

## REPRESENTATIONS

Our assumptions about the world and our place within it are naturalized through social institutions. We are bombarded daily with representations from government, the academy, the media, popular culture, and the arts about who we are, how we should behave, and what we should dream. These representations are also reproduced in our daily social interactions in both our private and public lives. Because they are based on assumptions, they are not experienced as one perspective, but “the way things are, have always been, and will and should be in the future.”

Alternative institutions and movements resist these messages often by revealing that they are, in fact, representations in the service of dominant groups. Feminist scholarship has been in the forefront of revealing and analyzing these messages. But as the critiques by women of color, poor women, and lesbians have shown, some of this work continues to perpetuate unacknowledged assumptions about race/ethnicity in representations of women as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. The blindness resulting from privilege is a testament to the power of dominant representations and the depth of their internalization.

The essays in this section span a range of scholarly approaches and topics, but all do the difficult work of deconstructing and analyzing various forms of representation. Reading two books on the impact of commercial food production on U.S. culture from the perspective of gender and race, Alice Julier critiques the authors for relegating them to variables of importance only as they refer to women and people of color. By not building these basic social formations into a structural analysis, the authors reproduce dominant representations of women and people of color. Both Sharmila Sen and Carole Counihan look at the place of food in self-representation, Sen in a literary analysis and Counihan in an ethnography. In her analysis of David Dabydeen’s novel *The Counting House*, Sen argues that food is deployed to denote ethnic differences, rivalries, as well as shared colonial status between women from two groups forced into labor in the Caribbean, Africans and East

Indians. Employing what she calls “food-centered life histories,” Cou-nihan identifies the interaction of multiple ethnicities and racial and class representations of self.

These analyses of representation with three different methodologies in three very different sites underline the importance of being aware of the gender and racial aspects of analysis, particularly when they are absent or marginalized, the ways in which gender and race are central to identities, and the ways they may be enacted through food discourse and practices.

## Hiding Gender and Race in the Discourse of Commercial Food Consumption

**ALICE P. JULIER**

What is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use.

Igor Kopytoff

I met a guy who eats those chocolate-frosted Pop-Tarts. He breaks them up, puts them in a bowl and pours milk on them. I said geez, you might as well cook.

Paula Poundstone

Like many people who teach at a college or university, I find that my weekly stack of mail usually contains a fair number of publishers' catalogs. As publishers discover my interests in the social aspects of food, more of my mail consists of advertisements for new food books.

For every book that comes across my desk describing large-scale changes in food consumption in American society, I get another book that deals with women and food, often concerning eating problems. The authors of the first are usually men. The authors of the latter are usually women. Today's mail contained a glossy ad for George Ritzer's newest volume, *Enchanting the Disenchanted World*, which expands his ideas about McDonaldization to take the reader on "a tour of the settings and structures that generate hyper-consumption." In another flyer I'm being encouraged to purchase *Fed Up: Women and Food in America* by Catherine Manton, which takes on "the place of food in women's history" from an eco-feminist standpoint. Why, I wonder, is "women's special relationship with food" positioned against "analyses of globalizing trends in consumption"? Aren't the two related? What does this dichotomy tell us about the study of food and eating? Why don't either of these texts consider a discussion of race relevant to their argument?

Rather than accept these divisions, I want to explore the conse-

quences of dividing the study of food and eating into such categories. In particular, I am struck by the increase in books that examine the impact of industrial food on the diet and social experiences of Western peoples without centralizing the construction of difference and inequality. Using two recent texts of this sort, I highlight both the overt and subtle constructions of gender and race (and, to a lesser extent, class) that are unavoidably intertwined in these analyses.<sup>1</sup>

In general, the authors who write about global food processes want to explain trends in consumption, offering various theoretical treatises on the nature of food choice and eating patterns.<sup>2</sup> Given a long tradition of class analysis in Western social sciences, it's no surprise that they all contend with economic social inequality in some form. But when gender is included, it is often used to mean primarily "women." Race is even less present, often subsumed under discussions of ethnic variations and immigration patterns. In other examples, gender and race become variables, designating categories of consumers or even trajectories along which people consume. But what happens if we consider race and gender structural sets of arrangements that simultaneously operate to position people, construct meanings, and determine activities in relation to food?

Social scientists acknowledge that food, eating, and cooking are more than material or physiological processes; rather, they are ways in which people socially create and construct boundaries. At the same time, this insight is often restricted to particular topics that are considered "about" race or gender (e.g., talking about women in relation to the body or the family, or African Americans and prenatal nutrition). Race and gender are often deployed as labels that describe only the experiences of women or people of color, as if these were not reciprocal, structural, and relational terms that define life circumstances for dominant groups, too. What if we saw the construction of race and gender, of the "devalued Other" as a *defining feature* of both the production and consumption of food? What if this insight were applied on both the large, commercial, structural scale and the intimate everyday scale of smaller communities, households, families, and partners?

## Commercial Food and Contemporary American Culture

Americans can eat garbage, provided you sprinkle it liberally with ketchup, mustard, chili sauce, tabasco sauce, cayenne pepper or any other condiment which destroys the original flavor of the dish.

Henry Miller

Richard Pillsbury's *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place* and George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* both attempt to explain why people eat the foods they eat and how those food choices are related to an increasingly globalized market which expands commercial foodways and has a major impact on both diet and desire. I discuss these two books because they have received a fair amount of publicity. I believe it's particularly important to pay attention to books that explicitly try to popularize analyses of food and social life

Pillsbury's (1997) *No Foreign Food* is written in a style accessible to the general public, using boxed personal anecdotes to punctuate his lengthier analyses of changes in national and regional consumption. Pillsbury uses a "geography of American foodways" to argue that even as various cultural identities are being subsumed by commercial processes and mass culture, there is some evidence that regional cultural differences in food consumption remain. He charts a brief history of the American diet, turning then to the technologies and processes of production and distribution that have modernized our eating habits. In his view, large-scale economic and social changes are key to modern culture: the ability to grow and transport perishable foods is a defining feature of late capitalism and one that profoundly affects the cultural meanings available to individuals. Pillsbury then focuses on the ways advertising, restaurants, cookbooks, immigration, and commercial foods all disrupt "earlier" patterns.

Summarizing "the American diet," Pillsbury provides general information about changes in what people eat. Although he admits that it's difficult to characterize why people choose the foods they do, he ends up concluding that eating practices are "largely determined by the economics, regional affinity, and cultural heritage of the family" (Pillsbury 1997, 192). He accounts for competing trends between commercial standardization and an abiding regionality, but, in the end, he concludes that Americans are assimilationists, such that "an all-embracing [national] culture has meant that there can be no foreign foods" (1997, 208).

