household. In order to relieve the family from economic pressure, the sister steps out to attend the medical school and becomes a doctor later. As a clear challenge to Ralph's patriarchal role, the protagonist shows resentment of his sister's career

[79] Jen, p. 66.
[80] Jen, p. 67.

success by nicknaming her "Know-it-all." The tense gender conflict within the household soon results in the literal and symbolic house fissure once again, highlighted not only by the breaking-down of the radiator but also by Ralph's lack of motivation for his research. Very much like Helen's relentless effort to repair the corrupted apartment, Theresa also secretly labours to save the broken household by faking her loss of scholarship. Her plan that aims to maintain the male's esteem turns out to work well since the lie "makes Ralph feel better" as he acknowledges later and gets him back to work shortly after.[81]

In general, Helen and Theresa forge an effective feminist strategy to manage the Chang household in order to save the family from collapsing. With particular focus on maintaining domestic tranquillity, both heroines accommodate themselves to the rules of patriarchy. The secrets of Theresa's faking her loss of scholarship soon gets summed up in the lesson that Helen imparts to her daughters: "When Helen taught the girls *how to talk*, she'd teach them when *not to continue*, as she said, but the way she said it, the girls knew that by point she meant *barb*."[82] Here Helen clearly attaches great importance to feminine silence in gender conflicts, which significantly contradicts the traditional treatment of silence as a lamentable essence of femininity. After all, feminine silence is long constructed and understood as "a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience."[83] The suggestion that silence signifies a weakness of female condition aligns closely with the notion that women deemed out of order should be locked up in the household and lack the ability to call for help.

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[81] Jen, p. 126.
[82] Jen, p. 135.
[83] Cheyl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Illionois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 2.

Very much like Helen's preparation of food, which effectively combats male cruelty and empowers feminine strength, the female protagonists' silence towards patriarchy threats turns out to signify their presence other than absence, and repletion other than emptiness in the household. In another occasion when she enacts her technique of "not to continue," Helen's reflection points to a clear centralization of the female in the household. While the wife is fully aware of Ralph's fancy in being an imaginer but keeps silent, she is "growing more and more still." Notably, she is not only able to be "her resourceful self" empowered by her domestic labour but also becomes "an instinctive counterweight to Ralph's activity." Therefore, Helen's interruption of masculine self-making idealism leads to a feminine resolution that "makes her feel nearer the center of the household." While the husband "goes wandering off" and loses himself in the American illusions, Helen determines to get other family members to "stay put" in the strange land.[84]

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Jen's narrative once again points to the essential role of the female family members and the ultimate failure of Ralph's masculinity by documenting the liberal return of Theresa to home. As the novel develops, Ralph continues to grow his masculine arrogance and drop into illusions of success. His sexist discrimination also leads to Theresa's breaking out of the family. The hero's degraded ego soon traps the family into economic crisis. At this point, Theresa chooses to literally return to the Chang family and symbolically reform the household through refreshed feminist liberation, typically featuring her freedom to love Old Chao in public. Notably, the culinary metaphors have been applied again to signify such gender dynamics. Ralph is seriously disturbed by the cooking smell from a dinner that Helen prepares for Theresa and Old Chao so that "his stomach begins to

[84] Jen, p. 115.

hurt so much that he has to check into the hospital, and comes home only to eat certain foods."[85] His sickness that causes limited food indigestion testifies to the ultimate failure of his pursuit of self-making idealism. Ralph is no longer able to enact his gender performative through gluttonous dietary habits; nor is he capable of constructing a Chinese Yankee ethnic merit, which is identified by Helen as an ability to eat anything to survive in any circumstances --- according to Helen's citation of a familiar Chinese idiom, one should "eat the bitterest of the bitter, [then he / she can] become the highest of the high."[86]

Conclusion

As the novel concludes with spaces for the readers to imagine developing stories of the new Chang family, which tolerate the illicit relationship between Theresa and Old Chao, Jen's narration ends with a lonely Ralph full of sadness in witnessing their flirting and more importantly, limits in typical American masculinity. In order to depart from Chinese male immigrants' tragic fate of being alienated and feminized, Ralph attempts to claim his American character through a blind embrace of US self-made manhood and boundless individualism. Through their mutual gluttony, Ralph and Grover forge an alliance that lays claim to an all-American masculinity. They utilize food in such a way as to perform their gender superiority and facilitate their sexual repression of the Chinese women around them. Yet this gendered consumption of American foods and women is then dismantled by Ralph's lack of knowledge towards the essences of American self-making idealism. The hero's gluttonous eating violates the spirits of self-constraints valued by American founding fathers and

[85] Jen, p. 288.
[86] Jen, p. 288.

Chinese philosophy. Ralph's engagement with the food industry also emasculates him doubly by American racialization of Chinese immigrants and Cold War constraints on manhood. To make things worse, the hero's falling prey to illusions of success makes him unaware of the gradual females' take-over of the family through their effective feminist strategy achieved by cooking foods as well. While Jen's presentation of gender dynamics in food consumption indicates a site of contradictions and conflicts, it also opens up spaces for further discussions of the complex relationship via lens of transnational politics, which I aim to explore in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998).

Chapter Three Inside the Abattoir: Meat and Transnational Politics of Women in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

In 1995, Susan Bordo's ground-breaking research in *Unbearable Weight* demonstrated the enormous pressures that contemporary Western culture places on women. Women, the cultural feminist showed, were both vulnerable to sexual attack and subject to what she characterised as the tyranny of thinness: the transformation of "female bodies" into "a socially shaped and historically colonized territory."[1] Objectification --- or what *Unbearable Weight* called the "virile mastery over bodily desires" at once imposed by western philosophy and US consumer culture—was also, in Bordo's view, being internalised by women themselves, leaving them increasingly prone to eating disorders as a gendered pathology.[2] Under Western patriarchal cultures, in Bordo's provocative argument, women's bodies become a site of the substantiation of normative feminine ideals and of new forms of revolt or rejection of them. Thus Bordo's 1990s work consolidates Michel Foucault's belief in the body as culturally and politically constructed. It suggests a close and complex relationship between eating disorders and patriarchy, and hence between the recovery from such pathologies and feminist liberation.

Three years after the publication of *Unbearable Weight*, the Japanese-American novelist Ruth Ozeki uncovered a similar dynamic between gender, food and body politics in her debut novel *My Year of Meats* (1998). Ozeki achieves this by

[1] Bordo borrows Kim Chernin's term of "tyranny of slenderness" to suggest the Western obsession with women's thin bodies. As historical rituals of fasting assert the belief in fatness as women's enemy, women achieve this physical transformation through diets, exercise, chemicals and surgery nowadays. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 185 & 21.
[2] Bordo, p. 15.

delineating the troubled experiences of two female characters in a world of meats. Throughout the novel, the American documentary director Jane Tagaki-Little and the Japanese housewife Akiko Uerno find themselves involved in the controversial promotional campaign of American beef sales in Japan. This campaign revolves around a one-year shooting of *My American Wife!*, a televised advertising documentary directed by Jane, which markets not only beef but also visions of American idealized conservative womanhood to Akiko as an aspirational ideal for Japanese housewives. A masculine scheme of meat eating soon takes shape as *My American Wife!* alludes to "typical American wives" who present delicious meat-rich meals and their own diet-thin bodies for the pleasure of their husbands. Ozeki's narrative not only associates American masculine culture with excessive carnivorous eating and the manipulation of women's bodies; it also suggests these two phenomena are, troublingly, linked.

Significantly, *My Year of Meats* does not offer an isolated critique of the social pressures that are placed on women's bodies. Instead, through its recurring exposés of the violence behind American consumer culture, it links the degradation such pressures induce with what seems a more general tendency within American culture, to associate women's bodies with corruption. Set in the 1990s, an era that witnessed growing US concern over the perceived Japanese economic threat, the documentary arguably answers this historic background and aims at the Americanization of Japan, an Americanization it understands in terms of not only promoting US family ideals but also disseminating its global economic and cultural hegemony. However, American corporate agribusiness, as Jane discovers when filming the documentary, poses a great danger, threatening to corrupt the consumers' bodies owing to its illegal use of hormone chemicals in animal breeding. In Ozeki's narration, Jane and other

American women suffer from a series of mysterious diseases and, often, infertility, a clear reflection of the bitter consequences of corporate pursuit for profits and efficiency.

In *My Year of Meats*, then, a kind of toxic collaboration between US media and meat takes its greatest toll on women--and, specifically, on their bodies, which emerge in the novel as a contentious focus for the social politics of meat-eating, family formation, public health and corporate profits. In its narrative construction, however, *My Year of Meats* clearly adopts Bordo's strategy and relies on women's bodies to oppose these challenges. As I will argue in this chapter, it is exactly by exerting control over their bodies that Jane and Akiko prove able to refuse US gender hierarchies and the pollutions of globalized capitalism. Specifically, I argue, both of these heroes reclaim such control through a kind of abjection of beef by which they then gain control and restore the boundaries of their bodies. Here, effectively, Akiko agrees with Bordo's political understanding of eating disorders: the pathology of anorexia nervosa which she succumbs to seems connected to her husband's sexual violence and demands for children. While Akiko's narrative focuses on the working mechanism of body politics within private family units, Jane tends to perform such politics in a public sphere and her film-making relentlessly strives to critique connections between meat eating and patriarchal models, constantly presenting carnivorous yet unpleasant American families. At the same time, Jane also asserts her feminine subjectivity by launching a campaign to uncover the food toxins that American meats seem to threaten her body as well.

In the following chapter, I aim to investigate how *My Year of Meats* bespeaks the rich dynamics of food eating and gender politics in a transnational setting. Bearing Bordo's theory of food, gender and body in mind, I wish to examine the process in

which the women's bodies are subject to the sexual politics of meat eating and US consumerist culture inside the abattoir, both in a realistic and a symbolic sense. It is also these vulnerable bodies, as the chapter will argue, that initiate feminine resistance via redefining bodily relations with meats. While the chapter continues my interest in the gendered critique of food and individual identity, Ozeki's novel also leads me towards an exploration of the birth of a new feminist connection between Jane, Akiko and other American wives, especially in Ozeki's insightful rhetoric of reproduction.

Edible Women in Appetites of Macho Carnivores

The cover of *My Year of Meats* itself holds great interest.[3] The very first novel cover to be produced using Blippar technology, *My Year of Meats*' artwork features a delicate pair of wooden chopsticks that seem to reach out to a cow with pink flesh. By scanning the Blippar app, the readers find themselves presented with an insightful video in which the cow turns into an elegant and smiling Asian woman whose face remains partially unseen. The cover's symbolic interchange between a cow and a woman clearly foregrounds the novel's major motif of the animalization of women. Despite the dichotomous positioning of two female protagonists—Akiko is a domesticated housewife while Jane is an unmarried and sexually active professional--both might figuratively be thought to lie trapped between the chopsticks, on the brink of being consumed by the men and institutions that control them. In this section I wish to analyse this image of edible women, whose bodies have been seriously degraded by both patriarchal institutions and US globalized economy.

[3] I refer to the cover from a Canongate version of the novel.

This idea of women coming to seem edible first enters the text of *My Years of Meats* as it pictures Jane at work writing a motto for *My American Wife*!. Here a connection between women and meat becomes immediately apparent, the motto making clear that the promotional documentary is marketing not only beef but also visions of American idealized conservative womanhood to the Japanese housewives:

> My American Wife!
>
> Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home --- the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.[4]

Here the motto soon transfers focus from the central role of meats to its incarnated limits on the housewives to be filmed in the program. These women, all representatives of the US housewife archetypes, are described as "Meat Made Manifest." Their bodies notably need to be meat incarnate and readily to be consumed. Through its sanctioned shooting of U.S middle-class housewives and their benevolent cooking to feed families, therefore, *My American Wife!* characterizes the centrality of American beef, the treatment of women as meats and the showcase of U.S traditional family values. Jane's documentary climaxes in a series of edible women, encouraging viewers to buy into the televised ideals through purchasing American beef.

In these fields of symbolic association, women become edible largely owing to the animalization of their bodies, a form of dehumanisation in which—as Ozeki herself suggests—women are treated "as cows; wives as chattel (a word related to cattle); and

[4] Ruth Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), p. 12.

the body as meat, fleshy, sexual, the irreducible element of human identity."[5] This abusive way of associating of women's bodies with meat eating sits within a longer cultural lineage. As Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan explain in *Animals and Women* (1995), the linkage between women and animals boasts a long history: "Historically, the ideological justification for women's alleged inferiority has been made by appropriating them to animals: from Aristotle on, women's bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality. Since rationality has been construed by most Western theorists as the defining requirement for membership in the moral community, women --- along with non-white men and animals --- were long excluded."[6] Jane's masculinist motto clearly consolidates the ideological inferiority of women by envisioning the images of ideal American wives with the bodily resemblance to the beef delicacies espoused by the documentary. While the motto regards ideal women as figures who look like cows, "ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest," the malignant intention behind this suggested physical resemblance becomes clear later as Kato, in a slip of the tongue, requires Jane to shoot "healthy American wives with most delicious meats."[7] This stigmatization of women as cows has been arguably long used linguistically to characterize women's body as fat and dull. In her acute observance of metaphorical reference to cows, Joan Dunayer contends that the linguistic practice to equate cows with women naturally connects the human's exploitation of cow's body for milk with the men's exploitation of women's body for offspring reproduction and milk source. In this light, *cow* verbally abuses women by identifying them with the abused cow, which Kato and other male

[5] Ruth Ozeki, "A Conversation with Ruth Ozeki," <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/330739/my-year-of-meats-by-ruth-ozeki/9780140280463/readers-guide/> [accessed 23 November 2016].
[6] Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (Durhan: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 1.
[7] Ozeki, p. 14.

characters rely on to carry out their masculine control.[8] Along with the linguistic abuse of women, Ozeki's implication of food pornography can be regarded as another scheme to facilitate Kato and Joichi's aspiration to not only eat the American beef but also sexually connect with American women. With the background of a beautiful American wife, the advertised meat glistens moist and pink like the pages of soft pornography, offering forbidden pleasure that is intricately connected to female servitude, objectification and repression of the process of production.

As Carol J. Adams suggests in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), the animalization of women's bodies grants meat-eating a significant position in the cultural constitution of gender relations. She reports how, especially since the intensification of racism during the American 1890s, "intellectually superior" people (white men in particular) were urged to eat meat as a way of consolidating their superior gender and racial position. One of the cookbooks on the reading list assigned by Joichi, the Japanese husband and TV series' Tokyo-based producer, P. Thomas Ziegler's *The Meat We Eat* (1966), helps endorse such male identification by their choice of meat. Joichi reads aloud the opening paragraph of the book, which proclaims meat to be "a virile and protective food." He continues to read "a liberal meat supply has always been associated with a happy and virile people and invariably has been the main food available to settlers of new and undeveloped territory."[9] From Ziegler's patriarchal perspective, meat-eating measures individual and societal virility. Such US illusions of gender superiority enable Joichi to "take an American course" –to become a carnivorous consumer of American beef, and to demand that his

[8] Joan Dunayer, "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots," in *Animals and Women*, pp. 11-31 (p. 13); Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires: How they are Sought, Bought and Packaged* (New York: Grove, 1985), pp. 101-6.
[9] P. Thomas Ziegler, *The Meat We Ea*t (Danville: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1966), pp. 5 & 1.

wife Akiko prepare meat meals every night, thus constructing a traditional pattern of gender hierarchy within their family unit, in which the wife is kept busy with domestic tasks and remains invisible in the public sphere.[10]

While US cultural history of meat-eating leads to the masculine animalization and commodification of women's bodies, Ozeki's female characters are presented with further challenges through the male characters' control over their reproductive bodies. Ozeki's discourse of reproduction starts from Akiko's narration of her way of life, which abounds with Joichi's efforts to improve the heroine's fertility:

> "John" [Joichi] was a great believer in positive thinking, though. He had taken an American course in it. He believed that if she [Akiko] concentrated on positive thoughts of maternity, she would get pregnant, so he had forbidden her to write about anything else. His meat campaign to fatten her up and restore [Akiko's] periods was part of the same training. Positive Thinking leads to Positive Action which leads to Success.[11]

Misled by information linking American meats to improvements in fertility, Joichi demands that his wife cook red meat to "put some meat on her bones"[12] and give up her career of an editor to "prepare for motherhood."[13] Akiko is later involved in Joichi's weekly instructions to learn not only the culinary but also the visual contents of *My American Wife!*, which espouses an ideal housewife who can prepare delicious meats and conceive "attractive, obedient children."[14] Here Joichi's masculine control over his wife centres on her capacity to become pregnant. US poet and feminist Adrienne Rich argues that men's evolving regulation over women's reproduction --- including contraception, abortion, fertility, sterilization, and birth --- is "essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not

[10] Ozeki, p. 48.
[11] Ozeki, p. 48.
[12] Ozeki, p. 26.
[13] Ozeki, p. 48.
[14] Ozeki, p. 16.

mothers."[15] Hence Akiko's competence to bear a child is closely related with her state of domestic welfare. Almost every night after the airing of the documentary, the heroine's failure to meet Joichi's patriarchal demand results in her husband's physical violence. His aggression then culminates in a violent rape which he commits towards the end of the novel.

In this light, Joichi's seemingly far-fetched connection between meat eating and women's pregnancy constitutes a further terrifying threat to the physical and psychological integrity of Akiko's subjectivity. In her observation of the relationship between eating and reproduction, Carole J. Counihan suggests that both activities "share certain biopsychological attributes that endow them with metaphorical and symbolic identity --- particularly their contributions to life and growth, their passing through body boundaries, and their mingling of discrete individuals."[16] Despite their essential roles in life growth, both emblematic activities are universally associated with femaleness and are inflicted with men's one-way bodily permeability. This process of penetration, as argued by Nancy Chodorow, represents women's weak sense of autonomy and power.[17] In Joichi's eating and sexual behaviour, Ozeki seems to delineate Chodorow's belief that both acts typically cross the physical boundaries of various bodies and pose threats to Ozeki's female characters, who are immersed in masculine projects of meat eating and fertility improvement. As such it is unsurprising that Akiko faces enormous psychological pressures and appears at first

[15] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 34.
[16] Carol M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 62-3.
[17] Nancy Chodrow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in *Women, Culture and Society* (California: Stanford University Press, 1974), ed. by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, pp. 43-67.

as a housewife who "feels like a thief" and claims her weak feminine identity only through "stealing back moments and pieces of herself."[18]

The masculine scheme continues as Ozeki moves readers' attention from Akiko's distressed domestic welfare to Jane's public involvement with meats and fertility. Long before her shooting of *My American Wife!*, Jane has been suffering from a situation similar to that facing Akiko. Her inability to bear a child leads to the failure of her first marriage, and leaves a great impact on her perception of sexual relations and family making afterwards. At first Jane attributes her infertility to her mixed racial identity. Her self-defeated attitudes towards her hybrid body largely originates US racial discriminating culture. Before the protagonist starts to film the documentary, Jane records a situation in which a WWII veteran asks her to provide legitimacy as an American. Her racialized identity has been constantly challenged through a series of questions from "where you from, anyway?" to "where were you born?" to "*what* are you?"[19] She clearly feels hurt by her "racially half" ethnic identity, bitterly describing herself as "a cultural pimp," who feels racial affiliation with "neither here nor there."[20] Jane notably appropriates the ethnic disaffiliation to her difficulty in bearing children. She bitterly likens herself to a mule, or "mulatto," a "half horse, half donkey" body "destined to be nonreproductive."[21] This same hybrid body then becomes a target of Joichi's violence; he attempts to rape her simply because he finds in her body a "hybrid vigour" he equates with fertility.[22] These textual plots once again showcase the vulnerability of women's bodies to attacks of

[18] Ozeki, p. 47.
[19] Ozeki, p. 15.
[20] Ozeki, p. 13.
[21] Ozeki, p. 183.
[22] Ozeki, p. 55.

patriarchal manipulation and racial discrimination in Ozeki's discourse of reproduction.

This interwoven relation between gender and racial politics in the female's fertility casts a shadow upon the rich meanings behind Ozeki's rhetoric of reproduction: it is not merely a biological issue with clear bounds any more. Instead, as Michelle Murphy suggests, it bears with "a multifaceted effect in time and space, a problem both material and political to which questions of state, race, individualism and economic prosperity were bound."[23] The complex relation clearly gets deepened in Jane's public involvement with meat industry throughout the novel. The heroine's year-long filming significantly uncovers another twinning of eating and fertility, and it starts from her investigations into a negative side of American beef consumption which is touted as healthy and privileged. The documentarian's professional curiosity as a documentarian drives her to investigate an incident in which Oda, a member of her Japanese crew, has a seizure after eating the delicate Sooner Schnitzel. Jane soon discovers that a man-made oestrogen named diethylstilbestrol (DES) is responsible for Oda's seizure. As the readers learn from Jane's narration of DES history in America, DES has long been used in US farms as a chemical hormone to castrate male cows and chickens so that they could develop succulent meats. The obvious economic benefits bring about the rampant use of the chemical, whose side effects have been long been ignored and point to the feminization of consumers' bodies. The author soon complicates such damages through her critique of corrupted human bodies in the circle of meat eating. Apart from the case of Oda, the novel also features a case of Gale Dunn, who handles the drugs on a regular basis and, as a result, suffers

[23] Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 6.

from changes to his voice and infertility. In this light, Jane's record of notorious DES application in US agribusiness clearly voices Ozeki's critique of issues of contamination in industrial food supply, which triggers ecological criticism against the development of American factory farms.[24]

While Jane's findings emphasize the negative impact of the degrading food industry on individuals' bodies, she moves further to inform the readers of a new relationship between meat eating and women's fertility, a relationship that points to the corruption of US corporate economy. According to her research, DES has not only reached American dinner tables and their bodies but has also been approved as a vitamin for pregnant women, even being advertised in the prestigious *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. As a drug that is recommended "for all women to produce 'bigger and stronger babies'," [25] DES clearly marks an industrialized effort to guarantee healthy female bodies solely for bearing children, which reinforces "the chains of a patriarchy that fundamentally depends on the uneven material distribution of mammalian biological reproductive labour into male and female bodies."[26] Hence this institutional intervention into women's reproduction becomes an instance of biopolitics, a term that Michel Foucault defines as a strategy with governance in which "the basic biological features of the human species" become the primany means and ends of politics.[27] Coupled with a clear investment from American patriarchal culture, the governance of reproduction was dedicated to the anatomo-political task of disciplining productive, if docile, bodies and the biopolitical task of

[24] The ecological critique of US agribusiness begins with Ruth Harrison's focus on high possibility of contamination in food processing, which is regarded as one common characteristic in the corporate food system. Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines: The New Factory Farming Industry* (London: Vincent Stuart, 1964).
[25] Ozeki, p. 149.
[26] Murphy, p. 5.
[27] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1979* (New York: Picador, 2010), p. 1.

managing heathy national populations. Yet this project went wrong as a team of Boston doctors discovered in 1971 that DES caused a rare form of cancer named clear cell adenocarcinoma and increased "the risk of testicular cancer and infertility" in women whose mothers took the drug, and it soon comes true of Jane's damaged fallopian tubes.[28] Thus instead of increasing women's fertility as the program and Joichi strive to publicize, consumption of American beef poisoned by DES rejects the romantic version of US female idealistic images and achieves the damage of male cruelty once again. In this light, the dissemination of DES, as a notorious symbol of capitalistic greed, sexual and bio-political intervention, makes females and their next generation vulnerable to attacks of sexual violence and the globalized economy.

Long before Jane makes direct contact with the industry itself, in fact, the damaging effect of DES on individual female bodies can be predicted through the author's early presentation of US globalized economy, which features promising materialistic amplitude and diminishing cultural diversity. As those who take up the task of passing an "authentic" America to the Japanese audiences, the Japanese male crew regard their trip in America as an opportunity to admire "the sheer amplitude of America," and the pilgrimage starts when they step into a Walmart in Texas. From the Japanese perspective, the American hypermarket is "awesome, the capitalist equivalent of the wide-open spaces and endless horizons of the American geographical frontier." They tend to believe that re-creating the spectacle of American materialist abundance by shooting in Walmart could induce the Japanese women at "a state of want" because it reminds the Japanese housewives of what they lack and desire. Thus they start to shoot the American women who "fill their carts with Styrofoam trays of freezer steaks, each of which, from a Japanese housewife's

[28] Ozeki, p. 150.

perspective, would feed her entire family for several days."[29] The US material abundance that often impresses the Japanese crew, however, is soon followed by Jane's provoking warning that " 'Stocking up' is what our robust Americans called it, laughing nervously, because profligate abundance automatically evokes its opposite, the unspoken specter of dearth."[30] "The unspoken specter of dearth" soon bespeaks itself through the damaging influence of Walmart on local business, which is forced to transform to some "ingenious hybrids and strange global grafts."[31] Similar to those individuals who lose the ability to decide which additives they will take in industrial farming as above mentioned, the omnipotent US consumer culture and globalized economy marginalize local markets and family ranchers, which Chad Lavin suggests as "those embodiments of American autonomy and rugged individualism."[32] The deprivation of individual autonomy or even health under capitalistic pursuit for efficiency becomes more evident when an American child Christina Bukowski is run over by a Walmart delivery truck and paralyzed from the waist down. Much more symbolically, "vegetable," which Adams and Donovan regard as "a symbol of feminine passivity," is used to denote the paralyzed female body of poor Christina, providing a firm dichotomy against "meat" which is deemed as male privilege.[33]

The image of a degenerating female body finally reaches its peak when Jane is involved in filming the Dunns family, the owner of the Dunn & Son cattle feedlot. The Dunns seems to be a perfect fit for the documentary at first due to the permeation of meats in the family's work and life. Not only does the staging of the wife Bunny Dunn serve to assert masculine superiority through her cooking of Pan-Fried Prairie

[29] Ozeki, p. 45.
[30] Ozeki, p. 45.
[31] Ozeki, pp. 71-2.
[32] Chad Lavin, "Factory Farms in a Consumer Society," *American Studies* 50.1/2 (2009), pp. 71-92 (p. 75).
[33] Adams and Donovan, p. 36; Ozeki, pp. 157-8.

Oysters (bull's testicle), "a traditional delicacy in the American West to increase [men's] strength and their manhood," the family also boasts the ownership of "a twenty-thousand-head [cattle] operation," a typical US factory ranches.[34] The state of Colorado where the Dunns feedlot is located also "conforms perfectly to Japanese people's preconceptions of America's 'Big Rugged Nature'." As Jane digs deeper into the operation of the feedlot, however, the slaughterhouse that guarantees consumers' meat eating as "an integral component of the American Dream" gradually becomes a site that endangers public health and threats individual's identity.[35] Ozeki suggests an implicit danger underlying the perceived perfect location for the shooting. As Jane reveals in a letter to Ueno, the Wild West stories that Japanese audiences are fascinated in include "a cannibal named Alferd Packer, who killed five traveling companions and ate their remains during a particularly cold winter in 1874."[36] The author soon complicates the threats in the essence of American factory farming itself. The industrial feedlots, as Michael Pollan points out, are in fact un-American in that they violate old-fashioned feedlots' tradition and principles of economic self-determination in following the demand of corporate meat processors to inject their animals with large doses of hormones and antibiotics.[37] The corporate economy's impacts then worsen as Jane discovers with shock that the Dunns take pride in their recycling way of rearing and feed the cattle with some "by-products from the slaughterhouse," a recycle of "cattle right back into cattle."[38] Such practice results in the widespread occurrence of mad cow disease and thus consolidates the sickening cycle of meat consumption and physical pathology.

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[34] Ozeki, pp. 247 & 300.
[35] Ozeki, p. 150.
[36] Ozeki, p. 272.
[37] Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 65-84.
[38] Ozeki, p. 304.

Beyond that cycle is Ozeki's clear designation of polluted animals as unfit for consumption, which invokes the theory of dirt and body from the works of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristiva and Judith Butler. In a direct reference to Mary Douglas' theory of dirt as "matter out of place," Butler states, "Douglas suggests that all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous. If the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment."[39] Cattle offal and excrements arguably defy "those excremental passages in which the inner becomes the outer" and pose pollution to the margin of the bodily boundaries, by which individual subjectivity and social systems are constructed.[40] Precisely owing to the Dunn's distorted environmentalist belief in US illusions of corporate economy, the consumers' physical bodies suffer from severe diseases and corruption in their eating of animals that have themselves been fed something designated to be outside at first and many more forms of growth hormones later. As Jane continues to film, signs of hormone overdose are exhibited on the bodies of the Dunns, leaving Gale with a higher voice register and striking five-year-old Rose with developing breasts, public hair and the commencement of her period.

