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EATING THE WORLD: FOOD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN
MINORITY LITERATURE

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Abstract Content (Single spaced, one page, two space paragraph indent, no more than 350 words.)

Food studies is an important disciplinary area of study and way to access the literature of marginalized minorities, because of the major role food plays in life. Food is a common denominator among all people; however, it works not only as an equalizer that brings people together, but also as a dividing force. Food production and consumption vary drastically between cultures, regions of the globe, and even among individuals within the same societies. The fastidious approach to food that humans exhibit creates a space in which the identity of an individual can be articulated. Individualization through food is seen in the cultural adage 'you are what you eat.' Food choices are a direct reflection of how one sees oneself and how one wishes to be seen by others. The representation of self and perspective of others through food is especially true when there are a variety of food choices from different cultures available. Critical consideration of food production and consumption represents a door that could lead to increased cultural understanding and solidarity across cultural lines.

The area of food scholarship has grown rapidly in recent years with more critics focusing on everything from the way that food can represent identity to the role of food in cultural connection, to how global factors affect food distribution and consumption and beyond. One of my aims in this project is to push against that thinking and demonstrate the relevance and seriousness of work within food studies. Additionally, this project will explore these questions: how can food be used as platform for identity creation? How might writers express cultural or individual identity through food? Could cuisine be an effective and appropriate way to introduce oneself to a new culture? How do marginalized minorities find a way to express their identity within a larger cultural context? How might marginalized minorities use food production and consumption to their benefit? What are the advantages of analyzing food in literature? As Stephanie H. Chan proclaims in her essay 'Refusing Food,' "asking questions about food is the way one can be most critical and politically responsible" (35-36).

Eating the World: Food Production and Consumption and Cultural Resistance in Minority Literature

By Brittani Hissom

J. K. Gibson-Graham defines globalization as the “set of processes by which the world is rapidly being integrated into one economic space via increased international trade, the internationalization of production and financial markets, the internationalization of a commodity culture promoted by an increasingly networked global telecommunications system” (38). Globalization is a modern concept, and Arjun Appadurai is interested in “deterritorialization,” which he considers “one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies” (33). Appadurai recognizes the movement of bodies within globalization, which is something Gibson-Graham neglects in her definition of globalization. Appadurai perceives the movement of bodies in his idea of the “*ethnoscape* ... the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and moving groups and individuals” (30). The movement of bodies requires the movement of food as well, and globalization has caused an increase in American food-based interactions, whether in America or when Americans travel abroad. David Harvey sees this as the way “the whole world’s cuisine is now assembled in one place” (13). There is also an increase in changes made to culturally located dishes as people who, for a variety of reasons, find themselves away from home yet still wish to cook those foods must leave out or make substitutions with ingredients available to them. The majority of the people who make up the

global movement of bodies do so out of necessity, ranging from economic to political, and come from the periphery nations of the globe.

Immanuel Wallerstein uses the idea of “core states and peripheral states” in his analysis of world-systems (28). His use of the core and periphery relies on looking at the “relationship between production processes” where “core-like processes tend to group themselves in a few states ... [and] peripheral processes tend to be scattered among a large number of states” (28). In Wallerstein’s analysis, the core and periphery are in constant flux with little change to the overarching system. Important here is not the “relationship between production processes” but the unequal power relationship between the core (the West) and the periphery (everything else). This unequal power relationship is what accounts for the demographic makeup of the people who constitute the global movement of bodies. Globalization has, in some ways, been forced upon the periphery by the core, but there is resistance to the force of globalization. Roland Robertson explores this resistance in his essay “The Universalism-Particularism Issue:” the core is considered universal, and the periphery is the particular. Robertson considers global resistance as “resistance ... to the conception of the world as a series of culturally equal, relativized, entities or ways of life” (25). The characters discussed in this project resist globalization in a different way; they are resisting a globalization where the core absorbs and eliminates the peripheral. Robertson seems to be missing the two-way direction of globalization where the core reaches into the periphery and the periphery begins to seep into the core. This project will explore how the West (the core) has no problems with globalization when it is enforced on other countries (the periphery), but they resist when that periphery finds its way to them.

The rise of globalization has increased tourism to the periphery, and the Caribbean has proved popular with Americans. The increase of American tourism in the Caribbean has facilitated unenlightening experiences for American travelers. The most exposure Americans have to Martinique, and the Caribbean in general, is through tourism and, Americans often leave the island(s) envying the locals and the no-rush lifestyle those island citizens have. However, the majority of locals tourists interact with are in the customer service industry, notably the food service industry, where employees are required to put their best face forward and not complain. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, in her book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, points to the way “cooking and serving food for a living is extremely common in human societies, [but] for ethnic Americans[,] both European and non-European, the activity does not merely entail a matter-of-fact exchange of food for money” (57). The unequal exchange seen by Wong in ethnic American cuisine can be expanded to include the unequal power exchange happening within the privileged tourist and placating local dynamic in the Caribbean. In 2011, the journal *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* released a special issue centered entirely on food: “Teaching Food and Foodways in Asian American Literature and Popular Culture”. Eileen Chia-Ching Fung, in the introduction to that issue, claims that “relationships between ethnic subjects and food are never simply about consumption” (ii). Power dynamics play a major role in employee/customer relationships, and this is reflected in the customer service industry “that links politics to the production of labor and the exchange of commodities for social value that the body preforms” (ii). The customer service industry is all about keeping the customer happy, smiling, and wanting to return, and this imperative, along with the economic necessity of maintaining a job, keeps employees from

bringing up topics like inadequate infrastructures, high unemployment, and exploitation with tourists. In order for Caribbean food service workers to be seen as having “social value,” in the eyes of the West, they must function as the “embodiment of cultural enterprise” which the West expects. The position of food service workers often dictates that they are “forced to play up stereotypes of their own group” (Wong 57). Cultural exposure through tourism is problematic here because Caribbean tourism is designed to keep the actual life of its citizens hidden, and even when it fails to do so, the tourist can easily misinterpret. While Americans see the slow pace and seeming free time of the island citizens as enviable, Americans are neglecting the high unemployment rates, which create that free time and the lack of resources that prevent geographic mobility.

The incomplete view of Caribbean life that tourists often walk away with can be linked to their desire to see Caribbean life in that way. In *Feasting with the ‘Other’: Transforming the Self in Food Adventuring Television Programs*, Jacqui Kong recognizes that the Western “Self” can use food to make a real connection with the non-Western “Other” but only through “an active acknowledgement of the Other” and “a subsequent ‘dis-covering’ of the hidden Self” (47). Wenying Xu, in her book *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, alleges that “cuisines serve as a medium for casual and safe exchanges” between cultures (13). Because “‘dis-covering’ the hidden Self” requires an “un-covering or laying bare of one’s privilege and positionality,” tourists are not likely to engage in this work and instead will reach for something “casual and safe” (Kong 47). Kong also notes that “the Other must be the one initiating the exchange between Self and Other,” which is unlikely to happen in the tourist/local dynamic (52). Due to the unequal power levels of visiting Western tourists and Caribbean

locals, cross-cultural interaction and understanding become challenging more so when the Western “Self” engages with the “Other” on the surface level or not at all.

In an interview with Jeffery J. Williams, Lisa Lowe makes the link between the abolition of slavery in Britain and that in the U.S., with the rise of indentured Asian worker: “the introduction of Chinese indentured laborers in the ‘new world’ permit the abolition of the slave trade” (355) . Martinique is very much a part of this “new world” and was, briefly and at varying times, a colony of Britain. Black Martiniquians, like Vietnamese Americans, face similar problems of erasure and being overlooked. Just as Frank Wu claims that, in America minority means black, on a global scale, black means African to Americans. Caribbean, let alone specifically Martiniquian, politics, problems, and standards of living are not widely discussed in America, while those same issues taking place in Africa make national news and magazine covers. Vietnamese Americans and black Martiniquians have a historical relationship to European/American imperialism and labor control.

Both Martinique and Vietnam have been colonized in the past: Martinique by Britain and France and Vietnam by France. This colonial link makes postcolonial theory, seen in Lowe and Glissant, appropriate for use on these works. These two seemingly disparate areas are also linked in terms of globalization. Globalization has opened the periphery (including Martinique and Vietnam) of the globe to access as well as use by the core. Therefore, the theory of globalization, which I highlight with Appadurai, Wallerstein, and Harvey, is applicable in this

project. Globalization is a valuable approach to analyzing diasporic¹, postcolonial individuals. Nguyen's characters are clearly diasporic having fled from Vietnam just before the fall of Saigon, and while the characters in *Solibo Magnificent* do not overtly identify as diasporic, their diasporic past greatly influences their present.

Solibo Magnificent and the selected works by Nguyen also share thematic similarities. All the works, perhaps because of their diasporic ties, elements of trying to fit themselves into the constraints of the core/dominant world view. The narrator in Chamoiseau's work seeks to fit the oral, performative Creole language into the strict, written French form. In *Pioneer Girl*, Nguyen overlays her narrative with that of *The Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This decision inserts Nguyen's story directly into the national literature of America. Nguyen's memoir, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, is an examination of her attempt to change herself and the perception others had of her through consumption of the dominant food culture.

This project will focus on the minority cultural groups of Vietnamese Americans and black Martiniquians – two groups that represent crucially important global “ethnoscape[s].” These marginalized minorities are often left out of the racial discussion and equal rights movements within America and are overlooked by Americans within the scope of globalization. Within America, Frank Wu, author of *Yellow*, identifies the way “people speak of ‘American’ as if it means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ as if it means ‘black.’ In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority” (20).

¹ Diaspora is of major importance in the scope of globalization. However, this project does not tackle the role of diaspora in food production and consumption. There will be short discussions on the issues of food and memory and food availability.

While the ongoing immigration debate has helped to broaden the white/black binary illustrated by Wu and brought Mexicans and Mexican Americans to the forefront of racial politics, Asians and Asian Americans are still left out of the dialogue. The model minority myth accounts for some of the exclusion Asian Americans face in the American discussion of race and equality. Wu exemplifies the model minority myth in the way Americans “are nonchalant about the racial generalization: ‘You Asians are all doing well’” (40). Because Asian Americans are stereotyped as intellectual, successful, and obedient citizens, many Americans are unaware of the struggles they face and the high number of Asian Americans who are living in poverty or are exploited because of their race and susceptible position within American society. Vietnamese Americans find themselves even more susceptible as the result of the military conflict in Vietnam. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, in her book *This is All I Choose to Tell*, claims that “Vietnamese American writers, because of their connection to the Viet Nam War and because they are people of color, encounter stronger pressure of representation than other Asian American immigrants” (2). The connection that Vietnamese Americans have to the Vietnam War puts them in a position where their identity is allocated by the dominant culture. However, as Wu points out, military conflicts abroad create dangerous situations for all Asian Americans on the domestic front: “if ordinary people were to act out their aggressions toward Asia, they would hurt not Asians but Asian Americans. They cannot reach Asia, but they can easily hit Asian Americans” (11). Asian Americans are not vulnerable only to violence because of the Vietnam War but also of erasure from national consideration. Lisa Lowe’s, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, underscores how the American desire to forget the war can lead to a desire to forget Vietnamese people. Lowe points to the way that in order to become American, Asians are

forced into a “‘forgetting’ [of] the history of war in Asia and adopting the national historical narrative that disavows the existence of an American imperial project.” However, this is almost impossible since “immigrants retain precisely the memories of imperialism that the U.S. nation seeks to forget” (27, 17). As “the U.S. nation seeks to forget” its involvement in the Vietnam War, and imperialism in general, it eliminates Vietnamese people along with the topic of the Vietnam War.

Food studies is an important disciplinary area of study and way to access the literature of marginalized minorities, because of the major role food plays in life. Food is a common denominator among all people; however, it works not only as an equalizer that brings people together, but also as a dividing force. Sidney W. Mintz, author of *Sweetness and Power*, a book focused on how sugar and its production have altered lives in Western society, is sensitive to the way food can bring people together; food and its consumption forge “a bond, created simply by partaking of food, linking human beings with one another” (4). Food production and consumption vary drastically between cultures, regions of the globe, and even among individuals within the same societies. Mintz claims that “human beings never eat every edible and available food in their environment” (3). The fastidious approach to food that humans exhibit creates a space in which the identity of an individual can be articulated.