George Ritzer's (1996) *McDonaldization* thesis has received a fair amount of critical attention since he first coined the term in 1983.<sup>3</sup> He begins by asserting the continuing significance of Weber's classic theory of rationalization, which demonstrated how complex industrial society is dominated by bureaucratic principles. Institutional rules, means-ends structures of efficiency, and hierarchical ordering of activity dominate increasing areas of modern life. Such rational control simultaneously eases people's experience of modernity and limits their ability to act freely. Ritzer argues that a more contemporary version is modeled after

McDonald's rather than the bureaucratic organization. Although not focused on McDonald's per se, the analysis uses both the image of the fast food restaurant and its operating principles to suggest that more and more arenas of social and economic life are being governed by "efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control" (9). Along with the fast food industry and supermarkets, Ritzer applies his thesis to such varied topics as health care, shopping malls, higher education, family vacations, and workplaces.

Avoiding information about actual consumers, Ritzer speculates in depth about what drives people to accept and encourage a "fast food approach" to daily consumption. Within his analysis of the various dimensions of McDonaldization, he makes particular claims about both the shape of contemporary social lives and the motivations of individuals making such choices about consumption. The argument extends well beyond the realm of food choice in homes and restaurants.

Both books attend to the specific experiences of people through an exploration of larger structural trends, resting their analyses on some assumptions about the boundaries between spheres of social life and about the cultural norms people use in deciding what counts as good food. In the rest of this essay I explore two of these assumptions, one that focuses on gender and the family meal and the other on "American" food and white middle-class culture.

### Gender, Commercial Food, and the Family Meal

In the fast-food industry, of course, family means people who spend quite a bit of money but don't wreck the furniture.

*Calvin Trillin*

How has commercial food changed our social practices? Why do people eat fast food? What changes have globalization and mass production wrought on the symbolic meanings and material conditions of people's daily food choices? Both books contend with these questions, most frequently by suggesting what global industrial trends mean for the routines of daily life. The site Ritzer and Pillsbury unquestioningly choose as the crucial space for local practice is the household, represented in these writings specifically as "the family."

Each text argues that standardized commercial food production and distribution have a direct and often deleterious impact on "the family." The arguments begin from the assumption that family is paramount, ubiquitous, and has a normative form that is, most often, a heterosexual

couple with children. Historically, the family is a key site where social bonds are forged and socialization takes place, usually around food. In Western society, capitalism creates the conditions where family is no longer economically productive and self-sustaining but a basic unit of consumption. The boundaries between “outside” and “inside” worlds are actively created through the consumption practices of people in households. People “take in” the commercial world through their homes and close relationships.

Both authors establish that contemporary social structures (in particular the commercial production, distribution, and marketing of food) change the nature and frequency of family meals. Family meals are important because we can pinpoint them as one of the actual events where close emotional bonds are created and maintained. Mary Douglas (1972, 61) writes, “food acts as the medium through which a system of relationships within the family is expressed.” Close ties are built on time spent together, preferences expressed and met, food shared, and emotional bonds realized. The dinner table is where family itself is actively constructed, both historically and ideologically. Marjorie DeVault’s (1991) study of feeding work uses women’s descriptions of creating family meals to demonstrate how “the material trappings of meals can become foundations for more emotional aspects of family life” (130). Many people’s reminiscences about family love and support center on being fed both emotionally and physically at the dinner table.<sup>4</sup>

In contemporary society, laments about fast-paced social and economic changes in family life are often expressed through anxiety about families who do not sit down to “home-cooked” meals together. By imposing products and selling cultural meanings, commercial food changes the experience and function of family. For Richard Pillsbury, these changes have a negative effect on American cultural life. As he puts it, “The traditional ‘normal’ meal with Mom, Dad, and the kids sitting together at the kitchen table at the prescribed time and leisurely consuming a home-prepared meal while discussing the day’s events has disappeared from most homes. . . . The concept of Dad always sitting at the head of the table and Mom at the foot is alien to many children, and the idea of using mealtime for relaxation and family bonding is almost inconceivable” (1997, 189).

These concerns about the decline in nuclear family meals center on what Stephanie Coontz (1992) describes as the “elusive traditional family,” which, if it ever existed, did so for a short duration in American history (76).<sup>5</sup> Such complaints assume that there is a set of boundaries between the rational “outside” world of the industrial marketplace and

the emotional “inside” world of home. This construction draws on a historical ideology of “separate spheres,” where men and women have different relationships to the world based on their dominance of distinct social and economic arenas. Thus the logic of commercial production and consumption penetrates the sanctuary of private emotional life, the “haven in a heartless world,” to impose cultural meanings and construct artificial needs for individuals within a household.

More specifically, capitalist culture encroaches upon the “female” sphere of nurturing, where women act as keepers of the culture, primary agents of children’s socialization, and defenders of the private realm of family life. The implicit fear is that kids know more about Ronald McDonald than they do about their “own” regional, ethnic, or racial background. Pillsbury’s analysis draws heavily upon these stereotypes of family and gender:

Forty years ago the daughter of the family often spent hours in the kitchen with her mother learning the mysteries of how to cook all the family favorites. The arrival of Little League and then girls’ sporting teams meant that less and less time was available to spend in the kitchen learning cooking techniques. All of the blame cannot be placed on after-school activities, however, as Mom probably wasn’t there slaving away over the stove anyway; rather she was at work. The result has been a very significant decline in cooking knowledge in the typical household. Coupled with the attitude that cooking is boring, this has led to ever greater demands for prepared foods. (1997, 97–98)

The powerful marketing of commercial food production and the changing family structure, particularly women in the workforce, increase people’s use of restaurants, fast food, and “value-added” supermarket meals.

Ritzer pinpoints more particular culprits: “There is much talk today about the disintegration of the family, and the fast food restaurant may well be a contributor to that disintegration” (1996, 134). According to the logic of McDonaldization, eating out does not allow for the kind of leisurely slow-paced meal, complete with conversation and socialization of kids, that is supposedly so central to the formation of family relations and for training family members in their proper roles beyond the home.