Hormonal corruptions threaten Jane's body too. Already facing huge pressure to bear a child, Jane finds herself, during the filming, in a room dominated by a large hopper "used for funnelling the mixed feed into the auger system."[41] The mixed feed, as she soon discovers, contains composites from a bottled chemical named Lutalyse, a

[39] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 180.
[40] Butler, p. 182.
[41] Ozeki, p. 307.

hormone used "for easier artificial insemination."[42] As the crew call into question the application of the chemical, Gale explains with pride that the hormone works as another positive manifestation of US corporate economy in that it enables breeders to abort pregnant heifers in the feedlot and to maximize economic benefits. Ozeki's critique of degenerating female body under unhealthy economic pattern becomes apparent again as the use of such a hormone threatens pregnant women with miscarriage and foetal abnormalities.

Although Jane avoids these risks by washing the Lutalyse off her hands, she soon succumbs to another severe attack in the form of a slaughterhouse accident towards the end of the filming. Ozeki predicts the harmful biopolitics of a modern-day abattoir situated near the Dunns' feedlot from her depiction of its setting. The site features "a wood-paneled panopticon" which can "overlook the meat-cutting operations below."[43] As famously identified by Foucault, the panopicon can serve as "the continuous and permanent systems of surveillance" by removing barriers to sight that create opportunities for darkness and concealment.[44] This construction of modern sovereignty is also invested with a clear signification of sexual manipulation in that the panopticon is decorated with "a large poster of a young blond Amazon in jungle bikini."[45] The enormous pressures doubly imposed by human surveillance and sexual devaluation leave Jane vulnerable to attacks of victimization and animalization she will later face.

Ozeki soon complicates the pressures by describing the protagonist's feeling of being "like walking through an invisible wall into hell" as she steps into the abattoir.

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[42] Ozeki, p. 308.
[43] Ozeki, p. 328.
[44] Michel Foucault, *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interview and Other Writings, 1972 – 1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 105.
[45] Ozeki, p. 328.

What first depresses Jane, notably, is a concrete manifestation of modernized slaughter efficiency: "Steam hissed, metal screeched against metal, clanging and clamouring, splitting the ear, relentless. Chains, pulleys, iron books, whipped around us with unbelievable speed, and as far as the eye could see, conveyors snaked into the distance, heaped with skinned heads and steaming hearts. Overhead a continuous rail system laced the ceiling, from which swung mammoth sides of beef, dripping, and heavy with speed as they rattled toward us."[46] With the assistance of mechanization, animals in the abattoir are seen as products, insentient means to human consumptive ends. In this light, the kill floor at an abattoir, according to Timothy Pachirat, turns out to be a place "where every vestige of an animal's individuality is erased, and a homogenized raw material is put in the animal's place."[47] Yet Ozeki's narration moves beyond such deprivation of animal subjectivity and extends its lens to the damaging effects on female identity. Jane reflects that the slaughterhouse strips "every sense [she] thought [she] owned" from her, leaving the heroine as an individual "overpowered and assaulted."[48]

The disempowered protagonist finally gets physically hurt when the team attempt to film a killing scene. The unexpected expulsion of the blood from a freshly killed cow topples Jane and sends her "sprawling into the path of a thousand pounds of oncoming carcass."[49] The edge of the knock pen, a tool to knock cows out before killing, accidentally hits the heroine and as a result, immediately renders her unconscious. While Jane experiences the same physical harm as those animals do, the symbolic mixture between her body and the carcass arguably poses great threats

[46] Ozeki, p. 330.
[47] Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 40.
[48] Ozeki, p. 330.
[49] Ozeki, p. 333.

towards her human subjectivity. Based on her readings of Darwinism, Freudian psychoanalysis and linguistic formalism, Carrie Rohman contends that the autonomy of the human subject is constructed upon "our difference from animals, our disavowal of them, and the material re-instantiation of exclusion through various practices."[50] Thus Jane's vulnerable body, under metaphorical threats of mechanization of alienation, is prone to attacks of an animalization, an animalization that marks the heroine as edible and subordinate.

Ozeki adds more complexity to Jane's troubling experience by coupling the animalization of her body with the myth of childbirth. The insightful coupling is foreshadowed in Jane's weird dream only days before the accident:

> That night I dreamed it was time to give birth … I pulled up my dress and waited. As I stood there with my legs spread, it started to emerge, limb by limb, released, unfolding, until gravity took the mass of it and it fell to the ground with a *thump*, gangly and stillborn, from my stomach. It was a wet, a misshapen tangle, but I could see a delicate hoof, a twisted tail, the oversize skull, still fetal blue, with a dead milky eye staring up at me, alive with maggots.[51]

Jane's imaginary production of a stillborn half-baby-half-calf arguably marks her body as an abject one, in which a tenuous border between life and death gets destabilized through her twisted fallopian tubes. The abjection of Jane's body is highlighted in Ozeki's provoking presentation of blood. After all, blood is essential for maintenance of one's life; yet it also signifies death once it leaves the body. In analysing the cultural prohibitions of eating animal blood, Kelly Oliver asserts that the blood of animals "is not to be eaten because blood is the life of an animal and to eat both the dead flesh and its life is to mix two elements from different orders, flesh

[50] Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 16.
[51] Ozeki, p. 324.

and blood, death and life," thus "calling into question separation, or identity."[52] In this light, Oliver's association between food prohibitions and human subjectivity can be readily applied to the critique of Jane's female characters as well. The blood of Jane's deformed child, to some extent, marks its death but fits the nutrient needs of the maggots, thus predicting the heroine's abject identity after witnessing how a girl's body is ruined by US food industry. Much more importantly, the figurative notion of blood comes true in the slaughterhouse accident, in which blood becomes the ultimate reason for the heroine's physical harm and supposedly eventual loss of her child. Though Jane later learns that the baby has died a week before the accident, she holds the belief that the accident and her direct contacts with beef and cows throughout the shooting of *My American Wife!* are the ultimate reasons for her twisted fallopian tubes, the death of her child, and the impossibility of conceiving a child again.

Jane's eventual infertility as a result of a harmful US food industry sums up the notorious treatment that the female characters have to suffer throughout *My Year of Meats*. Both Jane and Akiko find it difficult to tackle challenges doubly imposed by a masculine scheme of meat eating and degrading American consumerist culture. Ozeki notably presents such challenges in the manipulations of both protagonists' female subjectivity, and such manipulations point to a typical animalization and commodification of their bodies in the abattoirs both in a realistic and a figurative sense. Injuries to female bodies, however, do not result in a complete defeat of femininity in Ozeki's narrative, and we may have a glimpse at it through Jane's response after the slaughterhouse accident. Though sadness of her loss comes back to the heroine from time to time, she recovers pretty soon and throws the clothes covered with blood in the garbage, a symbolic gesture to reject self-defeating. She then takes a

[52] Oliver, "Nourishing the Speaking Subject," p. 73.

critical part in a public campaign against the illegal usage of hormones in meats through airing the meat video in all the major U.S networks of the Dunns' feedlot and the slaughterhouse. Coupled with her determination to adopt international children, Jane's public activism contributes to her transformation to a heroine "to tell truths that alter outcomes."[53] As the next session will point out, Jane's concluding image reflects a reclamation of feminine control, which is interestingly initiated by the female's eating disorder and culminates in Ozeki's discourse of feminine fertility.

Eating Disorder and Mothering in the Transnational Feminist Alliance

Clearly, Ozeki's presentation of masculine control over the female's bodies cannot overshadow the female protagonists' year-long effort in revulsion against the gender cruelty. On the one hand, beyond her battle against food toxins, My American Wife! becomes a site for Jane Tagaki-Little to oppose the underlying sexist and racist contents that the Japanese documentary supervisor Joichi Ueno proposes. Under Joichi's use of beef as American cultural marker to signify a predominantly white and male-oriented America, the female protagonist attempts to show an American society extolling cultural diversity and female independence through her inclusion of the so-called people of physical, sexual and ethnic imperfections in the program. Akiko Ueno, on the other hand, is greatly influenced by Jane's project and practices the female autonomy within the domestic sphere. While the Japanese housewife keeps rejecting the patriarchal ideals through the symbolic pathology of an eating disorder, her revulsion culminates in her final escape from the constrained family and remarkably courageous journey towards the United States. Towards the end of *My Year of Meats*, therefore, we witness the transnational alliance of two female

[53] Ozeki, p. 425.

characters, who turn their back on a corrupt US food system and reject its masculine schemes of meat eating and assumptions about female fertility. The section will thus focus on how Jane and Akiko redefine their bodily relations with food and give birth to a transnational feminine alliance.

Ozeki starts her narrative of female revulsion from Akiko's physical resistance against her husband Joichi's gendered project of meat eating. As I have argued in the last session, the project inherits the traditional male superiority in meat eating and attempts to achieve a patriarchal family through linking the females' domestic welfare and their competence to bear children. While she is often required to cook and eat US beef to accommodate her husband's needs, the Japanese housewife speaks against such coercive requirements by rejecting the meats from her body:

> Akiko had a hard time with positive thoughts. After dinner, when the washing up was done, she would go to the bathroom, stand in front of the mirror and stare at her reflection. Then, after only a moment, she'd start to feel the meat. It began in her stomach, like an animal alive, and would climb its way back up her gullet, until it burst from the back of her throat. She could not contain it. She could not keep any life down inside her. But she knew always to flush while she was vomiting, so "John" wouldn't hear. She also knew that she felt a small flutter in her stomach, which she identified as success, every night when it was over. [54]

Ozeki's detailed narration of Akiko's inability to contain meats marks the heroine as a typical victim of anorexia nervosa, yet this cannot mask Ozeki's complex representations of the gendered eating disorder. According to Ferreday's summary of current works on anorexia, the implicit anorexia embodiment keeps being elided "in favour of a discourse of representation that aims to fix the meaning of 'the anorexic body' to position young women as Other."[55] The designation of anorexic that aims to reproduce the docile body that Foucault articulates, however, cannot account for the

[54] Ozeki, p. 48.
[55] Debra Ferreday, "Anorexia and Abjection: A Reviewer Essay," *Body & Society*, 18.2 (2012), pp. 139-55 (p. 140).

transformative, empowering and ambiguous experiences of anorexia. While Akiko's body is subject to the dominant patriarchal scrutiny, reducing anorexia nervosa to a mere boast other than "a real illness" as illustrated in the ridicule of a Japanese male doctor, her bodily engagement with anorexia runs counter to the hegemonic and dualist inscription of social values on women's bodies.[56] As I will show later, her bodily loathing of selective food and its incarnated meanings delineates what Megan Warin has termed as anorexia embodiment and identity, in which anorexia becomes a vehicle for extending the relational matrix of body, food and gender.[57] It points to an effective feminist strategy to contest against the fixed meaning imposed on a female body as the one in need of correction. Her anorexic embodiment, furthermore, illustrates how her body becomes "an experiencing agent that is intersubjective, relational, dynamic, sentient, and indeterminate in nature."[58]

Specifically, Akiko's experience of anorexia nervosa features a rejection of the polluting foods from women's diet, invoking and repeating the project's central focus on food abjection. Akiko's eating disorder echoes Mary Douglas' articulation of people's fear of polluting food as something that threatens system of classification and bodily boundary. By configuring carnivorous eating as a kind of cannibalistic consumption of living animals, the anorectic subject labels meat as something that does not fit into the bounded category of humanity. Here Ozeki lends more complexity to the somewhat fixed designation of food as dirty and polluting by delineating her heroine's acts of vomiting to expel polluting food out of the body. The effort to repel polluting food notably takes a concrete form of a visceral and pulsating

[56] Ozeki, p. 97.
[57] Megan Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), p. 5.
[58] Warin, p. 18.

movement of the heroine's body, in which the abject is produced under Kristeva's term. The psychoanalyst develops Douglas's focus on the functions of food taboo in social regulation and explains the individual and bodily experience in the process of food rejection: "Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at the milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. 'I' want none of the element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it."[59] In this light, Akiko's self-control over food and dieting marks the anorexic, who regards abjection as the proper method to remain clean and pure. This effort to assert her feminine subjectivity is soon followed by her ritualistic acquisition of abilities to recognize clean and unclean acts from Shonagon's *The Pillow Book.* By expelling meats and other things that are deemed filthy and dangerous, therefore, Akiko rejects forms of patriarchal authority that are signified in meat eating and strives to solve the contradictions of the female self that is fractured by the dichotomies of reason and desire, body and self, nature and culture.[60]

For the Japanese housewife, what should be kept out of her body is not limited to the polluting food but extends to its signified sexual violence. In Ozeki's narrative, Akiko becomes sick of red meats, the food that is forcibly fed, and by extension, Joichi's following forced sexual intercourse each night. Here the coupling of force feeding and sexual violence consolidates Maud Ellmann's belief in the destructive power of force feeding for female subjectivity. Enlightened by Sylvia Pankhurst's historic depiction of force-feeding as an oral rape in *The Suffragette Movement* (1931), Ellmann states that force-feeding pulverizes the females' "essential being"

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[59] Kristeva, p. 3.

[60] The Cartesian ideology that separates mind from body has been long correlated with the opposition between female and male. Females are often regarded as enmeshed in their bodily experience in a way that makes the attainment of rationality questionable. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, "women are somehow more biological, more corporeal than men." Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 14.

that is supposedly built upon the subjects' ability to establish their own bodies by actively ingesting the external food. Yet force-feeding inverts this psychoanalytic pattern of subject formation because "it is not the subject who consumes the object but the object that invades the subject."[61] Being forcibly fed with red meat, which is invariably inscribed with masculine associations, Akiko faces threats of being objectified as a commodity to be shaped, deformed and violated by sexual manipulation.

Through identifying the small flutter in her stomach every night as "success," the heroine arguably contends with Bordo's famous analysis on anorexia nervosa and voices a clear rage against the circumscription of her life. As mentioned in the opening of the chapter, Bordo's conception of eating disorder stems from the notion that women attempt to achieve bodily control, which is admired by patriarchal order, while simultaneously losing control. "The pathologies of female protest" such as anorexia and mental hysteria, as the feminist philosopher remarks, "actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them."[62] According to Bordo, an eating disorder clearly epitomizes female thinness praised by the society, but simultaneously destroys women's life, thus proving the failure of such social obsession. Even though Joichi poses a direct contrast against the western context and wishes for a female's fleshy body to improve fertility, Akiko's eating disorder by abjecting meats adopts a similar feminist strategy to reflect the failure of Japanese patriarchal culture through malnourishing her own body, to the point where menstruation has ceased and reproduction has become impossible.

[61] Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 34.
[62] Bordo, p. 159.

Akiko's individual bodily rejection of beef eating and its incarnated male superiority does not stop her husband's masculine manipulation in many occasions of *My Year of Meats*. With the ongoing filming and airing of *My American Wife!*, the brutal Japanese husband continues to verbally mock and physically beat his wife immediately after their conflicts over Akiko's capacity to bear a child, and much more usually, over the contents of the documentary. The conflicts notably arise from Akiko's rating of the documentary for "authenticity," "wholesomeness" and "deliciousness of meat."[63] Akiko's low rating for the "authenticity" of some episodes, featuring a decent preparation of beef dishes by white middle-class American housewife, clearly bespeaks her resistance towards Joichi's static ideas concerning race and gender, which are conveyed through the episodes. More specifically, Joichi's intentional creation of idealized American housewife images is constantly challenged by his wife's overwhelming distrust in the authenticity of the model. Such distrust, as I will argue in the paragraphs to follow, lies in the troubling dissemination of US transnational femininity and is significantly initiated by Jane's presentation of a renewed version of US womanhood.

Ozeki makes clear from the very beginning of her novel that the construction of a mode of transnational femininity is one of the ultimate aims of the documentary. Jane lays out the aim of the specifically gendered project in one of her memos to the Japanese staff: "*My American Wife!* of the '90s must be a modern role model, just as her mother was a model to Japanese wives after World War II."[64] Here Jane's statement correctly articulates the historic fact that the great impact of American womanhood on Japanese wives originates America's occupation and reconstruction of

[63] Ozeki, p. 27.
[64] Ozeki, p. 18.

Japan in the immediate post-war period. Yet immediately after the documentarian sets out the agenda, she expresses her concerns over some fresh challenges to tackle, and these challenges point to Japanese women's transforming perceptions towards the U.S material life:

> However, nowadays, a spanking-new refrigerator or automatic can opener is not a "must." In recent years, due to Japan's "economic miracle," the Japanese housewife is more accustomed to these amenities even than her American counterpart. The Agency thinks we must replace this emphasis on old-fashioned consumerism with contemporary wholesome values, represented not by gadgets for the wife's sole convenience but by good, nourishing food for her entire family. And that means meat.[65]

Here Ozeki reminds the readers of the important role of American womanhood and its gendered politics of domesticity in the American military occupation of Japan. In her historical research on the feminist discourse in American military authority over Japan, Mire Koikari depicts the central focus on the emancipation of Japanese women as parts of American project of democratic leadership and beneficence. The positing of American women as models of liberation for Japanese women has "constituted an extraordinarily powerful historical account shaping American and Japanese self-understandings."[66] The transnational femininity has been achieved by the invention of a bourgeois domesticity, which Koikari identifies as a movement that "the emerging state machinery collaborated with civil groups to pursue various 'life improvement movements,' which focused on regulating sentiments, habits, and practices of its subjects at home."[67] The new and ingenious kitchen appliances being produced in the post-war US were an essential part of this movement. Their introduction and popularization ensured that the reconstruction of Japan also involved a

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[65] Ozeki, p. 18.
[66] Mire Koikari, *Pedagogy of Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 4
[67] Mire Koikari, "Cultivating Feminine Affinity: Women, Domesticity, and Cold War Transnationality in the US Military Occupation of Okinawa," *Journal of Women's History*, 27.4 (2015), pp. 112-36 (p. 117).

reconfiguration of gender identities and the emergence of a new association of wives with bourgeois domestic space. Women, released from heavy household labour, were granted more time to enjoy presumable freedom as suggested by Richard Nixon in his famous 1959 "kitchen debate" with Nikita Khrushchev. Thus in the 1950s, when the US was keen to seek political allies, American feminine discourse, capitalistic success and transnational expansion worked together to construct "manifest domesticity" under Amy Kaplan's term, from which "the nation reaches beyond itself through the emanation of women's moral influence" to achieve the project of national expansion.[68]

In the 1990s context when American economic and political supports were no longer keenly demanded, a refreshed stimulant is highly needed to guarantee the dissemination of such transnational femininity. Thus *My American Wife!*'s exportation of values as commodities via the collusion of media and meat relies on the cultural dimensions of globalization to build the transnational ties, in which male superiority and racial exclusion are interwoven with US normative female identity. In Arjun Appadurai's mind, this interconnectedness of mass migration and modern media takes a "joint effect on the work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity."[69] This effect takes a concrete form in the deterritorialization of traditional borders of nation states and in production of the cultural practices "to annex the global into their own practices of the modern."[70] In this light, the documentary team attempt to realize this cultural dimension of globalization and assert that Japanese housewives' consumer desire will be well defined by the

[68] Kaplan, p. 29.
[69] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 3.
[70] Appadurai, p. 4.

American values attached to food provided to nourish their family members. In the Japanese housewives' acquisition of models from American wives, therefore, *My American Wife!* is supposed to lead to a new form of cultural identity and new ways in which Japanese people and communities imagine their female identities.

However, the designated transcultural connection is disturbed by the long Japanese history of rendering red meat eating as impure and polluted. As Ozeki makes clear early in the novel, "the eating of meat in Japan is relatively a new custom."[71] Meats were thought uncouth and unclean due to the influences of Buddhism until the twentieth century. Even though beef began to appear in Japanese diets following the American occupation after 1945, many followed Ozeki's characterisation of Akiko Uerno and continued to prefer more traditional ingredients such as rice, vegetables and fish, the food staple for Japanese to distinguish themselves from the Westerners.[72] It is therefore no wonder that "the modern Japanese housewife finds the human interaction necessary to purchase meat distasteful [because they] find it embarrassing to say the names of meat cuts out loud" according to the conclusion of a market survey in Ozeki's novel.[73] The survey indicates that many Japanese women prefer to purchase meats via the vending machine, which is normally used to purchase similar embarrassing products such as condoms and pornography magazines in Japan.

Beyond Japanese rendering of meat eating as dirty and unclean, meat functions as a larger reference to racialized American violence. According to the documentarian's depiction of a well-publicized shooting incident, a Japanese exchange student named Yoshihiro Hattori was shot to death by Rodney Dwayne Peairs, a meat packer in

[71] Ozeki, p. 18.
[72] Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time* (New Jercey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 106.
[73] Ozeki, p. 105.

Louisiana, when the student rang the doorbell to ask for directions. Yet the American meatpacker was later "acquitted by the jury of manslaughter, on the grounds that he had acted in a reasonable way to defend his home."[74] The obvious injustice of the case invokes Japanese domestic distrust of US gun controls, suggesting that American possession of guns and its signified violence are deeply embedded in US society and culture. Jane moves further to indicate that the whites' exclusive racial discrimination lies behind the murder: "Hattori was killed because Peairs had a gun, and because Hattori looked different. Peairs had a gun because here in America we fancy that ours is still a frontier culture, where our homes must be defended by deadly force from people who look different."[75] While the heroine delineates the racialized notion of the frontier theory through the case,[76] she insightfully links meat and its system of production and consumption with the contemporary implications of individual welfare and social values: "Guns, race, meat, and Manifest Destiny all collided in a single explosion of violent, dehumanized activity."[77] Thus even before *My American Wife!* works to fulfil the Americanization of Japanese femininity, this propaganda is doomed to fail when facing Japanese unfavourable eating habits and the meats' association with American violence.

More importantly, what keeps Japanese housewives further away from US exportation of values and meats also amounts to Joichi's narrowed vision of

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[74] Ozeki, p. 106.
[75] Ozeki, p. 107.
[76] According to many scholars, there is an underlying racial discrimination behind the frontier thesis. Frederick Jackson Turner and other historians of the Progressive Era found no place for race and gender in their perspectives for American history. Turner himself views the immigrants of the late nineteenth century and the early century as "a menace to traditional views and institutions." His racial bias also gets reflected in the loss of presence of ethnic minorities in his presentation of frontier thesis, those races which appeared even before the whites in the western experience. Margaret Washington, "African American History and the Frontier Thesis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 13.2 (1993), pp. 230-241.
[77] Ozeki, p. 107.

American women, who are destined to bear "warm personality," "attractive, docile husband" and "attractive, obedient children."[78] Such distorted presentations of American women have been rebuked through Akiko's recognition of Joichi's hand-picked episodes as highly inauthentic. After she is shown the episode of Becky Thayer, a white American wife who shows her pleasant life to attract Japanese tourists, the heroine laments the lack of authenticity in the show: "They were so … perfect, you know? I guess maybe they just didn't feel like a real family to me …."[79] Akiko's blunt refusal of such televised idealized women is soon followed by her recognition of upward mobility and ethnic diversity in Jane's episodes. The classic ethnic mode of self-definition, for example, is illustrated in the Martinez family show. In Jane's filming of this Mexican family, Texas–style Beefy Burritos has given way to the husband Alberto Martinez's narration explaining how the family's efforts pay off to own an American farm and keep "on their way to becoming a real American success story" despite the accident in which he loses his left hand.[80] At this moment, the burritos become "the symbol of their hard-earned American lifestyle, something to remind them of their roots but also their new fortune."[81] This immigrant success narrative culminates in a slow motion of the Mexican son Bobby offering his American piglet to the audiences and the nation of Japan. The episode is notably well received and highly rated by Akiko and other Japanese housewives because "it widened the audience's understanding of what it is to be American, [of] the quirky, rich diversity and the strong sense of individualism that make the people of this country unique."[82] Significantly, this "surreal and exquisite moment" of a Mexican

[78] Ozeki, p. 16.
[79] Ozeki, p. 154.
[80] Ozeki, p. 73.
[81] Ozeki, p. 76.
[82] Ozeki, p. 80.

American child's enjoyment provides one example of how racial and ethnic paradigms help Akiko give birth to a renewed version of a transnational feminist alliance, which starts to take shape through the Martinez show's uneasy rupture from US racial and gender exclusive narrative. American promises of opportunity and advancement provoke the Japanese housewife to take down the beef recipe on the back side of her crumpled poem, in which "Disobedience" against the masculine manipulation has been described as one of the "*Things That Give a Hot Feeling*" in *The Pillow Book*.[83]

As the documentary continues to be aired against Joichi's opposition and involves US families of more diverse backgrounds in Japanese televised networks, similar eruptions of Akiko's feminine empowerment become much more evident through her reclamation of bodily control. While her husband becomes withdrawn, thinner and even emasculated due to his continuous failure in preventing Jane from shooting exotic series, Akiko develops a longing for meat dishes, attempts to play an active role in sexual behaviour and as a result "sort of had a figure again."[84] The profound change of attitudes towards meats and sex, as the heroine herself makes clear, results from her significant departure from the role as a subservient wife and suggests her envisioning herself as a mother rather than a wife: "She [Akiko] wanted a child; she'd never wanted John; once she became pregnant, she wouldn't need him ever again."[85]

The emphasis on biological reproduction in Akiko's feminist resolution brings forward the effects of maternity on the empowerment of female identity, which is clearly facilitated by Jane's efforts to divorce female identities from patriarchal values in which they are often embedded. In doing so, Jane introduces new modes of

[83] Ozeki, p. 78.
[84] Ozeki, p. 220.
[85] Ozeki, p. 217.

mothering in various episodes --- Grace Beaudrox as an adoptive mother of international children, Elena Bukowsky as a care mother for her physical disabled daughter, Lara and Dyann as lesbian mothers.[86] Very much like the Martinez family show, all of these popular episodes make meat dishes secondary to family wholesomeness, foreground US myths of minority tolerance and most importantly, unveil the international possibilities of women's reproduction.

These biopolitical experiences of mothering notably run counter to US historical and gendered perception of "moral motherhood," a term used by many feminist scholars to refer to US institutional operation of maternity that "extols the private virtue of domesticity" and "legitimizes women's public relationship to politics and the state."[87] The diverse models of mothering take an anti-essentialist stance against US traditional discourse of maternal bodies, interrogating the relations between women's fertility and their identity formation. The episode of the Beaudroxes, for example, depicts a typical white Louisiana family who have a longing for adopting Korean and Vietnam war orphans. Though their act of adopting Asian war orphans other than African American children shows their implicit racial bias, it indeed cuts the essential links between giving birth and having a relationship to a child as a biological parent.[88]

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[86] Here I agree with Adrienne Rich to draw a difference between the term "motherhood" and "mothering" to indicate the duality of maternity. According to Andrea O'Reilly's summary of the core idea from the US poet and feminist, "the term 'motherhood' refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word 'mothering' refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women." Adrea O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 2.

[87] Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880–1920," *American Historical Review*, 95.4 (1990), pp. 1076–108 (pp. 1076-8).

[88] The fact that the couple do not adopt black children corresponds to the 1990s debates in America about domestic adoption, in which racial matching becomes the leading principle of adoptive child placement. The attitudes towards African Americans is further proven in a scene when the couple is asked about their photo of perching on a Civil War Confederate memorial. Grace describes their act as "shameful," which they "just didn't think." Thus Shameen Black argues that "this reclamation of feminist control … is frequently governed by the prerogatives of class, racial identity, and faith in ideologies of consumerism and upward mobility." Ozeki, pp. 83-4; Shameen Black, "Fertile

The experience of adoption, suggests Margaret Homans, "reveals that all parenthood is fundamentally adoptive," which subverts "the assumption that identity is largely determinant through our familial bloodiness."[89] The rejection of biological determinism clearly facilitates the significant transformation of Jane Tagaki-Little from a self-defeated and submissive women to a self-determined and fulfilled mother. As a once traditional woman who attributes her marriage failure to her "deformed" and "barren" body, Jane points out that it is through "Gracie Beaudroux and her ever-growing brood" that "awaken her desire all over again" to "consider motherhood seriously enough."[90] Her renewed perception of motherhood takes immediate effect on her temporary confusion of her miscarriage and eventual loss of fertility after the slaughter accident. The heroine soon recovers herself through an imitation of the Beaudrox model. She ends up on the verge of adopting international children and forming a new relationship with Sloan, a gender relationship that suggests rebuttals of biological essentialism of parenthood and invokes fluid female identity favourable to those women trapped in the rhetoric of reproduction.