Individualization through food is seen in the cultural adage ‘you are what you eat.’ Food choices are a direct reflection of how one sees oneself and how one wishes to be seen by others. Mintz asserts that “what we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others” (4). The representation of self and

perspective of others through food is especially true when there are a variety of food choices from different cultures available. Critical consideration of food production and consumption represents a door that could lead to increased cultural understanding and solidarity across cultural lines.

The area of food scholarship has grown rapidly in recent years with more critics focusing on everything from the way that food can represent identity to the role of food in cultural connection, to how global factors affect food distribution and consumption and beyond. The growth of food scholarship is, in my opinion, overdue, and Wenying Xu claims that this lag in the scholarship is due to “the classic philosophy in the West ... [which] regards personhood as an autonomous and disembodied mind. Any philosophical attention to the embodied self is often deemed to be ordinary and banal” (4). That is, food has been ignored as a significant part of the subjectivity because it is linked to the body and not the mind. Further, connection to food has been stigmatized in certain ways, since as Xu points out, “many of those who grow and prepare food do not occupy the full status of personhood in the Western philosophical tradition, and these people are, more often than not, manual laborers, women, and people of color” (4). This concentration of minorities, both large and small, within the realm of food may lead some to believe that food scholarship is less academic than other forms of criticism, or that it is a womanly pursuit, the woman’s work of literary criticism. As Xu observes, food scholarship “persists in being associated with the mundane and feminine, and thus is often regarded as undeserving of scholarly attention. Food talk is often thought of as women’s conversation” (162). One of my aims in this project is to push against that thinking and demonstrate the relevance and seriousness of work within food studies. Additionally, this

project will explore these questions: how can food be used as platform for identity creation? How might writers express cultural or individual identity through food? What are the implications of food production and consumption? How is globalization effecting the production and consumption of food? Could cuisine be an effective and appropriate way to introduce oneself to a new culture? How do marginalized minorities find a way to express their identity within a larger cultural context? How might marginalized minorities use food production and consumption to their benefit? What are the advantages of analyzing food in literature? As Stephanie H. Chan proclaims in her essay "'Refusing Food': Asia Pacific American Eaters in the World as Pedagogical Example," "asking questions about food is the way one can be most critical and politically responsible" (35-36).

“Make myself over from the inside out”:
Food, Appropriation, and Diasporic Resistance in the Works of
Bich Minh Nguyen

“Food permits a person ... to partake each day of the national past” –Roland Barthes (*Food and Culture* 24)

“Each of the family-owned restaurants that have rented a space competes energetically to sell a consumable introduction to the national culture its owners represent, giving the misleading impression that to eat is to understand” –Frank Wu (*Yellow* 217)

“Their parents were anxious for them to fit into Grand Rapids and found the three quickest avenues: food, money, and names” –Bich Minh Nguyen (*Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* 48)

Bich Minh Nguyen, a Vietnamese American author, published her memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, in 2008. As the title suggests, the memoir looks at her experience of growing up an immigrant in America through the crosshairs of food and culture. *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* is an examination of how food, both traditional Vietnamese food and archetypal American food, plays a part in her cultural assimilation and identity. One of the narrator’s first encounters with her white peers results in being called “Chop suey,” but it takes several years before seeing canned chop suey in a grocery store for her to “wonde[r] at being called a mix of noodles and vegetables” (75). In her memoir, the narrator delves into the desire she had for commercialized American food products in her youth and her attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture of white American society. At the narrator’s school, lunches became a

platform which “displayed status, class, and parental love,” but the narrator is most concerned with the “one shining element” that might make her lunch acceptable to her peers: “the right dessert snack ... [such as] a Hostess Cupcake” (75, 76). The narrator’s assimilation is further complicated by her Mexican American step-mother, Rosa, and step-sister, Crissy, who both enter her life when she is three. While Rosa throws herself into her family life by attending Vietnamese functions, embracing Vietnamese food, and “impressing us all [the Nguyen family] with her effort to master chopsticks,” Crissy, a pre-teen at the time of her mother’s marriage to the narrator’s father, is resistant to the inclusion of Vietnamese culture and cuisine in her life (22). The narrator finds herself torn between a multi-ethnic identity, a battle represented, on the one hand, by her step-mother’s urging to embrace her heritage, her Vietnamese origin, and on the other hand, by her dream of becoming a full-fledged American unidentified by ethnicity.

A text that thematizes this second pole of the immigrant’s struggle, the desire to assimilate, is *Pioneer Girl*. *Pioneer Girl*, Nguyen’s second novel, came out in 2015 and tracks Lee Lien on her journey to discover her family’s history and place herself culturally as a second-generation Vietnamese American. Structurally, the novel intertwines the plot with that of *The Little House on the Prairie* series. Lee and her family are traveling throughout the Midwest just as the Ingalls do; in addition, the Liens are looking for a place to call home just as the Ingalls family did. *Pioneer Girl* uses the overarching structure of popular culture and myth to map the Asian American experience onto the American narrative. While many reviewers have focused on the issues of white entitlement and the tensions between first and second-generation immigrants, the issue of food has been largely overlooked. This is ironic, since in an NPR interview, Nguyen says about *The Little House on the Prairie* series, “I was obsessed with these

books and obsessed with the way they depicted family and food.” In *Pioneer Girl*, food develops as a shaping force in Lee’s interpretation of the dominant culture and how one can assimilate into it. Additionally, Lee spends significant amounts of time in the restaurants where her family works, and this serves as a site of interaction between Lee and the dominant white culture.

Arjun Appadurai points to the ways that the discourse of eating is brought into the discussion of nationalism and globalization. On the global scale, Appadurai claims that “the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular” (Robertson 17). Appadurai’s analysis of the nation reveals that “there is a battle of the imagination, with state and nation seeking to cannibalize one another” going on within the nation (34). To cannibalize something is “to take parts from one unit for incorporation in, and completion of, another (of a similar kind)” (OED). The dominant culture cannibalizes the food of minority cultures to augment their cuisine, and in this way cannibalization becomes a stand-in for consumption. The cannibalization Appadurai speaks of is concerned with having control; in the case of the nation, it is control over the dissemination of information, and on the global scale, it is about the capacity to claim both “the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular.” These are connected in that controlling information is directly related to how people are seen and even who is seen. The ability to be both “universal” and “particular” means that one stands with the majority and incurs all the benefits that accompany that position, yet is still seen as an individual with unique thoughts and desires. Finding one’s place between or within

those positions is the process of assimilation. Lisa Lowe, in her book *Immigrant Acts*, identifies the two poles of “cultural nationalism” and “assimilation” with “cultural nationalism” as the place where “the concepts of racialized group identity and ... cultural identity is essentialized” (75). Therefore assimilation requires one to step outside, to some extent, one’s own “racialized group identity.” Assimilation becomes problematic when outside groups are forced to assimilate not as themselves but into specific, singular categories laid out by the dominant culture. Nguyen’s, *Pioneer Girl*, has distinct parallels to her memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. In both of these works, Nguyen uses the arena of food, where one culture tries to consume the other, to deconstruct the ways that the dominant culture appropriates food to create a singular experience which is applied to Vietnamese Americans while Vietnamese Americans, in turn, appropriate food for the purpose of assimilation on their own terms.

Dominant Culture and the Appropriation of Asian Food

The dominant culture appropriates food through the Americanization of Asian food. In *Pioneer Girl*, this Americanization comes through in the “sweet, sweet, viscous sauces” and “array of fried” foods prevalent in the Chinese buffets which are familiar even in rural areas (50). Traditional Asian cuisine is transformed into a fried, sugary, cheesy version that barely, if at all, resembles the original. Traditional Asian cuisine is sugar-coated and made palatable to the dominant American culture. Lee identifies the food as “arbitrarily labeled” and is irritated that it comes in the form of premade sauces “that arrive in giant plastic jars or frozen blocks” (50). Nguyen underscores the mass production that goes into this Americanized Asian food. In her memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, she identifies mass production as a characteristic of American food using Pringles, McDonald’s burgers, and Hostess baked goods as examples

throughout. When breaking down the anatomy of the Chinese buffet, Lee sums up the true monotony and appropriation of the situation in an ironic tone: “It’s all gloriously American” (50). The use of “gloriously” shows how Lee is aware of the privileging that Americanized Asian food is given over a culturally located version. Asian cuisine is retrofitted for American palates and in the process is divested of its ethnic roots; thus it becomes a new form of American food.

Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, author of *Reading Asian American Literature*, claims that while “offering ethnic food to someone from an outgroup may be a genuine gesture of sharing,” in the ethnic restaurant industry, “the symbolic meaning of inclusiveness” does not apply (57). According to Wong, the Americanized version of Asian food that is provided in the Chinese buffets of *Pioneer Girl* is an “appeal for acceptance by the mainstream customer” (Wong 57). Significantly, it is that customer “who has the power to decide what is agreeably authentic and what is unthinkable outlandish” even within the confines of the Chinese buffet (Wong 57). The power held by the customer, most often a member of the dominant white culture, is the force behind the Americanization of Asian cuisine. There is an imbalance when the person determining what is culturally credible in cuisine is not familiar with that cultural. Jacqui Kong notes a similar problem in her article “Feasting with the ‘Other’: Transforming the Self in Food Adventuring Television Programs”: it is “the issue of ‘difference’ which underlies” the cultural exchange and not the issue of food (45). When that “difference” is found to be unpalatable to members of the dominant culture, they simply demand an Americanized version. The Americanization of Asian food is problematic because it fails to adequately represent Asians American cuisine and reduces the multiplicity that cuisine and the people associated with it to a singular experience.

The Americanization of Asian food is a way of reducing multiple experiences to a singular experience. Many of the Chinese buffets that Lee speaks of in *Pioneer Girl* have more than just Chinese cuisine available and “take a pan-Asian approach, with California rolls, pad Thai, chewy parcels of bulgogi” instead of sticking to one specific Asian cuisine (50-51). A multitude of Asian food offerings in a single place denies the multiplicity and uniqueness of individual Asian cuisines. There are other buffets that “go for broad ethnic variety,” spanning European, Mexican, and traditional American options (51). The inclusion of other cuisines reflects the convergence of multiple cultures into a singular culinary experience. There are distinctions made between the cuisine of northern and southern French food, and northern and southern Italian food, but not among the wide swath of Asian cuisine. Nguyen implies that, by lumping all unique Asian cuisines into a single experience, the dominant culture denies individual identity to Asian Americans. This consolidation does not stop at food either, with the décor of Chinese buffets subject to this singularity as well: the “Dusty red lanterns; pictures of dragons and fishermen; paper place mats printed with the signs of the Chinese zodiac” are all standard for Asian-American restaurants (49). The décor does not truly represent any one Asian culture and certainly does not represent a specifically Chinese culture. As Wong notes, Asian American restaurants are never just about the food: “the activity does not merely entail a matter-of-fact exchange of food for money” (57). The Chinese buffets in *Pioneer Girl* provide a platform for the dominant culture to simplify the myriad of cultures, cuisines, and individual possibilities into one easy-to-swallow bite.

One might argue that the inclusion of other cuisines in the Chinese buffet is a positive trait that represents some form of cultural hybridity or fusion cuisine. However, Wenying Xu, in

her text *Eating Identities*, points out, “in such fusion, the East and West often are not equal partners” (8). Xu’s sentiment is mirrored by Frank Wu in *Yellow* when he says that “criticism must be reciprocal and between equals” (225). There is little equality or reciprocity in the inclusion of other foods in the Chinese buffet, but that inclusion comes from a necessity to appeal to a larger number of diners, some of whom may be too intimidated to eat traditional, or even Americanized Chinese cuisine. The hybridity displayed by Chinese buffets in *Pioneer Girl* is reminiscent of Lisa Lowe’s definition of hybridity: “the formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations” (67). Lowe goes on to elaborate this imbalance:

hybridization is not the ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities. It is the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives. (82)

The “unsynthetic power relations” between the dominant culture and Asian Americans drive the inclusion of food at Chinese buffets, and the “violences of the U.S state” force Asian Americans into the position of culinary provider for that dominant culture. The mere presence of American-style foods and the Americanization of Asian food privileges the dominant culture. Roland Barthes claims that “food permits a person to partake each day of the national past” (*Food and Culture* 24). His quote applies to the white entitlement of many Chinese buffet diners in *Pioneer Girl* who see America as having the only “national past” worth dining on. The quote also applies to Crissy in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, the narrator’s teenaged stepsister who

rebels against her mother's remarriage by distancing herself from the Vietnamese heritage of her stepfamily. Crissy reacts to Vietnamese foods by "running away, screaming, 'NASTY!'" (45). Crissy is not simply rejecting Vietnamese food but Vietnamese culture as well. This rejection is why she refuses to attend Vietnamese parties with her mother and Vietnamese family. The memoir makes clear that Crissy is not alone in her reaction to the girls' appetites and their white peers recoil at Noi, Lee's grandmother, and her habit of harvesting mushrooms which grow on the family's lawn. The inclusion of Americanized food is a way for the dominant culture to believe they are having a new experience while retaining the comfort of the national front line. The dominant culture wholly believes what Wu points out as "the misleading impression that to eat is to understand" (217). The Chinese buffets of *Pioneer Girl* show how members of the dominant culture seek to have the illusion of culinary multiplicity and cultural compassion while experiencing the safety of culinary and cultural singularity.