Ritzer also indicts convenience in the home kitchen, where the microwave, frozen foods, and supermarket “value-added” products such as ready-to-go burritos or rotisserie chickens bring McDonaldization into the private home. Buying and using mass-produced food alters not only the amount but also the nature of labor within the household. By exten-

sion, it changes the meaning as well: “Those qualities of the family meal, the ones that impart feelings of security and well-being might be lost forever when food is ‘zapped’ or ‘nuked’ instead of cooked” (141). Lamenting kids who make their own meals with microwaves, Ritzer equates not having to cook with not having to care. Further, there can be no pleasure or satisfaction involved in feeding others or in eating when some of the work is done for the cook by an impersonal “outside” source.<sup>6</sup>

In this logic, reducing the labor involved in creating the family meal reduces the significance of family itself. This labor is discussed without either substantive or theoretical analysis of the way such work is generally the source of gender, race, and class inequality. Women are the ones who are ideologically and personally held accountable for doing cooking as caring work that constructs the family. By failing to do so, women “handicap” their children and spouses as they negotiate the “outside” world. For example, a typical parenting magazine suggests, “Kids whose families share meals are likelier to succeed in school and even to have better vocabularies” (Lapinski 1999, 7). People who cannot create “proper meals” for their families are to blame for all manner of social problems. This construction also leaves no room for any variations in the circumstances that structure the symbolic meanings of eating together.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, if the commercial marketplace provides the food, it inevitably becomes the source for cultural meaning. Barely hidden in this logic are ideological assumptions about who “should” be doing such work to construct family in an ongoing way: while women create family through their efforts, they are also “doing gender,” reinforcing or recreating differences between men and women (West and Zimmerman 1987; DeVault 1991). Fears about the decline in the family meal are really fears about the disintegration of “recognizable” gender boundaries. The assumption is that fast food, take-out, and commercial advertising are replacing women’s function as nurturers and caregivers.

My critique questions the gendered and racial nature of such logic. Feminist researchers have challenged the ideological boundary between home and marketplace since research shows how both women’s and men’s daily practices cross such lines. The work of constructing family includes provisioning, deciphering ads and advice about what’s good to eat, and finding appropriate places to buy the kinds of food that meet the physical and emotional needs of family members (DeVault 1991). Black feminist scholars demonstrate how the separate spheres ideology ignores the experiences of racial-ethnic women who have historically worked in and outside the home and defined themselves from both

vantage points (Collins 1990; Dill 1988; Glenn 1985). The emphasis on family as a site of consumption also tends to obscure the conditions under which commercial food is produced and distributed. This is particularly important when we consider that women, people of color, and recent immigrants are often the ones doing the work of preparing and selling industrial foods.

By asserting that changes in the family meal equal a decline in family life, Pillsbury and Ritzer gloss over constantly shifting issues regarding family. In particular, these arguments would need to account for some of the following historical trends: how racial, ethnic, and working-class families have relied on women in the paid workforce; how wealthier white people have relied on paid and unpaid women of color to cook for their families; how “ethnic entrepreneurs” played a large part in creating products and defining commercial markets (Gabaccia 1998); and how “traditional” extended families who engaged in more household production generally depended on the labor of children (Coontz 1992). The ability to create and defend family as a private realm is not equally valued or equally available. Maxine Baca Zinn (1994) argues that “research on women of color demonstrates that protecting one’s family from the demands of the market is strongly related to the distribution of power and privilege in society” (16). These conditions are all equally relevant to the ways in which commercial foods have changed people’s eating habits within families.

If “family” is emblematic of types of consumption, the discussion needs to delineate how various kinds of families create and respond to current social and economic conditions. For example, Ritzer suggests that the reason why the McDonald’s model and fast food have proven so “irresistible” is because contemporary Americans desire efficiency and this desire is a product of our current family and workplace arrangements. In particular, Ritzer often cites two different family “types” as important groups of consumers who determine practice: “Thus, the speed and the efficiency of a fast-food meal fits in well with the demands of the modern, dual-career or single-parent family” (1996, 146).

The rise in dual-income and single-parent families is a real social and economic feature of contemporary social life. On the surface, Ritzer’s assertion of these appears sensitive to a wider view of what constitutes a household. But he is still constructing a normative center from which all others draw their ideological images. It also assumes that families themselves are the premier unit of consumption, creating the bulk of mass cultural meaning by eating Happy Meals in their minivans, even when statistics show that the majority of regular customers are individual men.<sup>8</sup> But the idea of family as a cohesive and supportive group is

an ahistorical cultural construct, not necessarily reflective of people's real and changing experiences of family life. The important questions center on what is family and how are these various social groups (not all of which constitute family) affected *differently* by the structural forces of commercial production?

In his history of sugar, Sidney Mintz (1985) articulates the difference between "outside meanings" imposed by the forces of production, and "inside meanings." "Inside meaning" refers to the daily conditions of consumption, where people negotiate and impart significance to their acts, often in ways that complicate and abrade the forces of structural power. In effect, people approach commercial foods with a variety of purposes and create their own meanings within those structural constraints. For example, there are variations in cooking and eating that occur across stages in the life course of individuals. As already noted, teenagers and young single men tend to predominate as fast food consumers. At the same time, many groups of young adults in their twenties describe cooking at home with friends because it's an inexpensive social activity. Some married women reach a certain age and reject doing feeding work for others, finding liberation in letting the commercial marketplace do the cooking.

Whatever detrimental impact commercial foods have had on our lives, Jack Goody reminds us that they have "enormously improved, in quantity, quality, and variety the diet (and usually the cuisine) of the urban working populations of the western world" (1997, 338). Given this, we need to think and research, without prejudgments, about the ways people from various social and economic circumstances incorporate commercial foods into their lives. For families who live in more rural economically depressed areas outside of cities, "traditional methods of food acquisition (gardening, maintaining domestic animals, hunting and fishing) are still being used to supplement new foods" (Whitehead 1992, 106). All of these people do some food consumption through the public commercial sphere, and yet each constructs cultural meaning about food and about family in ways that go beyond Ritzer and Pillsbury's images of household life.

Igor Kopytoff (1986, 73) insists that all commodities have a biography and are best thought of as in the process of becoming, rather than in an all-or-nothing state of being. If relations of gender and race get enacted and created around home-cooked meals, it stands to reason that a comparative process operates with commercial foods like McDonald's, frozen dinners, and microwavable meals. Even so, this does not mean that we can assume that people passively accept the cultural meanings imposed upon them by outside forces. The power to bestow meaning is

not always a function of the power to determine availabilities. Questioning the superficial gender-neutral nature of these analyses also entails questioning the universality of the effect of commercial food on choices made by individuals and small groups.

### White Middle-Class Culture and American Food

White folks act like they invented food and like there is some weird mystique surrounding it—something that only Julia and Jim can get to. There is no mystique. Food is food.