The fluid gender relationship that builds on defiance of biological reproduction becomes much more evident in the case of Lara and Dyann, the biracial lesbian couple who accept donated sperms and give birth to two "coffee-coloured" daughters. Here the scientific altering of women's reproduction takes a similar strategy as international adoption offers chances for homosexuals to experience parenthood. Yet Ozeki moves beyond the biological perspective to explore the complex relations between racial formation and women's fertility. The reproduction by the lesbian

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Cosmofeminism: Ruth L. Ozeki and Transnational Reproduction," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 5.1 (2004), pp. 226-56 (p. 234).

[89] Margaret Homans, "Adoption and Essentialism," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 21.2 (2002), pp. 257-74 (p. 266).

[90] Ozeki, p. 226.

couple achieves the racial blurring on the bodies of their children and lays out a romanticized version of multi-cultural society. Thus women's reclamation of maternity via technoscience or adoption not only liberates women from their subservience to men but also consolidates, in Jane's own reflection, "a powerful affirmation of difference, of race and gender and the many faces of motherhood."[91]

In Akiko's eyes, such "powerful affirmation of difference" epitomizes US myths of racial and cultural tolerance. It becomes, after her husband's violence has escalated into rape and her resultant pregnancy, her principal reason to flee to America for Jane's help. The pregnant heroine's spiritual connection with the American wives finally takes a concrete form in her traversing between the women's homes from New York (Jane's home) to the Deep South (Grace's and Lara / Dyann's homes). While her visits are narrated in a simplistic tone, Ozeki nevertheless depicts Akiko's experience of her train ride in detail, bringing our attention to the complex relations between food, races and gender once again. According to the warm introduction from the Amtrak coach attendant, the train is nicknamed Chicken Bone Special because "all these poor black folks, they too poor to pay out good money for them frozen cardboard sandwiches that Amtrak serves up in what they call the Lounge Car, so these poor colored folk, they gotta make do with lugging along some home-cooked fried chicken."[92] The passengers, as Psyche Williams-Forson records the anecdote of the train, are "said to have tossed their bones from the windows, leaving an 'identifiable' trail."[93] In Williams-Forson's minds, these trails signify the visible resistance of African American women, who have been deemed invisible within

[91] Ozeki, p. 221.
[92] Ozeki, p. 399.
[93] Psyche William-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, & Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 116.

American society and African American patriarchy. Chicken and other foods which travel easily become a motif in African American travel narratives, transmitting cultural traditions and enabling women to challenge economic and cultural institutions and ideologies.[94] Though unaware of black culture, Akiko is deeply moved by the coloured people's hospitality when her presence is made known and she is immediately offered a typical shoe-box lunch, "drumsticks and paper plates of potato salad and chips and pickles and drinks of soda."[95] The heroine's sharing of food and songs, to some extent, symbolises her mutual status and desire with those black women, who cook fried chicken and suffer from subordination in a public sphere. Thus Chicken Bone Special turns up to be a site where the women share their foods and resolutions, escape the dreary life of patriarchal institution and move forward to the construction of a common homeplace, in which women could enable them and their children to defy and subvert the racial and sexual discourses that commodify them as meats ready to be consumed.

Conclusion

Jane's final announcement that her year of meats is "not so easy, but done" marks not only the success of her documentarian career but also the reclamation of both protagonists' female control.[96] Just several months before the announcement, the collusion of meat eating and US capitalistic economy keeps placing the bodies of Jane and Akiko inside an abattoir. On the one hand, this abattoir means an industrialized slaughterhouse and indicates the damaging effects of the corporate business on

[94] William-Forson, pp. 114-34.
[95] Ozeki, p. 399.
[96] Ozeki, p. 426.

individuals' bodies; on the other hand, the abattoir points to a symbolic social institution in which women get animalized and slaughtered. Ozeki arguably draws a single-minded association between meat eating and normative feminine images and complicates the sexual politics of meats through the females' reproductive bodies, damaging the female protagonists' domestic welfare and public involvement. To tackle the challenges against their female identity, Akiko illustrates Bordo's theory of eating disorder, redefines her bodily relations with food and voices her resistance against the masculine cruelty that is imposed upon her body. Furthermore, the transnational connection that *My American Wife!* initiates enables the female protagonists and the American wives to construct a transnational feminine alliance, an alliance that is built upon Ozeki's discourse of reproduction and US myth of racial and cultural tolerance. The feminine alliance culminates in Jane's and Akiko's settling down in a refreshed America, a country that is free of polluted meat industry, isolates masculine cruelty and extols racial diversity.

Chapter Four The Myth of Bourgeois Intimacy: Food, Colonial Desire and Queer Diaspora in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

On July 13, 1869, a three-day convention was held at the Greenlaw Opera House of Memphis as one event among a series of regional commercial conventions set up to consider the economic development of the US Southern states during the transitional era after emancipation. As *The Congressional Globe* recorded, this Memphis convention was dedicated to devising "ways and means to inaugurate the importation of Chinese or Asiatic labour." In order to explain the mission of the convention, the leading organizer J. W. Clapp asserted that the key to establishing a new South was to have coerced labourers, a group that "you can control and manage to some extent as of old" African slaves. "Experience taught that the great staples could not be produced by voluntary labor, but under coerced labor systematized and overlooked by intelligence … labor that the owner can control." He made a further reference to the management of race and labour in the Caribbean islands and believed that the Southern masters should follow suits: "The same islands now employ a coerced labor, and again blossom like the rose; … Asiatic labor supplies the place of the stricken down by emancipation, and the country again commences to be what it once was. Shall we not profit by its example?"[1] Clapp's speech led to a significant shift in the racial composition of the labour force in the US South, bringing it in line with the expanded use of Chinese labour that had been practised in the British colonies for half a century. Although the exploitation of ex-slaves continued through these years, the white oligarchs' decision to import free yet indentured Asian labours offered an

[1] Moon Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: the John Hopkins University, 2006), p. 101.

increasingly important solution to their desire to suppress wage costs and maintain a prosperous bourgeois society for themselves.

What accompanied this shift of employment targets was an important change in Asian involvement in US society from the public works on the transcontinental railroad to the private services within the bourgeois household. Tye Kim Orr, an ethnic Chinese delegate born in the British colony of Malaysia, encapsulated the mood in an ingratiating speech he gave on the second day of the convention. Asian workers, Orr conceded to his white supremacist audience, "can't do so much as white man, but do different kind of work." During this period of time, when public or industrial works were often deemed to hold a greater value than private service, this "different kind of work" meant such domestic work as cooking and household maintenance: forms of menial service that allowed white employers to keep to their evangelical role of, as Orr put it, "bring[ing] 'The World' to the people who have not it."[2] As Lisa Lowe argues in "The Intimacies of Four Continents," the subsequent entry of Asian labours into US and European bourgeois households gave birth in turn to "bourgeois intimacy," a biopolitics through which "the colonial powers administered the enslaved and colonized and sought to indoctrinate the newly freed into forms of Christian marriage and family."[3] More specifically, Lowe develops the notion of "intimacy" on the basis of its lexicon meanings --- a descriptive marker of the familiar and the essential and of the relations grounded in sex.[4] In this light, we can situate the bourgeois intimacy in a critical terrain for the class, racial and sexual

[2] Jung, p. 102.
[3] Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. by Ann Laura Stoler, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 191-212 (p. 195).
[4] According to Oxford English Dictionary, intimacy means: a) the state of close familiarity; b) euphemism for sexual intercourse; c) closeness of observation and knowledge; d) intimate or close connection or union. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intimacy> [accessed 10 October 2017].

relations between the white masters and the Asian servants. While the hiring of Asian labours ensured the familiar subordination of Asian coolies to regulating notions of Western colonial politics in a manner reminiscent of European slavery system, Lowe adds that the colonial management of Asian labourers' sexuality formed a central part of the microphysics of domestic US labour relations. The affective intimacy of white employers, for Lowe, thus hinges on the fact that indentured Asian domestic labourers were at once ignored yet crucial to the production of material comforts that supported the leisure lives of the new bourgeois homes. As Orr put it in Memphis: "if you have a grand house you want a cook. If you have a big table you want a footstool."[5]

This chapter examines how Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong's award-winning novel *The Book of Salt* (re)constructs the historical and imagined bourgeois intimacy that exists between Vietnamese domestic workers and white employers. Initiated by the astonishing records of two Vietnamese servant cooks working for US modernist figure Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas, Truong's literary project exposes the dynamics of race and sex under bourgeois management and offers a compelling narrative by Thinh Binh, a Vietnamese servant cook who works not only for Stein and Toklas as a couple but also the French Governor-General in Vietnam during the 1920s.[6] As the title of the novel itself indicates, the book depicts every familiar sting of salt for the servant living in a diasporic and coerced status under the

[5] Jung, p. 102.

[6] In an interview about the novel, the Vietnamese American writer remembers finding a revelation in the pages of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, which is both a cookbook and memoir of Toklas' life with Stein. "In a chapter called 'Servants in France,'" remembers Truong, "Toklas wrote about two Indochinese men who cooked for [them] at 27 rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin … When I got to the pages about these cooks, to say the least, surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence --- and such an intimate one at that --- in the lives of these two women." Monique Truong, "An Interview with Monique Truong," <http://www.hmhbooks.com/booksellers/press_release/truong/#questions> [accessed 23 November 2017].

colonial rules of white employer: "kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea."[7] The exploitation of Binh's subjectivity for bourgeois benefits is unfolded via his broken memories. Truong's narrative continuously shifts in time and space and takes the readers back into Binh's past, shuttling between Saigon, the sea and Paris. From these complicated flashbacks, it becomes obvious that the employers practise various forms of bourgeois intimacy that situate the Vietnamese cook in a marginalized yet essential position that nourishes the Euro-American employers' racial and class superiority. As I will argue in this chapter, the employers' heavy reliance on Binh's unacknowledged services epitomized in his food preparation proves essential in their colonial desire and control of the Asian body. The colonial logic of eating extends to the sexual intimacy between the Vietnamese cook and Chef Bleriot / Marcus Lattimore, in which these upper-class characters expect to satisfy their sexual appetites for Oriental subjects.

While emphasizing how illegitimate sexual unions between the employers and the Asian labour are woven into the fabric of colonial governance, *The Book of Salt* is arguably concerned with the variability in the making of racialized categories. As many have argued, the transgression of sexual desires into racial boundaries suggests that bourgeois intimacy is never a one-way or fixed concept; instead, the notion of intimacy often works to unsettle the fixed boundaries set for the semiotic order. In the novel, Truong explores Binh's methods of resistance in his secret yet intimate labour. More specifically, the protagonist reverses the usual directionality of desire and gains control of the knowledges engendered through the bourgeois intimacy. To some extent, Binh holds paradoxical viewpoints towards such desire: he refuses yet wants to be desired. This combination of motivation and response articulates the complexities of his cooking for the employers and sexual affair with them. Truong, I

[7] Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 5.

argue, presents a renewed version of bourgeois intimacy --- an affective relation that is made accessible partly by foods and indentured labours, and which casts the West as a controlling network of consumption and desire; it, nevertheless, offers a discursive space in which the Vietnamese subaltern labours are able to contest and transform the normative cultural discourses from within.

This chapter demonstrates these dynamic varieties of intimacy by exploring the complex insurrections of food, colonial desire and queer diaspora in the space of bourgeois intimacy. It starts with an investigation into how the white employers in the novel put bourgeois intimacy into practice: the Vietnamese chefs' involuntary cooking of "authentic" French dishes alienates their labours from the bodies that produce them, culminating in a symbolic devouring of the exotic Vietnamese body. Yet this abjection of Truong's Vietnamese labourers in the bourgeois kitchens never amounts to a complete exclusion of them as a force who might disrupt the employers' heteronormative authority. Reanimating a pre-1900s genre of the servant's narrative, Binh's work behind the scenes of Stein's household expresses a subversive oral and culinary autonomy that highlights the effective strategies that resist the bourgeois control of exotic labours. I end with an analysis of how the acts of preparing and sharing food produce queer diasporic desire. With the eruption of this bodily desire, Binh forms alliances with other queer diasporic subjects not only to contest the sanctioned histories of colonist and racist violence but also to conjure up the culinary strategy which resists and transforms the class, gender and racial hierarchies that work to discipline bourgeois intimacy.

Devouring the Asian Body

The cover of *The Book of Salt* itself touches upon a central trope that Truong is keen to develop. On it a faceless Asian cook wears a white apron, holds a pair of lemon fruits, and presents them to the western readers.[8] The idea of the facelessness of the Asian servant pervades the novel itself, reminding the protagonist Binh that his exotic food and body have been deemed foreign and disruptive to the Western order. His discreet service "ensures that all the cups are steaming and that the tea table stays covered with marzipan and butter-cream-frosted cakes," on which Stein relies to organize her famous modernist salon at 27 rue de Fleurus; yet his presence is unacknowledged by the guests: "I imagine that when the guests look my way they see, well, they see a floor lamp or a footstool. I have become just that."[9] Binh's status of being forgotten extends to every detail during his service in Saigon, on the sea and in Stein's household. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, Truong depicts an interesting scene in which Toklas begs Binh's help to sew Stein's loose shoe button. At first, Toklas whispers to Binh: "please, Bin, sew on GetrudeStein's button. We cannot have photographs of her looking so dishevelled in this way!" Toklas' command soon turns to a plea: "I cannot have photographs of me prostrated before her in that way."[10] Despite his essential role in keeping the Madame from looking dishevelled, Binh is still kept from being present on Stein's portrait photographs. If Correin Anderson is right in pointing out the power imbalance in the portrait of the couple on the cover of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), suggesting the noted US modernist writer as the overbearing master and Toklas as the dutiful servant, Binh's invisibility in all the portrait photos then seems to bespeak a condition

[8] I refer to the cover of the novel released by the Vintage press.
[9] Truong, p. 151.
[10] Truong, p. 255.

worse than that of a white servant, complicating a racialized Asian coolie image.[11] In this section, then, I will explore how Truong uses a series of colonial symbols such as food imagery, language assimilation and other ritualistic methods to articulate the ways in which Binh is constructed as one of the invisible Asian coolie labours. While Stein's relegation of the protagonist to an invisible figure reflects a historical subjugation of Asian domestic labours in the rise of Western liberal modernism, Binh's status as an exile Vietnamese servant clearly brings complexity into the trope by describing how his racially marked and working-class body is infused with the supressed Oriental expectation and cultural discourse in a charged eating culture.

Before I dig into the textual plots, it is worth mentioning the long-standing discourse of domestic workers in western middle-class households. According to Kyla Wazana Tompkins's summary of the narratives of US kitchen labourers in *Racial Indigestion* (2012), kitchen labours in the bourgeois households were gradually pushed away from the front-of-house activities to become an increasingly hidden or private form of labour in the nineteenth century.[12] In the antebellum period when modern kitchens were introduced into bourgeois families, as illustrations from a variety of contemporary domestic manuals indicate, middle-class housewives were customarily assigned the task of bringing order to the kitchens, which were thought to be inherently disorder and chaotic: Catherine Beecher suggested that the housekeepers' duty was to maintain "a habit of system and order" in a kitchen, which, in Mary Randolph's words, was "a disorder with all her attendant evils" without

[11] Anderson describes this frontpiece in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: "Stein sits at the desk, pen in hand. Something in her pose suggests Prospero's conjuring skills, for Alice seems summoned to the scene." Furthermore, Stein is also portrayed as a figure who is in the pursuit of knowledge while Toklas serves only to meet Stein's desire with the effacing voice. Correin Anderson, "I Am Not Who 'I' Pretend to Be: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and its Photographic Frontispiece," *The Comparatist*, 29.5 (2005), pp. 26-37 (p. 28).
[12] Tompkins, pp. 15-52.

several days' attendance.[13] Yet the US industrial ideology that emphasized on "public" over "private" life, "waged" over "unwaged" labour led housewives' benevolent task to be downgraded: women's domestic labour gradually lost its footing as a recognized aspect of economic life in America. After the 1830s, an increasingly widespread system of domestic services relieved domestic pressure on middle-class housewives throughout the United States. Cooking became a servile practice, one imposed on an expanding servant class whose members were "taught that domestics use a different entrance to the house, and sit at a distinct table" in Beecher's description.[14] Ralph Waldo Emerson also acknowledged the class inequality in the household when he admitted that, while "we sit here talking & smiling" at the dinner table, "some person is out there in field & shop & kitchen doing what we need, without talk or smiles."[15] After the end of the Civil War, the huge numbers of manumitted African Americans, together with ongoing waves of European immigration, continued to lower the cost of hiring servants, ensuring that the employment of domestic workers became even more popular. The dominant discourse on servants that grew out of these social transformations increasingly mixed questions of the class stratification with notions of ethnic hierarchy. In *American Woman's Home*, for instance, Beecher and Stowe called the Irish maid "a creature of immense bone and muscle, but of heavy, unawakened brain." As these servants of linguistic and religious differences populated the servant-labour pool, middle-class housewives' writings on domesticity were more concerned with the governance of the houses, acts that were often rhetorically expressed through missionary tasks. Beech and Stowe

[13] Mary Randolph, *The Virginia Housewife* and Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise in Domestic Economy*, in Tompkins, pp. 39-40.
[14] Beecher, *A Treatise in Domestic Economy*, qtd in Tompkins, p. 43.
[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* V.9 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960-82), ed. by William H. Gilman, p. 127.

asserted: “The mistresses of American families, whether they like it or not, have the duties of missionaries imposed upon them by that class from which our supply of domestic servants is drawn.”[16] In this charged culture, therefore, the kitchen was seen as a separate and abject space in which women were denied entry into public life, and foreign labourers were regarded as in need of being civilized, fulfilling the aspirations of liberal capitalist modernity.

Exploitation in respectable American kitchens became intensified in the case of Asian domestic workers. The entry of Asian coolie labourers into bourgeois families was significantly granted new meanings owing to the liminal and ambiguous position that they occupied between enslaved and free labour. As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the chapter, the particular obscurity of Asian coolie labourers facilitated not only a modern European understanding of political liberation but also a modern racialized division of labour. Colonial labour relations on the plantations in the New World permitted opportunities for European and Euro-American employers to include the Asian labourers such as Chinese coolies and Vietnamese servants in the political discourse of colonial society. Asian labourers, in Lowe’s reading of British colonial archives, were deemed by the European colonists as a race “who … could be kept distinct from the Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to the Euro.” Those of Asian background continue to appear as they did in the colonial archive explored by Lowe: as figures who embody “a new racial mode of managing and dividing labouring group through the liberal promise of freedom that would commence with the end of slavery.”[17] Thus the Asian “coolie” seems to be

[16] Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *American Woman’s Home*, qtd in Tompkins, p. 44.
[17] Lowe, p. 195.

constructed as an abject figure --- midway between slavery and free labour, used both to define and to obscure the boundary between enslavement and freedom.

In effect, then, this bourgeois management of Asian labours casts new light on Stein's and Toklas' autobiographical account of their Vietnamese servants in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) and *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954), the archives on which Truong relies for her fictionalized version of Binh. In the midst of describing numerous servants in the couple's forty-five-year history of employment, Toklas briefly mentions two Vietnamese servants named Trec and Nguyen among other nameless Asian servants. From the very beginning, the American employer deems Asian servants as untrustworthy, defining the ethnic group as "insecure, unstable [and] unreliable."[18] Yet out of the French anti-American sentiment during the 1920s, Stein and Toklas are forced to hire Vietnamese cooks since they "are French but not so absorbing not so yet being Frenchmen" in Stein's mind.[19] Stein's comment clearly displaces the immigrants to an ambivalent position where they are submissive to and disaffiliated from the French characters. Such ambivalent position in the racial and class stereotype, according to Homi K. Bhabha, gives the colonial discourse its currency and empowers the production of colonial otherness --- ambivalance "ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures, informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed."[20] While Stein continues her colonial discourse and describes Trec in a bittering and

[18] Alice B. Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (London, Penguin, 1961), p. 226.
[19] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971), p. 125.
[20] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," in *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: SAGE, 1999), ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, pp. 370-8 (p. 370).

joking tone: "he is little now that is he is a little man,"[21] Toklas joins her and ridicules the servant's French: "[Trec] would say, not a cherry, when he spoke of a strawberry. A lobster was a small crawfish, and a pineapple was a pear not a pear." Moreover, the American employers showcase their colonial arrogance through their ignorance of the servants' home culture, which highlights in their viewpoint towards the servants' cooking: they call Trec's and Nguyen's cooking "Chinese" and make no efforts to distinguish between Vietnamese dishes and other Asian cuisines. The ignorance further extends to Toklas' impart of French cooking, which she describes as an act that answers Trec's "childish joy," delineating the masters' colonial thoughts that are caught between disdain and paternalism towards the Vietnamese immigrant.[22] Hence the American employer's recording of the Vietnamese cooks amounts to a typical Oriental practice --- the process by which West knows and teaches the Orient has been a way of exerting power over it.

Without doubt, Stein's and Toklas' Orientalist scheme continues to fuel Truong's characters in *The Book of Salt*. As we learn from his desultory narration, Binh was born to a father who becomes a proselytizer to Saigon's poor people and who parades a slavish obedience to the conventions of colonial power. The Old Man, as Binh calls him in a gesture of filial renunciation, asserts that Christianity offers him with a promise of deferred recognition and even turns Catholicism into a profitable business. His restoration of patriarchy in the God's eyes leads him to abuse and then abandon his wife and the fourth son Binh, whom he regards as illegitimate. Worse still, the father later persuades Binh into full submission to predetermined racial hierarchy, and it is highlighted in the Old Man's recognition of heteronormative employment

[21] Stein, p. 125.
[22] Toklas, p. 226.

relations: "You were taught how to say *'s'il vous plait, merci, Monsieur, Madame'* so that you could work in the Governer-General's house." In the ignorant father's mind, being a cook for the colonizers brings honour for the family and proves successful in the life of the eldest son Anh Minh, who works as a sous chef for the French Governer-General and "wears a crisp white apron and knows more French words than the neighbourhood schoolteacher." [23] Yet Truong implicitly suggests the ultimate failure of the Old Man's blind pursuit for social recognition. For instance, the domestic cooks and servants are often required to wear clean white aprons before the guests who are deemed more superior, an act that aims to hide their dirty and filthy works from being seen. In other words, instead of assuming dignity and acclamation of the cooks' services or being purified by the Old Man as "a vestment, embroidered, consecrated by the outstretched hands of his god," wearing white aprons ensures alienation of the cuisines from their servitude and completes the skilled erasure of every sign of their works, thus keeping the cooks from being seen and recognized.[24]

Contrary to what the Old Man expects, Anh Minh's identity comes into being through his mixed feelings towards his work. Binh recollects years later that Anh Minh passionately agrees with the father and regards the linguistic acquisition of French as signs for the colonizers' inclusion: "The French language would save us, would welcome into the fold, would reward us with kisses on both cheeks."[25] Truong soon voids his claim in the French ruling class's resistance to acknowledge the Vietnamese "correct" usage of French. Binh mentions Minh's accounts earlier: "Minh the Sous Chef had told us how the French never tired of debating why the Indochinese of a certain class are never able to master the difficulties, the subteleties, the winged

[23] Troung, p. 12.
[24] Troung, p. 44.
[25] Troung, p. 14.

eloquence, of the French language."[26] The eldest brother's memory clearly delineates a familiar process of "installing a standard version of language as the norm and marginalizing all the varieties as impurities," which places colonial language as "the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated."[27] Though aware of such power dynamics, Anh Minh remains deluded and firmly asserts that his linguistic eloquence guarantees a bright future not only for himself but his youngest brother as well: "Even the lowest-paid helpers get two meals a day and a chance to wear the long white apron someday."[28]

While Minh's claim suggests the continuance of his subjugated labours through a typical self-negation of his own dilemmas, his blind submission to French order extends to the mastery of French cooking as well. The Vietnamese cook believes that his capability of cooking authentic French dishes could provide essential cultural capital for his pursuit of a higher ranking position in the French Governor-General's household. After the death of the old chef de cuisine, the Vietnamese cook believes that there is no need for his masters to send for another French chef to replace him because he can cook such authentic French cuisines as "omelette a la bourbonnaise, his coupe ambassadrice, his crème marquise."[29] Yet Minh's aspirations are soon shattered by the fact that the French employers hire a new French cook to take the place of the *chef de cuisine*, leaving him to stay in the position of the sous chef.[30]

What remains unknown to Minh is that food, very much like such ritualized paraphernalia as his white apron, is never a sign for his inclusion into heteronormative

[26] Troung p. 13.
[27] Bill Ashcroft, Garreth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.
[28] Troung, p. 51.
[29] Troung, p. 14.
[30] Troung, p. 46.

culture but rather a significant tool by which the colonizers can abject and marginalize the Asian labour as a figure belonging outside the French order. In Ahn Minh's depiction, French chefs are "purists, classically trained, from families of chefs going back at least a century." Those who are not pure French descendants are deemed incapable of cooking authentic French gourmets, as exemplified in the case of the *chef de cuisine* at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon. Though bearing a "harmless-looking Provencal" appearance, the chef is rumoured to be "the illegitimate son of a high-ranking French official and his Vietnamese seamstress."[31] His questionable citizenship triggers the French clientele's refusal to accept the chef's culinary invention; the French gourmets become bewildered by such staples of Southern and Eastern Asian food as lemongrass and straw mushrooms. A similar rejection of Asian foods and labours on French tables occurs in the French Governor-General's household, where each Vietnamese food and ingredient has been deemed foreign, impelling the "dignity and distinction" of French households. This biased viewpoint, held by Madame Governor-General, leads her to insist on changing every dairy food item because the Vietnamese milk is seen as noxious enough to turn a healthy woman barren. The fear later turns into a thorough erasure of Vietnamese milk in the French household, or in the Madame's "unflinching rallying-cry," to keep everything "as if in France" in a long-thought primitive country. These accusations clearly point to the essential position of French food in maintaining the superior colonial position: as this national cuisine, in Andrew P. Haley's mind, "embodies luxury, tangibly represents aristocratic taste, and, when necessary, monitors the boundaries of polite society,"[32] the French gourmets that are served in pure French

[31] Troung, p. 42.
[32] Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 38-9.

ingredients become the symbolic goods that situate Asian food and indentured labours outside what Norbert Elias refers to in the title of his book as a "civilizing process."[33]

Minh's disappointing experience in the Governor-General's house not only offers Binh an early lesson on the fixity of colonial stratification but also enables him to develop a growing awareness of the Vietnamese labourers' condition that society stigmatizes as servitude. To some extents, he sees the dead end of his path to what the Old Man would call glory: "And, me, what was I supposed to do? Twenty years old and still a garde-manger … Equipped with skills and desires that no man would admit to having, what was I supposed to do?"[34] Though he seems suspicious, Binh is forced to be a low-level cook for the colonizers during his exile on the sea and after he settles down in Paris, which suggests the few options that colonial society leaves for the Vietnamese labourers.

Through Binh's constant flashbacks, Anh Minh's image of a fallen figure continually reminds the protagonist of the corruptions of colonial power. Such corruption becomes evident from the start of his service for the Steins as a couple, which is initiated by Stein's advertisement for a live-in cook on a local newspaper: "*Two American ladies wish to retain a cook --- 27 rue de Fleurus. See the Concierge.*" A confident and public statement, and the "captivating" one which also appears in Alice B. Toklas' memoir, the advertisement might seem progressive given that it leaves the relationship between Stein and Toklas so thinly veiled.[35] For Binh, however, it is also infused with colonial logic. As he puts it, "Two American ladies 'wish'? Sounds more like a proclamation than a help-wanted ad. Of course, two

[33] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
[34] Troung, pp. 14-5.
[35] Toklas, p. 226.

American ladies in Paris these days would only 'wish' because to wish is to receive."[36] Binh's bitter recognition once again brings to the fore an unfair employment relation in a colonial setting, in which the migrant servants serve the white employers' desires while their bodily needs are neglected in a colonial articulation.