Dominant Culture and the Single Narrative of Asian American Experience

In Nguyen's works, the members of the dominant culture are not concerned that their singular experience of Asian cuisine represents cultural locality. Their concern lies in that singular experience representing what they believe to be an authentic cultural experience. In *Pioneer Girl* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, there is an expectation from Chinese buffets, and no matter where they are or who runs them, they resemble each other in décor as well as food. When eating at a Chinese buffet, cuisine based in a specific location or culture takes a backseat to ensuring that the right face is representing the dining experience of the dominant culture. There is little concern about the recipe, ingredients, or preparer coming from a specific Asian locale so long as the face clearing the dirty plate and taking payment for, what Lee blandly

describes as, the “\$5.99 at lunch and \$8.99 at dinner” meal, functions for the dominant culture as a stand in for a multitude of cultures (*Pioneer Girl* 51). The dominant culture makes a half-hearted attempt at understanding other cultures through watered-down versions of their food. The food, even the overall experience, does not represent any kind of cultural consistency, but the dominant culture views it that way. The Liens, in *Pioneer Girl*, defer to this reduction of experience because they are seeking to provide financially for their family. They partake in what Frank Chin calls “‘food pornography’: making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways” (Wong 55). They submit to jobs that are sometimes demeaning and most often contrived because “the ability to obtain food ... is related to the ability to work around the terms set by powerful others” (Wong 55). These “powerful others” that surround the Vietnamese Americans have a demand for a specific kind of dining experience, and in order to survive the Liens must act the part of being “exotic.” Because it is not important to the dominant culture that the ethnic dining experience is culturally significant, all Asians or Asian Americans are given authority to cook any Asian cuisine, regardless of training or specific cultural ties.

Within the dominant culture, Asian Americans are denied a multiplicity of professional positions and historically have been channeled into a limited number of industries, food service being one of those limited options. In the first chapter of his book *Yellow*, Wu provides a list of potential identities or “masks to wear” provided by the dominant white culture: he could be “a laborer laying railroad tracks, ... a kamikaze pilot ... an advertisement for Ginsu brand knives ... [or] a chef serving up dog stew,” while his female relatives “were Madame Butterfly from the mail order bride catalog ... [or] the dragon lady in a kimono” (5-6). The list Wu supplies

highlights the finite possibilities available to Asian Americans in what Anne Anlin Cheng describes as the “exclusion-yet-retention” attitude of America, where Asian Americans are never allowed to be fully American, yet America never fully rejects them either (qtd. in *A Psychoanalytical Approach* 17). Nguyen explores the liminal but specific space granted to Vietnamese Americans in the restaurant industry in *Pioneer Girl*. This is seen through Lee’s parents, who are not Chinese and have no training as chefs, “but it didn’t matter because the customers didn’t know the difference” (*Pioneer Girl* 53). The Lien family’s continuous employment in the restaurant industry emphasizes that Asian Americans have been forced into jobs that do not necessarily suit them or represent their inherent talents or goals. As Wu claims, “the gathering of Asian Americans in particular occupations is the product of circumstances beyond their control” (53). Xu expresses the same position as Wu when identifying that “there is nothing natural or culturally predetermined about Asian Americans’ vital relationship with food” (*Eating Identities* 12). There are both “voluntary” and “involuntary identities” associated with Asian Americans and the “involuntary identities” frequently come from the dominant culture’s expectations (Wu 258). This becomes problematic because of the power “involuntary identities [have] in directing our lives” (Wu 258). Lee’s parents are pushed into jobs on the basis of those “involuntary identities.” The dominant culture does not respond to globalization in the way David Harvey suggests: “as spatial barriers diminish so we become much more sensitized to what the world’s spaces contain” (8). Instead of honing the ability to see the unique talents of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, the dominant culture sees what slots they need filled in society and relegates Asian Americans to those specific areas. The placement of Asians and Asian Americans in the workforce is a central idea in Lisa Lowe’s book

Immigrant Acts. She is interested in “the importance of Asia in the development of Western capitalism globally and the use of Asian labor in the development of capitalist America” (ix). Lowe's concerns are reflected in Nguyen's works, where the jobs Vietnamese Americans often find themselves in are the result of economic necessity, not cultural or personal indicators. This economic categorization exemplifies the perceived and enforced singularity of Asian Americans according to the dominant culture.

The dominant culture creates a narrative about ethnic food's cultural locality in order to feel culturally open-minded. However, as Frank Wu reminds us, “people can eat Asian foods but still have contempt for Asian peoples ... [and] eating at a Chinese restaurant is not the same as ‘breaking bread’ with Chinese people” (223). People within the dominant culture often think that ethnic dining creates an exemption from racism; as Wenying Xu claims “we demonstrate our cosmopolitan and adventurous selves by trying and relishing exotic dishes” (4). Wong suggests that dominant culture diners are looking for an ethnic “dining experience to be a cultural excursion that is at once adventurous and tame [while] leaving their sense of cultural superiority intact at the end” (57). Being culturally open-minded in the culinary sense blocks any guilt that people within the dominant culture might feel about how Asian Americans are, or have historically been, treated in society. It is not necessary for members of the dominant culture to ensure Asian Americans are properly treated and represented if they have an appreciation for Asian cuisine, no matter how Americanized that cuisine may be. The dominant culture appropriates Asian food and then appreciates the Americanized version of that food as one mode of avoiding the reality of the marginalization of Asian Americans.

In *Pioneer Girl*, the Vietnamese American experience and cuisine is undistinctive and reduced to a singular point because of the entitlement of the dominant white culture. Wong alludes to the idea that “white society tends to treat all Asians alike (the derogatory *Chink* is ‘generic’)” which is not dissimilar to the reductive process behind white society’s treatment of Asian cuisine (61). The “broad ethnic variety” of foods available at the Chinese buffets in *Pioneer Girl* represents the way the dominant culture expects all Asian Americans to incorporate the American experience into their cuisine (51). In his book, *Yellow*, Wu brings up the fact that “throughout history, assimilation has been compulsory rather than voluntary,” and, further, that this forced assimilation is echoed in the culinary inclusion of Chinese buffets in *Pioneer Girl* (238). Both Wong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, author of *This Is All I Choose to Tell*, note that the language of the food chain is related to white entitlement, which not only is patriarchal, but also encourages tension and competition between races. Wong sees this language in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Warrior Woman*, where the character of Brave Orchid, because of her gender, is at “the bottom of the pecking order (which is, in fact, a feeding order)” (28). Pelaud relates this language to the tensions between races in America using the travelogue *Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham to claim that Asian Americans, and Chinese Americans in particular, are “immediately relegated to the bottom of a system ... describe[d] as a sort of food chain” (69). The food chain is reimagined as a metaphor for racial and social hierarchy, and just as in Alexander Pope’s *Great Chain of Being*, it is vital to know one’s place within that hierarchy and even more important to stay in that place: “Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell, / Aspiring to be angels, men rebel: / And who but wishes to invert the laws / Of order, sins against the Eternal Cause” (127-130). The hierarchy of this food chain is established

by the dominant culture, and unsurprisingly they place themselves at the top. Both the patriarchy and the dominant culture seek to punish those women and minorities who aspire to equality, full-fledged citizenship, or even a hybrid identity that recognizes their indigenous past. The entitlement behind the culinary expectations of Chinese buffets exists because it is a one-sided requirement; a member of the dominant culture would never expect to see Tom Yum soup at an Italian restaurant or be disappointed by its absence.

The style of eating at a Chinese buffet also exemplifies white entitlement. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the reader sees the narrator, in her attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture through food and mimicry, mirroring this entitlement when eating with her own family at the "Ponderosa" buffet (211). After describing the vast quantities of food available, the narrator says she would "leave plates of uneaten food" and show no concern over the waste (211). It is not until she is older that she can "see the myth of endlessness" that "all you can eat is a lure and a dare" (219). The narrator, whose appetite and eating ability is shown to be nearly bottomless in the rest of the memoir, engages in this wasteful eating only when in the buffet setting. Her attempt to embody the ideology of the dominant culture results in her wasteful actions. As Lee says of the buffet experience "a kind of determination tends to come over people ... like the food is free, that the whole of it is yours. That you ought to claim more and more, even if you don't eat it" (*Pioneer Girl* 51). It is not important to "gauge your hunger to your greed" because the food all belongs to the dominant culture (*Pioneer Girl* 50). Words like "greed," "claim," and "determination" highlight the entitlement of the dominant culture. There is no reason to limit the self when there is endless bounty and endless refills. This mirrors the pioneer mindset toward land seen in *The Little House on the Prairie* series, which

plays a role in both of Nguyen's works. When the Ingallses move to Kansas, Pa sees the land, as Nguyen narrates his desire, as one long buffet line and is "certain that the government will seize the Indian Territory and hand it to white settlers," so he simply settles the family to reap the bounty of the land and await the anticipated fortune cookie ending to his land grab meal (*Pioneer Girl* 125). He does not think about the Indians or their rights to the land; he only thinks about taking his share of the land, to which he is entitled by right of his whiteness.

Food Appropriation and Identity

Xu claims in her introduction to *Eating Identities* "that food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others" (2). Food is a way of identifying oneself. Pelaud describes identity as "the relation between the self ... and the group" (64). While Pelaud is more concerned with "the articulation of remembered emotional disturbances," (64) she pairs her thoughts with James W. Brown's idea that "'appetite attests to, and even comes to symbolize, the space existing between subject and object, between 'me' and the 'world'" (18). The combination of these two takes on identity show how food becomes an important bridge between ourselves and others and how the distinction between self and other is a major factor in the creation of identity. Eileen Chia-Ching Fung, who wrote the introduction for the journal of *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* special issue "Teaching Food and Foodways in Asian American Literature and Popular Culture," identifies this combination of food and identity as well. She notes that "the roles of the cook and the eater ... bear information for developing personal and communal identities" and that "physical aspects of hunger and appetite become discrete but pervasive markers of ethnic, gender, and sexual identifications" (Fung ii). Her thoughts on identity are applicable to

Nguyen's works since both memoir and fiction deal with the coming-of-age story of a Vietnamese-American female.

Nguyen uses the appropriation of food as a path to assimilation for immigrants. In *Pioneer Girl*, Lee's and Sam's attempts at assimilation can be seen through their fondness for Americanized Asian food such as the deep fried crab and cream cheese wonton. As Lee describes, "Sam and I knew we were American because we loved those things the most" (54). By mimicking the dominant culture's food consumption, Lee and Sam are trying to establish themselves as Americans. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the narrator does something similar when she identifies "the three quickest avenues" to assimilation as "food, money, and names" (48). As a child, the narrator has little control over her name: "Who would allow me to change," and she can do even less to effect a change in her family's economic situation (49). This leaves food as her most likely option for assimilating into the dominant culture, and thus she pushes her stepmother to provide essential American food like "McDonald's ... Campbell's soup and Chef Boyardee" over traditional Vietnamese foods such as "pho and sautés" (48). When her stepmother fails to provide food that is adequately American, the narrator feels "as if Rosa herself were preventing me from fitting in and being like everyone else" (52). Wenying Xu's article "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*," states that food "organizes signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others" (8). The role of food in the memoir becomes vital to the creation of identity for immigrants, and the narrator, like Lee in *Pioneer Girl*, believes that if she eats like an American, she will become an American, and more importantly that she will become accepted and seen as an American by others.