*Verta Mae Grosvenor*

Conflicts about what is traditional and what is “American” are recurrent in both popular and academic food writing. Alan Warde (1997, 56) surmises that “the structural anxieties of our age are made manifest in discourses about food.” As I’ve shown, some of these anxieties focus on a perceived loss of women’s caring work within the family. But tied to these concerns are others about race and ethnicity, about the place of people within the structural and cultural landscape, and about the ability to construct a “national culture” amidst both pluralism and commercialism. Both Ritzer and Pillsbury play out these anxieties as they analyze the impact of commercial foods on regional and racial-ethnic food patterns.

Both authors agree that the forces of mass production and the marketing of industrial food inevitably obliterate many of the distinctions in consumption in American society. As evidence, Ritzer (1996, 95) quotes a *Saturday Review* article which claims, “Food in one neighborhood, city, or state looks and tastes pretty much like food anywhere else.” Pillsbury evokes a previous era, where regional and ethnic boundaries created the variety that was the spice of American life: “The invasion of standardized signage, corporate retailers, and international manufacturers as well as a highly mobile population and the general placelessness of most urban society has meant that the connection with the past is just not as strong as it once was” (1997, 210–211).

At the same time, both writers suggest that the commercial marketplace is unequivocally the source of ethnic and regional variation in people’s diets. They invoke the image of the food court in a suburban mall, where shoppers sit at centralized plastic tables surrounded by a ring of “global” fast food choices such as eggrolls, tacos, pizza, gyros, gumbo, and southern fried chicken. It is the commercial standardization of an urban street food experience. Certainly the nature of such

foods is changed when they are mass produced for a large population. But to call such things “Americanized” suggests that there *is* a normative standard of American food, and implicitly food from a white European history, reminiscent of the kinds of diet and values that home economists attempted to impose on working-class, immigrant, and Native women in the early 1900s (Gabaccia, 125). It is no accident that the moral premise of such food instruction imposed by upper-middle-class white women was the same set of values (scientific order, efficiency) espoused by the developing commercial food industry.

Ritzer and Pillsbury’s seemingly contradictory set of claims needs to be examined for the validity of its argument and for how it typifies both the idea of American culture and the average consumer through implicit assumptions about white middle-class experience.

### Homogenizing Difference

In Ritzer’s view, the commercial marketplace has the ability to level difference. The homogenizing effects of McDonaldization are more powerful than the historical activities of people who create and consume unique foods as a way of differentiating their region, race, or ethnicity. Thus, the foods produced and distributed by corporations, supermarkets, and most restaurants appeal to people more than “traditional home-made” foods for the following reasons: One, they’re readily available and easy to access. Two, they require less effort to purchase and consume. Three, they are packaged and sold in ways that draw upon supposedly common cultural values.

The last reason is worth exploring for the way it suppresses differences between people in the name of shared national meanings. By consuming such products as a Big Mac, one consumes American culture. Indeed, this is often how people in other countries perceive such products. As Rick Fantasia (1995, 204) has pointed out, “fast food is identified abroad as a distinctively ‘American’ commodity[;] its cultural representations are likely to be strongly suggestive of what is viewed abroad as a distinctly American aesthetic, way of life, or experience.”

However, the history of industrial food production in the United States and the variety of consumer experiences of and with commercial food products suggest that not all Americans approach commercially prepared foods in the same ways. Ritzer and Pillsbury’s argument assumes that the cultural message of homogenization, developing a shared culture and assimilating, matters more in contemporary society than the culture people create from other aspects of their personal experience. But ample evidence exists to the contrary. For example, Tony

Whitehead's six years of food-related research with African Americans in North Carolina concludes the following: "Those who argue that the modern-day national diffusion of technological, communication, and transportation advances has effectively wiped out a distinctly southern culture . . . have mistakenly reduced the concept of culture to simple behaviors and ideas that can be completely destroyed by the introduction of powerful new ideas and material culture" (1992, 106).

For example, in Christi Smith's (1999) ethnography of white Appalachian out-migrants, people who have moved to cities describe eating at Cracker Barrel, a fast-food chain of "southern" restaurants, as a way of "tasting home" when one cannot easily get home-cooked versions.

As Sidney Mintz has pointed out, there are certainly cultural expectations about "newer" populations becoming integrated and assimilated into some version of mass culture that is packaged as "American." But the push toward homogenization is only one of the structural and personal forces people contend with in their daily lives. Mintz surmises, "That there are powerful pressures toward sameness, working particularly upon children, may be thought to increase the homogeneity of American food habits . . . but while learning to eat ice cream, and at fast food and ethnic restaurants has the effect of increasing homogeneity of a kind, this experience is not the same as learning or creating a cuisine. Strictly speaking, by learning such behavior people are becoming more sociologically alike, but it is not really clear that they are becoming more culturally alike" (1996, 113).

Differences based on gender, ethnicity, and race are intricately tied to class divisions in contemporary society. But Ritzer claims that commercial foods blanket such divisions. Since everybody has access to fast food and its popular cultural meanings, eating it becomes an easy way to participate in mainstream America. He contends that more people are affluent today and therefore can buy fast food and other McDonaldized products with their increased disposable income. While some groups of Americans may be experiencing greater affluence than before, many more are struggling harder with economic constraints. A large number of those who struggle are people of color and recent immigrants. Although theoretically most people have access to commercial food products, buying and consuming certain goods are inherently part of material and cultural stratification. While the upper middle class may consume commercial products, they have the material and symbolic resources to engage in other, more specialized forms of consumption.

Most important, in his desire to prove the power of cultural homogeneity, Ritzer misses the extent to which McDonaldization emerges,

organizationally, in every setting, in relation to its opposite: production and consumption that is craft-based, artisanal, labor-intensive, and local or traditional.<sup>9</sup> Fast food exists in contrast with the boom in high-end haute cuisine. A supermarket that sells Velveeta probably also sells locally made specialty cheeses.

In fact, regional and ethnic racial differences are often strengthened in relation to McDonaldization. As Rick Fantasia (1999) points out, we need to pay attention to “the incredible marketing of creole, blackened, mesquite cooking processes and tastes . . . as well as the completely patterned progression of restaurant fashions that have moved from ‘Chinese’ or ‘Asian’ to increasingly specialized cultural fare (requiring an ever more finely-tuned ‘cognoscenti’ to determine the latest new taste) from Szechuan to Thai to sushi, each requiring a fairly elaborate infrastructure of specialized food distribution and marketing.” Some of these competing trends in production and consumption are also about competing ideas about what is authentically “ethnic” in comparison to what is “American.” Is it possible for only group members to create and consume “real” cuisines? Or are people with the cultural and economic capital of the upper middle class able to purchase such knowledge and engage in cross-boundary production and consumption? Is “eating the Other” an act of subjugation or empathy? (hooks 1998; Abrahams 1984). These debates, while vigorously pursued by some food scholars, are subsumed by Ritzer and Pillsbury’s emphasis on homogenization.