Truong soon complicates this victimization of Vietnamese labours through Binh's acute categories of three groups of the prospective Parisian employers. The first group reject his application immediately "after a catlike glimpse at my face," denying his eligibility to serve based on his ethnicity. The second adopt similar attitudes, fire suspicious questions at him, doubt his reliability, and "behave as if they have been authorized by the French government to ferret out and to document exactly how it is that I have come to inhabit their hallowed shores."[37] Things become quite different when the Vietnamese cook attends the interviews conducted by the third group, who, in his own term, are "the collectors." This group of employers quickly hire him as they buy paintings or other objects of curiosity. Notably, the Vietnamese cook confides that most Messieurs and Mesdames of this type do not consider his cooking skill as the precondition for the employment. Instead, this group accept him out of their missionary impulses to civilize the foreign servants, a common practice that further facilitates colonial discourse's permeation of domestic space. In their eyes, Binh is but one of a long line of "wounded trophies," a mere addition to "the Algerian orphaned by a famine, the Moroccan violated by his uncle, the Madagascan driven out of his village" --- who lives a miserable life in the home country and flees to France to seek shelter. The defining core of the employers' obsession with employing exiled

[36] Troung, p. 11.
[37] Troung, p. 16.

immigrants does not lie in "where [they] have been or what [they] have seen," but resides in their longing "for the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts." Binh continues to define their sentimentality through metaphorical references to food: the employers ravenously see the servants' diasporic experiences as honey, which stimulates their "yearn[ing] for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes." In this light, Binh's food imagery not only implies the light tone of the employers' treatment of the servants' misery in acts of leisure eating; it also suggests a symbolic devouring of the colonized body, a devouring that takes place subtly amongst their subservient labours: "a question slipped in with the money for the weekly food budget, a follow-up twisted inside a compliment for last night's dessert, three others disguised as a curiosity about the recipe for yesterday's soup." Under the exposure of a series of "measured" and "controlled" questions, Binh clearly fears the weakening of his cultural identity, a fear he understands in the impeding loss of his culinary skills:

> When I am abandoned by their sweet-voiced catechism, I forget how long to braise the ribs of beef, whether chicken is best steamed over wine or broth, where to buy the sweetest trout. I neglect the pinch of cumin, the sprinkling of lovage, the scent of lime.[38]

Reading the protagonist's recollection above, Wenying Xu argues that "with his labour, his art, and his stories devoured by his employers, Binh becomes an allegory for the colonized vulnerable to the cannibalistic practices of colonialism --- practices that nourish the Self by consuming the Other."[39] Yet Xu overstates the employers' figurative consumption as singular and overwhelming. I contend that the symbolic eating amounts to a strategy of what bell hooks calls "eating the other," a complicated

[38] Troung, pp. 18-20.
[39] Xu, p. 141.

way of commodifying Otherness in which desire towards the Other coexists with fear of its possible contamination. Truong, then, captures the employers' Orientalist fascination with the servants' diasporic experiences in Asia, exemplified in the desire to acquire foods associated with the East while keeping Asian bodies at a safe distance. This fetishizing consumption brings to the surface the unconscious fantasies in the Caucasians' contact with the Asian subaltern labours which are deeply embedded in the structure of white supremacy. Together with their impulse to civilize the foreign servants and to keep them from polluting limited Eurocentric domestic ideals, the selective desire to imbibe what Others eat is thus to articulate a normative bourgeois intimacy, an affective relation that turns Asian ethnicity into a "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" in hooks's metaphorical articulation.[40]

The five years Binh then spends serving Stein and Toklas's household at 27 rue de Fleurus allows Truong to elaborate on these bourgeois sentiments. The Vietnamese cook, in this role, becomes an intimate observer of the famous salon which Stein and Toklas hold every week with leading figures from the worlds of Parisian high art. Yet Truong also emphasises that, within this bohemian and liberal environment, the employers continue to treat the Vietnamese cook as their racial inferior. For instance, Binh reveals that most employers inherit Victorian tradition and prefer that their servants wear white gloves during their services. Very much like the white aprons I mentioned earlier, this recurring and ritualised fetish of white gloves becomes an effective way of using yet containing the involvement of colonial hands. It distances the foods that the employers consume from the hardship and circumscription of exploited foreign labour. Visible traces of servants' work vanish as, in Binh's

[40] hooks, p. 181.

description, hands which were covered with "fish- scale cuticles, blooming liver spots, the pink and red ridges of scars and burns, warts like a sprinkling of morning dew" become insulated from the dishes they create.[41]

Whereas the servants' hands are made invisible and disassociated from their circumscribed actions, the masters rely on the servants' words to demonstrate the power of colonial logics. From the start of the novel, the cook contends that his acquiring some "cheap, serviceable" foreign words functions only to meet the colonizers' desires. Binh observes that Stein "takes an interest in my … interpretation of the French language, affirmed by my use of negatives and repetitions, inspired by witnessing such an elemental, bare-knuckled breakdown of a language."[42] The author soon complicates Stein's sense of delight in observing the cook's misuse of French when Binh forgets the French expression for "pineapple" and therefore hesitates before Toklas: "Madame, I want to buy a pear … not a pear." In response to the cook's linguistic confusion, the scene that also appears in Toklas's cookbook, Stein begins "amusing herself with Binh's French. She was wrapping my words around her tongue, saving them for a later, more careful study of their mutations."[43] Here Stein metaphorically becomes a "co-conspirator" with other masters to consume colonial subjects through their demonstration of what Bernard Cohn would call a "command of colonial languages,"[44] which functions to maintain the ruling class' distinction from others, or in Chef Bleriot's mindset, "to elevate him from the fray, to keep his nose clean even when he was rooting in the dirt of some else's land."[45] Indeed, Binh later asserts that he can pick up some French words very quickly without having to

[41] Troung, p. 65.
[42] Troung, p. 34.
[43] Troung, p. 35.
[44] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 16-56.
[45] Troung, p. 123.

understand them, and that these terms are consequently like "the seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth."[46] Here Truong offers a compelling food metaphor to suggest how the colonizers impose their imperial dominance. In the process of civilizing the colonial Other, the fruits that are planted in the colonial vines and branches nourish the colonial bodies, but their inedible seeds "ungraciously" suffocate the alternative cultural consciousness.

The damaging effects of such linguistic imperialism come to the surface as Gertrude Stein meets Thinh Binh for the first time and merrily mispronounces Thinh Binh's name as "Thin Bin."[47] In spite of various monikers for the cook, Stein's and the other masters' misnaming notably complicates what Gayatri Spivak would define as catacharesis, a Greek term to describe what occurs when an object is misnamed because there is no proper name for it.[48] Since there is no adequate referent for Binh's name in the Western languages, the wittily rhymed "Thin Bin" emerges as a dominant denotative term --- a term that ridicules the cook's short figure and significantly relegates Binh to a bin where the masters' rubbish is deposited, thus abjecting the cook and positioning him in the hinterland between the clean and the dirty, the inside and the outside, the pure and the impure.

Apart from the master's linguistic abuse, Binh's diasporic subjectivity is further eroded by Toklas's acts of culinary assimilation. Binh sums up the American employer's alimentary requirements:

> Believe me, it has not been easy for me to work for these two. Miss Toklas is a Madame who uses her palate to set the standard of perfection. In order to please

[46] Troung, pp. 11-2.
[47] Troung, p. 32.
[48] Gayatri Spivak revives "catacharesis" from its original meaning as "abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor" and applies this word to master words that claim to represent a group. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 14.

> her, her cook has to do the same, an extremely difficult feat. Her cook has to adopt her tongue, make room for it, which can only mean the removal of his own.[49]

Here, through a pun on the idea of tongue, Truong interlines notions of language and taste. She deliberates over the American masters' manipulation of the servants' orality --- ability to speak, cook and eat. In Binh's detailed narration of his food preparation in the kitchen, the American employer's impartation of her own recipes adheres to a strict pattern and "sounds more like an assertion than a line of instruction."[50] The Vietnamese cook implies that the function of such food rituals lies in not only asserting the American employer's superior colonial identity but also corroding his own cultural identity through the removal of his own culinary style.

Truong notably complicates the linkage between the cook's loss of cultural identity and the master's rejection of exotic food in one of the many kitchen episodes, in which Binh follows Toklas' instructions for the slaughtering and cooking of pigeons. Learning a Euro-American approach to slaughtering, for the protagonist, amounts to a coercive departure from the economical Vietnamese approach of his own mother and the indigenous culture of independent subsistence. While Binh's mother tends to nick the pigeon's skin until the blood flows, asserting that her way means less congealed blood for the soup, Toklas puts her way of killing as humane as possible and asks the cook to press harder on the neck's precise point. As he begins to follow his employer's way of slaughtering, scraping the pigeon's neck, Binh accidentally cuts his fingers in scraping the pigeon's neck, spilling his blood in the dish. Although Toklas finds out immediately and accuses Binh of drinking on the job, the couple accept the taste of the servant's blood. As they do so, Binh's body becomes an

[49] Troung, p. 211.
[50] Troung, p. 68.

allegory whereby the employers enact a cannibalistic practice that points to his loss of humanity. Truong describes the servant's physical pain of the wound as "the slipping away of a life … that accompanies the eventual clam."[51] Here Stein and Toklas's feeding upon Binh's blood constitutes their irreducible communication with the servant as the other by engaging in a typical endorsement of "institution of speciesism" in Cary Wolfe's term, an institution that "relies on tacit agreement that the full transcendence of the 'human' requires the sacrifice of 'animal' and the animalistic."[52] The discursive and institutional practice makes possible what Derrida would call a "noncriminal putting to death" of such undervalued humans as Binh by turning them into edible animals or other foods, thus providing material conditions for the whites' absolute power over others in the fact of slavery.[53] Hence under the powerful linguistic domination and culinary assimilation, the cook's limits in the colonial household finally culminate in the couple's quasi-cannibalistic incorporation of his body to nourish their colonial subjectivities.

Under this circumstance the Vietnamese cook bursts into a sudden realization of his miserable condition in Stein's household. When Binh finds with astonishment that his partner Marcus Lattimore's move freely between Stein's guests and is treated as one of them, the Vietnamese cook reflects on the limits of his coloured body: "[My body] marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin." In the colonizers' mind, Binh's Asian body seems to predetermine his servitude, itself suggesting his generalized inferior cultural identity:

> Foreigner, asiatique, and, this being Mother France, I must be Indochinese … We all belong to the same owner, the same Monsieur and Madame … Within the few

[51] Troung, p.70.
[52] Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourses of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 6.
[53] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991), ed. by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-luc Nancy, pp. 96-119 (p. 112).

> second that they have left to consider me before they stroll on by, they conclude that I am a labourer, the only real option left. Every day when I walk the streets of this city, I am just that. I am an Indochinese labourer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same. It is this curious mixture of careless disregard and notoriety that makes me long to take my body into a busy Saigon marketplace and lose it in the crush.[54]

Here the Vietnamese cook not only suggests the eradication of the labourer's individuality by the coercive colonial power but also brings forward a racialized dynamic behind certain assumptions around his body image. Binh's Asian body is seen as a physical embodiment of "foreigner" and "asiatique" and significantly helps construct the masters' identification as "Mother France." Such racial encounters recollect Frantz Fanon's foundational adoption of the Lacanian model of the mirror stage as a general theory of the psychic mechanisms which institute racialized subjectivity. In a footnote of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon writes: "When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man. The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as non-self --- that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimiliable."[55] Hence the relation of "Mother France" and "foreigner / asiatique" is determined not simply by the psychic processes of misrecognition and projection but by the masters' designation of Asian bodies as what Mary Douglas would call "matter out of place," which is "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements."[56]

In both Binh's and Fanon's description, the skin becomes a border or boundary, supposedly keeping the subject inside from the other outside; or in Fanon's term, the

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[54] Troung, pp. 151-2.
[55] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 124.
[56] Douglas, p. 44.

skin is a "seal," determining the ultimate superiority of the white race over others.[57] But Sara Ahmed points out that as a border or a frame, skin also "performs the peculiar destabilising logic, calling into question the exclusion of the other from the subject and risking the subject's becoming (or falling into) the other."[58] Ahmed's redefinition notably echoes with Julia Kristeva's belief in how abjection is produced. Kristeva calls skin "a fragile container" that "no longer guaranteed the integrity of 'one's own and clean self'."[59] Thus the skin may open up a space of undecidability where the subject risks its superiority, where it might leak into the world at large, or in other words, it grants opportunities for the foreign others to invade the integrity of self. This destabilizing impact of the skin soon takes effect on Binh as a colonized subject, who implies that the whites' biased viewpoints towards exotic bodies hinder Western imagination rather than promote it as espoused by Western progressive spirit: "[My body and skin] stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of whom I could be."[60] Not only does Binh immediately defy the colonizers' suppression in this resolution, claiming that he is "just a man, anonymous, and, at a passing glance, a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar."[61] His culinary skill, as I will argue in the next section, also gives rise to his subversive performativity in destabilizing the fixed boundaries that govern the bourgeois household.

The Servant's Hands: Destabilizing Colonial Order

[57] Fanon writes that "the white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness." *Fanon,* p. 3.
[58] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 45.
[59] Kristeva, p. 53.
[60] Troung, p. 152.
[61] Troung, p. 152.

Admist his memory of serving the French Governor-General's household in Saigon as a low-level member of the kitchen staff, Binh makes a sobering summation of the employers' unfair treatment of the servant cooks, emphasising how this treatment negates their bodily needs: "Most MESSUIEURS AND MESDAMES do not want to think about it. They would prefer to believe that their cooks have no bodily needs, secretions, not to mention excrement." Binh's claim again highlights the system of power that dehumanizes subaltern figures in domestic servitude, yet the Vietnamese cook immediately counters this institutional rejection of his bodily functions, adding: "but we all do." Binh goes on to explain what he and his counterparts bring to colonial households: "We are not all clean and properly sterile from head to toe. We come into their homes with our skills and our bodies, the latter a host for all the vermin and parasites that we have encountered along the way." The protagonist marks his body as an abject host for infectious disease and a source of danger for the white employers who are his masters. Cooks, according to the protagonist, are in a good position to threaten those they serve:

> I have seen *chefs de cuisine* who never wash their hands, never, not even after they stick their fingers into a succession of pots and suckle on them like piglets at their mother's teats. I have seen pastry chefs who think nothing of sticking a finger into their ear, giving it a good swirl, and then working the wax into their buttery disks of dough. Merely a bad habit or a purposeful violation? The answer depends on their relationship with their Monsieur and Madame.[62]

The trope of food pollution and poison --- the most feared power of the cooks --- seems to govern the morality of the passage. As an intimate act to undermine the employers' commanding roles, food preparation turns into a hidden activity that makes the cooks' unquestionable biopolitical presence visible even as their autonomy remains in question. After all, such figures might threaten to poison the employers

[62] Troung, p. 64.

with their dirty hands to express their anguish over the masters' mistreatment --- or, as *The Book of Salt* tells us, they might symbolically infuse the food he produces with the stifled political affect that the kitchen wall strives to contain.[63] After all, a brief review of the kitchen narratives over the last two centuries may tell us that a kitchen is never a mere place for the performance of circumscribed labours; it is what Mary Louise Pratt defines as a "contact zone," a place where "the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters" cut across class and ethnic differences. The kitchen is thus a space in which the subjectivities of the bourgeois employers and the servants are brought troublingly together via "copresence" and "interaction, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power."[64] This asymmetrical relation seems implicitly dangerous to Gertrude Stein herself. Toklas records her attitude: "Stein used to say nothing seemed more unnatural to her than the way a servant, a complete stranger, entered your home one day and very soon after your life and then left you and went out of your life."[65] Stein's worry soon comes true in practice as it becomes apparent that cooks such as Binh not only know the taste of every family member but also become aware of the intimate details of their private lives. This leads him to acquire a knowledge beyond that recognised or expected in his designated function, undermining the cult of domesticity and its maintenance of privileged knowledge from within. In what follows, I will examine how the master's ignorance and abjection of the Asian coolie grant Binh with opportunities to enact his subversive scheme in the kitchen, the ideal domestic location not only to fulfil the

[63] Food poisoning amounts to the most feared power of the cooks and very often exhibited the masters' anxieties over the cooks' trustworthy. For instance, Chinese cooks were often accused of having opportunities to conduct similar crimes, as said by Mrs. Fluke in Thomas Stewart Denison's *Patsy O'Wang: an Irish Farce with a Chinese Mix-up* (1895): "Decidedly I feel nervous with a Chinaman in the kitchen. Who knows but he may poison us all." Thomas Stewart Denison, *Patsy O'Wang: Lively Plays for Live People* (Chicago: Denison, 1895), p. 85.
[64] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 7.
[65] Toklas, p. 225.

employers' Oriental ambition but also to develop the protagonist's kitchen narrative. The servant-cook's hands, which not only prepare foods but also realize their affective powers, arguably destabilize the established class, racial and sexual orders --- master over servant, whites over ethnic minorities and man over women --- that keep the Stein's household in order.

We may get a glimpse of the subversive performativity of the domestic cooks from the emergence of servant writings and kitchen narratives during the nineteenth century. From the outset, the publication of memoirs by servants was seen as a clear threat undermining the masters' authority, especially during a Victorian era in which traditional master-servant relationship was thought to be under threat and in decline. The centrality of the servant's experience in such memoirs also seemed to disrupt the marginal role such figures occupied in canonical British and US writings, upsetting an approach in which, as Ambreen Hai puts it, servants had more usually been used to "signify the protagonist's socio-economic status and class privilege; serve as comic relief; enable the plot; bear witness or provide crucial information; offer unequal parallels to the master('s) narrative; tell the master's story rather than their own; provide local color or setting; and (sometimes) subvert or destabilize the (self-)portrayal of the dominant classes."[66] Rising literacy rates among servants over the course of the nineteenth century created new cultural conditions from which

[66] Hai mentions some classic servant images: "Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest* serve as parallels to Antonio and Sebastian and evidence for Caliban's lower instincts; the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* mothers Juliet and enables the romance; housekeeper Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* and butler Gabriel Betteredge in *The Moonstone* acts as minor participants and witnesses to the stories of the family they narrate." The restraints on the servants' voices in these writing seem to reflect the employers' habitual silencing of the labourers in the household. One advice manual named *The Servant's Behaviour Book* counsels: "A servant's voice should never be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the house except when necessary and then as little as possible." Ambreen Hai, "Postcolonial Servitude: Interiority and System in Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*," *Ariel: a Review of International English Literature*, 45.3 (2014), pp. 33-73 (pp. 34-5); Mrs. Motherly, *The Servant's Behaviour Book* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1859), p. 31.

individuals could begin to challenge this normative subordination. As Jean Fernandez argues, the Victorian establishment's impulse to educate servants was intended to improve the quality of domestic service yet turned out to trigger a growing anxiety about the servants' "procession of a narrative capability that could endanger the integrity of the self-made individual engaged in performing respectability, and the coherence of his world order."[67] Such anxieties were certainly deepened in what Barbara Ryan figuratively calls as the "kitchen testimony," a literary trend in which servants and cooks gain full narrative autonomy to observe and speak about their master's stories.[68]

Most servant writings, admittedly, remained mild in tone, hedging their complaints in order to remain publishable amid the norms and expectations of nineteenth century culture. Yet the authors of such works nonetheless found ways to display their awareness of the constraints imposed upon the waged labours. At a level of implication and insinuation they suggest other strategies, strategies designed to subvert the prevailing domestic hierarchy. In *The House Servant's Directory* (1827), written by African American author Robert Roberts, for instance, the advice to new cooks seems to follow this pattern in the rich metaphoric ties that are drawn between speech, food, and the spaces of kitchen. In a very characteristic piece of advice, Roberts discusses the appropriate mode of speaking to the masters and mistresses:

> We hope the culinary student who peruses these pages will be above adopting the common, mean and base, and ever unsuccessful way … of currying favour with fellow servants by flattering them and ridiculing the mistress when in the kitchen and then prancing into the parlour and purring about her, and making opportunities to display all the little faults you can find (or invent) that will tell against those in

[67] Jean Fernandez, *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 7.

[68] Ryan notably draws the term from the public's suspicion over the testimony from the servant-witness in a famous divorce suit of Edwin and Catherin Forrest. The onlooker once commented that "an ignorant housekeeper, and an equally ignorant Irish man servant, are not exactly the persons whose construction should govern us in estimating the conduct of their superiors." Barbara Ryan, "Kitchen Testimony: Ex-Slaves' Narratives in New Company," *Calaloo* 22.1 (1999), pp. 141-56 (p. 141).

> the kitchen, assuring them, on your return, that they were praised, for whatever you heard them blamed; and so, excite them to run more extremely into any little error, which you think will be most displeasing to their employers, watching an opportunity to pour your poisonous lies into their unsuspecting ears, when there is no third person to bear witness of your inquiry --- making your victims believe it is all out of your sincere regard for them…[69]

In Roberts' description, the servant cook's range of expressive possibilities, like his or her semiautonomous power in the hidden activities of food preparation, seems wide. The cook may flatter or ridicule, assure or blame, lie or invent stories, always manipulating the employer's ears and thoughts. This freedom in linguistic expression proves dangerous or "poisonous" to the middle-class domestic order.

The Book of Salt reflects on the dangers that arise when servants acquire such expressive liberty. In terms of the narratology of *The Book of Salt*, Binh's capacity to move between past and present and to inhabit a variety of alternative perspectives in his narration ultimately calls attention to the general unacknowledged presence of Asian domestic labours in the bourgeois household, giving voice not only to his own recollections and feelings but those of the silenced servant cooks. His narration, continuously shifting in time and space, ensures that his floating memories of Vietnam, sea voyages, and his five-year service in the Stein's household come together to offer an anatomy of the protagonist's queer and diasporic desire, creating a narrative structure that marks his forgotten presence in a stubborn refusal of orthodox western conventions.[70]

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[69] Robert Roberts, *The House Servant's Dictionary; or, A Monitor for Private Families: Comprising Hints on the Arrangement and Performance of Servants' Work* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1827), pp. 140-1.

[70] In analysing the plots of *The Book of Salt*, I bear in mind what Peter Brooks defines as "narrative desire," the belief that literary narratives serve to fulfil writers' desire to find meaningful, bounded, totalizing order to the chaos of life. In his *Reading for the Plot* (1984), the literary theorist famously asserts that "narratives both tell of desire --- typically present some story of desire --- and make use of desire as dynamic of signification." Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 37.

Truong soon complicates this structural defiance in the Vietnamese servant's speech through her portrayal of Anh Minh's service in the French Governor-General's house. The Madame's instruction to keep everything "as if in France" is implicitly undermined by the servants' linguistic ridicule of the command. Every afternoon, after the Madame leaves the house, even the most loyal of her servants would "let it slip from [their] lips, an all-purpose complaint, a well-aimed insult, a bitter-filled expletive."[71] While these insults assault the Madam's status of distinction, they also show how the servants are thrown back on the control of orality --- in terms of food and speech --- to resist the normative practices of white supremacy and autonomy.

In this light, *The Book of Salt* brings to the fore Binh's unacknowledged testimony to suggest the masters' loss of verbal restraints on their domestic servants through many aspects that have appeared in the nineteenth-century kitchen narratives. Binh leads a miserable life under the Western employers' stressful exploitation yet becomes a cook who can reverse the abusive structure of immigrant employment in the kitchens of the colonial France. Throughout the novel, the protagonist shows his colonial awareness of imperial epistemology and the ability to survive the inferior social status despite his limited knowledge and agency. Instead of waiting to be disempowered by the discriminatory culture, Binh scrambles to seek shelter in the kitchens where he can take full charge with his incredible skills as a chef and gain authority on the employers' tastes in his culinary invention. He reveals from the beginning of the novel:

> Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite, where I am the village elder, sage and revered. Every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender. In their heat and in their stream, I allow myself to believe that it is the sheer speed of my hands, the flawless measurements of my eyes, the science of my tongue, that is rewarded. During these restorative

[71] Troung, p. 46.

> intervals, I am no longer the mute who begs at this city's steps. Three times a day, I orchestrate, and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced.[72]

While his employers are overwhelmed by "a nostalgia for places they have never been," a sentiment that articulates the imperial discourse inherent in food consumption, they unconsciously grant him opportunities to sneak into their lives and bodies through a mysterious collusion between food and labour:

> Dare I say it is your ignorance, Madame, that lines my pocket, gives me entry into the lesser rooms of your house, allows my touch to enter you in the most intimate of ways. Madame, please do not forget that every morsel that slides down your dewy white throat has rested in my two hands, coddled in the warmth of my ten fingers. What clings to them clings to you.[73]

Reading the above paragraph, Denise Cruz has rightly argued that "the passage of Binh's creations from his hands to his Mesdames' mouths reverse assumptions about the hierarchy of American over Asian workers or, in broader terms, the French and U.S. empires and their exploitation of Asian bodies."[74] I would add to her interpretation that Truong's emphasis on the role of body deepens our understanding of how Binh's food reverses the settled hierarchy and constructs a new version of intimate relations between the migrant cook and his Mesdames. In the cook's narration, the masters' mouths, which originally assume the task of claiming what Derrida has named as an exemplary orality, are now unconsciously open to the food's supressed political affect.[75] Through the mouths, in Tompkins's words, "as a site to

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[72] Troung, pp. 153-4.
[73] Troung, pp. 153-4.
[74] Denise Cruz, "'Love Is not a Bowl of Quinces': Food, Desire, and the Queer Asian Body in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), ed. by Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan and Anita Mannur, pp. 354-70 (p. 358).
[75] In "Economimesis", Derrida defines exemplary orality as a process by which a mouth "transforms everything into auto-affection, assimilates everything to itself by idealizing it with interiority, masters everything by mourning its passing, refusing to touch it, to digest it naturally, but digests it ideally, consumes what it does not consume and vice versa." Jacques Derrida and Richard Klein, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11.2 (1981), pp. 3-25 (p. 20).

which and within which various political values unevenly adhere and through which" food mediates relavant experiences, the conversion results from and is in effect a form of forced eating, in which the relations between the eater and the eaten are reversed.[76] The consuming subject undergoes a transformation into what is consumed, which carries the servants' abject pollution. It is this trope of bodily contamination that unsettles those assumptions about class and racial classification signified by French cuisine.

Binh soon complicates his bodily unsettlement by drawing pleasure from his mastery of secret ingredients and culinary techniques, which stem from the labours that are rendered invisible and devalued. In one example, Stein rises early one morning to ask for an omelette; in spite of her acclaimed cooking skill, Toklas takes up the literary model of H.H. Monroe's "The Byzantine Omelette," where Sophie Chattel-Monkheim does not how to cook the titular dish without the help of the servants.[77] When asked about the secrecy of the ingredients, Binh lies to the novice, telling her that adding a touch of freshly grated nutmeg to the beaten eggs could make "an omelette laced with the taste of hand soaps and the smell of certain bugs whose crushed bodies emit a warning odor to the others." Yet the Vietnamese cook later reveals that the omelette would have choked the masters if the nutmeg is not sugared and creamed. In his refusal to disclose the recipes of the particular kinds of omelettes that the Steins crave, the protagonist makes attempts to arouse the employers' interests while withholding secrets, a strategy that rejects any chances to "downplay his skill" and "cheapen his worth." His strategy allows him to confuse his Mesdames and gain a new power over them. They can only speculate about his exquisite dishes

[76] Tompkins, p. 5.
[77] H.H. Monroe, "The Byzantine Omelette,"
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/saki/beasts/chapter19.html> [accessed 5 May 2017].

and culinary prowess, preferring to see them as mysterious, rather than the result of his years of "repetition and routine, servitude and subservience, beck and call."[78]

Queering the Kitchen

While Binh's eloquent cooking amounts to an effective strategy to resist the employers' colonial perception of downgraded servants, Truong moves further to expose this subversive strategy through his interaction with other homosexual subjects. In brief, very much like the "servitude and subservience" scripted in his kitchen labour, Binh's homosexual experiences are infused with a lot of conventional colonial logic and Oriental sexual fantasies. Yet as I will show below, the Vietnamese cook's queer subjectivity works against the perceived target for the Western gender, sexual and nationalist ideologies. Instead, Binh's queer incidents with a few exile characters in the novel --- the unnamed man, Alice B. Toklas and Marcus Lattimore --- confirms the instability of homosexuality in the colonial system and more importantly, explores the ways in which the queer subjects use food preparation and consumption to contest the logic and dominance of the sexual, gender and racial norms, thus serving their ultimate needs to queer the colonial domestic space.