The role of food in the development of identity is exemplified by the different generational reactions. In both of Nguyen's works, the older generation has less interest in American food than the younger generation, and "mothers cooked two meals ... [one] for the elders ... [and one] for the kids" (*Stealing Buddha's Dinner* 48). Wu shares a similar anecdote in *Yellow* and describes how as a child he went to "potluck meals that had Chinese dishes for the adults and American options for the children" (305). Even when the older generation incorporates American food into their diet, like Ong-Hai's enjoyment of "sugary breakfasts, especially things like Pop-Tarts," they still retain their cultural roots (*Pioneer Girl* 121). In Nguyen's works this ability to retain culture is related to the connection the older generation has with the production of cultural cuisine. Both grandparents in Nguyen's works have strong cultural ties to Vietnam, and both are directly involved in cultural food production. While the older generation is seen in some cases to eat and even enjoy American food, they find a way to assimilate to the dominant culture on their own terms and without sacrificing their own cultural roots. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the narrator's father, uncles, and grandmother, Noi, routinely attend parties hosted by Vietnamese friends, and Noi keeps up her practice of offering food to the Buddha statue even when Rosa and Crissy, who are not practicing Buddhists, join the family. Noi incorporates the new without neglecting the old in her life. When the narrator finally meets her mother, at the end of the memoir, they go to lunch at a Chinese restaurant and then to a bakery where she buys the narrator a mooncake, but not the mooncake shaped like "a dragon [or] a dollar sign" but the mooncake shaped like "the fat happy Buddha, his face scrunched up in laughter" (233). She chooses the mooncake specific to the narrator, the Buddha, and not the more generic Asian form of the dragon. Additionally, it is

“the fat happy Buddha” as if he somehow knew the narrator’s mother would make the selection particular to her and not to the universal idea of Asianness. Even if the older generation does not assimilate they are not as hampered as the younger generation is by the lack of assimilation. This is because the more established identity, seen in the older generation, does not submit as easily to the pressures of the dominant culture. Important to remember when thinking about Nguyen’s work in the context of intergenerational relations is Lisa Lowe’s comment that “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians” (63).

However, an identity still in the making, represented by the younger generation, is much more susceptible to those same pressures, and the youth often have more contact with white peers which can result in additional peer pressure. This additional contact with white peers may also affect the younger generations’ adverse reaction to traditional ethnic foods since, as Pelaud points out, first-generation children have a desire to distance themselves from their immigrant parents and grandparents as a way of furthering their own assimilation (95). Since the younger generation is in close living proximity and guardianship to the older generation, this distancing is often channeled through foodways. However, Stephanie Chan uses the film adaption of *The Joy Luck Club* to exemplify how “food provides occasions for inter-generational connection” (31). This becomes apparent in the “cha gio” making scene between Noi and the narrator in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, which I will explore in more depth later (248). Ong-Hai’s enjoyment of “Pop-Tarts” presents a somewhat special case when compared against Wong’s

statement that “the American-born may be said to suffer from a collective ‘sweet tooth’” (44).

Wong furthers this by claiming that “the children, then, are more interested in the consumerist aspect of food than the substantive” (45). And although the narrator is not “American-born,” in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* she certainly exhibits this particular kind of “sweet tooth” and pursues the “consumerist aspect of food” with her desire for brand name and restaurant food.

Additionally, pricier brand name and restaurant food combine two of the three elements she identifies as avenues to assimilation “food” and “money” (48).

In *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, the dominant culture’s power and privilege in the realm of food is seen through proper noun capitalization: “Chef Boyardee” is capitalized, while traditional Vietnamese food, “pho,” is written without capitalization (52). American food is represented by brands and specific foods that resist replication, while Vietnamese food can be reproduced in the home. These brands reflect the mass produced quality of American food that the narrator highlights in her memoir. The food is more significant and in some way more special because it cannot be made by anyone or in any place. One of the few examples of homemade American food, Toll House cookies, still manages to uphold this power imbalance. The narrator herself emphasizes the brand of “Nestlé’s Toll House” by thinking, when she first hears of them, “you name your cookies” (57). Later she dissects the name by analyzing that “each chocolate chip [was] a reminder of the toll, the price of admission;” the toll that the narrator must pay for assimilation and social acceptance (71). Even non-commercialized, homemade food requires sacrifice for Lee. The lack of capitalization in her memoir is present even when she experiences positive culinary involvement with her grandmother. An intricate scene details the making of “*cha gio*” where “a forkful of the filling on a triangle of *banh trang*”

results in a delicious dish that the narrator says she “ate slowly, trying to memorize the flavors” (248). Even in this scene, which emphasizes familial and culinary comfort, the lack of capitalization orthographically sends a perspective that Vietnamese cuisine that is second in importance to American food. The use of italics creates a feeling of foreignness surrounding Vietnamese food. However, Nguyen’s lack of capitalization concerning Vietnamese foods opens up the possibility of viewing Vietnamese food, at least for Lee, as accessible. This accessibility can be seen in the “cha gio” scene; Lee is included in the production and consumption of this food in an atmosphere of safety and acceptance. The “cha gio” scene comes only a page after the narrator fantasizes about being an adult so she can eat whatever she wants, thinking “I could make myself over from the inside out” (247). Here the narrator’s thought process reinforces the idea that she can become a part of and be accepted by the dominant culture through consumption.

Asian American Appropriation of Food

The appropriation of food for the purpose of assimilation is a two-way street, and thus becomes a site of resistance for the narrator of *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* and Lee toward the dominant culture. Lisa Lowe argues that “Asian American cultural productions [are] countersites to U.S. national memory and national culture” (4). While Lowe speaks of artistic, specifically literary, cultural productions, food can be seen as a cultural production, and Lowe further argues that “aesthetic representation is always also a debate about political representation” (4). Thus the realm of food, where “aesthetic representation” is an important factor, becomes a place for the “political representation” of a people who are all but erased by “U.S. national memory and national culture.” By including the “*cha gio*” scene with her

grandmother, easily one of the most positive moments of familial connection in the memoir, the narrator is resisting an assimilation that demands immigrants erase their cultural ties in order to join the dominant culture. In *Pioneer Girl* this resistance is present as well, but Ong Hai, Lee's grandfather, takes the role of food maker, and "banh mi" becomes the representative food for Vietnamese culture (102). Lee supports her grandfather's culinary pursuits and helps him craft his "banh mi" recipe. Just as in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the relationship with the grandparent in *Pioneer Girl* is the strongest and most supportive in the book.

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Nguyen accents Vietnamese diasporic resistance to complete assimilation through the food relationship between herself and her stepsister Crissy. The narrator says, "whatever she liked, the rest of us siblings liked" (134). The narrator is accustomed to blindly accepting assimilation through Crissy's consumptive patterns: "I was used to following Crissy's orders on what to eat," which never include Vietnamese or even Asian food (134). But there comes a day when the narrator "could not bring [herself] to eat what she offered that day" (134). Crissy's culinary control is questioned by the narrator in "a moment of withholding. A moment of dissent, marking myself as the one who would not go along" (134). In the same way that the narrator believes eating American food will help identify her as American, the rejection of Crissy's form of American food is a way for the narrator to identify herself as different from the dominant culture. Yet in this case the difference is positive, since the narrator, and not the dominant culture, is the one doing the "withholding." She is asserting her identity and refuses to accept a form of assimilation that requires her to relinquish her own desires and tastes, which are a reflection of her culture.

Food becomes a way for the narrator to establish an identity all her own. However, her identity is a hybrid one that allows her to become part of the dominant culture through cuisine such as the “hot dog, hamburger, grilled cheese sandwich,” while maintaining the culinary roots that tie her to her culture and ancestors (*Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* 200). Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his multi-part documentary on African Americans, claims that people access their ancestors through food (Ep. 1). This may account for why, in both *Pioneer Girl* and *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, the strongest ties to cultural cuisine come through the grandparent. Food and language are the first learned cultural indicators and also the last to leave a person (*Eating Identities* 26). They create a link to family, culture, and an ancestral homeland. The link to homeland created through food is especially important to diasporic people, which Lee represents even as a first-generation Vietnamese American and the narrator of *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* exemplifies as a Vietnamese immigrant.

Nguyen’s use of food into her works puts her in a prime position to comment on the contemporary issues surrounding cuisine and race happening today. In fact, along with fellow Asian American writers Karissa Chen and Celeste Ng, Nguyen wrote a poetic response to Calvin Trillin’s poem *Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?*², which was published in *The New Yorker* early in April. Calvin Trillin, as Timothy Yu points out, “is no Chinese food tourist, but a revered food writer with serious knowledge of Chinese regional cuisine,” yet his poem lacks cultural sensitivity even while demonstrating that “serious knowledge.” Trillin’s poem lists different regional Chinese cuisines that have made their way onto the American plate without

² See appendix A for full text

excitement or delight but with trepidation “as each brand-new province appears” waiting to enter the American food scene (Trillin). Nguyen, Chen, and Ng’s poem *The World is Our Oyster/Sauce*³, is directed toward Trillin beginning ironically with “Calvin, that was a real nice poem” and follows the heroic couplet style Trillin used but carries a tone of humor along with a delicate balance between indifference to Trillin’s attitude and a desire to set him straight about Chinese cuisine. *New Yorker* director of communications Natalie Raabe claims that the poem was meant “to satirize ‘foodie’ culture” (Wong, Julia Carrie), yet this response is woefully inadequate to many Asian Americans, and Nguyen’s collective poem responds to just that:

You were aiming for funny, some kind of satire—

What you got instead was a big ol’ quagmire ...

But taking down hipsters at the expense of others is crazy.

Your intent might’ve been good, but the execution’s lazy

They even give Trillin a ‘voice’ in the poem:

‘You’re overreacting: it’s a parody,

You Asians really aren’t being fair to me!’

We’ve got news for you, my food critic friend:

There’s a lot more to Chinese food than chasing superficial trends (Chen).

³ See appendix B for full text

Timothy Yu also responded to Trillin's poem in a *New Republic* article titled "White Poets Want Chinese Culture Without Chinese People," which balks at the way Trillin's poem continues the white tradition of "white writers praising Chinese culture while ignoring Chinese people ... a China without the Chinese." Yu claims that Trillin "continues an American tradition of talking about Asia as if we Asians were not in the room," and the writers of *The World is Our Oyster/Sauce* seem to agree with him:

Yeah, there's good Chinese food from every province

But it's not there for you to mock or practice intolerance.

We're not a tool for your humor, not some literary prop.

We're real people, with real stories, not your personal backdrop.

The resistance to being a prop for white culture is the same argument Chinua Achebe gives in his essay "An Image of Africa" concerning Conrad's use of Africa and Africans. In a similar manner Yu argues that American poets use "Chinese objects, Chinese culture, and even Chinese bodies to express white American anxieties and desires". While Trillin's poem and the subsequent feedback refers to China, this form of food appropriation can be expanded to all of Asian cuisine. Nguyen's works respond to the prevalence of food appropriation in the dominant culture seen even today.

In her works, both fiction and memoir, Nguyen uses food appropriation against the dominant culture. While reading the Little House series in her memoir *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the narrator becomes fascinated by the pioneer lifestyle and says, "after I read the *Little*

House books I began to pretend that bacon was salt pork and that I was Laura herself” (158).

The narrator makes the imaginative leap of food and identity, placing herself directly within the Ingalls family, whom she sees as “the epitome of American” (159). Nguyen opens a space for Vietnamese-Americans to assimilate to the dominant culture without requiring them to abandon their unique cultural heritage. The narrator of *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* and the character of Lee can have their assimilation cake and eat it too. Her work justifies the presence of Vietnamese Americans, and in a larger sense Asian Americans in general, in the landscape of the dominant culture, and makes them more complex than a social caricature or single industry participant. Through her works, Nguyen challenges the face of the dominant culture to reflect a more accurate, lived experience of what it is to be American.