Pillsbury does attempt to document the contributions of various racial and ethnic groups to a “national diet,” but his version, which does not abandon the notion of a national cuisine, positions a model of culture and consumption that starts from a white European background and “adds in” ethnic and regional foods. He continually uses a normative center of white European fare in comparison to “immigrant” cuisine, stating in point, that “Chinese food has made few inroads into the traditional American kitchen” (1997, 162). Pillsbury’s conflation of whiteness and Americanness is what Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek would describe as a “white rhetorical strategy” (1999, 99).

Normative assumptions about “American cuisine” erase ample historical evidence of generations of ethnic Americans at the center of defining foodways, using both native and imported foodstuffs to create new patterns of consumption even in colonial times. While dominant white European groups may have had the power to more strongly influence what gets defined as national culture, they did so in complex and contested ways, particularly around food. Donna Gabaccia (1998) demonstrates how, from the start, the Americas were a nation of “creolized eaters,” drawing their basic foodstuffs from a variety of people’s food-

ways. For example, culinary historians have recently begun to acknowledge the influence of African foods and cuisines on Europe and the Americas. Even so, they do not always recognize how African cooks in America came up with new and different ways to cook the same staples. According to Diane Spivey (1999, 239), “African American cooking itself encompasses numerous complex preparations that are considered to be standard ‘American’ recipes in this country today.”

What lurks in Pillsbury’s and Ritzer’s analyses is the conflation of mass culture and national identity, as if one could completely determine the other. While critical of how capitalist mass production defines American culture, both authors accept its control over consumers. But, as Sidney Mintz has pointed out, “A ‘national’ cuisine is a contradiction in terms; there can be regional cuisines, but not national cuisines. I think that for the most part, a national cuisine is simply a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system” (1996, 104). Such attempts at defining national culture—and in particular, national cuisine—are contested social and political battles. For example, Jeffrey M. Pilcher (1997) argues that the evolution of a Mexican national cuisine involved clashes between industrialization, Mexican elites who favored a European model, and the ultimately successful communities of women who incorporated Native American and campesino foodways into their cookbooks

People contend with mass culture in various ways, making it relevant and useful to their lives. Alan Warde suggests that scholars of consumption are often remiss in

recognizing the way in which mass-produced commodities can be customized, that is appropriated for personal and private purposes. . . . Groups of people buy a common commercial product then work on it, adapt it, convert it into something that is symbolically representative of personal or collective identity. That it was once a mass-produced commodity becomes irrelevant after its incorporation into a person’s household, hobby, or life. In one sense, all cookery is of this nature: labour is added, and by transforming groceries into meals social and symbolic value is created. That is the currently legitimate labour of love. (1997, 152)

Perhaps part of the problem comes from the way the authors divide contexts of production and consumption. Food production in both the “public” and “private” spheres depends on the labor of women and people of color, but these are treated as distinct topics for analysis.

When examining commercial food Ritzer and Pillsbury use race, gender, and class as variables and not as interrelated organizing princi-

ples for social life. In Ritzer's view, one of the potentially positive aspects of McDonaldization is that "People are more likely to be treated similarly, no matter what their race, gender, or social class" (1996, 12). Would he be able to maintain this claim if he centralized the construction of difference and focused more on the active ways that food gets produced and used by both industries and individuals? His analysis overlooks people who work in food service and food production. Most of these workers are at the lowest end of the wage pay scale and receive no benefits. The majority of people who hold these jobs are women, people of color, and recent immigrants. Thus, the "McDonaldized world" has inequality built right into the very nature of its production. Furthermore, fast food restaurants, supermarkets, and convenience stores vary depending on the neighborhood, region, urban or suburban setting. Customers are generally drawn from the demographic area surrounding the site. If we accept evidence of America's continued geographic segregation by race and class, it is highly likely that these commercial venues are equally segregated in the range of people who frequent one McDonald's over another. Studies of restaurants and fast food places suggest that, as in most workplaces, gender, race, and class are used as ways of differentiating and discriminating against workers and consumers.

### Eating the Other

A walk around a typical supermarket today highlights products that were not standard available fare ten to twenty years ago. Ready-made hummus, instant couscous, soy sauce, and twenty varieties of salsa have equal shelf status with ice cream, pasta, ketchup, and mustard. Clearly, commercial food companies increasingly exploit the selling power of racial, ethnic, and regional variety. For Ritzer and Pillsbury, this "broadening of the American palate" is muted by the effects of commercial production on the quality and "authenticity" of such foods.

Ritzer (1996, 136) fears that "paradoxically, while fast-food restaurants have permitted far more of its people to experience ethnic food, the food that they eat has lost many of its distinguishing characteristics." Uniformity and predictability replace the craving for diversity. He claims that "people are hard-pressed to find an authentically different meal in an ethnic fast-food chain"(139). Pillsbury echoes this idea by arguing that ethnic and immigrant restaurants are "slowing Americanizing."<sup>10</sup> Such arguments make implicit assumptions about ethnicity, race, and the "ordinary American" consumer. Both writers assume that the majority of restaurants are patronized by white non-ethnics looking

for an “exotic” meal. While some racial and ethnic restaurants have courted customers from the broad spectrum of American society, some have existed as part of ethnic enclaves where immigrants could partake of the foods of home.

Underlying these designations are two interesting assumptions. The first is that some foods can unquestioningly be defined as ethnic or racial.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic food, like ethnic culture, is assumed to be static, such that any change is viewed as assimilationist or a loss of tradition. The second is that food adaptations represent an inevitable corruption of authentic foods. Using interviews with Chinese Americans in the restaurant business, Netta Davis (1999) documents historical changes in the cuisine served, suggesting that such shifts are “a representation of Chinese and Chinese-American culture which is both ‘unauthentic’ fabrication and the product of an ‘authentic’ cultural adaptation. The accommodation of Chinese cuisine to the American market and palate are the result of a process of negotiation and transformation carried out by Chinese-American restaurateurs.”

Leslie Prosterman (1984) uses a biographical account of a Jewish caterer to describe how changes in a standard kosher menu represented negotiations between the boundaries of religious culture, class-based concerns about sophisticated foods, and larger trends in American eating habits. Such changes illustrate the evolving rather than static nature of food traditions.