The sexual and class hegemony in Binh's homosexual affair is tellingly revealed in his own reflection in the efforts to meet his Parisian partner and employer Lattimore's culinary demands: "I kneel down to see what he hungers for today."[79] This straightforward recognition --- that not only points to Binh's submissive role as servants but also carries a sexual implication of fellatio --- speaks to the unbalanced power dynamic in his homoerotic relation: the Vietnamese labourer has always been a

[78] Troung, p. 154.
[79] Troung, p. 237.

fodder for Western homosexual fantasy; or, as Joseph Allen Boone suggests of the homoerotic aspect of the practices of Orientalism theorized by Edward Said, "an all-powerful, masculine 'West' seeks to penetrate a feminine, powerless, and sexually available 'East' in order to possess its resources."[80] Truong vividly captures what Boone calls as "the homoerotics of Orientalism" in Binh's role as the submissive partner to the Western masters. The author's portrayal of the French chef Bleriot, for instance, answers to predictable Orientalist fantasy and dominance. Upon his arrival in the Governor General's household to take the place of the deceased chef de cuisine, Bleriot appears as "a remarkable specimen of French manhood" and is "commanding in his looks as in his manner."[81] Bleriot's commanding masculinity is then illustrated in the homoerotic scene when Binh soon finds himself involved in "a slow seduction" of the language game initiated by Bleriot. Yet the affair is disturbed by the power imbalance showcased in the walking distance between these two lovers in public. Bleriot always appears as "a colonial official" and walks a few steps ahead of the protagonist, a gesture not only to mark their class difference but also to "relay his exclusive control over the four Indochinese who followed him."[82] Binh even feels gracious towards the French Chef's rare looking-back since Bleriot is "feeling generous and wants to share … a man in love with his own face."[83] Hence the master's homosexual affairs with the Vietnamese cook facilitate their intimate yet powerful transgression into the Asian body, creating a monolithic "Orient" dominated by an equally monolithic "Occident" whose seemingly benevolent, all-seeing, all-knowing mastery comes to seem universal and irreversible.

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[80] Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. xxi.
[81] Troung, p. 59.
[82] Troung, p. 122.
[83] Troung, p. 120.

Nevertheless, what might not be visible to colonizers is the underlying subversive power in the queer subjectivities heavily contained by the Oriental sexual perceptions. From the outset, as homosexual groups may have in common their collective experiences of sexism and homophobia, the sexual and gender identity may subvert the identity category that aims to make them up. This idea has been expressed by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976): "the discourse [of homosexuality] can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point of an opposing strategy."[84] Judith Butler later details how the opposing strategy takes effect: "the negative constructions of lesbianism [or gayness] as a fake or bad copy can be occupied and reworked to call into question the claims of heterosexual priority … lesbian sexuality can be understood to redeploy its 'derivativeness' in the service of displacing hegemonic heterosexual norms."[85] While the destabilizations that follow Western explorations into the alternative explanation of sexuality call into question many conceptions such as masculinity and sexual authority, the colonial and postcolonial societies in which *The Book of Salt* is set also become the critical terrain that homosexuality inhabits in its struggle against heteronormative values. After all, the gendered nature of the colonial expansion, as argued by Robert Aldrich, provided many possibilities for homoeroticism, homosociality and homosexuality. The championship of males in many colonial activities and the limited agency of women in public life created chances to develop intimate male bonding in the colonial plantations.[86] To some extent, the popular emergence of homosexual incidents, nevertheless, proves

[84] Michel Foucoult, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. by John Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 101.
[85] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), ed. by Henry Abelove, pp. 307-20 (p. 310).
[86] Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

Foucault's and Butler's belief and points to a failure of colonial system in part. After all, colonialism and imperialism, in theory, aim to set up respectable, loyal and lovable colonial models in the European outposts and bring virtue to civilize the "inhuman" or "barbaric" colonized society; in this design, there is no place for homosexuality to exist. In this light, its paradoxical existence --- to the horror of moralists at home --- encourages sexual irregularities that seem to threaten the colonial orders.

As I will show, Truong not only proves the destabilizing effects of homosexuality in Binh's queer incidents but also complicates the trope in alliance with queer diasporic desire and food politics. This is evidenced in Binh's recollection of a meeting with a Vietnamese exile in Paris, two years before he is hired by Stein and Toklas. When he roams around the Parisian streets on an "exhaust and smoke" Monday and feels uncertain of his further stay in France, Binh comes into "a man on the bridge" by accident and is invited to an erotic dinner in a restaurant run by a Vietnamese cook. The man, as we later learn from Truong's interview, is based on a fictional version of Nguyen Ai Quoc, the pseudonym that Ho Chi Minh used when he was living in Paris.[87] As a young political pioneer who was literally "on the bridge," struggling between socialism and democracy at that time, the unnamed man is portrayed as sharing a lot of characteristics with the protagonist. During his exile, the stranger has taken up almost every occupation available to the Asian indentured labourers: "kitchen boy, sailor, dishwasher, snow shoveler, furnace stoker, gardener, pie maker, photograph retoucher, fake Chinese souvenir painter, your basic whatever-needs-to-be-done-that-day labourer, and … letter writer."[88] Both characters tend to

[87] Deborah Kalb, "Q & A with Monique Truong," <http://deborahkalbbooks.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/q-with-writer-monique-truong.html> [accessed 14 July 2017].
[88] Troung, p. 89.

call each other "*Ban*," a term that not only represents their indentured, nameless and outlawed status, but also foreshadows the consequent queer encounter, as "real names … are never exchanged during such encounters."[89]

Yet it is over the course of a shared meal that their diasporic affiliation and homoerotic emotions start to erupt. In this unique setting, in which Binh transfers from a food labourer to a food consumer, he and the unnamed man are served with extravagant salt-and-pepper shrimps and many side dishes including morels, butter, butter and watercress. Among a variety of ingredients, it is the chef's use of salt that draws the protagonist's attention. When he learns that the dish is seasoned perfectly with a generous sprinkling of *fleur de sel* or "salt flower," Binh says: "I knew it was not salt quarried from the earth. That would have had a more explosive reaction on the tongue, pushy, even abusive if there was but a grain past moderation." Out of his expectation, the fictional Ho Chi Minh reveals that the chef uses only "mounds of salt," the one "sets apart from the common sea salt that waits for me in most French kitchens." In explaining how to obtain the salt, he then makes a sombre analogy between the production of salt and the long-standing distresses of the Asian coolie labour: "When seawater is evaporated by the sun in this way, it leaves behind its salt, in the same way that we will leave behind our bones." This bitter reflection on salt, as Michelle Peek argues, gestures to a history of exploited low-class labourers in the context of global capitalism. Drawing on Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat's chapter on the history, symbolism and production of salt, Peek insightfully observes that salt has been crucial to the emergence of western modernity because it is not only a valuable commodity but also a "byproduct of working bodies" that become integral to the

[89] Troung, p. 91.

world system of production and consumption.[90] In this light, by naming the servant's memoir *The Book of Salt*, under Truong's pen and the fictionalized Stein's authorship as well, the employers' fetishizing citizenship not only builds on what Y-Dang Troeung suggests as Stein's "status as a singular and unified author in the traditional philosophical sense."[91] It is also linked with the cultural practices that treat the exploited Asian body as edible in both a realistic and a symbolic sense.

Nevertheless, salt clearly carries a significant affective and metaphorical charge for the protagonist, who is immediately startled by the man's provocative explanation. As the use of salt produced by solar evaporation makes it hard to categorize the main course as either American food or Chinese cuisine, the Asian diasporic bodies also defy the fixed meanings that Western hegemonic culture imposes upon them. According to the description of the unnamed man, the defiance is most evidenced in the cooking of a Vietnamese chef, which, during the chef's exiles, becomes "his way of remembering the world" --- a way to inform the existence of diaspora communities and to nourish the silenced ones of their shared culture through the eating of foods that are inherently diasporic. At this moment, the salted shrimp that reminds Binh of his diasporic identity forms a unique affiliation between him and the unnamed man. The taste of salinity is notably taken by the protagonist as "a kiss in the mouth" and later turns to a realistic homoerotic scene of "a kiss on the mouth" and "a hand on the hips," through which Binh and the fictional Ho Chi Minh attempt to rescue time that "refuses to be translated into a tangible thing" and "is often said to be 'lost'" without "a number or an ordinal assigned to it."[92] Here their erotic enjoyment of salted

[90] Michelle Peek, "A Subject of Sea and Salty Sediment: Diasporic Labor and Queer (Be)Longing in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 4.1 (2012).
[91] Y-Dang Troeung, " 'A Gift or a Theft Depends on Who is Holding the Pen': Postcolonial Collaborative Autobiography and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010), pp. 113-35 (p. 117).
[92] Troung, pp. 98-9.

shrimps speaks to the birth of Gayatri Gopinath's notion of "queer diasporic desire." It is precisely "at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated," argues Gopinath in *Impossible Desires*, that queer desire allows subjects to remember "these submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence", which, more importantly, "are imaginatively contested and transformed."[93] As such, if Euro-American consumers regard the eating of salted shrimp as a tacit acknowledgement and erasure of a racist past, then Binh and Ho Chi Ming arrive at an alternative synthesis of queer desire and culinary nostalgia as a way of guarding the memory of colonial violence experience in their displacements and exiles. Together with other acts that contest and transform the conventional bourgeois script, therefore, this scene of communal eating works against the violent effacements of the Vietnamese diasporic community, effacements that are designed to produce the purity of the dish and its incarnated nationalist ideologies.

Yet it is also important to note that such struggle does not lead to a sense of closure or a healing of the wounds inflicted by colonial and racial circumscription. Rather, the queer desire shared between Binh and Ho Chi Minh creates space for painful pasts to be acknowledged and remembered. While his queer intimacy with the unnamed man restores his belief in love and strengthens his determination to stay on in Paris, it makes him return on many Mondays afterwards to the bridge --- a location that not only enables what Peek suggests as "the movement of transnational bodies and ideas" in the characters' oceanic crossings or what Troeung sees as a signification of "a pause in between overlapping, but also mirroring, histories of French colonialism and American imperialism in Vietnam."[94] In my reading, the bridge also facilitates a melancholic relation to the past that does not let go the injury of racism and motivates

[93] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 2 & 4.
[94] Peek, p. 20; Troeung, p. 120.

the victims to move on. This movement between past and present, memory and imagination leads to the emergence of an alternative space and time discontinuous with what David L. Eng calls as "historical catachresis."[95] Eng sees the notion as an assertion of the Euro-American version of historical order that "shifts our attention from the problem of the real" names and histories of the queer diasporic labourers "to the politics of our lack of knowledge" of manipulative structures of colonialism.[96] Through the interruption of queer diasporic desire that "becomes central to [Binh's] telling and remembrance," the Vietnamese cook demonstrates affective eating as a way to contest sanctioned historical narrative and to leave room for the queer possibilities Truong envisions.[97]

Binh soon enacts the defiance of the imposed limits on his queer diasporic subjectivity through an unexpected queer connection with the famous Stein couple, who bear similar experiences in gender struggles. The fictional Gertrude Stein, according to the cook's narration, has to leave America owing to her confused perception on sexual and gender issues. During her studies at John Hopkins medical school, Stein is seriously offended by sexist comments and homophobic abuse from the professors and the students, who believe that her admission is a waste of valuable resources designated solely to men. Worse still, Stein's rejection to fulfil a typical feminine task of reproduction marks her as "a symbol … of how the natural order of things had been violated by the spinsters and their money."[98] Under the enormous pressures of being isolated and expelled, her further sexual entanglement with another female medical student makes the young Gertrude Stein question her homosexuality

[95] David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 62.
[96] Eng, p. 65.
[97] Gopinath, p. 2.
[98] Troung, p. 206.

and “mistake it for a disease,” which can be cured by “the power of strenuous exercise and a modified diet.” But boxing and restricting her diet do not work to alter her sexual orientation. As she writes to her brother Leo, she leaves university not because she fails obstetrics but rather “obstetrics fails” her, a gesture that marks her insights into the limits of sexual fixity.[99] Very much like Binh who is unbearable to the hostile environment, Stein leaves America, a country that she views as being stuck in the conventionalist viewpoints of the old times, for Paris, where she can immerse herself in the modernist threshold and live in a tolerant society with “no husbands and no wives needed.”[100]

Stein’s rejection of patriarchal convention nevertheless does not keep the modernist writer from establishing her own female masculinity, the very existence of which is regarded by Judith Halberstam to refuse the traditional softness of femininity and call into question most basic assumptions about the functions, forms and representations of traditional masculinities.[101] Binh’s observations associate Stein with masculinity not only at a physical level, describing the American modernist writer as “broad, unmistakable, a bit coarse;”[102] she also enacts a lot of typical masculine behaviours inside the household. She always urges Miss Toklas to answer the door even if she is closer; she is in a position to be fed by her partner on Sundays when the cook is on leave; in many portrait photographs hung in the studio, Stein presents herself as someone in control of knowledges by posing near her notebooks and papers whereas Toklas takes up the feminine task of typewriting and becomes “the procurer of love affection.”[103] In a blunter description, Binh tells us that Gertrude Stein “tends to avoid

[99] Troung, p. 205.
[100] Troung, p. 207.
[101] Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
[102] Troung, p. 28.
[103] Troung, p. 213.

the company of women" because all these women are considered to be all "merely wives," whose marital status does not trigger her sexual interest. The modernist writer's masculine character even develops into her misogynist view of women, as when she claims that "wives are never geniuses. Geniuses are never wives."[104] Stein's queer subjectivity, which exposes the workings of hegemonic masculinity, finally leads to the devaluing of Toklas as a wife, who "could never be a genius, as there can only be one, according to GertrudeStein, within any given family."[105]

Clearly aware of the power imbalance in the homosexual affair of his masters, Binh shows a clear identification with Toklas as a diasporic queer femme, who employs an intentional submission to Stein's hegemonic masculinity while maintaining her own semiautonomous power. From the very early pages of the novel, Binh starts to suggest the ambiguity of Toklas's seemingly coercive role as an assistant to Stein's writing. Instead of typing and proofing Stein's writings with dullness and wearisomeness like many other women do, she chooses to take a much more proactive attitude towards her work, taking pleasure from recognizing Stein's flow of emotions in the writings. Toklas also makes efforts to clear every unfamiliar item on the typewriter's table in order to keep the writings from the corruption of their sweat or smells. These acts lead to her indispensable position in Stein's household: "She is as much a guardian of their temple as the solid door to the studio. She is the first line of defense, the official taster of the King's food, the mother then."[106]

Moreover, Truong elaborates on Toklas's gender politics of food preparation and serving to further disrupt the designated gender scheme. On the one hand, the cooking of Toklas as a model of queer femme significantly establishes what Anita Mannur

[104] Troung, p. 184.
[105] Troung, p. 185.
[106] Troung, pp. 30-1.

calls “a shared queerness,” where food has the ability “to engender antinormative forms of desire that challenge the notion that the home is a necessarily heterosexual formation designed to reproduce citizens who will uphold tradition and its concomitant values.”[107] Every Sunday, when Binh is off duty, Toklas’s cooking finds the couple “safely settled in their dining room with their memories of their America heaped onto large plates,” consolidating the affective values of food and smells that structure memories of home for the diasporic subjects. While the suppression of US misogynist and heterosexual values seems to govern the couple’s culinary nostalgia, they form a common queer desire through “sharing a taste for foods that fortify them in their youth.” Such fortification is derived from the traditional American foods renewed with an implicit and erotic culinary invention by Toklas. Filled with a lot of exotic ingredients, the apple pie stimulates Stein’s culinary and sexual appetite when “she finds the faint impressions of Miss Toklas’s fingerprints decorating the crimped edges of a pie crust,” thus establishing intimate bonds of queer kinship through such acts of food consumption. Here the cooking of Toklas not only plays an indispensable role in forming the shared queerness but also empowers her own diasporic queer subjectivity, turning the weak female into “a pagan who secretly yearns for High Mass.”[108]

On the other hand, through her hidden control of Stein’s food choice, Toklas takes a proactive submission to her lover’s need to claim gender superiority yet maintains a semi-autonomy in the power struggle that subsists between the lesbian couple. In Binh’s words, this strategy “holds Miss Toklas’s most elaborate and eloquent of secrets” that “she appears to the world to be profoundly giving, wholly selfless,

[107] Mannur, *Culinary Fictions*, p. 78.
[108] Troung, p. 27.

graciously volunteering."[109] While Stein indulges herself in tepid dishes against her partner's will, extracting "satisfaction for every indignity that she has suffered at the hand of Miss Toklas," the queer femme soon counteracts by banishing cream and lard from their diets. "The exile of salt, the expatriation of alcohol, the expulsion of cigarettes" soon ensues, imposing a "passive, potent, and cruel" retribution on Stein. However, what accompanies her food punishment is Toklas's equally proactive use of food as a tool for homoerotic luring. As Binh reveals when he moves unnoticed through the rooms of 27 rue de Fleurus, Toklas often offers her lover pieces of cake in privacy, which marks not only gustatory pleasure but also sexual one owing to Stein's naming her partner as "Cake"; or as Elspeth Probyn might phrase it, such conflation of eating and queer desire triggers "eating sex." Yet as Probyn insightfully observes in *Carnal Appetites* (2000), such gastronomical pornography not only confirms "the recognition of excess and pleasure" but also bespeaks "the exigency of thinking about restraint, control and the taste of power," thus consolidating "the possibilities and limits of eating sex."[110] In this light, one might suggest that Toklas's food lure also works against Stein's hegemonic female masculinity owing to the role of restraint advocated in her culinary philosophy. After all, as shown in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Toklas's cooking is completely informed by the philosophy of restraint, and her golden rule is to "respect for the inherent quality and flavour of each ingredient."[111] She continues to write about the importance of ensuring the quality of every ingredient before combining: "This restraint, *le juste milieu* … the golden mean, is what makes … not only good cooks but good critics of food."[112] Hence Stein's consumption of cakes --- cakes baked in accordance with Toklas's culinary restraints

[109] Troung, p. 158.
[110] Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 61.
[111] Toklas, p. 4.
[112] Toklas, p. 5.

and very possibly prepared without cream or lard --- produces a body with weakened female masculinity, works against the logics of categorizations that govern the construction of identity and more importantly, formulates the dependent nature of the queer relationship between the couple: "GertrudeStein feeds on affection, and Miss Toklas ensures that she never hungers. In exchange, in the fairest of trades Miss Toklas has the satisfaction of being GertrudeStein's only one."[113]

As a gay servant cook who learns the most intimate details of the couple's life, Binh inherits many aspects of Toklas's queer insurrections in his homosexual affair with Marcus Lattimore, an affair that lends more complexity to the critical terrain of queer diaspora with their cross-racial and cross-class encounters. At first glance, the romance between the Vietnamese cook and the African American writer seems to help strengthen the protagonist's slaved subjectivity. In the first meeting between two lovers, the erotic attraction changes his indentured invisibility in the Steins' household when the cook serves the guests in a usual salon with a tray of sugar-dusted cakes: "After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched, a sensitivity born from absence, a grain of salt on the tongue of a man who has tasted only bitter."[114] While Lattimore's erotic gaze clearly takes an escalating effect on Binh's subjectivity, the cook soon realizes that his queer identity cannot spare the disruption of class and racial politics: when the Vietnamese cook comes to Lattimore's flat for the first time and keeps being attracted by the African American writer's appearances and gestures, the master's wish to conduct an interview "is a sharp reminder that I was a servant who thought himself a man, that I was a fool who thought himself a king of hearts." Thus every step that Binh takes to

[113] Troung, p. 71.
[114] Troung, p. 37.

walk with Lattimore to his flat not only constitutes a path to the romantic affair but also repeats a familiar route to servitude, or in his words, "with each step I was a man descending into a place where I could taste my solitude, familiar and tannic."[115] For Binh, desiring Lattimore is then intertwined with the legacies of bourgeois household governance in the 1920s France. On the surface, the ambiguous ending of the scene --- where Binh descends to another master's kitchen and maintains his invisibility --- may suggest his eventual submission to the psychic amnesia that wipes out the bourgeois exploitation of Asian labours. Yet Binh in a sense reverses this submissive dilemma via the linkage of the suffering to his queer desire. As Gopinath analyses another similar situation in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), if for Lattimore sex with Binh is not only a strategy of peeking into the Stein's private life and illegally obtaining their handwriting scripts but also a way of asserting his class superiority and racial masquerade, for Binh, queer desire is precisely what allows him to remember the stigmatized class inequality. Hence it is at the moment when the queer sexuality is articulated that "the barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present"[116] --- as shown in *The Book of Salt*, Binh's bitter awareness of class inequality in his queer desire leads to an immediate but rare present-tense reflection on the essences of love, which, in his metaphorical references to food, "is not a bowl of quinces yellowing in a blue and white china bowl, seen and untouched."[117]

While the protagonist's insightful reflection speaks to the inextricable relationship between queer desire and racial / class politics once again, Binh clearly follows Toklas's model to maintain a fake submission to Lattimore's class and racial subordination while claiming the power through his food preparation. When Binh is

[115] Troung, p. 40.
[116] Gopinath, p. 2.
[117] Troung, p. 40.

hired by Lattimore and prepares the first dinner for Lattimore and the possible guests, the Vietnamese cook makes a mental list of the ingredients for the dinner: "twenty-four figs, so ripe that their skins are split. A bottle of dry port wine. One duck. Twelve hours."[118] For Binh, the extravagant duck dish connotes a lot of sexual implications: the figs and the port not only "get to know each other" in an earthenware jug but also have to go through twelve-hour curing which "will be sufficient for a long and productive meeting." The delicate cooking leads to a complete harmony of two ingredients, metaphoric of the transgression in the sexual behaviour between two men: "By then the figs will be plump with wine, and the wine will be glistening with honey flowing from the fruit." While the roasted duck is finally "evaporated and moistened" by the heat, Binh's recipe of duck dish points to the construction of his queer desire and sexual fantasy framed by the erotic implications of the foods.[119] The implications soon become concrete when he and Lattimore turn back against "the baptismal and the communion" and "celebrate Sunday by drinking wine from each other's lips." At this moment of the romantic intercourse, more importantly, the class hierarchy between the employer and the Asian labour seems to be erased: in Binh's mind, the affair "is freely given … Pleasure for pleasure is an even exchange. Lust for lust is a balanced scale."[120] This denial of class inequality empowered by his queer identity demonstrates a complex impact of queer identity in colonialism, in which racial and class differences are undermined as shown in Binh's awareness of his unequal relationship with Lattimore.

Truong notably illustrates the denial of conventional class structure in a further exploration of their asymmetrical relationship through the Vietnamese cook's culinary

[118] Troung, p. 75.
[119] Troung, pp. 76-7.
[120] Troung, p. 83.

creation to meet his lover's demands. When Lattimore asks for food ingredients out of season such as "ripe figs when there is frost on the ground, lamb when all the trees have already lost their leaves, artichokes when the summer sun is fast asleep," revealing his ignorance of matters in the kitchen and his customs of being served by others, Binh relies on culinary creativity to meet Lattimore's needs: "I have simmered strings of dried figs in bergamot tea. I have braised mutton with bouquets of herbs tied in ribbons of lemon rinds until their middle-aged sinews remember springs. As for the artichokes, I have discarded all the glass jars of graying hearts afloat in their vinegared baths that I found hiding inside his kitchen cabinets."[121] Binh's cooking facilitates Lattimore's impossible culinary demands, and more importantly, seems to help form an equal homosexual relationship, a relationship that bears a striking similarity to that of the Stein couple: "I cook for him, and he feeds me. That is the nature of our relationship."[122] It is at this moment that Binh starts to bear a metaphorical reference as a bee, which feeds on Lattimore as "a honey talker." Very different from the previous moment when Lattimore's renaming of Binh as Bee to posit the African American employer's centrality in their relationship, the Vietnamese cook regards the rare taste of sweetness as a symbol of departure from his miserable experience as an Asian coolie that is defined in the embodiment of salt: "When I am with him [Lattimore], I am reminded that sweet is not just a taste on the tongue. Sweet is how my whole being can feel. He quickens my pulse, and I stay in that alert state, even when our bodies are no longer one. He inhabits a body that is free to soar through the continuous blue of this city's sky, and he takes me with him when he dreams."[123] In other words, with the assistance of his culinary invention that points to

[121] Troung, pp. 236-7.
[122] Troung, p. 213.
[123] Troung, pp. 212-3.

his strategy to claim semiautonomous power, Binh is able to redefine the logic of consuming citizenship that structures food consumption and queer intimacy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Truong's notion of bourgeois intimacy resists any simple affirmation of western liberal modernity and any easy Orientalization of an Asian race that is silenced and othered in bourgeois kitchens. It emphasizes how food, on which the white colonial and capitalist class draw to construct universal Euro-American economic and political ideals, must be understood in terms of the labour that is displaced to produce it, as well as of the concomitant forces of globalization and racialization that shape consumption. Truong encapsulates the moods of the historic and institutional abjection of Asian kitchen labours in his account of white employers' culinary assimilation and quasi-cannibalistic eating, and the modes of consumption that alienate Binh from the food he produces and from his Vietnamese identity. This hegemonic governance of the bourgeois household is tackled by the Asian cooks' invisible efforts to claim semiautonomous control over the employers' orality in both culinary and expressive terms. Truong's further exploration of food politics within a critical terrain of queerness adds to the protagonist's strategy of reversing abusive structures of bourgeois intimacy by contesting the sexual and colonialist violence in scenes of sharing and cooking food. The queer intimacy between Binh and the unnamed man, and between Binh and Toklas, leads to a much more empowered Asian domestic labourer, who, as his asymmetrical relationship with Lattimore suggests, is now able to blur class, sexual and racial boundaries within the domestic space of a bourgeois household.

When the *SS Champlain* carries the Stein couple for America in the final pages of the novel, Bihn ends up with a reformed queer and diasporic subject who is more sensitive to the use of salt. He opposes Stein's over-determined treatment of salt as a generalized term to signify the application of Asian indentured labour to season not only her writing but also the Western capitalistic economy. Binh writes: "salt, I thought. GertrudeStein, what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same. Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine."[124] The Vietnamese cook's knowledge of the important distinctions between salt in its forms and characters demonstrates his ability to learn the logics and structures embedded in the circuits of bourgeois intimacy and global trade. Such knowledge gets him ready to present his servitude as "a story" and "a gift" for the Stein couple and to wait for another placement in which he can rewrite his own book of salt.

[124] Troung, p. 261.

Chapter Five "That Chinese guy is where you go if you want egg foo yung": Construction and Subversion of Exotic Culinary Authenticity in David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians are Coming*

In her 1958 cookbook, *The Far Eastern Epicure*, Maria Korzslik Donavan takes the readers on a journey through Indonesian food. In the book, she provides a detailed account of her experience of a rijsttafel, a formal Indonesian banquet, served with multiple courses of Indonesian food staples and by a series of "boys." Donavan writes: "The first boy appears, … barefoot, but in a scrupulously clean linen uniform. The little black Moselem cap is placed firmly on his head. He brings the rice, the basis of the Rijsttafel, and serves you." What the boys deliver is "the smell of spices" that "tickles our noses in the meantime," along with "Opor Daging (slices of beef braised in coconut milk), Daging Ketjap (pork flavoured with garlic and soybean sauce), Goreng Ati (friend calf's liver), salted and dried fish fried in oil, red hot chilies, and krupuk --- frothy wafers made with shrimp and egg white."[1] Here Donavan states in no uncertain tone that these perceived authentic Indonesian dishes are infused with an aura of colonial splendour. In fact, rijsttafel was instituted by the Dutch colonialists at the turn of the twentieth century to impress the visitors with the material abundance and multi-ethnic character of the colony. In addition to her fascination with the exotic tastes and smells, Donavan pays attention to the uniforms and actions of the Indonesian servants, who represent the uncivilized servitude. Hence eating rijisttafel gives birth to a sentiment of imperialist nostalgia for the American female food writer, who, during the meal, restores her lost colonialist status and feels

[1] Maria Kozslik Donovan, *The Far Eastern Epicure* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 9-10.

truly revered and catered to by the colonialized people whose main goal is to satisfy the dominant group's needs.