Make Your Dinner, Make Your Identity: Food Production and

Identity in *Solibo Magnificent*

“The tongue is thus the target of a double colonization: that of eating and that of speech” –
Valérie Loichot (“Between Breadfruit and Masala: Food Politics in Glissant’s Martinique” 126)

“Culinary references are also inscribed in our history” – Patrick Chamoiseau (*Solibo Magnificent*
141)

Patrick Chamoiseau is a Caribbean novelist born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, in the early 1950’s and educated in France. Martinique has a deep colonial history, having been a French colony for many years and a hub of colonial Caribbean activity during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. The island of Martinique was used by the French as a site for the growth and production of sugarcane as explored by Sidney Mintz in his book *Sweetness and Power*. The French have had majority control over Martinique, and that French influence can still be felt today and is further reinforced by Martinique’s status as a Department of France. French influence, however, is only a part of Martinique’s cultural heritage, and one cannot discount the cultural influences that resulted from the Atlantic slave trade and the African influence. Chamoiseau is sensitive to the hybrid nature of Martinique and Martiniquian identity. As is clear in his novel, *Solibo Magnificent*, which is an examination of this hybrid identity. Chamoiseau’s characters face the challenge of juggling their colonial past and its influence, which is felt even in the present day, as well as the portions of their identity which are not French and often fight against that French colonial influence. These various cultural influences each bring their own culinary norms and traditions to bear on Martinique. Chamoiseau uses

these contrasting culinary influences as a stage on which to play out the future and creation of Caribbean identity.

In the novel, the narrator, along with a dozen or so other Martiniquian locals, are accused of and detained for the murder of Solibo Magnificent, a local man known for his speaking skills and admired by all. While being held, the prisoners alternate between in the present episodes of police brutality and in the past stories of Solibo's life, one of the major stories being his cooking of a shark stew. The novel *Solibo Magnificent* makes use of the decisions behind food choices made by Solibo and Congo, an older local man, to frame a statement concerning the formation of identity in Martinique. *Solibo Magnificent* favors food production over purchase; by advocating for a mixed cultural production of food, the novel demonstrates that Martiniquian identity is both a hybrid of cultures and an identity, history, and cultural matrix still in-progress.

1. Production over Purchase

The scene where Solibo makes shark stew illustrates the novel's preference for production over purchase. Production here being the making of a whole from separate parts or ingredients while purchase is merely buying a ready-made product that requires no interaction from the self. Solibo is a highly respected character in the novel, evidenced not only by the view other characters have of him but also in the way the novel offers a retelling of Solibo's life and a re-creation of him after his death. The narrator begins the book, a retelling of Solibo's life and death, by imploring his reader to "imagine only an upright Solibo Magnificent ... imagine Solibo in his most handsome days" (8). In his spontaneous making of the stew, Solibo produces

a dish instead of opting for a pre-made, purchased meal. The shark stew scene highlights the making of the stew by stretching out the narrative time: “he washed the rice longer than you would wash your underwear,” “taking his sweet little time,” until “finally, the time came” to make the stew itself (80, 82, 81). This elongated sense of time emphasizes the way in which production is a time-consuming process, wholly different from the quick process of purchasing a ready-made product. The prolonged sense of time Chamoiseau creates in this scene aligns with David Harvey’s statement that “the home becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression” (7). “Time-space compression” is the result of increasing globalization, or what Harvey calls “political-economic practices” (6), an ever increasing open globe that has begun the “annihilation of space through time,” a project “that has always lain at the center of capitalism’s dynamic” (7). However, the home becomes a site of resistance where “events ... become the focus of a contemplative memory, and hence a generator of a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion” (Harvey 7). The making of shark stew is one such event, and it has the effect intended by Harvey; it becomes “a contemplative memory” after Solibo’s death and works to create identity outside the capitalist export economy of Martiniquian colonial inheritance. The novel rewards the effort of production over the ease of purchase, and there are several mentions of Solibo’s renowned cooking skill: “you had to be careful not to bite your fingers, your mouth drooled so much” (80). Later in the novel, Solibo is also responsible for the vegetable soup that is prepared and served at Ma Gnam’s wake which feeds the “bottomless throats” of the wailing mourners (106). The productive actions of this highly respected character reflect the novel’s advocacy for a production over purchase mentality and lifestyle.

Food is not the only material that Solibo produces. Early on the novel says of Solibo: “he talked, voila ... he talked at every step, he talked to everyone” (9). The stories he tells are creative productions in themselves that, like the making of shark stew, are unscheduled but not wholly unexpected. People were not told that Solibo would be at Sidonise’s making stew, yet he still draws a crowd of devoted attendees, none of whom seems surprised to see him there. These attendees follow the smell of his food in order to find him, just as they would follow the sound of Sucette’s drum when looking to hear Solibo speak. Like the stew, Solibo uses the resources available to him to craft his stories and share them with his fellow islanders. These are in no way unlimited resources, but just as with the stew, Solibo is able to bring the bits and pieces he has together to make an appealing and representative story that satisfies the needs of his community and himself.

The ingredients of the Creole language that Solibo uses in his storytelling is also a production- a mixture of several languages and forms of expression. In his essay, “Caribbean Discourse,” Edouard Glissant points out the ways that slaves used the resource of Creole to make something that was denied to them: communication. Glissant says, “the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise” (124). Just as the police officers in *Solibo Magnificent* do not recognize storytelling as a legitimate job, the béké, identified in the *Solibo Magnificent* glossary as “white Creoles of Martinique, members of the old planter class and their descendants,” of colonial times, did not recognize Creole language hidden in “the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise” they heard (187). Arjun Appadurai sees a similar oversimplification happening in the analysis of “the new global cultural economy” that reduces the complexity of the situation and “cannot

any longer be understood in terms of existing center[core]-periphery models” (29).

Appadurai’s solution to this oversimplification is the framework of five different “scapes⁴” which are “fluid, irregular” and “deeply perspectival” (29). Solibo’s position as a producer of stories places him as a potential “mediascape” which in Appadurai’s terms is “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” (31). While Solibo is clearly avoiding electronic formats, he does “disseminate information,” and when he speaks it is a production. Solibo does not produce only shark stew within the novel; he also produces language and information. In the same way that slaves used what little was at their disposal to form a necessary part of life and community, language, Solibo uses what he has available to produce food and stories that aid his fellow islanders.

Solibo is not the only character to display this production over purchase mentality; Congo exhibits this trait as well. Congo is involved in the production of graters for the locally grown root vegetable manioc. Manioc may be the epitome of production over purchase because it requires so many steps before it can even be made edible. The tuber contains cyanide and must be grated, drained, ground, and dried before becoming a culinary ingredient (Chamoiseau 141). As the one responsible for the production of the manioc graters, Congo is associated with the first step in manioc’s evolution from poison to life-sustaining food. Congo’s role in the manioc process is significant because while “Solibo was of the word ... Congo was of the manioc” (141). Solibo’s reputation surrounding speaking is unchallenged, and this comparison highlights how accomplished Congo is in his role as maker of manioc graters.

⁴ I will not be delving into all of Appadurai’s “scapes” but further information can be found in his article “Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.”

Considering what a respected character Solibo is, there is little praise the novel could give that is higher than being favorably compared to him. On the opposite end of this social spectrum are the police officers who represent Caribbean identity that has been saturated with French influence and Western thinking. This saturation inspires their distaste for and mistreatment of the non-Westernized island characters.

One of these officers, Chief Sergeant Philémon Bouaffesse, is linked to Western identity through a purchase over production mentality. His nickname is one such tie. Behind his back he is called “Ti-Coca, Li’l Coke” (31). It is true that the sergeant’s squat body type, “short, massive, almost round like a bottle,” lends itself nicely to this nickname (31). However, the pre-made Western commodity status and sweetness of Coke cannot be ignored. Sidney Mintz, in his book *Sweetness and Power*, claims that “sucrose also supplies ‘body’ to soft drinks, because ‘a heavy liquid is more appealing to the mouth than water’” (206). In *Solibo Magnificent*, Chamoiseau links heaviness in the mouth, demonstrated by an inability to talk, and power structures; however, his characters do not find “heavy liquid [to be] more appealing” and are stifled by it. The heavy mouthfeel brought in by Bouaffesse symbolizes the weight of colonial power dynamics still in play. Bouaffesse demonstrates this weight when he silences Doudou-Ménar: Doudou goes to the police station to report Solibo’s death, and there she sees Bouaffesse with whom she had a brief romantic affair, and when they are in private, Bouaffesse allows Doudou to speak freely about the incident, which makes her feel “legalized and proud” (39). The “legalized” state Doudou finds herself in comes from having her story, her voice be heard by the authorities. However, when they arrive at Solibo’s body, the sergeant returns to the procedures laid out by power dynamics, and his men forcefully take control of the

bystanders who are relabeled as suspects. Doudou “still believing herself legitimized” attempts to get answers from Bouaffesse: “Pleeze, I’m not sure I understand what’s going on, on whom have you unleashed this gamut of words” but is refused by the sergeant, “whose voice seemed to deny most recent memories” (55, 56). Soon after Doudou is assaulted and later dies. She permanently loses her ability to voice her story or the injustices leveled against her, and Bouaffesse, the one person who could legitimize her, remains quiet.

The sergeant is represented symbolically as a purchase product and significantly one that cannot be authentically replicated in the home. The sergeant serves as a model for Lynn Marie Houston’s observation that “a Western lifestyle [is] informed by a system of economics that favors purchasing over individual production” (105). The novel states that “if [Bouaffesse] had been a vegetable, he would have naturally been a hot pepper, attracted to all sauces” (28). While on the surface this comparison may seem like praise concerning the sergeant’s link to the island and his culture, Chamoiseau leaves room for a more nuanced and potentially negative interpretation. Hot peppers are seen in other places in the novel (the shark stew is one example) but they are tempered with other local ingredients, which the sergeant is not. Being “attracted to all sauces” is significant given the wide use of sauces in French cuisine.

The totalizing effect of being “attracted to all sauces” also has an imperialistic tone. Just as France and other European nations are attracted to the imperialistic possibilities in all regions of the world, the sergeant, as a vegetable, is attracted to all the different “sauces” available in cuisine. The sergeant is not concerned about what “sauces” would be improved by the addition of hot pepper; he simply wants to be a part of all of them. Additionally, Chamoiseau prefaces this all with “if” instead of a stronger simile, for example, ‘as a vegetable.’

The sergeant is directly linked to a purchase mentality, which aligns him with Western identity despite his island heritage.

Another way the novel favors production over purchase is through the sense of time. For Congo and Sidonise, time has been established through their culinary production: the growth, harvest, and processing of manioc for Congo and the making and churning of sherbet for Sidonise. When these processes are affected by Western influence, the characters lose their sense of time. Sidonise's sense of time is clearly laid out in the novel: "as for Sidonise, there was once a time when her sherbet maker told her the time" (98). In the same way that Patricia Clark sees the "shifting [of] the emphasis away from Western modes of narration and narrative time to" Houston Baker's idea of "black women's time," Chamoiseau shows how shifting from the Martiniquian modes of cooking to the Western modes results in a disruption of Sidonise's own sense of "black women's time" (152). "Black women's time" functions in a way that "allows women to create narratives that reveal their allegiances to the past," a past which transforms "into 'an energetic after' that 'resonates a new *now*'" (152). Sidonise loses not only her connection to her past but also her ability to revitalize her black present with memories of a better past. Just as the stories of the suspect mourners fade to nothing but dust in the harsh light of the police van, Sidonise's prospects for a bright future are dimmed by her weak connection with her past. The loss of "black women's time" is directly related to the loss of connection. Once Sidonise switches to pre-made sherbet and no longer has a direct link to time, "she glided over the hours and everything else" (98). Without her culinary production, she becomes detached from the world around her and fails to fully engage in her own life.

Western influence leads to a reorganization of time for Congo. Congo was not always a maker of manioc graters; he was once a member of the agricultural process in Martinique, but is blacklisted after his involvement in demonstrations concerning worker's rights: "his unflinching participation in the agricultural strikes made him a pariah. No overseer called his name any longer on hiring day. He had to find himself another way to live" (141). This removal from the agricultural sector is the first step in the disruption of Congo's sense of time. He loses his natural yearly rhythm of planting and harvesting, but this sense of time is replaced by manioc and the multiple steps of its production. Along with the decrease in the need for his services, Congo's sense of time becomes intertwined with the Western transportation system: "all he knew about time was the planes taking off over his hutch into the airport sky" (98). The phrase "all he knew" highlights the colonial underestimation of indigenous people's intelligence and places Congo into a Western framework. Here what he knows is being attributed to him and not proclaimed by himself which denies him agency in the situation. The very "sky" is implicated in Western influence and overtaken by it.