Pillsbury comments that the commercial marketing of certain foods “has encouraged those Americans fearful of ‘foreign’ cuisines to be a little more adventuresome” (29)<sup>12</sup> While it is important to emphasize how people choose foods outside their racial, ethnic, class, or regional experiences, the crucial questions should also focus on the conflicts around who gets to produce and define what is authentically ethnic or racial.<sup>13</sup> According to Donna Gabaccia, “Ethnicity in the marketplace was not the invention of corporate demographic marketing strategies” (1998, 160). She points to the belated corporate recognition of already thriving enclave markets and their attempts to compete with the already existing “enclave entrepreneurs.” Big business food corporations “discovered” the selling power of ethnic and regional diversity after World War II, when there had already been a long history of successful smaller food producers, often from ethnic and racial groups, promoting products to both enclaves and the larger public market. Doris Witt (1999) and Rafia Zafar (1996) both use Verta Mae Grosvenor’s culinary autobiographies to grapple with the symbolic and material uses of the term “soul food,” concluding that it is not “a historical entity but as an evolving, flexible continuum: the food may change but the identity persists

... the ‘boundaries’ of culinary Black America may alter (in this case foods or styles of preparation) but the group itself remains identifiable by itself and to others” (Zafar, 81).

For example, the history of Aunt Jemima demonstrates the complex ways that African Americans have contended with a commercial representation of Black women and food. Witt sees “the trademark as a site where individual and collective boundaries have been mutually, albeit by no means equivalently, constructed and contested” (1999, 42). Significantly, each of these examples points to the way ethnic and racial groups participate in defining foods as part of their cultural experience. Those definitions are created both in tandem and in contention with those espoused by the commercial marketplace. Rather than focus exclusively on the impact of the capitalist market as it absorbs and sells various cultures, we need to examine how people in various groups act, collide, and collaborate in this cross-consumption.

### Conclusion

If we understand race and gender as structural frameworks for social and economic life, then our analyses of global food trends and general patterns of consumption need to change. The first step is to move beyond the limits that consider gender and race only in relation to “feminized” topics like the body or only as symbolic markers for the experiences of nonwhite peoples. In particular, centralizing race and gender forces us to consider more than one level of analysis in studying food. Ritzer, Pillsbury, and other analysts of global capitalism do provide evidence that commercial foods do change the meanings and activities of people’s daily lives. But it is equally true that people don’t just accept the structural conditions and meanings of the material things they have access to; rather they construct their own critiques and new meanings which may or may not draw upon an already inscribed set of traditions.

I began by speculating about the divisions in the kinds of food books that come across my desk. I want to end by thinking about the scholarship on food and eating that I hope to see in the future. Most emphatically, it seems essential that studies of food and social life must explore how gender and race and class collide to create both the local and the global. Such research would focus on how specific food behaviors and roles regarding commensality are given gendered and racial meanings, how paid and unpaid food labor is divided to express gender and race differences symbolically, and how diverse social structures—not just families or ethnic groups—incorporate gender and racial values and convey advantages. These books would analyze the *construction* of such

packages, simultaneously emphasizing the symbolic and the structural, the ideological and the material, the interactional and the institutional levels of analysis.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps then my appetite would be satisfied.

## Notes

1. Although I prioritize gender and race, with some discussion of social class, I rely on conceptualizations of these terms that see them as intertwined with each other and various other forms of constructing difference and inequality in contemporary society. Ferree, Lorber, and Hess (1999) suggest that “gender, race, and social class are simultaneous social processes.” Sexuality is also implicated in such arrangements, as another one of the “socially constructed, historically specific outcomes of the actions of and conflicts among dominant and subordinate groups [which] organize and permeate all the institutions of contemporary society in the United States” (xxi).

2. Examples of recent texts with similar aims include Bell and Valentine’s (1998) *Consuming Geographies* and Gabaccia’s (1998) *We Are What We Eat*. Although both of these books do a better job of contending with ethnicity, race, class, and gender, at a basic level they reproduce the same problems as Ritzer and Pillsbury. For Bell and Valentine, gender appears relevant only in relation to the home and the body. Even though Gabaccia presents a wonderful history of ethnic and racial entrepreneurship that defined local and national foodways, she minimizes the discussions of conflict and power inherent in such clashes of material and symbolic activity because she fails to theorize race and gender as organizing principles that set the stage for conflict.

3. *The McDonaldization of Society* was listed as one of the best-selling sociology books of the last twenty-five years (*Contemporary Sociology*, 1997). It was recently reissued along with two edited volumes, which include other writers’ extensions of the McDonaldization thesis. There is often a McDonaldization panel at sociology conferences. Ritzer himself points out many instances of the way his term has entered popular usage (1996, xiii).

4. On the other hand, the family meal is often the site of conflict. Rhian Ellis (1983) documents stories from battered women who describe dinner as the catalyst for violent incidents. Bell and Valentine present research that shows children using dinner as a means of negotiating and asserting autonomy, which often results in conflicts (1997, 84–85).

5. Coontz (1992) argues for a historically informed analysis of family, concluding, “If it is hard to find a satisfactory model of the traditional family, it is also hard to make global judgements about how families have changed and whether they are getting better or worse. . . . Lack of perspective on where families have come from and how their evolution connects to other social trends tends to encourage contradictory claims and wild exaggerations about where families are going” (76–79).

6. Interestingly, Ritzer ignores the obvious comparison between households that rely on market-prepared food and households that rely on domestic help. Feminist historians describe the long legacy of wealthier white families who relied on African American or immigrant women and some Chinese and Japanese

men to cook for their families. By talking about how these families historically depended on cooking from an “outside” source, Ritzer would have to consider race and gender as organizing principles for the production and consumption of food. This changes the force of his critique about the nature of caring work. For example, although white women often relied on paid help in the kitchen, they were still the ones who held primary responsibility for the production of domestic hospitality and close social relationships in the family. A closer and more complex reading of such scenarios forces the analyst to view caring work as both physical and interactional labor that can be divided while still resting on structures of inequality that hold women and people of color more accountable. See Olesen (1993) and Rollins (1985).

7. Although the article asserts the absolute significance of primary socialization by family, what’s interesting is that it goes on to try and alleviate the responsibility parents feel about providing home-cooked meals, suggesting that take-out food served at home can function as an equally successful way of creating family time and thus family itself.

8. “The ‘superheavy users’ in McDonald’s parlance, mostly male and in their mid-teens to early 30s, come back at least twice a week. These are the people who make up 75% of the company’s business” (Peter Drucker, *New York Times Magazine*, June 10, 1996).