What is equally, if not more, significant is that Donavan's cookbook, along with some other first few Asian cookbooks written by American women, contributed to reproducing Lisa Heldke's notion of "cultural food colonialism" at countless US homes.[2] As recorded in Mark Padoongpatt's depiction of the exotic culinary landscape during the period between the 1950s and the 1970s that preceded the arrival of mass Asian immigrants, there was a wide-spread fascination with Asia and Asian cuisines among the white American housewives, even in places that were predominantly white.[3] These cookbooks, largely based on some American women's journeys across the Pacific as military wives, accounted for the smooth translation of inaccessible cooking methods into recipes that can be replicated inside the homes. As a result, they turned Asian food practices into a pleasurable experience for the American diners to interact with the wholly "other" whose cuisines materially nourish the dominant culture's Orientalist perceptions.

Clearly, this discursive, selective and often prejudiced constitution of culinary authenticity around Asian food, as exemplified in Donavan's writing, ensures the adaptation of oriental food cultures to the ideological appetites of white Americans during the Cold War, the era that reconfigures Asian Americans from the yellow peril into the model minorities who are regarded to be ethnically assimilable. By authenticating their versions of Asian food practices, the American women authors

[2] Different from the familiar notion of food colonialism that points to the disruption of the colonized country's food system and the exportation of cheap labour, cultural food colonialism in Heldke's term refers to the imposition of food practices by colonial powers. In her mind, Western people's adventure cooking and eating of Asian food is motivated by an attitude bearing deep connections to Western colonialism and imperialism, thus becoming a form of cultural colonialism. Lisa Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 101-150.
[3] Mark Padoongpatt, " 'Oriental Cookery': Devouring Asian and Pacific Cuisine during the Cold War," in *Eating Asian America*, pp. 186-207.

fetishize the culinary difference delivered in Asian cuisines and, more importantly, characterize "authentic" Asian cultural identity as a site to justify US cultural domination over the Asian countries as well as the Asian immigrants. But this cultural phenomenon leaves space to consider the specific ways in which US pursuit of authentic Asian taste works to enact various arrays of hegemonic politics that bespeak the material consequence of racialization and subordination of the Asian food labourers. Moreover, are those Asian people as invisible and powerless as it seems when they are overwhelmingly marginalized by US Oriental definition of Asian Americans and foodways? If not, how do they respond to the circularity of authenticity and exoticism that expects to limit their identity to assigned ethnic characters?

To explore the complex influences of this distinctive cultural discourses on Asian American subjectivities, this chapter discusses the representations of culinary authenticity in Chinese American writer David Wong Louie's critically unknown novel *The Barbarians are Coming* (2000). Set in 1979, the rites-of-passage narration revolves around Chinese American second-generation immigrant Sterling Lung, a former resident chef for the Richfield Ladies' Club and later a host for a cook show aired in a major televised network. The novel illustrates how the American patrons take advantage of the essentialist association between the hero's Chinese identity and his limited capacity to cook only authentic "Chinese" food. While Louie adds more complexity to the Cold War enchantment in Oriental food by delineating the racial, sexual and class repression of Sterling's subjectivity, *The Barbarians are Coming* is deeply concerned with the liberating potential of the culinary authenticity that works to empower the protagonist's impeded identity. Sterling's culinary service in the club and performance on the cooking show confirm the affective power of exotic culture

through his ability to reclaim authority over the definition of Chinese authenticity and its practice to enact mediation and resistance. Louie complicates Sterling's self-empowerment by focusing on the dynamics of food tropes and inter-generational reconciliations to show the workings of collective cultural memory in the formation of a renewed Asian American identity. Louie's interrogation of culinary authenticity, I argue, defies the simplified reading of the cultural phenomenon, frames culinary performances as traceable embodied practices and reveals the need to re-examine the mimetic linkage between culinary authenticity and exotic othering.

My focus on the tension between culinary authenticity and its incarnated ethnic origins in *The Barbarians are Coming* builds upon a series of critical works that aim to deconstruct the material and emotional meanings produced in these cultural and ethnic encounters. As shown in philosophical and sociological research, the concept of authenticity, no matter whether it applies to food, people or other cultural artefacts, hinges on the definition of historic origins and cultural roots and is thus always affected by contextual power dynamics.[4] The central role of power lays the foundation for my and many other scholars' efforts to deconstruct authenticity in the configuration of food production and consumption. I draw on the work of Josee Johnston and Shyon Bauman, both of whom suggest that culinary authenticity is socially constructed and relational. Nothing inherent in the food makes it "authentic," they argue; instead, authenticity emerges from the shifting standards, conventions,

[4] Many philosophical and sociological researches on the notion of authenticity reject the common link to the existential idea of truism, promoting the connection to a larger social context and evaluating authenticity in relation to "a specific network of commodified signs, social relations, and meaning, a world of human experience and subjectivity." It should be noted that there is a general agreement that authenticity is a modern value and is thought to be based on modern ideals like individualism, uniqueness, sincerity, self-determination, and personal choice. However, recent studies tend to evaluate how authenticity is negotiated in a complex dialogue involving tradition, creativity, economy, politics and races. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); David Grazin, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 17.

cultural, and class backgrounds of the food producers and consumers.[5] My analysis is further informed by Lisa Heldke's consideration of the Euro-American fascination towards authentic exotic cuisines. In *Exotic Appetites* (2003), she suggests that the desire thrives on ideas of the essence or the purity of origins that are conventionally understood to be static and unchanging.[6] In my reading, *The Barbarians are Coming* illustrates the ways in which the American patrons' designated ability to define the position of cuisines in culinary landscape allows the food adventurers not only to legitimize their own knowledge, enhance the "cultural capital" under Pierre Bourdieu's term, but also access the strangeness of the foreign culture.[7] While US hegemonic citizenship is arguably built upon the quest to authentically connect with the often left-behind countries that usually leave the weak parties displaced, vulnerable and exploited, Andrew Warnes' exploration of the historic invention of authentic US Southern barbecue renews our understanding of the complex dynamics of invented tradition and inventions --- culinary authenticity might grow in the hands of powerless culture and thus leads to a possible threatening against the ideal of purity.[8] Warnes' emphasis on the affective power of authenticity shows that Sterling's cooking and eating authenticity as a disruptive lens signify the vulnerability of American purist identity formation and mark the subversive strategy of culinary performance.

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[5] Jose Johnston and Shyon Bauman, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 61-85; It is worth noting that Sidney Mintz agrees with Johnston and Bauman, arguing that there is no authentic national cuisine in the United States. The global flow of food, its eaters and producers makes it more difficult and sophisticated to determine the process in which authentic food is constructed and imagined. Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
[6] Heldke, pp. 23-44.
[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[8] Andrew Warnes, "Edgeland Terroir: Authenticity and Invention in New Southern Foodways Strategy," in *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2013), ed. by John T. Edge, Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt and Ted Ownby, pp. 345-62.

With all these in mind, the chapter investigates Louie's representation of culinary authenticity to show the workings of US fascination with exotic culinary authenticity in asserting consuming citizenship, and to demonstrate the varieties of Chinese American subjectivities in subverting the cultural discourse from within. I will start to examine the ways in which the American patrons' quest for "real" Chinese food prepared by Sterling legitimizes US hegemonic power and further situates the cook in a controlling network of class stratification and racial gendering in the 1970s America. Yet this consumption and abjection of Asian labour is soon curtailed by the liberating potentials of the perceived authentic Chinese cuisines. Louie's portrayal of "egg foo yung," suggests the chapter, invests subversive power in the ethnic subjectivity of the hero in a culinary as well as a linguistic term owing to the food's strategic initiation of invented tradition to satisfy US exotic appetites. I end with an analysis of the connection between culinary authenticity and collective cultural memories in the novel, arguing that the scenes of recognizing once rejected Chinese gustatory desire evoke the recuperation of collective memories of Asian exploited labours and facilitate the hero's integration into Chinese diasporic community.

US Construction of Exotic Appetites

Inspired by a poem with the same title written by Chinese American poet Marilyn Chin, *The Barbarians are Coming* demonstrates the process in which US dominant culture designates Chinese food and culture as exotic. Chin's poem mimics prejudiced views of the Chinese that have existed in US culture, and likens the Chinese race to animals like "horse" and "bison," which are regarded to be "equally guilty" as they

are excluded from Western civilization.[9] As shown in Louie's novel, one of the effective ways to reject Chinese rights of assimilation is Americans' denial of recognizing the authenticity of orthodox haute cuisine prepared by an ethnic minority. Unfortunately, very much like the characterization of Jing Mei in *The Joy Luck Club* and of Ralph Chang in *Typical American*, Sterling is presented as a Chinese American hero who aspires to achieve a full-blown American identity based on the misleading belief that the expertise in French cooking will assist his departure from "lean lives among the barbaric" and to embrace US promises of prosperities and opportunities. He says: "after spending the majority of my years growing up in the back of a Chinese laundry, I was on the verge of ascending to a new station in life, home in this stately patrician edifice, planting my feet firmly in the American bedrock."[10] Nowhere can act as Sterling's "American bedrock" better than his place of work Richfield Ladies' Club in suburban Connecticut. In his description, the club is located in a historic white mansion, the origin of which bears traces of American founding fathers and their liberating ideals. To live inside such a mansion, he believes, fulfils the promise of American bourgeois aspiration --- the promise of economic success and social recognition. Though Sterling's confident comparison of his new home to the log cabin of Abraham Lincoln is soon disturbed by the "strangeness" and "unfamiliar sounds" in the house, predicting his forthcoming difficulty in fulfilling the ritualistic wishes, the protagonist is trapped in a misleading illusion that his acts of cooking can become a definitive feature of his identification.[11] He asserts that his cooking keeps the ladies' "talk of sweets and diets, gynaecological procedures and dinner parties,

[9] David Wong Louie, *The Barbarians are Coming* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2000), p. 1.
[10] Louie, p. 28-9.
[11] Louie, p. 29.

cosmetics and brassieres" running smoothly, hence marking him as "the engine that makes things go."[12]

What remains unclear to Sterling is that the American club is not a perfect site for individuals to achieve their initial upward mobility. One may relate the relationship between US clubs and self-possessed individualism to Sinclair Lewis's 1922 famous satire of the middle-class citizen's standard and homogenized experiences in *Babbitt*. For the protagonist Babbitt, the clubs that he joins are embodiments of conformism of the 1920s America and control over what he thinks about war, economy of the state and his individuality.[13] In this light, *The Barbarians are Coming* follows *Babbitt*'s lead to delineate the Chinese immigrant's circumscribed subjectivity in another American club. When knowing that his residence is the carriage house apartment rather than the main building of the club as promised, Sterling comes to a sudden realization that he "occupies the servant's quarters," marking him as "undeniably the servant."[14]

Despite the enormous pressures that arise from the containment within the servants' position and the subsequent struggles over understanding the elements of "authentic" cooking and culture, Sterling for a while clings to the initial misleading belief that his mastery of French cuisine provides him with a foothold in US cultural hierarchy. Every time he plans lunch menus for the ladies, the chef has "my Julia Child and my recipe binder from the CIA splayed open in front of me." In Sterling's mind, his expertise knowledge of French cooking restores confidence under the ladies' assaults on the essence of his identity: "Usually when I flip these wonderful pages I hear Julia and my professors speaking directly to me, their voices familiar and comforting as

[12] Louie, p. 31.
[13] Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973).
[14] Louie, p. 29.

they guide me through each dish so that I feel safe, centered, and loved." Parts of the empowerment, explains the chef, come from the first concept that he learns at the CIA --- it is adapted from French famed chef Alain Chapel's classic idea and is called "the *mise en place*," literally "the 'putting in place' of the ingredients and flavorings, equipment and tools." The concept proves necessary for the orderly preparation of the French dishes and, more intriguingly, leaves a great impact on the protagonist's psychic development. A gastronomic philosophy "more than just what one does with one's hands and a knife," he asserts that it bespeaks "a state of mind … in a metaphysical sense" as "it is being attuned to the order of things in the universe."[15]

Mise en place clearly forms Sterling's purist viewpoint towards his cooking, leaving only "authentic" French dishes on the menu and seeing all other "exotic" ones as an embodiment of disorder and threatening. His point of view is closely related with the protagonist's childhood memory, which revolves around the embarrassment and disgrace that consumption of Chinese food brings to him. Describing the foods in his parents' multiple refrigerators, he remarks: "It's barefoot food, eat-with-sticks food … squatting-in-still-water food. Pole-across-your-shoulders, hooves-in-the-house food."[16] Chinese communal ways of eating are also targeted as one of the reasons why this cuisine is blamed to be "unreal" whereas typical American food is thought to be "what real people eat" --- those foods are served "with forks and knives, your own plate, your own portions, no more dipping into the communal soup bowl."[17] Here Sterling asserts that his childhood consumption of Chinese food ties him solidly to the Oriental perception of a poor Coolie labourer, who uses uncivilized etiquette and eats unhygienic food. One of the ways to erase the barbaric cultural roots from his

[15] Louie, pp. 94-5.
[16] Louie, pp. 75-6.
[17] Louie, p. 76.

identity, according to the young protagonist, is to adopt a more civilized American way of eating. While US consistent fixation of his physical looks to Chinese identity denies his chances to claim American citizenship and works to satisfy the whites' Oriental desire, the protagonist's questionable logic arguably brings more detriments to his ethnic subjectivity. Sterling's reductionist viewpoint that regards chopsticks as sticks overlooks the positive characteristics of the eating utensil and its incarnated Chinese characters. As his naming misses the affix "chop," meaning and indicating the quickness and convenience of the tool, he also leaves behind the encoded Chinese philosophy that might enlighten him with methods to survive US racial subordination. Roland Barthes offers an explanation to the meaning of chopsticks and its difference from Western cutlery in his eulogies on the East Asian manipulation of chopsticks in *The Empire of Signs* (1970):

> The instrument never pierces, cuts, or slits, never wounds but only selects, turns, shifts. For the chopsticks … in order to divide, must separate, part, peck, instead of cutting and piercing in the manner of our implements; they never violate the foodstuff; either they gradually unravel it (in the case of vegetables) or else prod it into separate pieces (in the case of fish, eels) thereby rediscovering the natural fissures of the substance … In all these functions, in all the gestures they imply, chopsticks are the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork): they are the alimentary instrument which refuses to cut, to pierce, to mutilate, to trip … by chopsticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does violence (meat, flesh over which one does battle), but a substance harmoniously transferred.[18]

As food remains unviolated in the selecting and turning of chopsticks in Barthes' reading, Sterling, if comprehending the values of the utensils and his mother culture, can very likely escape the alienated feeling like "being sold like a piece of meat," a gesture to mark his subjectivity as vulnerable enough to be penetrated by Western pursuits of economic profits and white supremacy as figured in the violence of using

[18] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), pp. 16-18.

knives and forks in food eating.[19] Worse still, Sterling's naïve recognition of Seanson TV dinners as a staple of the best American food distances him further from the Chinese ethnic roots. Since the emerging US frozen food industry makes it possible for each family member to eat different meals at the same time or even at different time, the consumption of the standardized meals erodes family communication and diminishes opportunities for intergenerational reconciliation. Yet chances are that the protagonist's unconditional yet misleading assimilation into American eating habits does not function as expected. After all, the standardized production of frozen foods since the 1950s, according to Philip Wylie's rallying call against frozen food commercial success, signifies a homogenization of American foodie and cultural values. Wylie writes: "'deep-freezing' … has rung down the curtain of American cookery. Nothing is improved by the process. I have yet to taste a deep-frozen victual that measures up, in flavour, to the fresh, unfrosted original. And most foods, cooked or uncooked, are destroyed in the deep freeze for all people of sense and sensibility."[20] The young Sterling, however, asserts that the placing of different foods in separate compartment is an embodiment of US propertied individualistic virtue: "Meat in one compartment, vegetable medley in another, apple crisp next door. What a concept! Everything had its own house or its own room. How real people lived."[21] Wylie's fear of US frozen food industry, to some extent, runs counter to Sterling's misleading perception that the layout of Swanson dinner packages nourishes American individualistic characters.

The protagonist's exclusionist logic extends to his challenge of some of the French recipes that he regards exotica. In a scene when he's reading the classic recipes for the

[19] Louie, p. 296.
[20] Philip Wylie, "Science has Spoiled My Supper," *Atlantic*, April 1954, pp. 45-7.
[21] Louie, p. 76.

next lunch, Sterling comes across a recipe for a *lievre roti en saugrenee*, or roasted hare with blood sauce in English. Though made in accordance with the concept of *mise en place*, the dish immediately calls into the fore the foreignness of such food items and ingredients as hare and blood sauce. This dish clearly evokes the Chinese chef's feeling of abjection due to its blurring the boundaries between pets and food, life and death. The designated impurity and uncleanliness transmit danger to Sterling, imperilling his culinary creation: "I try to imagine the dish taking shape. But I get no further than skinned hares hanging from the ceiling of the Ladies' Club kitchen. It's useless, I can't stay focused, am distracted, as if someone's watching me."[22] An unusual and disturbing image of French cuisine not only makes Sterling realize that his "*mise en place* is one big mess," but also leads to his sanctioning of the culinary items he deems as authentic and edible: "I rip the *lievre roti en saugrenee* recipe from the binder and tear it into pieces. What was I thinking? Hare in blood sauce for the ladies?"[23] Hence cooking "authenticity" under Sterling's term establishes on the appropriation of selective features of French gastronomy and culture into his perceived status in American society --- to borrow Jean-Fracois Revel's classic formulation of French food, the chef's livelihood and identity are inextricably tied to the ability to make true the higher forms of taste, designating the food on the menus as "international" and "cerebral" cuisine in contradistinction to regionally anchored and feminine household cuisine which appears to lack its aspiration to transcend the domestic.[24] However, this culinary appropriation once again predicts the protagonist's

[22] Louie, p. 96.
[23] Louie, p. 98.
[24] Jean-Francois Revel, *Culture and Cuisine: A Journey through the History of Food*, trans. by Helen R. Lane, (New York: Doubleday, 1982); It is worth noting that Louie also suggests the ultimate failure of Sterling's aspiration to empower his identity in the pursuit of authentic French cooking. After all, his gastronomic guru Julia Child publishes well-known recipes as a gesture to make the French cuisines accessible to the American public through a lot of customising revisions like simplifying and domesticating the process of cooking. To some extent, then, the authenticity in Child's recipes becomes a relative concept and challenges the protagonist's purist viewpoints towards his cooking.

inability to secure a credible foothold in the mastery of French cuisines. After all, hare and blood claim a necessary, if not essential, position in the philosophy of French sophisticated cooking. While Jean Brillat-Savarin illustrates the gaming of hares for food as aristocratic pleasure and the use of blood to repair the loss of the vital organs in his well-known *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), similar decency as *lièvre à la royale* (wild hare in blood sauce) builds its reputation on the legend of King Louis XIV's invention so that the dish nowadays represents a higher form of French food.[25] Therefore, Sterling's ordering of his culinary recipes and denial of hare and blood cooking suggest a paradoxical sense of self-negation of culinary access to the aristocratic tastes, on which he relies to severe links with Chinese ethnicity.

Worse still, he finds that the culinary skill cannot insulate him from the disruption of US exclusionist race and class politics; instead, his cooking becomes the site for the American patrons to maintain their hegemonic control. In one of the events set in the exclusive club, Sterling's subordination becomes apparent when a fundraising dinner is held for Mr. Drake's political campaign to run for the state legislative. It is during his service for the dinner that he learns that the president of the club and also a housewife Libby Drake, along with other ladies, takes no interest in the chef's culinary skill but in the exploitation of his "authentic" cooking and the consumption of his Asian body for their Orientalist pleasure. In spite of the fact that Sterling is well trained as a French chef, Libby expects that Sterling can "cook Chinese food someday."[26] Towards the end of the dinner, when the protagonist refills the coffee for the American diners, Libby introduces Sterling as "our very own Chinese chef."[27]

Kennan Ferguson, "Mastering the Art of the Sensible: Julia Child, Nationalist," *Theory & Event*, 12.2 (2009).

[25] Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, pp. 56 & 233.

[26] Louie, p. 39.

[27] Louie, p. 47.

More intriguingly, she draws the diners' attention to the roasted swans in the main course by labelling them as a "real" Chinese dish without Sterling's consent even though the swans are prepared in a French style, "stuffed with julienned scallions, sliced mushrooms, diced tomatoes, and minced fresh herbs."[28] As "an American trait" in Sterling's words, Libby's authority in designating authenticity to his cooking and ethnicity alike immediately makes him understand the vulnerabilities of his enslaved subjectivity, driving him to come up with involuntary and fake confession: "It's as Chinese … as I am."[29]

Clearly, Louie depicts in detail the excessive burden that immigrants face in this struggle over culinary authenticity. Very much like the persistent aroma of Chinese food considered to be exotic, authenticity always hovers over Sterling's head. He is seen as the uncivilized stranger who seeks to be integrated into the mainstream culture. Under the consistent gaze of the American diners who symbolise the "host" culture, the material presence of his appearance, food and even sounds continuously raises questions about origins, followed not only by the Drakes' attempt to communicate with Sterling in Chinese but also by his enduring ubiquitous question of ethnic surveillance: "Where are you from?" Unsatisfied by the protagonist's set of answers, from "New York" to "Lynbrook," Drake adds further to "aid [his] comprehension" of what he wishes to ask: "Where are your parents originally from?" Sterling soon links this quasi-interrogation that displaces him from the real birthplace to US historical legislations and restrictions on the entry of Chinese immigrants into the promised land: "And here, in this reception room in Connecticut, I have my first inkling of [my mother] Zsa Zsa's ordeal on Ellis Island, her entry barred, more than

[28] Louie, p. 38.
[29] Louie, p. 47.

thirty years ago."[30] By tasting "real" Chinese food and tracing Sterling's Chinese ancestors, therefore, the American patrons elide the chef's protests of intrinsic American citizenship and enhance their imperial knowledge and power through gaining autonomy over defining authenticity of an exotic culture.

Drake's misinformed gastronomical and ethnic knowledge provides the stage for his enchantment with foreign lands, on which he relies to increase the social value and perform the newly bestowed "expertise" to others in the West. When he hears that Sterling's parents come from Canton, Drake's subsequent discussion on his recent travel to China is infused with a set of discriminating perceptions and sentiments of culinary tourism and adventures. He tells the diners that despite the notorious fame of Richard Nixon, the Chinese people have a special crush for the impeached president because he has "brought an outlaw state into the fold." US evangelical politics also applies to the Ping-pong diplomacy, in which, as revealed by the politician, the American sportsmen intentionally yield to the Chinese counterparts in order to gain their affection. Yet he also holds conflicting viewpoints that Ping-pong is "suited for the whole race of [Chinese]" because "those petite paddles and little balls are perfect for their little hands." One diner then follows to call Chinese as "small people, with delicate bones and skinny muscles," who "flit … like a bunch of birds" in the game of Ping-pong that "doesn't require strength." Drake attributes such diminutive Chinese figures to the country's collective culture, which, as he claims, removes all "evolutionary imperative" for them "to develop bigger, stronger bodies."[31] This caricature of social Darwinism takes for granted the exclusive superiority of US sportsmanship and culture over Chinese ones. It also prefigures a mode of

[30] Louie, p. 48.
[31] Louie, pp. 49-50.

contemporary tourism that approaches Asian countries by selecting, consuming and even creating "authentic" Eastern resources and experiences to nourish the mainstream Orientalist expectations. Or, in the butcher and then waiter Fuchs's metaphorical reflection, the American diners are a group of "Pilgrims" on the Mayflower led by Captain Drake, whose navigation across the Asian continents replaces the unknown Chinese cuisine and culture with his sanctioned and selected perceptions that are necessary to explore the uncivilized land.[32]

Moreover, Louie expands this Orientalization of culinary authenticity by delineating the gender politics of the Cold War, the era in which the novel is set. Before his actual contacts with the club ladies, Louie depicts Sterling's heightened sense of the deficiencies of masculine persona, which is structured by the representations of Western hegemonic masculinity as white, heterosexual and propertied. The protagonist often cannot help but take his cues from models of manhood that trigger his anxiety and self-questioning. In one scene when Sterling learns that his girlfriend Bliss will soon return, the hero struggles to come to terms with his forthcoming affair with Lisa Lee. As he does so, he attributes his hesitation to a lack of masculine competence. He holds a picture of Robert Redford in front of his bathroom mirror, and soon the comparison between him and Redford leads him to "gauge… the extent of his deficiencies."[33] A similar scenario can also be seen in his gaze at another ideal masculine figure, Michelangelo's David, while waiting tables in the club. Sterling "measures myself against him" and wonders "where does that leave me?"[34] His desire to integrate into Western manhood seems all the more hopeless when watching a group of American elite males dining together in the club:

[32] Louie, p. 41.
[33] Louie, p. 18.
[34] Louie, p. 43.

> My eyes can't hold these men, because they wear suits that fit; because their cars guzzle gas and they don't care; because their women paint their nails, sign my paycheck, pet my hair; because their shirts (I can tell by their drape) are synthetic, the wash-'n'-wear fabric that's killing the Chinese hand-laundry business, and bringing my father to his starch-stiff knees.[35]

Here Sterling reaches the bitter conclusion that his masculine deficiency lies in class stratification, in which Chinese male immigrants are assigned to perform tasks that US culture typically associates with femininity such as washing, cooking and ironing. The feminization of Chinese men is then extended to general geopolitical relations. From a domestic focus, the novel identifies a wider cultural belief that Asians are weak and feeble and cannot hope to challenge the Caucasian in matters of global hegemony.

The protagonist feels further emasculated as a result of the American ladies' racial gendering of the chef in their club activities, which are expected to compensate for their inflicted gender weakness through the sexual exploitation tied to the culinary acts. Libby Drake, like many other upper-class housewives in the club, is deeply unsatisfied with her gender roles in domestic families and public society. Her blunt confession that "I feel so small tonight, with men in my club," reinvigorates US historical limitations of women to domestic roles and their subsequent silencing in public affairs during the Cold War.[36] This comment immediately leaves Sterling in bittering realization that he is rejected from claiming heteronormative masculinity in the American housewives' imagination. What's worse, the ladies' feminization of the

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[35] Louie, p. 41.

[36] As mentioned in Chapter Two, post-war America offered very few viable opportunities for women to achieve economic independence and professional achievement. The best route for them to secure financial security and social values was to marry a breadwinner and fulfil their familial task by fulfilling the domestic service with dignity and professionalism, and by raising children, which US society hoped, to prosper the economic development. Elaine Tyler May, "Women Stayed Home in the Cold War," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 1988, <http://articles.latimes.com/1988-09-18/opinion/op-3106_1_cold-war> [accessed 10 October 2018]; Louie, p. 39.