Sidney Mintz explores the connection between food and time commenting that "the patterning of time is linked to the patterning of ingestion" (204). Mintz's connection holds true for Congo; when the local patterns of ingestion change from locally sourced produce, including manioc to patterns of ingestion based on Western standards, the pattern of Congo's time changes as well. Congo goes from being a field worker with a strong link to time through his work with the land and the progression of planting to harvest to occupying the fringes of the agricultural world through his production of manioc graters, a process with a less defined sense of time. Perhaps less important than the disruption of a sense of time is the core reason for

this disruption: globalization. David Harvey's article "Time-Space Compression" states that "innumerable local food systems have been reorganized through their incorporation into global commodity exchange" and this is exactly what is happening in Martinique (12). Globalization's reorganizing effect on the pricing and opportunity surrounding local agriculture works to separate Congo from his traditional line of work and out of his accustomed sense of time. Congo's sense of time is disrupted when he loses his agricultural clock, just as his relationship with nature is disrupted by the take-off and arrival of airplanes into the once empty sky.

2. Food as Identity

The role of food in identity has been commented on by critics across multiple scholarly disciplines, but Caribbean critics and authors focus on how food is involved in the creation and reclamation of identity, the expression of identity, and the ways in which colonialism and its culinary implications have an effect on Caribbean identity. Firstly, food plays a powerful role in the creation of identity. Sidney Mintz highlights the ways that "food preferences are close to the center of [people's] self-definition" early on in his book (3). He notes that food plays a crucial role in society as "what we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it [affect] ... how we perceive ourselves in relation to others" (4). The role of food in identity and self-perception is played out in *Solibo Magnificent* through the islanders' choice of French foods or locally sourced foods. The place of community in the creation of identity also relies on food. Mintz observes in the !Kung Bushmen, who distribute gifts of meat to family members, that "each occasion to eat meat was hence a natural occasion to discover who one was, how one was related to others" (5). In this way, food becomes a roadmap for familial ties, and family plays a strong role in the creation of identity. The emphasis of food in the shaping of identity

resurfaces at the end of Mintz's work when he states the people "identify themselves differently by what they consume" (194). Mintz clearly sees ties between our choices of food, how we view ourselves and others, and how others view us.

Food is not just used to create identity; it can be used to reclaim or remember an identity that has been taken away. "'Making Do': Caribbean Foodways and the Economics of Postcolonial Literary Culture" by Lynn Marie Houston is concerned with this form of reclamation. Houston points out that the work of Jamaica Kincaid, another Caribbean author, "demonstrates the reclamation of Caribbean identity through literary projects that map or track the circulation of bodies and goods of, around, and through the Caribbean" (103-104). Charting the movement of food goods allows Caribbean people to see how their products, and to some extent their own identity, touch and affect other areas of the globe. J. K. Gibson-Graham sees globalization, the force behind this "circulation," as "the penetration (or imminent penetration) of capitalism into all processes of production, circulation and consumption, not only of commodities but also of meaning" (37). The process of "track[ing] the circulation of bodies and goods of, around, and through the Caribbean" functions as a way to reclaim not only memory and identity but meaning as well.

By highlighting the foods of their individual islands, as well as the Caribbean as a whole, Caribbean authors create an identity empowerment which directly opposes colonial ideas that would suggest the insignificance of Caribbean identity and cultural contribution. Colonialism also seeks to break the bonds of memory between an individual and their identity. Houston sees how food can fight against this by "crafting images of food [as] ... a means of reconnection with identity through memory" (105). Using food as "a means of reconnection" creates a

“positive sense of identity” (105). In *Solibo Magnificent*, we see this reclamation through memory in the stories that the islanders tell after Solibo’s death. These stories become a way to recreate Solibo and reconnect with him. Rachel Douglas, in her summary of Caribbean works and authors from 2007, sees this positivity of re-creation in Gisèle Pineau’s work where “the role played by tasting, eating, and cooking in her literary texts ... enable her characters to recreate a link with the Caribbean” (271). Pineau is able to “capture the links between food, memory, and a sense of home or belonging” in her work (271-272). These food-created links allow for the reclamation of identity.

While food is key in the creation and reclamation of identity, it is also crucial in how that identity is expressed. Mintz states early on in his book that “what people eat expresses who and what they are, to themselves and to others” (13). He expands that to say “food choices and eating habits reveal distinctions of age, sex, status, culture, and even occupation” (3). It is true in the novel that Congo’s identity is nicely articulated in his relationship to manioc. He is known to others as the seller of “useless graters” and is known “to hawk them obstinately around the markets or in front of bars ... a hopeless symbol of those [past] epochs when we had been different” (142). Moreover, Congo’s identity is in some ways depends upon his relationship to manioc. The word “symbol” shows how Congo comes to represent more than just himself and how his relationship to manioc changes how he is viewed by others. There is a symmetry in the phrases “useless graters” and “hopeless symbol.” Not only are they both missing something in the sense that they are “-less” but the decreasing use of manioc makes it, and the graters used for its production, a symbol for the outdated, the backward, the unmodern. Mintz sees the link between specific food products and ideas of modernity in the

case of sugar. Sugar becomes a status symbol; “sucrose turns up as a pioneering and popular sign of ‘progress’ among Native North Americans, Eskimos, Africans, and Pacific Islanders ... serving as a convenient marker of social position” (193). While it is important to remember the “progress” mentioned comes from a Western bias, the link between specific food products and ideas of modernity have a strong history. Chamoiseau does not stop at weaving Congo’s identity into his relationship with manioc but weaves this into an important point in the story. This section contains information about island diet, reaching back to times of slavery and including manioc’s role, Congo’s previous employment history and why he no longer works in the agricultural sector, his involvement with strikes, which lead to him becoming a maker of manioc graters. In the novel, this section is placed within Congo’s interrogation and torture by police officers; Congo refuses to lie to the offices, and they cannot believe his truth about Solibo’s death so he is beaten brutally, during this interrogation Congo leaps to his death. Congo’s story is a downward spiral that begins with a plentitude of food, of which manioc is central, then goes toward economic disenfranchisement and this downward spinning tale is told as Congo’s very life is spiraling down.

The colonial history and context of Martinique, and other Caribbean islands, have a powerful and lasting effect on Martiniquian identity. The colonial effect and the effect of colonial resistance is played out not only through food but through language as well. Valerie Loichot’s article “Between Breadfruit and Masala: Food Politics in Glissant’s Martinique” puts significant focus on the ways in which colonialism affects Caribbean identity, but she is not the only author to be concerned with this issue. Houston also sees this as especially relevant in the Caribbean: “the history of foods in the Caribbean speaks to the encounters between different

cultures” (104). She is commenting on the way that cultural encounters shape identity. The most significant cultural encounter according to Glissant is that of colonialism: “the memory of colonialism is clearly inscribed in the body that remembers starvation, and the memory of colonialism coincides with that of hunger” (126). Glissant’s link between colonialism and hunger makes poignant the emphasis Chamoiseau placed on hunger and mouths in the shark stew scene: “the waiting mouths became all gray with dry saliva” and “the drooling mouths trembled!” (81). Even in a situation where the risk of hunger does not seem ever-present, Loichot incorporates Burton’s idea that “the civilizing mission starts at the dinner table” and notes that in a colonial situation “the tongue is thus the target of a double colonization, a double civilization: that of eating and that of speech” (126). The colonial attack on the tongue becomes clear in the novel when the police officers comment that “the best way to corner [their suspects] was to track [them] down with French” (66). The Martiniquian police officers’ refusal to incorporate Creole into their portion of the justice system creates an extreme disadvantage for the characters-turned-suspects within the novel. The language of the colonizer was “as efficient as blows with a dictionary to the head, balls minced between two chairs, and nasty electric treatments” in harming the Martiniquian islanders, and in the case of *Solibo Magnificent* in trying to get the Martiniquians to admit to a crime they did not commit (66-67). The colonial systems’ use of language has a lasting effect on Martiniquian identity.

3. Martiniquian Identity as In-Progress

The in-progress state of Martiniquian identity is most succinctly summed up through the narrator in *Solibo Magnificent*. Throughout the novel, the narrator tries to establish himself and his role as “word scratcher” within the framework of a Caribbean identity (11-12). The

narrator represents a new generation in Caribbean identity. This is evidenced by his youth and the advanced age of the other major characters. The narrator will be Caribbean even after they are gone and functions as a stand-in for the coming generation. Beyond that, he is looking for a way to represent his community and their identity to people who are not part of that group. He is seeking to provide validation for his community beyond their borders to a place and people who do not have contact with or understanding of this specific group. His attempts are focused on writing, which is something that sets him apart from his community and Solibo. While Solibo and the older generation express themselves solely through speech and performative acts, the narrator is looking to capture the spirit of his community and share it with the outside world. The narrator's drive to write becomes especially significant when the suspects in Solibo's murder, members of the narrator's own community, are brutally treated as criminals despite a lack of evidence or motive. After experiencing the brutality surrounding Solibo's death, the narrator says, "with my soul struck blank, all there is left for me to do is testify, sanding here among you" (9). The narrator is a part of his community, but he distinguishes himself through his writing, his "testify[ing]."

Writing, not speech, can be a powerful way to expose this mistreatment to the wider world and thereby hopefully enact change. However, by the end of the novel, the narrator is still grappling with how his Martiniquian identity can also include the Western tradition of writing. Perhaps his treatment at the hands of Western influence made the narrator less inclined to act the part of Western experience through writing. He even flutters in his resolve to write his experience near the end: "as soon as I was free, I wanted to forget everything, even that frivolous promise of writing it all down, of telling the world about it" (155). The word

“frivolous” highlights the narrator’s equivocation concerning his identity as a writer or “word scratcher.” Further evidence of his unfinished identity, seen in the eyes of the older generation, is the multitude of names Solibo calls him. Solibo refers to the narrator as “Chamoiseau,” “Oiseau de Cham,” “Chamzibie,” and “Oiseau” (31, 44, 49, 87). There is fluctuation in what he is called, but Solibo always includes some form of “Oiseau,” which means bird, or “Cham,” which means fields according to the breakdown of names included at the end of the novel. The narrator is linked to both his colonial past, the fields, and a new future, the freedom represented by birds: he has both roots and wings yet cannot use them both. The uncertainty that the narrator experiences in regards to his position as a writer and the multiplicity of his name’s demonstrates that his identity as a Martiniquian individual or as a Martiniquian writer may be multifaceted, but the development of that identity is still in-progress.

The use of multiple food items highlights how versatile food can be in the expression of identity. Glissant, according to Loichot in her article “Between Breadfruit and Masala,” expresses Caribbean identity with the East Indian spice mix masala, but masala is not the only food used as a metaphor for Caribbean identity. Glissant chooses masala as a metaphor for Caribbean identity in part because the spice mix is not “a finished product” (Loichot 131). The in-progress state of the spice mixture represents how Caribbean identity is not a defined issue and actually “escapes a stabilizing definition” (Loichot 131). The masala metaphor shows “the traffic between” cultural influences that are still shaping the “open-ended” Caribbean identity (Loichot 132). Author Fernando Ortiz “argues that the formation of the Cuban nation can be understood by analyzing the history of agiaco” (Rosario 264). Agiaco is a vegetable and starch-

based soup, reminiscent of the curries and stews other Caribbean authors have put in place, made with local ingredients available to the lower class (Rosario 264). Ortiz is drawn to *agiaco* because of the “process of transculturation” its history represents and the multitude of variations that have arisen as various cultures interact with the dish (Rosario 264). While Ortiz uses the history of *agiaco* as the base for Cuba’s nationhood, other authors place their food metaphors in the present.

Food metaphors and their role in Caribbean literature is strong enough that in an interview Valérie Loichot pointedly asked Gisèle Pineau: “if you could choose one dish to represent Caribbean creolization, which one would it be?” (337). Pineau’s response is “colombo powder, curry”— a dish and spice cooked in Martinique which is the Caribbean take on curry powder but includes rice in addition to the standard curry ingredients (About Food). In the interview, Pineau says that colombo “became the island’s traditional dish” and that it was cooked specifically on “Sundays” (337). “Colombo” comes to represent the island and because of its specific Sunday preparation is given an honorary place within the religious scope. The name of the dish comes from a Sri Lankan port city that has significant contact with French traders (About Food). But this contact is not what facilitated the movement of “colombo” from India to the Caribbean according to Pineau; she claims that the transport happened with “Indians who arrived after the abolition of slavery” (Loichot 337). This time distinction is an important one; if “colombo” did arrive in the hands of free people to a land where all people were free, than its Caribbean entrance is into one of postcolonial existence. Regardless of when “colombo” arrived in the Caribbean, there is an implication of globalization: Pineau is interested in the way “the dish includes all the spices that have crossed the ocean to reach

Caribbean shores” (337). Glissant, Ortiz, and Pineau may not agree on one culinary dish which exemplifies Caribbean identity, but the use of multiple food items highlights how versatile food can be in the expression of identity.