9. Rick Fantasia provides evidence that “the reciprocally-determining process that creates ‘McDonaldization’ and ‘distinctive’ forms of culinary practice in the US has its perfect counterpart in the 1980’s in France, where haute cuisine became an object of ‘national (cultural) defense’ (i.e. the emergence of Conseil Nationale des Arts Culinaire, and the fondation Brillat Savarin), just as the threat of the homogenizing ‘other’ (fast food) was in the midst of a significant boom” (personal communication, 1999). Further “it was not a coincidence that a serious market for ‘Continental Cuisine’ (the earliest American version of gourmet dining) emerged in response to the development of the fast food industry, as a way for American middle class elites to distinguish themselves from ‘the masses’” (Fantasia 1995, 214).

10. For a better analysis of the relationship between commercial food corporations and ethnicity, see Warren Belasco, “Ethnic Fast Foods: The Corporate Melting Pot,” *Food and Foodways* 2 (1987): 1–30.

11. Doris Witt (1999) does a terrific analysis of the shifting ways that Verta Mae Grosvenor describes soul food as racial or nonracial, particularly in comparison to the idea of “white foods” as mass-produced. To Witt, “by ‘outing’ peaches, watermelons, mangos, avocados and carrots, Grosvenor foregrounds the quixotic impossibility of white America’s pursuit of racial purity via the consumption of chemically processed foods” (162).

12. Pillsbury’s notions of what is “authentically” ethnic or racial are suspect throughout the text. In one instance he describes Caesar salad as the one kind of Greek food most Americans eat. Caesar salad was an American invention. Further, Mediterranean foods have, in fact, had a profound influence on American eating patterns. See Gabaccia (1998) and Belasco (1993) for examples.

13. In a comparative example, Anne Goldman’s analysis of African American and Mexicana cookbooks concludes that they often constitute a form of culinary

autobiography, particularly for women, where gender and racial identity were issues to be explored in the text. The Mexicana cookbooks she analyzes often “evoke the flavors of the past in order to critique the cultural present” (1996, 17). What’s interesting is that she finds ways that the label “genuine” can authenticate the writer and create distance for the reader, act as a way of dividing non-native readers from the community it celebrates. Reproducing recipes does not necessarily lead to cultural ownership (24).

14. This paraphrases Myra Marx Ferree’s (1990) description of the difference between a sex-role analysis and a gender-relation analysis. I broaden her words to account for race and class, something she accomplishes in later writings with Judith Lorber and Beth B. Hess (1999).

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## Indian Spices across the Black Waters

SHARMILA SEN

### Crossing the Kala Pani

In a London saturated with South Asian curry houses, the Trinidadian novelist Samuel Selvon's search for Indian food as he knew it provides an illuminating anecdote about the location of contemporary Indo-Caribbean culinary culture. At a conference on Indo-Caribbean history, Selvon once said, "In all my years in England, I never came across the kind of curry we ate in Trinidad, and I searched all over London for a dhall pourri, and never saw one until one enterprising Trinidadian started up a little cookshop."<sup>1</sup> In order to fully appreciate the complexities involved in Selvon's search for Indo-Caribbean food on English streets lined with "Indian" restaurants run by immigrant Sylhetis from Bangladesh, it is necessary to remember those original vessels—or to use Mahadai Das's phrase, those "wooden missions of imperialist design"<sup>2</sup>—setting out from the Hooghly harbor near Calcutta, bound for Port of Spain or Georgetown in the nineteenth century. Between 1838 and 1917, indentured laborers from India crossed the dreaded kala pani (black waters) in thousands in order to compensate for the post-emancipation labor shortage in the British colonial sugar estates. While some Indian indentured laborers were taken to islands such as Jamaica, Barbados, Martinique, and Cuba, the majority landed in Guyana and Trinidad. Of the 551,000 indentured laborers brought from India to the Caribbean and South America, 238,909 arrived in British Guiana and 143,939 arrived in Trinidad.<sup>3</sup> East Indian<sup>4</sup> laborers transported (often as punishment for such activities against the empire as taking part in the so-called Mutiny of 1857)<sup>5</sup> to the British Caribbean colonies form a large part of the South Asian diaspora. These coolies<sup>6</sup> labored on the sugarcane fields to provide a sweetener for the tea produced by peasants in Assam and Bengal, as well as for coffee and chocolate, the two other

bitter colonial beverages. In England, from the late eighteenth century onwards, relatively cheap Caribbean sugar had begun to replace many Indian spices as a fruit and vegetable preservative.<sup>7</sup> And, ironically, at the same time when Eastern spices were being ousted by New World sugar at the English table, coolies were importing their Indian condiments and recipes across the oceans into their new home in the Caribbean colonies. While subcontinental cultures have been part of Caribbean traditions since the arrival of the first Indian cane-cutters in 1838, the Indo-Caribbean population has started to receive serious critical attention within academic circles only over the last two decades. To the already existing set of stock images which come to mind when speaking of the Caribbean—it is a place for tourists, a paradise, an area of contemporary poverty, a realm of natural disasters; it produces juicy fruits and fast bowlers on the cricket field; it is the promise of sugared profit and the site of unspeakable taboo acts such as cannibalism—we must add a new image: the East Indian coolie, working in the sugar estate under conditions scarcely better than that of slavery. The image of “fields and fields of swaying sugar-cane [planted by coolies] to give the taste of sweetness to us,” Rajkumari Singh writes, can exist only in juxtaposition to the memory of “how often this sweetness became bitter gall to them [the coolies] for seeking their rights.”<sup>8</sup>

If the East Indian population in general has been largely ignored in Caribbean discourse, the East Indian woman has been even more marginalized. Among the better-known Indo-Caribbean writers, especially those recognized by the Anglo-American readership, women’s voices are sadly missing. Moreover, as Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen argues, “since the dominant discourse within Caribbean feminism is Afro-Centric, [. . .] feminist analyses of Caribbean society have tended to focus on the black and coloured population and ‘creole’ culture.”<sup>9</sup> However, some contemporary fictions by Indo-Caribbean writers have begun to reconstruct the nearly forgotten coolie woman’s story. In his most recent novel, *The Counting House* (1996), the Indo-Guyanese writer David Dabydeen focuses on the experiences of coolie women in nineteenth-century Guyana. This novel, pieced together from seven artifacts found at Plantation Albion, owned by the Gladstone family, creates two rival female narratives about a colonial sugar estate: Rohini’s Indian tale and Miriam’s Afro-Caribbean tale. *The Counting House* is (at times problematically) tenacious in its desire to trace the development of an emerging Indo-Caribbean literary identity which seeks to distinguish itself from a more dominant Afro-Caribbean discourse. To this end, curry and crab callaloo are symbolically pitted against each other in order to classify the identifying culinary traits of two so-called rival populations who

were brought to the Caribbean for the specific purpose of producing the sweetest commodity of all: sugar. This essay is a reading of the cultural work performed by Indian and other food products in the making of a distinct Indo-Caribbean identity in Dabydeen's novel.