Asian chef soon ensues and interlinks the subjugation of Chinese labours with the sexual dominance of their bodies.[37] In Sterling's description, his cooking not only satisfies the American ladies' gustatory pleasures but also their sexual fantasies. "They have to eat, and that's why they come daily [to the club]," as the chef discloses the process in which their incorporation of presumably Chinese food is followed by the sensual touches of his Asian body, "and praise my cooking, squeeze my arm, caress my hair, pat my cheeks, pinch my rump."[38] Here the American women see the dominant position that they claim in these acts with sexual implications to justify the determining role of race in defining the Asian male's sexuality. His ethnic and gender subjectivity is perceived to be free from the normative mode of American masculinity, unthreatening and even entertaining to serve the white women's self-amplifying desire to assert their disempowered femininity. By claiming Sterling as "her own," each lady "is anchored to a square foot of reception room floor," thus transforming the protagonist "from son of immigrants to denizen of Plymouth Rock," the site where she can come ashore to practice her gender and racial superiority.[39]

Libby's similar behaviour lends more complexity to Louis's focus on the weakened sexual subjectivity of the Chinese American male. Appearing in Sterling's kitchen during the preparation of roasted swans, the housewife accidentally loses her balance, "touches [his] shoulder, then caresses [his] ponytail, her fingers running through my hair like a litter of nesting mice." Whereas the protagonist had hoped his hairstyle

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[37] I draw my analysis of the Asian American men's gendered subjectivity from Jinqi Ling's belief that it is necessary to distinguish the term "emasculation" from the term "feminization." Both terms "appear to occupy related yet different layers of a socially produced configuration, in which 'emasculation' more fully suggests the overall social consequence of the displacement of Asian men's subject position, whereas 'feminization' constitutes but one specific form of Asian men's racial gendering in America." Jinqi Ling, "Identity Crisis and Gender Politics: Reappropriating Asian American Masculinity," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ed. by King-Kok Cheung, pp. 312-37, (p. 314).
[38] Louie, p. 31.
[39] Louie, p. 41.

would express his masculine virility, relating him to other forebears like Beatles and Jerry Gracia as a gesture of inclusion into American hipster culture, it becomes a significant site where ethnicity, gender and class interlock to refuse such efforts and associate him with the exotic, ornamental, and animalistic. His ponytail, for his parents, has long been a source of shame, and a sign of his effeminacy according to its traditional Chinese connotations. His girlfriend Bliss regards his hairstyle as a way of "honour[ing] his forebears" since "this is the way Chinese men have traditionally worn their hair."[40] What Bliss craves is in fact called "pigtail," a compulsory hairstyle for Chinese males during the Qing Dynasty. Yet her craving for this "authentic" way of wearing hair immediately invokes the connoted long-standing myths and ideologies that associate Chinese people to certain stereotypical perceptions as old-fashioned and pedantic. As suggested in Rachel K. Bright's recent exploration into the cultural history of Chinese hair, the word "pigtail" was widely spread in English during the nineteenth century and became highly influential when the traffic of Chinese indentured labourers were called "pig trade" and Chinese male immigrants were named "the gentlemen of the pigtails."[41] The "pigtail" was the degraded metonymy not only for the subjective Chinese labours but also for their emasculated masculinity in American popular imagination, exemplified in a song "Big Long John" (1873) composed by Luke Schoolcraft. In the song, a Chinese immigrant named John is attacked by a Native American who cuts off his queue on the way to see "his sweetheart Chum Chum Fee." John further confesses to his lover that "he died from loss of his cue."[42] Given that the long hair of the Native American males often signifies their closeness to nature and inherent barbarism, their act to cut the Chinese

[40] Louie, p. 40.
[41] Racel K. Bright, "Migration, Masculinity, and Mastering the Queue: A Case of Chinese Scalping," *Journal of World History*, 28.3/4 (2017), pp. 551-86 (p. 561).
[42] Luke Schoolcraft, *Luke Schoolcraft's Shine on Songster* (New York: A. J. Fisher, 1873), p. 13.

male's queue deprives John's right to claim manhood, makes him shameful of the loss and leads to a failure to see his girlfriend, thus confirming Schoolcraft's portrayal of Chinese men as "less than manly."[43] In this light, Louie revives the historic and imagined account of Chinese immigrants in the club ladies' further playful touches of Sterling's hair. Millie Boggs jokes that his ponytail will make "a delicious whip as she gives it a playful tug." Sharon Fox even treats the protagonist as a horse, grabs hold of his hair and calls out "Giddyup!" One may argue that the ladies' toying with the hair bears interesting similarities in Thomas Nast's famed portrait "Pacific Chivalry" (1869), in which an angry and hairy American named "California" with a whip uses Chinese ponytails for the horse reins and prevents Chinese from escape during the period of anti-Chinese sentiments.[44] In this light, the club ladies takes fun of the ponytail as an "authentic" phallic symbol of an exotic manhood and brings power to their suppressed femininity by claiming the role of "California," who threatens, controls and even kills the Chinese immigrants to reinforce their physical and cultural superiority.

[43] Schoolcraft, p. 52.
[44] Thomas Nast, "Pacific Chivalry," *Harper's Weekly*, 7 August 1869, <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/25/pacific-chivalry-7/> [accessed 26 September 2018].

Thomas Nast, "Pacific Chivalry," *Harper's Weekly*

Under the American patrons' immense pressures produced by their pursuit of "authentic" experience of Chinese culture and ethnicity in culinary and sexual terms, Sterling conjures an acute observation of his role in the Caucasian elites' entertainment: "I can read [Libby] perfectly: Not only are the slides and the memories they hold hers, so are the people and objects in those pictures. And here I am, as if I'd just stepped off the screen, proof of her assertion."[45] Sterling's status as travel souvenirs feeds the public's imperial nostalgia and becomes increasingly solidified amidst their discussion on the body figures of Chinese people. The ladies even devise

[45] Louie, p. 47.

a contest to guess the protagonist's height and figuratively take him as a prize for the winner:

> "What fun, we'll have a contest!"
> "We need a prize."
> "That's brilliant!"
> "What about Sterling?"
> …
> "That's brilliant. Winner gets Sterling --- a gourmet meal prepared in your home!"
> "What a lot of fun! The Winner gets Sterling."[46]

The American patrons' circumscription of the protagonist culminates in this scene in which Sterling tragically becomes what he keeps refusing to cook --- the tasty yet clearly exotic culinary delight. Not only does he fail to fulfil the profession-bound identity, the chef's apparent foreignness also accounts for the very reason that the Caucasian race claims the right to define his gendered subjectivity. The dinner ends with another sensual interaction between Sterling and Kathy Lloyd who wins over the chef in the contest. On their way back Lloyd's home, the American housewife first wants his hands planted on hers and speaks highly of the hands. For the protagonist, the imagery of hands becomes an embodiment of social values and recognition out of culinary labours. When facing an identity crisis that enjoins the enslaved experience in the club and Bliss's unexpected pregnancy, Sterling turns to the David's hands to resolve the confusions. The protagonist believes that the success of Michelangelo's statue does not lie in the sculptor's presentation of ideal beauty but in his down-to-earth spirit. Sterling then claims his hopes to be valued in the American society: "That's all I want people to consider when they see Sterling Lung: what I do with my hands."[47] By contrast, Lloyd regards the hands as a simple source of erotic emotions

[46] Louie, p. 50.
[47] Louie, p. 53.

that empower the fetishizing of the Asian male as her love object. While such words like “I’m not going to bite” and “Mr. Lloyd might not be there” connote her sexual flirtation with Sterling, Lloyd reveals the negative consequences of the erotic affair that is inextricable from the exclusive racial and gender politics: the chef is still not entitled to bear the masculine beauty of the David statue or claim American citizenship.

The Myth of Egg Foo Yung

As the novel develops, Sterling’s belief in the power of authentic French cooking eventually begins to erode. Important transitions occur as a result of his marriage to Bliss and the relief this relationship gives him from the Orientalist assumptions of the American club. On the surface, the first meeting between the protagonist and Bliss’s Jewish family complicates the cross-racial affiliation between Jewish and Chinese American immigrants at first, yet the protagonist soon realizes that he cannot spare the continuous racialization and exploitation. As he drives to the Sass’s house, Sterling speaks of the Jewish family as an embodiment of the American elites that he aspires to join. “The new light, air, and sounds” immediately refresh the protagonist when his eyes are filled with “the bright whiteness of the vast groves of birches on both sides of the asphalt drive.” The ultramodern design of the house demonstrates the family’s economic self-sufficiency and braininess and fuels the hero’s aspiration to become one of the “model minorities,” examples of upward mobility allegedly achieved through thrift, family cohesion and educational achievement. “I see the house plainly,” narrates the French chef, “a giant tease, like gold littered on American streets, set among somber centuries-old trees, the ultramodern glass-and-steel jewel Bliss calls home. I am in love!” The more he drives, however, “the farther [he] seems

to be from reaching my destination."[48] As a cautionary action towards strangers deemed a danger to the family's property, "a looping drive to make access and getaway more difficult for trespassers and thieves" impedes the protagonist's way to arriving at the house and, more symbolically, to achieving the self-powered model of immigrants through the Sass's series of discriminating behaviours to see Sterling as low-class chefs and non-Jewish foreigners.[49] When Sterling complains to Bliss's mother Selma about Libby's demands on him to "cook back there in your apartment," for instance, the Jewish mother responds with sympathy but still mentions the family's expectation of the hero to cook Chinese food during weekends for the family. Though Selma asserts that the chef is not as "authentic" as a real Chinese cook later, Morton intervenes to establish a recurring link of the chef's look to his identity and labour.[50] The Jewish businessman's comment that "he looks Chinese to me" contests a simplified version of Chinese identification with the Jewish immigrants, who, bearing the strikingly similar racial arrogance to the white elites, posit the protagonist in a familiar network of desire and consumption that deems his cooking of Chinese food as one condition to be accepted in the family.[51] The Jewish family's hegemonic redefinition of Sterling's identity also runs counter to the protagonist's belief in the greatness of the US that "its people are judged for who they are, not what they are."[52] Though he admires that Morton's economic success can

[48] Louie, p. 137.
[49] Louie, p. 138.
[50] It is worth pointing out that Selma's discussion on comparative authenticity of Sterling's identity later becomes the very reason why the American patrons decide not to employ the chef. In order to increase her authority in the club, Libby replaces the hero with a more *real* cook named Wong Chuck Ting, who comes from Chinese fast food restaurant. Sterling attempts to prevent the inevitable, telling Libby: "Whatever he can do, I can do better." Libby replies: "I don't think so. He's Chinese … But he's from China. He's authentic." In this light, Libby's sense of authenticity claims a significant position in the process of Othering, making the coerced subjects vulnerable to displacement and even replacement. Louie, p. 198.
[51] Louie, p. 147.
[52] Louie, pp. 147-8.

elide the public's awareness of his Jewish ethnicity, this version of American cultural values sadly does not apply to the hero, and ultimately marks his foreignness to Americanness.

Yet Sterling experiences a brief moment of hope when Morton offers him with a chance to host his own televised cooking show: "[Sass] wants to discuss the proposed cable show, he wants to put me and my telegenic hands on the air; such faith he has in me, Sterling Lung, the male Julia Child, the lean James Beard!"[53] This fantasy of democratizing French cuisines in American households like those gastronomical gurus, however, is soon pulverized by Morton's disclosure of the cook show's name "Enter the Dragon Kitchen," confirming the Jewish entrepreneur's appeal to Chinese exoticism for profits once again. Sterling continues to explain that the name is "a takeoff on the Bruce Lee film title, and an unequivocal pronouncement of the show's basic theme: Chinese cooking."[54] This naming of the cooking show, through its linkage with the American audiences' tremendous interests in Bruce Lee as a model of Chinese man, brings forward the few variable opportunities of Chinese immigrants' inclusion in America. Very much like the martial arts actor, whose popularity allegedly symbolizes a further marginalization of Asian American immigrants during the 1970s, Sterling's role in the show is also infused with the white audiences' alienation of Sterling's Chinese identity and the categorically Chinese cooking that accompanies it from the American characters.[55] Though Morton later

[53] Louie, p. 186.
[54] Louie, p. 204.
[55] Not only is Lee recognized by many viewers as a foreigner born in Hong Kong who has nothing to do with Chinese American experiences, his films also feature kung fu characters who speak Pidgin English and wear traditional Chinese outfits. In *Enter the Dragon* (1973), for example, Lee's character clearly defines himself as a patriotic Chinese hero who is culturally and linguistically different from the American citizens. It is also worth mentioning that the trope of Chinese over White warriors in the films, though not harming the subculture of the American audiences, leads to Lee's transcendence of racial and sexual stereotypes, thus predicting Sterling's later efforts to renegotiate his Chinese authenticity during his performances on the cooking show. Chan, pp. 73-96.

compromises and renames the cooking show as “Enter the Dragon French Kitchen,” he dismisses Sterling’s initial proposal to “blend the aristocratic cuisine in which I was schooled with sprinklings of the plebeian fare that the masses apparently want,” labelling French cuisine as “normal” and Chinese one as exotic. The Jewish father blatantly voices his confusion: “Why do you want to compete with that crowd already cooking normal food?”[56] Morton’s essentialist association of the hero’s Chineseness to the limited avenue of his culinary authority culminates in the following conversation with Sterling:

> “Look, imagine you’re a housewife, and you’re looking to improve yourself, and you want to be more than just macaroni and cheese, more than just pot roast, boiled chicken. You aspire to, I don’t know, crepes suzette, whatever that is, so you flip on the TV set for help. Who do want to teach you to crepe suzette, that fat James Beard or some Chinese guy?”
>
> “The Chinese guy who went to the CIA?”
>
> “No, Sterling. Not the Chinese guy,” Morton Sass said. “Bur do your know what? That Chinese guy is where you go if you want to egg foo yung … You’ll be a pioneer, Sterling. Like Columbus! Neil Armstrong!”[57]

The provocative conversation demonstrates the American public’s mistreatment of the cook’s “foreign identity” as the definitive evaluation of authenticity regardless of his well-educated French gastronomic knowledge. For many US housewives, Sterling becomes the last person who they would consult for assistance in the cooking of “normal” dishes. This reliance on the Chinese chef to teach ways of cooking egg foo yung arguably complicates Louie’s belief that authenticity is linked to notions of invention and exoticism. On the surface, US fascination of exotic Chinese cuisine facilitates the dominant class’s acquisition, accumulation and transmission of cultural capital through legitimizing the Western knowledge of exotic cultural artefacts. By labelling such Americanized dish as egg foo yung as typical Chinese, the food

[56] Louie, p. 210.
[57] Louie, pp. 210-1.

consumers give this culinary fusion a naturalness in a sense that not only fulfils their quest to exotic culture but also ignores the Chinese immigrants' efforts in the global spread of Chinese food. In doing this, the dominant class gain control of what is originally at hands of food producers and facilitate what Bourdieu calls "the schemes of habitus" and "the primary forms of classification," an obsession with difference that springs from the preservation of imperial knowledge and the ignorance of the other culture.[58]

As this process of consumption and commodification of Chinese food and individuals illustrates, US desire of cultural difference is politicised through its aesthetics value, a value that can often be measured in terms of the exotic. The enticing allure of exotic dishes can not only enrich American palates but also, as suggested in Graham Huggan's observation of exoticism in the context of postcolonial literature, "relieve its practitioners … from the burdensome task of actually leaning about the 'other' cultures." Huggan cites Tzvetan Todorov: "Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox."[59] Here "praise without knowledge" highlights the very essence of the fetishized representations of an exotic other, in which the demystification of the foreign cultural forms based on sanctioned and artificial knowledges grants the dominant culture the imagined access to the cultural others. In the case of "Enter the Dragon Kitchen," therefore, the American housewives' desire for "authentic" Chinese tastes taught by a "real" Chinese chef

[58] Bourdieu, p. 468.
[59] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 17.

aims to "liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" and to repress the very cultural differences that are designed to reaffirm.[60]

What Morton and the American housewives continue to overlook is the fact that the complicated and somewhat paradoxical logic behind the consumption of exotic others also grants liberating possibilities for the foreign cultures themselves. According to Homi Bhabha, the representation of cultural differences is believed to be produced in the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances. Bhabha writes: "It is in the emergence of the interstices --- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference --- that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."[61] Thus the dynamics of differences suggest against the conventional belief of cultural identity as pre-given and ahistorical cultural traits and raise awareness of how strategies of differences enunciate the destabilization of racial typology. One way to understand the complexed destabilization initiated by the exotic culture, then, is to delve into the dynamics of "invented tradition" and "inventions," the tropes that claim essential position in our reading of culinary authenticity. Through a close reading of the term of invention in Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and Rebecca L. Spang's *The Invention of the Restaurant* (2000), Andrew Warnes suggests an unnoticeable yet radical shift of meaning that has tended to accompany the transformation of understanding on inventions. While Hobsbawm presents "invented tradition" as a purposeful and political act, in which the imposition of artificial truth inculcates a prior value and norm characterized by reference to the past and enacted by an often single and superior initiator, Spang, in observing the spread of restaurant

[60] hooks, p. 181.
[61] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

in revolutionary France, dislodges invention from the hands of the authority and complicates the diverse cultures' command over the inventions in various ways including culinary creation.[62] Warnes sums up the transition: "The concentration on *invention* comes at the price of a largely secret disinvestment in tradition. Its popularization is also a disarming, a dilution, which leaves the concept powerless to carry out its original work of spotlighting and exposing forms of cultural appropriation."[63] Hence the historical reinvention of barbecue in American South, suggests the food critic, demonstrates that authenticity is achieved not by the pursuit of purity but by "the heritage of process and technique we recover from it."

Warnes' perception of culinary authenticity arguably invests new meanings into culinary invention of egg foo yung, the labelled Chinese cuisine in Morton's mind that becomes a source of the exotic and achieves the Western association with pre-existing ideas of savagery and innocence. The popularization of Chinese food in America, especially during the first hundred years of its development, owed much to the versatility and adaptability that had enabled Chinese restaurateurs to cater to the sophisticated gourmets of Manhattan as well as less discriminating plates all around American small towns. Such efforts can be highlighted in the 1880's menu of the Hong-Far-Low restaurant, on the cover of which a Chinese man wearing Qing hair-style is claimed to be "the first man in Boston who made Chop Suey in 1879." It is intriguing that French fried potatoes and fried chicken accompanied the new dish on

[62] Hobsbawm defines "invented tradition" as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past." Spang links the origin of French restaurants to the political, economic and cultural upheaval of the 1800s France. It is highlighted in the viewpoints in one member of the aristocracy, who sees "the spread of restaurants and the development of gastronomic literature as further signs of revolutionary barbarism." Warnes, pp. 352-3.

[63] Warnes, p. 354.

the menu of Hong-Far-Low: this combination of dishes remained a staple for Chinese restaurants in the United States through much of the twentieth century.[64] It was not until the mass entry of Chinese-speaking Cantonese immigrants in the 1970s that the menus began to reflect a standard repertory of tasty but bland Americanization of such Chinese dishes as chop suey, egg foo yung and bamboo shoots. Though many more localized cuisines originating from different Chinese provinces become ubiquitous in modern Chinese-American restaurants, many Chinese restaurateurs organize their menus with startling homogeneity: in historian Cynthia Ai-Fen Lee's words, the menu "has to be exotic enough that it's different, but they have to keep it familiar."[65] In this light, the authenticity surrounding Chinese food grows from the hands of Chinese chefs, who are overwhelmingly governed by this gastronomic strategy that keeps Chinese food distant from and, in the meantime, attached to the American dietary expectation and familiarity. The immigrants' continuing investment in the possibility of integrated dishes situates them in the "third space" under Bhabha's term, where the marginalized minorities use a third rhetorical space to disrupt and destabilize the central authority. Through the proactive initiation of exotic tastes and "invented tradition," the Chinese culinary inventions run counter to "the exoticism of multiculturalism" and achieve "the inscription and articulation of cultural hybridity."[66] Therefore, the authenticity of egg foo yung that Morton buys into his US hegemonic perspectives, borrowing Warnes' analysis of terroir, "offers no dream of purity," and foreshadows Sterling's ability to renegotiate Chinese American

[64] "Hong Far Low, Boston," <https://lovemenuart.com/products/hong-far-low-boston-circa-1930> [accessed 3 March 2018].
[65] Michael Lou, "As All-American as Egg Foo Yong," *The New York Times*, 24 September 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/22/dining/as-allamerican-as-egg-foo-yong.html> [accessed 6 March 2018].
[66] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 56.

identity in his performance on the cook show and in his later interaction with the biracial son Moses.[67]

For a period of time during the process of shooting the cook show, however, Sterling remains unaware of its liberating potential and adopts part of Morton's misleading attitude towards the prevailing Chineseness in his performance. In his later account of carrying out "my duty to my fans to be as authentic as possible," the French chef disavows affiliation with Chinese cooking and rejects chances to touch upon the outlawed Chinese character. Especially when running out the Chinese recipes in the first months of the show, he has to pick up recipe ideas from his mother Zsa Zsa, but in the meantime, he confesses: "Yes, I've bought a cookbook, I have my culinary instincts and my education, but I'm walking on foreign soil … and to that end I come to learn from the native." Probably not aware to the hero himself, however, Sterling's performance points to his ability to earn commercial benefits out of the manipulative structure of the cook show in which the American audiences take delight in learning the exotic culture. In one scene when the hero makes mental notes of Zsa Zsa's preparation of stuffed bitter melon, Sterling remembers Morton's instruction to replace the simple names of Chinese dishes with more lavish ones to attract audiences. This expressive autonomy inspires the protagonist to conjure ideas of enriching the show and adding credits to its authenticity by complicating directions of some simple dishes --- the design of "a half-hour show around Bitter Melon Stuffed with Beef"[68] is supposed to intrigue the audiences with the "complexity" of Chinese cooking while not raising any suspicion of their "being played with."[69]

[67] Warnes, p. 359.
[68] Louie, p. 221.
[69] Louie, p. 222.

Though implicitly calling American audiences' authority into question, these performances of Chinese culinary "authenticity" prove a great success, and turn the French chef and the cook show into valuable commodities. Moments after Sterling's alienated feeling of the coerced commodification as above mentioned, however, such language of animalization like "being sold like a piece of meat" becomes a strategy for the hero to claim hidden powers. In his new adaptation, "The Peeking Duck," the protagonist delivers the opening and the rest of the show with a foreign accent that he admits borrowing from another TV Chinese chef Hop Sing, "Evvy week I peek into you lifes!"[70] On the surface, Sterling's parody of Chinese pidgin reflects the historic experiences of Chinese immigrants and demonstrates his consciousness of the ways in which the English language encodes dominance. In his analysis of the ways of performing Oriental in the 19th century America, Robert G. Lee traces the roots of Chinese accents in speaking English back to the representation of Chinese immigrants in the minstrel theatres of 1850s. As one of the few trading languages in California, the Pidgin English attributed to Chinese speakers integrated a variety of borrowed words from different origins and, as a result, were regarded to threaten the integrity of Anglo-American English-based culture and its ideological myth of nationhood. In response, the minstrel performances applied Standard English as a linguistic standard for participation into citizenship and further conjoined Pidgin English with nonsense as a gesture to diminish the status of Canton English as an important trade language and to infantilize its speakers.[71] Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's research on Chinglish suggests its destructing effects on psychic subjectivities of the immigrants: since the

[70] Louie, p. 296.
[71] It is worth noting that apart from the Chinese pidgin English, there are various references to Chinese foodways and pigtail hairstyle in the minstrel shows, which might arguably composite Louie's literary inspiration in composing the novel. Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), pp. 35-43.

pidgin language is deemed broken rather than "linguistically reinvigorating," it "has been associated with stunted psychic development and limited self-awareness."[72] These discriminating perceptions of Chinese-accented English that challenge the speakers' intellectual capability and economic status are reflected in characterization of Hop Sing, a laundry man in Bret Harte's play *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876) and a prototypical figure for TV series *Bonanza*'s servant cook. Very much like these characters' ethnic slurs that become targets for Caucasian citizens to show their commanding power in ridiculing tone, highlighted in Sing's most quoted words to bound himself with downgraded occupation of laundryman "No Tickee, no Washee,"[73] Sterling's adoption of this pidgin accents arguably invokes a sense of nostalgia, the emotional sentiment that American audiences draw on to keep on practicing the historic subordination of Chinese labourers during the capitalist expansion.

Nevertheless, this seemingly omnipotent linguistic suppression is soon impeded by the subversive potential of Sterling's ritualistic parody, which is initiated by the Chinese American hero and reconstructs English language as a site of cultural encounter other than simplistic racial exclusion. Ch'ien further suggests the aesthetic power of the variant forms of English: "Because weird English possesses the extra dimension of a foreign language, it requires not only interpretation but also translation. Weird English revives the aesthetic experiential potential of English; we see through the eyes of foreign speakers and hear through their transcriptions of English a different way of reproducing meaning."[74] While Ch'ien asserts that Maxine Hong Kingston's works revalue Chinglish's experimental features as linguistic

[72] Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien, *Weird English* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 106.
[73] Bret Harte, *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1888), p. 56.
[74] Ch'ien, pp. 6-7.

independence, Marjorie Pryse argues that the pioneering Chinese American writer Sui Sin Far reclaims and changes "English syntax both in order to use it better to reflect the experience of the Chinese in America and also to alter the English speaking reader's relation to his or her own native language in such a way as to give that reader direct access to the world of the immigrant" --- or, in other words, through their own words of speaking, the immigrant writers demonstrate their potential to write and think in less dominant and modest ways.[75] In this light, Sterling adopts Kingston's and Far's strategic use of simple and compound sentence construction to create an alternative space in the cook show, in which the American audiences are situated in a more vulnerable position to interact with the Chinese experience --- while the audiences' defensive mind-set is gradually relieved by the enjoyment of Sterling's parody, they are more likely exposed to the effects of the hero's hidden power. Not only are the US palates polluted with inauthentic and over-complicated Chinese recipes as above mentioned, Sterling's seemingly submissive language grants chances to infuse the political affects with the cook show that is aired to US mass domestic families.