Solibo Magnificent presents identity, especially in the case of the narrator as in-progress and not “a finished product.” The lack of a “stabl[e] definition” (Loichot 131) behind Glissant’s curry as culture metaphor is reflected by Chamoiseau through the multiple names given to the narrator and the narrator’s insistence that he is not a writer but a “word scratcher” (Chamoiseau 11-12). Claiming his identity to be that of “word scratcher” as opposed to writer hints at the ambiguity he feels about himself; a “word scratcher” is the layperson’s version of a writer, and that position holds less pressure for our narrator. He is able to occupy the space of “word scratcher” while still escaping clear and easy definition. The narrator represents the “traffic between” Western and Caribbean identity, which both Pineau and Glissant pick up on. He has great respect for Solibo, continually saying that the writing he does cannot touch Solibo’s stories and talent, yet he still tries to incorporate the Western tradition of writing into his orally-based Martiniquian identity.

The narrator’s effort to incorporate the written word harkens to Franco Moretti’s thoughts on the Western novel form and the non-Western experience. Moretti goes so far as to claim that he has a “*law of literary evolution*: in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials” (102). The narrator finds himself in just such a compromise where his lived non-Western experience is being forced into a Western

form into which it does not naturally or easily fit. Moretti overlays the discourse of economics onto the literary and publishing world to highlight the unequal power dynamics at play. In order to be seen as a true writer and not a “word scratcher,” periphery authors must compete on the playing field of Western literary standards where the novel is almost a requirement. The problem with this is not only that certain experiences do not mesh well with the novel form but also that formal literary experimentation is not open to these periphery authors, even though that same experimentation has been taking place on the Western literary front for years. By forcing all emerging authors to contort themselves into the novel form, Western influences ignore that “the very relationship of reading to hearing and seeing may vary in important ways that determine the morphology of these different ideoscapes as they shape themselves in different national and transnational contexts” (Appadurai 32). At the most basic level, Appadurai is saying that form becomes important on a global context.

Patricia Clark is sensitive to the idea of alternative forms of narrative, pushing for recipes to be read as narratives, and the Western tendency to force others into or to only accept forms they recognize as literary. Clark’s advocacy for the narrativity of recipes comes up against this issue of the oral and the written, and she observes “the apparent incompatibility of the African American recipe and standard American English” (156). Clark illustrates the ways in which Standard English is limiting to African American speech. The “performative” aspects of recipes do not escape Clark either, and when the performance that accompanies African American speech is taken into account, the limitations of Standard English become all the more stark (157). His vacillation between the oral and written form represents the state of identity instability in which the narrator finds himself. Chamoiseau also incorporates elements seen in

Otriz's colombo-based food metaphor. The ingredients comprising the shark stew are similar to colombo: "staples of the indigenous ... population" (Rosario 264). The nurse shark that is at the heart of the stew is not only an ingredient accessible to locals but serves as an example for Singleton's observation that stews operate as "a creative way of using pieces of meat considered undesirable" (Covey and Eissach 62). Similarly, Ortiz comments that, in colombo, "the Spaniards replaced the traditional meats of turtle, snake and crocodile for fresh and salted beef" (Rosario 264). Interesting to note is the aquatic nature of the traditional meats in a colombo stew. The main difference between these versions of upper-class and low-class stews is the meat with land-based mammals serving as the base for the upper-class stew and aquatic-based reptiles as the base for low class stew. The global variations of dishes Ortiz is interested in are reflected in *Solibo Magnificent* with Sidonise's comment on Solibo's rice washing technique: Solibo washed the rice "again after the first boiling the way the people from R union do" (80). Chamoiseau shows how even within the relatively small global scope of the Caribbean culinary variations flourish just as cultural variations or hybridity do.

The lack of purchasable items that represent Martiniquian identity in the novel also shows how, in Chamoiseau's Martinique, identity is still in-progress. The sherbet Sidonise sells, which at one time may have been classified as a Martiniquian product, is now a pre-made Western product. The manioc that Congo covets so highly is native to South America, not the Caribbean, and most likely comes from the slaves who were brought over in the Atlantic slave trade (Olsen 5586). The steak and fries which epitomize "eating well" to many of the islanders come from French dietary standards (Chamoiseau 142). The shark stew, which is arguably the

most Caribbean food in the novel, is not available for purchase but must be methodically produced by the hands of someone with cooking skill and local knowledge.

What is crucial about the shark stew is that it is purchased by neighbors not with money but with gestures of community and goodwill. "I'm going to come repair the rusty sheet on your roof," one of the eaters tells Sidonise (81). In her article, "Feasting on Sancocho Before Night Falls", Nelly Rosario reveals that Gabriel García Márquez celebrated the anniversary of his Noble Prize award "with a *sancocho* stew": this "meat and vegetable stew [is the] embodiment of abundance, celebration, and communion" (259). "Sancocho" is largely about community and togetherness: "abundance" implies sharing with and among a group of individuals. If the excess was meant for storage than it would be 'reserves' not "abundance," a "celebration" is rarely held in the company of one and the word suggests a unity comprised around religion or nationality, and "communion" is a group of people organized through religion. Rosario even goes so far to say "Solitude and *sancocho* are polar opposites" (259).

The introduction to *Food and Culture* purposes one of the book's claims to be "how food-sharing creates solidarity" (1). "Food-sharing" notably requires a group whether it is the one-pot food-sharing approach seen in *Solibo Magnificent* or the practice of communion whereby a group of religious followers partake of food and drink distributed from a communal container. Rosario later points out how "*Sancocho*, *potpurrie*, and *olla podrida* have also found their way into our pantry of language" ("potpurrie" and "olla podrida" are both linguistic siblings to the "sancocho" stew Rosario has been focusing on) (264). Rosario explains that "they are often used as metaphors for variety and diversity" in "our pantry of language" (264). If sancocho is anything like the previous stews/curries discussed, it can be assumed that the

diversity metaphor is one founded in life experience. The diversity metaphor of sancocho aptly represents the community of Martinique and *Solibo Magnificent*. By denying access to Martiniquian identity through a ready-made purchased food item, Chamoiseau is showing that Martiniquian identity is not something that can be acquired through purchase. Production is still needed to ensure Martiniquian identity.

4. Cultural Hybridity in Martiniquian Identity

In many ways, manioc, the local Martinique root vegetable, fails to represent the cultural hybridity that must be acknowledged in order to create Martiniquian identity. Manioc presents a problem in terms of Martiniquian identity as it represents cultural singularity; namely, because it is a root vegetable, it represents singularity of locale. It is literally rooted in one place. This rootedness is part of the reason why Glissant conversely chooses masala as his representation of Caribbean identity. Loichot points out that “movement defines masala,” and this movement opens Caribbean identity to a global stage, instead of confining it in one geographic region (131). Manioc, otherwise known as cassava, is native to “the southern border of the Amazon basin” in South America and as such does not necessarily incorporate the global movement or influence that Glissant achieves with his use of masala (Olsen 5586).

The versatility of manioc represents how it can be adapted to many other dishes, identities, or cultures, but it is not perceived as a main course. Manioc needs something else with it to be complete. In addition, the production of manioc has not been affected by Western technological advances. The islanders who still eat manioc, of whom there are fewer and fewer, use traditional methods for its preparation and production. Manioc production has

failed to capitalize on the positive Western influences available to it, and the tuber's production is still dealt with in the same way: "before it was harmless you had to grate it, purge it of its venom in snaky sacks of gauze, pass it through the mountain-palm sieves, then dry it in the huge cisterns. After that came the tasks of distribution, sale, transformation" (141). However, the real detriment to manioc is its undesirability to the local market. Congo says, "The Made-in-France stuff undid the manioc, putting it out of our way and even our memory" (142). This combination of factors makes manioc an unsustainable option as a metaphor for developing Martiniquian identity. As the novel notes, Congo "hadn't been the only one to sell [graters] in the country, but now he was the last" (141). Loichot sees this as the choice between "a vanishing past and an empty future" (130). Manioc and Congo's way of life are quickly becoming a thing of the past, yet there is nothing in the future that can fill that void in a positive way. Manioc fails to incorporate the globalized world into itself and fails to incorporate itself into that globalized world.

Beyond this, manioc does contain an acknowledgement of the cultural hybridity present in Martiniquian identity. Manioc is portrayed as a maternal food "which weaned us from the breast," in Congo's words (141). Manioc's roots come from South America, yet the tuber is a common staple in many African diets. This creates a link between the maternal food and a slave heritage. The food of the mother country (the food which represents mother in Martinique) is a culturally black food, and this mother food is being overshadowed and pushed out by the French food. Chamoiseau's use of manioc creates a subtle link between food and the sexual exploitation of black women by white men that occurs in colonial enterprises. In this way, manioc does acknowledge the cultural hybridity at the heart of Martiniquian identity. The

presence of manioc in Martinique suggests another negative aspect of this cultural hybridity. The root vegetable was literally uprooted, removed from its origin, and replanted in a different locale, just like the slaves who came to populate Martinique in the Atlantic slave trade and whose descendants still live there today. However, the hybridity that manioc represents is a negative and exploitative force which lacks any positive influence needed to create a positive Martiniquian identity.

The shark stew that Solibo makes is a more direct representation of Martiniquian identity because of the ways it blends Caribbean and Western elements together. It is a cultural and culinary hybrid which contains Martiniquian food: the shark, the peppers, “the garden spices” and the citrus, while also including “the French onion” (81). In the case of the onion, as with many Western elements that play into Martiniquian identity, it is transformed into something that would never be made in France. At the same time, the shark retains its local flavor, breathing out “smells of seashells” and directly reflecting the island environment (81). The shark, unlike the manioc, is not rooted in one specific locale and therefore shows global movement. It is impossible to say exactly what waters the shark came from and where in the world it traveled before coming to be the focal point of Solibo’s dish on the Caribbean island of Martinique.

In “communal dishes,” such as shark stew, theologian Eliseo Pérez-Alvarez sees “an open invitation to fight gastronomical conquest [and] a celebration of diversity” (Rosario 265). The “celebration of diversity” is present in the variety of neighbors who arrive at Sidonise’s home to help eat the stew. Solibo, Sidonise, and the others “fight gastronomical conquest” by producing uniquely Martiniquian goods out of foreign products. The fight against gastronomical conquest

can also be seen in the wallet metaphor Chamoiseau employs just before the stew is eaten: “ha, ha, ha, we gathered around in the dark around the stewpot, like a gang of thieves around a béké’s wallet” (82). Within this context, food and money are equated, and the production of a Martiniquian meal in the company of friends provides the same level of resistance against colonial forces as the theft of monetary resources. By opening with “ha, ha, ha,” Chamoiseau nods to the place of humor in the subversion of colonial powers. The repetition of “around,” and the circular image it conjures up, emphasizes the community and communal aspects of this kind of meal. Pineau’s closing comments on colombo as a metaphor for Caribbean creolization declare that it “represents ... the victory of humanity over pain, adversity, and exile” (Loichot 337). There is hope in the “little cumin seeds” and the way “they gathered around a dish” (337). The shark stew scene has that same small hope, that same little “victory of humanity” as the characters were able to forget about their pain in a bowl of shark stew, place themselves outside the physical and commercial sphere where they face constant adversity, and find a new community and home to supplement their slavery-induced exile.

Nor is food the only representation of cultural hybridity in this key scene; culture as represented through gender norms is on display as well. Sidonise herself is described as “a high-waist quadrille dancer at the Ball of the Wise” while she is helping Solibo prepare the stew (82). Quadrille dance came from European royal courts, and a “high-waist” is more consistent with European ideals of female beauty than Martiniquian ones (Quadrille). Sidonise may be presented as a Western dancer, but her involvement in the scene is wholly Martiniquian. Her Martiniquian-ness is evidenced by the fact that this scene is being told by Sidonise as a story and one that is meant to recreate and allow reconnection with Solibo after his death. Her

Martiniquian-ness is also seen in the way that her story features involvement from the other Martiniquian characters. They chime in throughout the story: “oh, beautiful words, Sidonise,” “yeah, Sidonise, tell it, tell us the tale,” “we are, Sidonise, we are” (80, 81, 82). Their interaction with the story is not unlike the traditional “e kree?” “e kraa!” call and response that Solibo uses in his storytelling and which the narrator recreates in the final section of the novel (164). The shark stew scene is about community, group identity, and a unity which comes from the cultural hybridity of Western and Caribbean influences.

In *Solibo Magnificent*, Patrick Chamoiseau captures the importance of food in the creation of identity. He uses his main characters to advocate for a Martiniquian identity that is based in production and not purchase. The production aspect highlighted in the novel indicates that, even today, identity in Martinique is something that is unfinished. At the same time, Chamoiseau is claiming that any form of Martiniquian identity needs to incorporate some aspect of Western identity. There is no escaping the colonial past of the Caribbean, and instead of denying it, individuals need to wrestle with that past in order to make sure their identities truly represent themselves and their heritage. The afterword to *Solibo Magnificent* states, “Individual artistic creativity comes to the service of this cultural and linguistic movement of self-discovery and assertion” (176). The novel itself presents two major forms of “artistic creativity:” the writing and storytelling that the narrator and Solibo take part in, and the culinary production which Congo and Solibo are so involved with. *Solibo Magnificent* pushes for the citizens of Martinique to produce their identity through an incorporation of Caribbean and Western elements. Luckily, the inclusion of both develops into “gourmet-mouth blackmen

... [who] scoured the stewpot and polished the bowls” of the delicious results of culinary and cultural hybridity (81-82).

Timothy Yu begins his article, “White Poets Want Chinese Culture Without Chinese People,” by saying, “It’s become a routine feature of the Asian American poet’s life: waking up to your inbox full of messages asking, “Have you seen this?” And it’s never good.” Early in April of 2016 Calvin Trillin, a frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* and well known Chinese food critic, wrote a poem titled *Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?*. Trillin’s poem is rife with racial insensitivity and I’d like to introduce the poem in its entirety:

Have they run out of provinces yet?
 If they haven’t, we’ve reason to fret.
 Long ago, there was just Cantonese.
 (Long ago, we were easy to please.)
 But then food from Szechuan came our way,
 Making Cantonese strictly passé.
 Szechuanese was the song that we sung,
 Though the *ma po* could burn through your tongue.
 Then when Shanghainese got in the loop
 We slurped dumplings whose insides were soup.
 Then Hunan, the birth province of Mao,
 Came along with its own style of chow.
 So we thought we were finished, and then
 A new province arrived: Fukien.
 Then respect was a fraction of meagre
 For those eaters who’d not eaten Uighur.
 And then Xi’an from Shaanxi gained fame,
 Plus some others—too many to name.
 Now, as each brand-new province appears,
 It brings tension, increasing our fears:
 Could a place we extolled as a find
 Be revealed as one province behind?
 So we sometimes do miss, I confess,
 Simple days of chow mein but no stress,
 When we never were faced with the threat
 Of more provinces we hadn’t met.
 Is there one tucked away near Tibet?
 Have they run out of provinces yet?

Given Trillin's knowledge of and experience with Chinese culture his attitude toward the people of China is almost shocking. However, Trillin responded by claiming that he was not being insensitive but was mocking the 'foodie bourgeoisie,' what I am dubbing the 'foodgeoisie,' who follow food trends without understanding the nuances behind them.

As Yu claims, Trillin presents "a China without the Chinese" a China that exists solely as a resource for white poets to pull from. This resource is meant to enrich white culture without changing the racial demographic of white culture. Trillin makes use of the trope of the Westerner as discoverer in his quote "a place we extolled as a find." This line implicates not only that the Westerner is in control of what constitutes "a find," meaning it has value, but also that the Westerner is responsible for 'find'ing the location, and bringing it to the attention of the Western world as a whole. The Westerner's power in Trillin's poem denies agency and history to Chinese people. Trillin further denies the history of Chinese people when he calls the provinces "brand-new." They are only "brand-new" from the point of view of the Western, but that is the only perspective that Trillin acknowledges.

These points and others are addressed by Bich Minh Nguyen, Karissa Chen, and Celeste Ng in their response poem *The World is Our Oyster/Sauce* which is included here:

Calvin, that was a real nice poem
 But our response is a big effing NO. We're
 sorry, but this piece is total trash
 and racial insensitivity is a real pain in the ass.

A Chinese lesson from an 80-year-old-white guy?
 Hey, *New Yorker*, that was a good try.
 You were aiming for funny, some kind of satire—
 What you got instead was a big ol' quagmire.

Maybe you didn't really think China was yours to Columbus.
 Maybe you thought this was a bit of social justice?
 But taking down hipsters at the expense of others is crazy.
 Your intent might've been good, but the execution's lazy.

Your clichés of Chinese food are extensive and offensive.
 Let us tell you the truth—now don't get defensive:
 You act like Chinese food's here for your own edification.
 Damn right, that's an accusation.
 Let us explicate our frustrations:

We didn't make this for you, not our stinky tofu
 Or the soup dumplings you can't seem to eat without a spoon
 Or the noodles our mothers make whenever we catch a cold.
 Are you feeling us yet? We're not yours to control.
 We didn't make dim sum so you could think it's exotic,
 Don't give a shit if you think eating chicken feet is totally psychotic.
 You think congee is weird? That it's bold to eat Peking Duck?
 Stick to cashew chicken because we don't give a fuck.
 Yeah, there's good Chinese food from every province
 But it's not there for you to mock or practice intolerance.
 We're not a tool for your humor, not some literary prop.
 We're real people, with real stories, not your personal backdrop.

Another thing, Mr. Chinese Food Expert:
 Don't lecture us, or try to tell us we don't get it.
 We know a satire when it's actually smart.
 But your defense is—what's the Chinese word?
 Oh—"horse fart."

"You're overreacting; it's a parody,
 You Asians really aren't being fair to me!"
 We've got news for you, my food critic friend:
 There's a lot more to Chinese food than chasing superficial trends.

While you were trying to make fun of foodie bourgeoisie
 You were perpetuating stereotypes of Asians egregiously.
 "Increasing our fears"? "Simple days of Chow mein"? All
 Offensive and outdated. Can you say "Yellow Peril"?

You keep saying "we" 'cause you think Asians are "they."
 When are you going to realize that racism works just that way?
 You say you want a simpler time, but what you really mean
 Is you want the people who feed and clothe you just not to be seen.

Maybe you think we should just stay silent—is that what you wish?
 Just give a smile and explain the menu in broken English?
 See, the problem with you is you think the world's your buffet:
 Everything for the taking because you never had it another way.

If you assume all Chinese food only aims to please
 but you still think those people overseas are coming to seize
 your jobs, your country, your American freedom
 Then go back to your meatloaf, your jello salads—
 Believe me, we don't need 'em.

You think laughing at Asians and Europeans is all the same?
 Learn about power and history, instead of hiding behind your name.
 You see us as weak, but we're getting bolder. If you don't want to face it, your loss
 Because here and now the world is our oyster sauce.

I devote a small portion of one chapter to close reading this poem so I will not take on that task here. I stress these poems because they demonstrate the relevance of food scholarship in today's world, and they highlight the intersection of food, race, and identity that I focus on in my project.

In the future I would like to take food scholarship and apply it to the work of other minority writers, specifically Toni Morrison. Her novels are full of opportunities to explore how food can operate as a place of resistance to oppressive forces and how food functions in the building of communities and identities. In *Beloved*, Sethe suffers trauma after the overseer steals her milk. *Paradise* features a town centered around an oven and there is the contrast of the townspeople's rejection of the convent women with their love of the peppers that the convent women grow. *Tar Baby* uses food and meal scenes as catalysts: the woman in yellow appears in a grocery store, Son is discovered during dinner and then joins Valerian for a meal, and Son and Jade first bond over a picnic. In *Love* the contested will is written on a menu and Heed fears Christine will poison her food.

Additionally, I'm interested to read *Short Girls* by Nguyen and *Texaco* and *School Days* by Chamoiseau to see if food continues as a theme in those works. Further research in this area might include Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*. In expanding this project, I'd like to read *Racial Indigestion* by Kyla Wazana Tompkins and *Falafel Nation* by Yael Raviv. I also feel Matthew M. Briones book *Jim and Jap Crow* would be useful for my understanding of that dynamic of race relations. There is also the possibility of examining white writers and how they write food in the context of minority or 'othered' characters. Examples include: the mostly vegetarian diet of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster, Conrad's representation of hippo eating cannibals, and the Price family and their reaction to African food attitudes in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*.

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Appendix A: Calvin Trillin's poem *Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?*

Have they run out of provinces yet?
 If they haven't, we've reason to fret.
 Long ago, there was just Cantonese.
 (Long ago, we were easy to please.)
 But then food from Szechuan came our way,
 Making Cantonese strictly passé.
 Szechuanese was the song that we sung,
 Though the *ma po* could burn through your tongue.
 Then when Shanghainese got in the loop

We slurped dumplings whose insides were soup.
 Then Hunan, the birth province of Mao,
 Came along with its own style of chow.
 So we thought we were finished, and then
 A new province arrived: Fukien.
 Then respect was a fraction of meagre
 For those eaters who'd not eaten Uighur.
 And then Xi'an from Shaanxi gained fame,
 Plus some others—too many to name.

Now, as each brand-new province appears,
 It brings tension, increasing our fears:
 Could a place we extolled as a find
 Be revealed as one province behind?
 So we sometimes do miss, I confess,
 Simple days of chow mein but no stress,
 When we never were faced with the threat
 Of more provinces we hadn't met.
 Is there one tucked away near Tibet?
 Have they run out of provinces yet?

Appendix B: Bich Minh Nguyen, Celeste Ng, and Karissa Chen's poem The World is Our Oyster/Sauce

The World Is Our Oyster/Sauce

Calvin, that was a real nice poem
 But our response is a big effing NO. We're
 sorry, but this piece is total trash
 and racial insensitivity is a real pain in the ass.

A Chinese lesson from an 80-year-old-white guy?
 Hey, *New Yorker*, that was a good try.
 You were aiming for funny, some kind of satire—
 What you got instead was a big ol' quagmire.

Maybe you didn't really think China was yours to Columbus.
 Maybe you thought this was a bit of social justice?
 But taking down hipsters at the expense of others is crazy.
 Your intent might've been good, but the execution's lazy.

Your cliches of Chinese food are extensive and offensive.
 Let us tell you the truth—now don't get defensive:
 You act like Chinese food's here for your own edification.
 Damn right, that's an accusation.
 Let us explicate our frustrations:

We didn't make this for you, not our stinky tofu
 Or the soup dumplings you can't seem to eat without a spoon
 Or the noodles our mothers make whenever we catch a cold.
 Are you feeling us yet? We're not yours to control.
 We didn't make dim sum so you could think it's exotic,
 Don't give a shit if you think eating chicken feet is totally psychotic.
 You think congee is weird? That it's bold to eat Peking Duck?
 Stick to cashew chicken because we don't give a fuck.
 Yeah, there's good Chinese food from every province
 But it's not there for you to mock or practice intolerance.
 We're not a tool for your humor, not some literary prop.
 We're real people, with real stories, not your personal backdrop.

Another thing, Mr. Chinese Food Expert:
 Don't lecture us, or try to tell us we don't get it.
 We know a satire when it's actually smart.
 But your defense is—what's the Chinese word?
 Oh—"horse fart."

"You're overreacting; it's a parody,
 You Asians really aren't being fair to me!"
 We've got news for you, my food critic friend:
 There's a lot more to Chinese food than chasing superficial trends.

While you were trying to make fun of foodie bourgeoisie
 You were perpetuating stereotypes of Asians egregiously.
 "Increasing our fears"? "Simple days of Chow mein"? All
 Offensive and outdated. Can you say "Yellow Peril"?

You keep saying “we” ’cause you think Asians are “they.”
When are you going to realize that racism works just that way?
You say you want a simpler time, but what you really mean
Is you want the people who feed and clothe you just not to be seen.

Maybe you think we should just stay silent—is that what you wish?
Just give a smile and explain the menu in broken English?
See, the problem with you is you think the world’s your buffet:
Everything for the taking because you never had it another way.

If you assume all Chinese food only aims to please
but you still think those people overseas are coming to seize
your jobs, your country, your American freedom
Then go back to your meatloaf, your jello salads—
Believe me, we don’t need ’em.

You think laughing at Asians and Europeans is all the same?
Learn about power and history, instead of hiding behind your name.
You see us as weak, but we’re getting bolder. If you don’t want to face it, your loss
Because here and now the world is our oyster sauce.