It is the sudden death of Sterling's second son Ira that makes him complicate the affective performance during the recording of one episode. In the first half of the novel, the protagonist is portrayed as a hero who remains loyal to a full-blown American identity and detests any perceived "impure" characteristics. It gets highlighted in his criticisms against Chinese ways of life and extends to his lack of successful ways to deal with the unexpected sons. Instead of viewing his marriage with Bliss and birth of bi-racial sons as a success of cultural integration, Sterling sees

[75] Marjorie Pryse, "Linguistic Regionalism and the Emergence of Chinese American Literature in Sui Sin Far's 'Mrs Spring Fragrance'," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 27.1 (2010), pp. 83-108 (p. 93).

them as obstacles against US recognition and acceptance since only full embrace of American traits marks the completion of assimilation in his mind. As shown in a depiction of his seeing Moses for the first time, the hero voices disdain towards the explicit Jewish characteristics attached to the new-born son:

> [Moses] is the name [Bliss] chose in accordance with some 'Jewish cultural tradition'; why she's suddenly upholding anything that involves religion, especially her own, is a mystery … Now, hearing the name and knowing there's an actual baby boy attached to it, indeed, my own son's, a charge of pure feeling rips through me, the outrage of a victim of theft. She's snatched my baby from me![76]

While the protagonist expects his disaffiliation from both Chinese traits and Jewish characters will result in fulfilment of American identity that features the effacement of ethnicity, his insistence, however, comes into a sudden turn in the second half of the novel, in which his witness of Bliss's extramarital affair leads to a car crash that kills his second son Ira. The family tragedy stimulates the hero to rethink his ways of survival in American society. In his own bitter recognition as a resolution to depart from his past, the chef writes: "My sons were the blades of scissors that were supposed to snip me permanently, and genetically, free from home, from past and present, from here and over there."[77]

At this transitional point, Sterling's act in the cooking show revolves around reformed parody of Chinese authenticity, the original version of which is free from any sentimental attachment to Chinese culinary history and tradition. In the shooting of another episode shortly after Ira's funeral, Sterling opens up the introduction of "Shlimp and robster sauce" with a familiar Peeking Duck voice, hypocritically entertaining the audiences with extravagant acclamation in Pidgin English like "Wah" and "Unberievable." Yet the demonstration of cooking this "velly famous dish" is

[76] Louie, p. 182.
[77] Louie, p. 323.

followed by Sterling's association of slicing shrimps' bodies with a slicing of his own: "When I dip the blade's tip in and eviscerate the black vein, my hand trembles. Lifting the dancing worm, I feel like a surgeon holding a heart, which later, transplanted, will give life to another. But here the heart is mind, I am opening my own chest, holding up my own heart, and frantically searching for a substitute."[78] This fantasy turns to his insightful contemplation of the ingredients of the dish, among which salt immediately draws Sterling's attention owing to its encoding of every emotion that he bears at the moment: "Salt in tears. Salt the only edible rock. Staple of life." The chef then visualizes such emotional sentiments by telling the audiences what he learns about salt at the CIA:

> The Jewish people used it in sacrifices and ceremonies. Homer described nations as poor whose citizens didn't mix salt with their food. The Roman Empire paid its soldiers a wage called *salarium*, or "salt money" (the root of our own *salary*). In the Middle Ages, the salt routes were the basis for the flow of trade. Across the centuries, state monopolies in the production and sale of salt brought wealth and power to nations and impoverished those so taxed. Gandhi in 1930 as an act of civil disobedience scooped up a handful of salt crystallized from the evaporated waters of the Arabian Sea, symbolically breaking his British master's monopoly and striking a blow against the Empire.[79]

As salt is added to foods not only for spice but also to preserve them from decay, it becomes a symbol of incorruptibility and permanence. In *The Bible*, salt also comes to symbolize purity and perfection as exemplified in the ritualistic "covenant of salt."[80] Sterling's presentation on an alternative cultural history of salt calls to the fore the notion of purity in that it confirms Sidney Mintz's belief in the complex workings in the creation of food's purity. Like what happens to the production of sugar and almonds, the purity of salt "is imputed to edible white substances" and is "processed

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[78] Louie, p. 331.
[79] Louie, p. 332.
[80] Chronicles 13:5: "Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt?" Here, a covenant of salt suggests an agreement of enduring qualities, even forever.

to whiteness by human ingenuity."[81] In the protagonist's narration, the purity of the natural food substance builds upon not only the salt labour's alteration but also by the regulating effects of the global markets in alienating food producers from salt as a valuable commodity. Like other staple commodities such as sugar and its plantation in the Caribbean Islands analysed in Mintz's another well-known work *Sweetness and Power* (1986), salt has been crucial to the emergence of Western modernity not only as a commodity to be used as means of payment or routes of trade but also as a byproduct of exploited labour bodies --- both the improper ways of salt eating and the reliance of salt for empire expansion point to salt's pivotal role in national and international entities vying for economic power at the expense of working class who are marginalized and disempowered in the formations of world systems of trade, production and consumption.[82]

However, as suggested in the example of Gandhi's use of salt as a symbolic tool for India's independence movement, the protagonist's sensitivity to salt defies the conventional inscription of salt as pure and natural. It is further constituted as an affront to US civilized palates by investing this common ingredient with enriched figurations that arise not only from the personal sentiments of sadness or life but also from the remembering histories of civil disobedience against imperial dominance. With "each new bit of history remembered," Sterling's gustatory engagement with the working class's resistance empowers his impeded subjectivity set to feed the American audiences' exotic appetites, gradually strengthening the originally quivered voices and, more intriguingly, triggering collective memories of Chinese ancient ways

[81] Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, p. 90
[82] Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

of acquiring salt.[83] In a sentimental account of something that he "never puts much stock in it," the protagonist tells the audiences that salt was invented by Chinese nearly three thousand years before the Western countries, making them the first to cultivate salt: "We flooded fields with seawater, and after its evaporation, we harvested the remaining crystals from the soil."[84]

Sterling's transmission from remembering in the form of history to the collective memories of racialized coolie labours, according to Lily Cho's analysis of the relationship between taste and memory, speaks to the enhancement of his diasporic subjectivity because these true memories recuperated from racialized history are often figured in collective gustatory desires, which pose radical challenges against US imperialistic powers. Cho's belief in the power of such collective memories of tastes notably builds on Pierre Nora's differentiation between the history that binds a community and the memory that a community shares in its collectivity. She quotes Nora: "memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective; plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority."[85] While Nora's differentiation between memory and history suggests against the singular tendency to historicize the ways to remember the past, Cho moves further to argue that the shared memory of diasporic community is deeply embedded in the corporeality of the diasporic body, longing for authentic experiences that defy the binds of historicism. In this light, through an individual and subjective recuperation of the memory attesting to Chinese salt labours from the history that justifies the Western exploitation, Sterling "authenticates the possibility of

[83] Louie, p. 332.
[84] Louie, p. 333.
[85] Pierre Nora qtd in Lily Cho, "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry," in *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literature in English* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), ed. by Tseen Koo and Kam Louie, pp. 81-106 (p. 96).

a collective gustatory desire as a route to an alternative history" by "giving credence to a mode of knowing that has been suppressed and misnamed as sentiments."[86] In his mind, the collective cultural memory that emerges from the unspoken but shared experience of exploitation and servitude mediates the gap between the past and the present and situates him "with the ancestors, among the world's first Lungs, smoothing the pans of seawater, pulverizing large sediments into edible grains." More intriguingly, Sterling's imagined integration into Chinese cultural roots gives birth to a collective ethnic community, in which his father, the remaining son and himself "work the salt" together with the deceased Ira, practice Chinese tradition to purify Ira's body with salt and get ready to protect others from calling Ira a barbarian.[87]

Cooking "Real" Chinese Food

Towards the end of the novel, Sterling steps off the screen and achieves his strategic performance in the recognition of once rejected Chinese character. During a visit to the dying Genius at the hospital, the hero's picture bride Yuk happens to watch his Peeking Duck act on the television and feels bewildered towards the extravagant toothy smile and fake expressive admirations. She asks: "Who is that person, Mr. Sterling? Why you do like that?" When Sterling responds that he is simply acting like other characters in TV series, the Chinese woman raises her central concern that the cooking show might lead to the audiences' inability to distinguish reality from performance: "I know those mens are acting. But how television watchers know you are acting?"[88] Yuk's fear speaks to the American audiences' common way to produce

[86] Cho, p. 101.
[87] Louie, p. 333.
[88] Louie, p. 347.

stereotypical and homogeneous Chinese ethnicity based on biased models of Chinese characters on the mass media, yet such fear is immediately but hesitantly dismissed by Sterling. By describing his growth in America metaphorically as a process of a lamb being raised as one of the wolves and waiting to be hunted down by these wolves one day, the hero confesses that his ethnic subjectivity is under threats owing to his designated but vulnerable role in racially purist America. But it is at this moment of confusion and depression that the hero pictures a vision of how he should perform on the Peeking Duck cooking show:

> I act like an ass on TV because I don't know how else to act. How am I supposed to be Chinese? By being myself? I'm not the kind of Chinese that viewers want to see, I'm Sterling, graduate of the CIA. So I try to give the people what they want: a goofy bucktoothed immigrant bastard who is humbled and grateful he's been let into their homes.
>
> "I'm acting like Genius," I say. Truly, I've modeled Peeking Duck, at least in part, after Genius, only jazzed up for TV.[89]

Here Sterling seems to conform to a popularized Oriental perception of the Chinese immigrants as exotic in appearance and submissive in character. His desire to act like his father, however, also hints at an alternative route towards claiming autonomous power in the process of serving American public. As we learn from Louie's depiction of Genius's life in an omniscient point of view in the middle of the novel, the Chinese father is also once blinded by US promises of economic success and opportunities, but later transforms into a full embrace of Chinese identity after his being attacked by white Americans, who mistakenly regard the immigrant as a Japanese at a peak of hostility between America and Japan during the World War. In Genius's metaphorical description, the attack poses damage to his physical eyesight and invests new insights into his way of life in America. The beating does not result in the blurring of his long

[89] Louie, p. 348.

view as expected but makes him "a new man," who wishes to "start his American life over."[90] This leads to his disillusion in the sexual fantasy with a white woman and holding up to the Chinese identity whilst performing submissive labour in the laundry shop. Thus Sterling's modelling of Genius becomes an inspiration for the hero to conjure ideas to maintain integrity in US domestic spaces of exclusion and consumption.

The empowerment is soon evident in the scene of Genius's funeral, in which Sterling practices a series of Chinese rituals to mourn the deceased father --- he not only bows to the coffin, lights incense but also keeps sitting near the casket. Louie brings more complexity to the hero's identification with Chinese heritage through a stewardship of his remaining son Moses on the rituals during the funeral. When realizing that he needs to feed Moses, Sterling leads the son to the kitchen of the funeral home, where the protagonist arranges a Chinese banquet of dim sum collections brought to the funeral. Moses's refusal of his offerings irritates the protagonist, and reminds him of the deep regrets over his "devising new and more potent ways of shutting [Genius] up, pissing him off so he wouldn't want to look at me, let alone speak to me from the heart."[91] To avoid repeating another father-son tragedy, Sterling devises various ways to convince his son to eat something. One of them is to use his Peeking Duck style to lure Moses into eating. "Peeling a sticky gray shrimp dumpling free of its partners in the paper boat and pop[ing] it into my mouth," Sterling claims with an extravagant tone: "Wow, really good." Yet the hero soon realizes that his efforts are in vain because his performance arouses Moses's distrust --- the son "narrows his eyes and looks vaguely at" the protagonist. Sterling's

[90] Louie, p. 265.
[91] Louie, p. 360.

confession that "Peeking Duck's dead" indicates the ultimate failure of the cook show in stimulating appetites of Moses as representative of those bearing Chinese ethnic consciousness.[92]

In the end, Sterling works out an effective method to fit into Moses's appetite, and it significantly points to a communal preparation and consumption of food that evokes reconciliation with the deceased Genius and the once lost Chinese values. The hero tells his son that he knows "the perfect thing," which is "what my father used to make for me for a snack when I came home from school." In his description, the concoction of saltine crackers, sweet condensed milk and boiled water become what he calls as "comfort food, warming and soothing." The comfort of the culinary experience works to stir feelings of solace via nostalgia and to reconnect him to Moses in a way that resurrects "good, safe, happy times" between him and his father.[93] More intriguingly, the hero's growing ease with the cultural roots that his parents represent is followed by their discussion on the food's authenticity when they prepare the snack together. The young son feels doubtful of Sterling's claim that "it's Chinese," but it is immediately dismissed by the hero, who regards a pleasant father-and-son relationship as the key factor to determine the authenticity of the culinary creation. Sterling says:

> Trust me. If you can only know what I want. Let the steam caress your face, smell the roasted sweetness, the milk's own sugar, and feel the glow of well-being radiating from within. I don't blame Moses his scepticism, because until this moment I wouldn't have believed either. But I'm not making these feelings up, they are as real as the food is pure: just flour, water, sugar, milk, and salt. … "It really is Chinese, you know. Ah-Yeah used to make it for me. It's a special recipe he brought from China. And think about it, you and I just whipped this up together."[94]

[92] Louie, p. 368.
[93] Louie, pp. 370-1.
[94] Louie, p. 372.

Here Sterling enacts a new version of authenticity that is grounded in the father-and-son cooperation, one that bears the consciousness of ethnic heritage and guarantees the smooth inheritance of familial customs. Notably, the hero's labelling of the culinary blend of saltine crack and condensed milk as "real" Chinese food negates the simplistic definition of culinary authenticity based on the food's origin. Instead, Sterling's sense of "real" is established upon the sentimental effects of any foods and ingredients that are regarded "pure" enough to evoke traces of memory in remembrance of the deceased father and the lost cultural roots. In this light, through a schooling of his bi-racial son that seeks to transmit the renewed concept of culinary authenticity from one generation to another, Sterling engages in a material project of what Lisa Lowe calls as "active cultural construction," the very effort that challenges a fixed profile of ethnic traits in a complex circle of hybridity and multiplicity. The hero's practice of cooking and eating food "that [is] partly inherited and partly modified, as well as partly invented" critiques the Western hegemonic values of otherness and questions the dominant conception of authenticity as fixed and singular.[95] Through this, Sterling eventually comes up with a successful means to facilitate the making of a hybrid identity that articulates the Asian American immigrants' ways of survival in the American society and is significantly deemed acceptable across the span of three generations.

In the final moment of the novel, Moses begins to understand the meanings of such practice and agrees with the mode of authenticity that his father espouses by claiming "We just cooked Chinese food!"[96] The call confirms the success of eating "authentic" food in strengthening the characters' weakened subjectivity --- the cultural practice

[95] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, p. 65.
[96] Louie, p. 372.

that speaks to US deep desire to connect with their racist past, in these final pages, mediates the intergenerational gap within Asian American community and constructs a hybrid identity that shows its versatility similar to the characteristic of culinary authenticity. In this chapter, I have suggested that Louie's representation of culinary authenticity alludes to its complexity in intermixing purity with notions of ethnic hierarchy, racial gendering and Chinese American diasporic subjectivity. Ultimately, the American patrons' essentialist association of Sterling's cooking with Chinese ethnicity seeks to inculcate white dominance and gender superiority with aims to revive the continuity with US historical oppression of Chinese coolie labours. This Western fascination with authentic exotic appetites denies Sterling's rights to claim American citizenship and ties him to certain stereotypical myths like barbarous eating, emasculated masculinity and manipulative "pigtails," thus achieving to impose a network of control and desire over the Chinese subjects. However, the seemingly solid collaboration between culinary authenticity and US fixation on ethnic identities is soon curtailed by Sterling's meaningful parody of cooking egg foo yung on the televised cook show, a dish that is labelled as real Chinese cuisine but evokes the hidden autonomy of the Chinese immigrants in creating authenticity. The inspirational cultural history of the "invention" of Chinese food in America moves Sterling to adopt a similar strategy to blur the boundaries between purity and invention, white employers and racialized labours. Not only does the hero use Pidgin English to create alternative space to pollute US plates with inauthentic Chinese recipes, he also infuses the affective politics of the working class's civil disobedience embodied in salt to evoke the collective memory of the diasporic community. In *The Barbarians are Coming*, therefore, Sterling's imagined return to Chinese homeland is portrayed not as an easy reach of authenticity but as an uncomfortable encounter with inauthenticity

and a complex negotiation between US nationhood and ethnic identity as a performative arena to dismantle the purity, originality and stability in the concept of authenticity. In other words, the novel leaves a space for the readers to ponder over the uncertainty of its title: we may need to think anew about who those barbarians are, what they are coming for and whether they will end up with a satisfied consumption, no matter in the literary space of the novel or in a realistic Chinatown restaurant.

Conclusion

In February 2015 the ABC network in the United States began to broadcast *Fresh off the Boat*, the first primetime television show to focus on an Asian American family since Margaret Cho's short-lived *All-American Girl* in 1994. Created by American producer Nahnatchka Khan, this ongoing sitcom is based on the memoir of Chinese American writer and chef Eddie Huang, and chronicles the fictionalized adventures of his family after they moved from Chinatown in downtown Washington D.C. to an overwhelmingly white, middle-class suburb of Orlando, Florida in 1995. With the eleven-year-old Eddie's opening line, "this is the story of my family, an American family," *Fresh off the Boat* reinstates classic immigrant narratives by casting the family as pioneers who believe in US promises of economic success and cultural acceptance "for only the bravest family … in a lawless land." The sitcom receives immediate commercial success and critical attention, perhaps partly because of its thematic differentiation from its predecessor. *All-American Girl* holds a fundamentally pro-assimilationist point of view and relies on the otherness of exotic Korean characteristics to produce comic effects. *Fresh off the Boat,* on the other hand, undermines its protagonists' faith in American cultural norms. At the same time, it often satirises the dominant American fascination with Chinese cultural practices, poking fun at the racial stereotypes prevalent in 1990s white culture.

The sitcom's critique of dominant culture becomes apparent in a scene of the first episode, in which Eddie eats lunch with the schoolmates during his first day in school. From his first step into the cafeteria, the Chinese student senses the difference between his packed Chinese lunch and the white students' Lunchables-branded food and snack, reminding him of the deep-rooted racial difference and leaving him with

no choice but to sit with the only African American student Walter. Yet Eddie sees this cross-racial affiliation that helps contest white exclusion as merely a temporary sanctuary. At the first opportunity he abandons Walter, joining a group of white students as soon as they invite him over after discovering they share a love of the rap star The Notorious B.I.G. In *Fresh off the Boat*, interestingly, the hip-hop culture is no longer an ethnically cultural thread that serves as a counterpoint against racism; instead, it turns into a cultural artefact that binds the Chinese immigrant with white culture to achieve the informal segregation of African Americans, situating the latter outside a reconfigured American mainstream that at this point seems able to accommodate Asian incomers.

Eddie's hope of assimilating into the American order, however, is soon dismantled by the alimentary differences. As soon as the Chinese student opens his lunchbox to reveal a portion of fried noodles inside, the white students cover their noses, yelling "What is that? Gross!" Their disgust at the Chinese food is followed by a racial insult: "Ying Ding's eating worms!" Eddie then finds himself alone: ostracised from the "white" table, shunned by his former African American ally, and forced to eat lunch alone behind the gym. The white students' depiction of Eddie as a living worm eater becomes another instance of what I have been discussing US historical and literary tendency to regard Asian culinary habits as exotic and disgust throughout the thesis. Much like the American culture which remains fascinated but troubled by Mother Orchid's cooking of unlikely creatures in *The Woman Warrior,* and much like George Frederick Keller's depiction of Chinese rat-eating, the scene of worm eating posits the Chinese eating and immigrant as a deep taboo to the Western civilization. Indeed, the accusation that they eat raw foods registers Chinese race as "nature," inferior to the "cultural" forms of Western sophisticated cooking in Claude Levi-Strauss's famous

polarities.[1] The cultural anthropologist's ethnographic category of cooking from different cultures is made possible and further complicated by the concrete racial ideologies and cultural codes ascribed to these culinary practices. As much as US repulsion against Chinese rat-eating works to justify its ideology to fend off the infection of Chinese pathology and immorality, the expulsion of worms and the Chinese subject from the American table recalls a set of distinct Oriental discourses, especially the one that cautions against the threatening of Chinese race's hybrid power. This sentiment is most evident in the popular novel series of Dr. Fu Manchu created by British author Sax Rohmer during the first half of the twentieth century. As a sinister Chinese figure who attempts to seize power from Western civilization by gaining control of science and nature, Dr. Fu Manchu, in *Fu Manchu's Bride* (1933), creates a creature that Rohmer calls as the "worm-man" because his "entire face, trunk, and limbs glistened moistly like the skin of an earthworm … the fingers webbed and the thumbs scarcely present."[2] Though the British author does not elaborate on its destructive potential of the "nearly perfected *homonculus*," the dramatic representation of the crazy worm-man as hard to control brings forward the destructive nature of Fu's science of genetic hybrid.[3] The Chinese character's aspiration to "appeal even to the lay mind" of Western people is immediately dismissed by Rohmer and the Euro-American readers,[4] who regard Fu as "a master of the dangerous art" and keep the sentiment consistent with Western latent fear of Asian-white miscegenation.[5] In this light, Eddie's consumption of "worms" triggers a deep-rooted feeling of abjection and disgust in the white students. The allegation of

[1] Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," pp. 20-27.
[2] Sax Rohmer, *Fu Manchu's Bride* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1933), p. 132.
[3] Rohmer, p. 150.
[4] Rohmer, p. 124.
[5] Rohmer, p. 130.

eating living worms disobeys the boundaries between edible and inedible, raw eating and cooking, nature and culture, the traces that can envision the production of Kristeva's notion of abject. Furthermore, the particular bodily incorporation of worms into the Chinese body also reminds the white observers of the necessity to contain and exclude the abject power of the ethnic subject that turns worm into an agent of transgression and fusion, diffusing the semantic order established between human and non-human, whiteness and Asian, inside and outside.

"Ying Ding's Eating Worms," *Fresh off the Boat*

In common with the nineteenth-century racist myths of rat-eating, then, the abjectness of worm eating here leads Eddie to realize the affective powers connoted in worms and to work out strategies to position himself on the American racist table. In the most well-known ecological work on worms, *Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Actions of Worms with Observations on Their Habits* (1881), Charles

Darwin records his forty-year observation of the living habits of earthworms, which surprisingly ends with a reflection that goes beyond their biology. Darwin writes: "Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first assume."[6] The English biologist asserts that worms join the construction of history because they make vegetable mould, which makes possible "seedlings of all kinds" and makes an earth hospitable to humans, and more importantly, preserves the cultural artefacts, rituals and endeavours of human history.[7] He further attributes worms' contributions to human history and culture to the species' activities as "small agencies" whose "accumulated effects" turn out to be quite big.[8] For Jane Bennet, Darwin's observations above "make a case for worms as vibrant material actants whose difference from us may be smaller than we thought." It is through these "small agencies" of the lowly worms that gain them access to the grand agency of humans and thus help construct the movement of worms as "a political act." Bennet notably develops this political implications of worms' encounter with humans in a racial ground, believing that "there are many affinities between the act of persons dragging their belongings to their new homes in the suburbs and the acts of worms dragging leaves to their burrows or migrating to a savanna-forest border."[9] This asserted analogy between worms and migrants, then, can be readily applied to the Huang family's movement from a Chinatown community to the racial frontier of a white town. Very much like those worms which bring to the surface a refined layer of vegetable mould and transform the soil more favourable to the humans, the Chinese family are involved in a complex and not-fully-predictable

[6] Charles Robert Darwin, *Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Actions of Worms with Observations on Their Habits* (London: John Murray, 1881), p. 313.
[7] Darwin, p. 309.
[8] Darwin, p.2.
[9] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 98.

project of claiming a liminal position in the binary racial system, gaining agencies to disrupt the fixed orders with multiple kinds of actants and creating conditions to assert their identity in the mainstream culture.

Importantly, Eddie, as someone accused of eating worms, complicates the affective nature of worm by working out strategies to negotiate his subjectivity in the school. At first, the Chinese character insists on bringing "white-people lunch." What is notable of this act is that Eddie does not recognize it as a full submission to the American characters; instead, he sees it as a way to proffer alternative solutions for US designation of Chinese food as loathsome and repulsive. As he reveals to his parents: "I need white-people lunch. That gets me seat on the table, and then you get to change the rules." While he attempts to realize his plan to gain agency in changing the whites' reductionist views of Chinese food from within by walking comfortably with pizza in the cafeteria, Eddie is harassed by Walter who calls him "Chink" and claims that he is now at the bottom of the racial hierarchy at the school. The discriminating comment that marks Eddie as a perpetual foreigner to the American order leads to his fight with the offender and to a more radical resolution at the end of the first episode. As Eddie sums up: "When you live in a lunchables world, it's not always easy bringing homemade Chinese food. But it always makes you special. My family was gonna create their places in Orlando, and we gonna do it our way, because you don't have to pretend to be someone else in order to belong."[10] Eddie is then determined to eat "worms" in front of his white schoolmates, a symbolic act that asserts a unique Chinese American identity that can survive the unfavourable

[10] I record the scripts of *Fresh off the Boat* above. Khan, Nahnatchaka, *Fresh off the Boat*, ABC Network

surroundings of the dominant culture's rejection of Asian food and body from its civilized culinary landscape.

I conclude the thesis with a reading of the food scenes in *Fresh off the Boat* largely because it provides a script to underscore the workings of US abjection of Asian food in psychic developments of Asian American subjects and to think about what affective powers and intellectual possibilities are invested in culinary tropes, underpinning what I have been suggesting throughout the thesis. The sitcom's provocative scene proves that the heightened sense of deeming Asian food as exotic and disgust still finds resonances in US contemporary cultural representations of Asian American immigrants and their ethnic characters. It manifests how eating becomes an act that is policed and overdetermined by white culture to be affiliated with an assertion of racial hierarchy that consolidates white supremacy over Chinese ethnicity. Yet this kernel of indigestibility of the Chinese food becomes the discursive site for the Chinese immigrant to contest the nuances of American racism against untruly immigrant food and bodies. To interrogate the complex meanings accrued to food tropes, as *Fresh off the Boat* and the thesis have shown, proves necessary to explore Asian American dynamic responses to the racialization of Asian culinary differences.

Throughout the thesis, I have been tracing US diverse cultural moments of othering and loathing Asian culinary conventions. I found the roots of these moments to the dominant culture's stereotypical portrayal of Chinese food as repulsive and taboo in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. I have suggested that this historic designation of Chinese immigrants as filthy and pathological marked a significant way to abject the ethnic group to maintain the inherent civility of white

diets and culture as exclusive and superior during the “drive out” era. I have argued that, even when Asian immigrants have claimed an essential position in American racial landscape nowadays, the discriminating food culture has managed to keep its political energies, which are discussed, mediated and tackled in a variety of contemporary Asian American fictional representations.

Through their creative engagements with food images, these authors have demonstrated how US constructions of a hierarchical dietary and ethnic order serve to consolidate jettisoned and victimized Asian American subjectivities that are centred on their food’s metonymic relationship with their bodies as well as their genders, sex and class identities. Beginning with Amy Tan’s classic account of mother-daughter struggle over the palatability of ethnic food, Chapter One suggested that the American daughters’ bodily disavowal of Chinese food did not work to severe links with the Chinese ethnicity as expected but rather made their subjectivities vulnerable to attacks of American exclusionist politics. Chapter Two saw Gish Jen’s exploration of the food consumption’s role in gender politics of the Cold War and linked the Asian males’ attempts to claim the perceived model of American manhood that were predicted on their violent consumption and abjection of Asian women’s bodies as food objects and taboos. By looking into Ruth Ozeki’s expansion of the gendered culinary politics from domesticity to globalized economy, Chapter Three delineated how US culturally sanctioned alliance of men and meat eating exerted controls over the Asian female subjects by treating their eating disorder as pathological and animalizing the bodies to mark them as edible and subordinate. Chapter Four saw the literary critique of colonial kitchens in Monique Truong’s debut novel, which complicated the historic abjection of Asian domestic labourers through the Euro-American employers’ institutional manipulation of their bodies that were subject to

alienation from the food they prepared and to metaphorical consumption. Chapter Five traced US fascination with Asian food during the Cold War in David Wong Louie's novel and explored how such quest of authentic ethnic food registered class stratification and sexual manipulation of the Chinese American cook. All these varied scenes of food preparation, consumption and rejection, together with the whites' racial ridicule of Eddie's eating noodles, articulated different kinds of political projects that linked the formation of white supremacy to the abjection of Asian American culinary conventions and ethnic characters.

The thesis has argued that such abjection, which has been figured in US historical and imagined appetites towards and aversions to Asian food, has provided a discursive space for the authors to subvert the dominant discourses that compelled Asian American immigrants into status of foreignness and invisibility. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the American daughters' assertion of American characters through their disavowal of Chinese food was impeded by the permeation of abject maternity that led to the realization of their perpetual foreignness to US assimilation and thus resulted in mother-daughter reconciliation. The Asian females in *Typical American* subverted the gendered politics of food tropes and domesticity by investing their cooking with feminist meanings, through which they were able to claim semi-autonomous control over the males' carnal appetites and to form feminine alliance against sexual violence. The masculine trend to animalize and commodify women's bodies as highlighted in *My Year of Meats* was refused by the Asian females' strategies to practice the abject embodiments of eating disorder and transnational mothering. The Vietnamese food labourers in *The Book of Salt* joined to resist US redistribution of bourgeois kitchens for sexual oppression and labour alienation, disturbing the domestic hierarchy with the releases of homosexual and diasporic

affects into cooking. *The Barbarians are Coming* saw the Chinese cook's proactive parody of culinary authenticity as key to produce authority around the cooking and to trigger ethnic cultural memories, both of which converged to assert Chinese American cultural identity that contested US racialization of the ethnic food labourers. Through their joint efforts to dismantle the politics of digesting and abjecting ethnic food as key to constitute American empire, these literary works have shown that the jettisoned and derided Asian food and bodies are not, or not only, the by-products of these processes of consolidating genealogies of white supremacy; instead, as much as Kristeva's belief in the subject's inability to exclude the abject from damaging the integrity of the self, they have staged as the dominant culture's incapacity to master the powers of Asian culture that are implicated in the psychic and cultural artefacts of ethnic food. As such, the Asian subjects in alimentary tropes stages the fraught relationship between inside and outside, assimilation and exclusion, whose boundaries are not fixed and vulnerable.

As Kristeva asks when pondering over nationalism and its relation with foreign culture in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991): "shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without levelling?"[11] She ends the book with a prescription that moves beyond her focus on French nationalism and could apply to all immigrant communities:

> To discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that "demon," that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid "us." By recognizing our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners.[12]

[11] Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 2.
[12] Kristeva, p. 192.

Interestingly, Kristeva uses a metaphorical language of bodily incorporation and consumption to describe the power dynamics between the dominant culture and the ethnic ones. As much as eating dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, subject and object, the Asian race becomes the "uncanny strangeness," whose underlying task is to produce Asian American cultural identities that can negotiate the poles of abject stereotypes and assimilation. The Asian historical and cultural figuration as "the projective apparition of the other" not only resists US continuous and institutionalized expulsion. Its strangeness and abjectness also turn it into a part of US culture, reversing American hegemonic exclusion of ethnic cultures from within. During this tense process of incorporation, America, in Randolph Bourne's words, "is coming to be, not a nationality, but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and force, of many threads and colours."[13]

Clearly, many more popular and critically acclaimed Asian and other ethnic American cultural productions are entering into the distinctive circuits of cultural discourses, creating and interrogating ways of presenting their diverse characters in opposition to uniformity and containment. Hence, it becomes necessary to develop theorizations of food in more diverse topics such as diaspora, comparative race relationship, queerness and transnationalism. The courses of Asian food will continue to be served on the American table. We, with critical cutlery, not only need to dine on their controversial tastes but also should stay a bit longer to reflect on the aftertastes which emanate from the concurrent representations of food and abjection in Asian American literature.

[13] Randolph Bourne, "Trans-national America," *The Atlantic*, July 1916, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1916/07/trans-national-america/304838/> [accessed 20 September 2018].

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