### Sweet Biscuits in a Sugar Estate

David Dabydeen's *The Counting House* is a rather clear response to the voices raised in conferences across the world and to the increasingly audible complaints heard in Indo-Caribbean academic circles demanding increased focus on East Indian women's experiences.<sup>10</sup> The novel charts the life of Rohini and Vidia, a young couple who flee mid-nineteenth-century rural India gripped by the violence of the so-called 1857 Mutiny, and arrive as indentured laborers in a sugar estate in British Guyana. The estate, Plantation Albion, is the site of the coolies' encounter with the newly freed African slaves. While Rohini eventually strikes up a friendship with an older Black woman, Miriam, Vidia fails to find succor in the sugarcane fields and attempts to make the voyage home to India, only to drown in a shipwreck.<sup>11</sup>

Although Dabydeen uses Indian foods as well as practices and tools which accompany them to draw attention to a distinct Indo-Caribbean experience, it is another type of colonial cuisine, one that requires a global network and global labor, which stubbornly appears at the very moment East Indian cultural identity is about to be fixed. Therefore, before turning our attention to the uses of Indian food in representations of coolie culture, it is necessary to analyze the English biscuit tin which survives as a material witness to the indentured laborers' presence on a sugar plantation and their relationship to the colonizing nation. The prologue to *The Counting House* consists of two quotations from Fielding and Gladstone and a paragraph listing the seven artifacts out of which the author invents his novel:

In the ruined counting house of Plantation Albion, British Guiana, three small parcels of materials survive as the only evidence of the nineteenth-century Indian presence. The first two parcels consist mostly of lists of Indian names, accounts of the wages paid to them, and scraps of letters. The contents of the third parcel are a cow-skin purse, a child's tooth, an ivory button, a drawing of the Hindu God, Rama, haloed by seven stars, a set of iron needles, some kumari seeds, and an empty tin marked "Huntley's Dominion Biscuits", its cover depicting a scene of the Battle of Waterloo.<sup>12</sup>

Last in an order of ascending rhetorical importance, the Huntley's biscuit tin is a surprising culinary witness to what, at least according to

Dabydeen, may be called a vanishing nineteenth-century coolie history. Huntley's dominion is vast indeed.<sup>13</sup> Taking our cues from anthropologists and sociologists such as Sidney Mintz<sup>14</sup> and Jack Goody, we can place the biscuit tin marked with British military triumph on a number of watery pathways. Goody writes that "it was this general context of colonialism, overseas trade and long-lasting foods that saw the development of the great British Biscuit industry."<sup>15</sup> Companies such as Huntley and Palmers, Carrs, and later Peek Freans were, by the mid-nineteenth century, rapidly growing and establishing an international clientele. Their impact on the eating habits of Britons both at home and abroad was tremendous, as was their impact on the industrial revolution.<sup>16</sup>

These tinned sweets circumnavigated the globe from India and the Far East to Africa and the Caribbean, arriving at last at the very estates that produced the sugar for relatively cheap, mass-marketed edibles. Rohini scarcely gets a taste of sugar biscuits in the coolie logic. In fact, her only encounter with Huntley and Palmers's product takes place when Gladstone gives her an empty tin as reward for her work in his house. The coolie woman in Dabydeen's novel, of course, is not knowledgeable about the network of political and economic systems in which the biscuit tin is embedded when she brings it home to her husband. Barred from experiencing the taste of sweet biscuits, Rohini satisfies herself with the visual pleasures the colorful tin offers. That the Huntley and Palmers tin is decorated with a scene from the battle of Waterloo the prologue had already revealed. However, through Rohini's eyes, we see the battle as an unfamiliar abstraction of blues and reds: "On the cover was painted a battle scene, a set of whitemen in red in one corner firing canons, a set of whitemen in blue in another firing back; in the middle was a field where a third set of whitemen mingled, some in blue, some in red, all on black horses, and all with raised swords" (150–151). Ignorant as the female coolie might be of European struggles for power and of the importance of the sugar economy, her highly ocular understanding of the biscuit tin as a system of symmetrically placed red and blue figures is quick to equate it with economic profit. Rohini brings the biscuit tin home to her husband so that he can hoard his meager savings of a few coins in it. Moreover, the symbolic status of the biscuit tin is reiterated again in the novel when Miriam, the ex-slave, divulges that she cannot risk her privileged status on the estate for a coolie insurrection: "I taste too much cadbury and sweet-biscuits to go back . . ." (168). As Goody and Mintz have both argued, capitalist global networks produce industrial foods *and* create a market for their consumption. Tinned products were invented for the most pragmatic of

reasons—sustenance during long journeys, civil or military. On Plantation Albion, however, the tins of biscuits which Rohini and Miriam cherish are not just intended to satisfy one's physical appetite but hold the promise of satisfying psychological desires as well. They are a bit of the imperial center suspended in sugar and flour. Thus, while Gladstone may look upon biscuits from Huntley and Palmers as barely palatable physical necessities in an alien environment, the coolie woman and the ex-slave see the same tins as desirable luxuries, intimations of a bountiful world far from servitude. These two sugar estate workers, Dabydeen's ironic portrayal of Huntley and Palmers's ideal consumer, remain adamantly blind to their own labor in the cane fields that produce the necessary raw materials for the biscuit factories in Britain.

For Rohini, and for many female indentured laborers like her, the voyage from India was intended as a journey away from economic and social hardships.<sup>17</sup> In the coolie barracks of Guyana, a frustrated Rohini is tempted to think that not only a departure from India but also a complete abjuration of Indian customs—ways of eating, marital relationships, even religious practices—is the only effective route to emancipation. In this context, the plantation owner Gladstone's eating habits seem to fascinate her at first: "In the coolie hut she squatted before the plate, mashing the food into a colorful mess, before scooping it into her mouth in hasty movements. Gladstone ate with graceful cutlery, his hands carving the meat as absent-mindedly as they moved over the globe" (154). *The Counting House* repeatedly attributes two qualities to Indian food: colorful and messy. The vibrant hues of this particularly symbolic diet within the novel are rarely muted. Echoing those popular tourism tracts of our own times which belabor the tired banalities of brilliant colors and attendant chaos when describing India, the Caribbean, or just about any place in the so-called Third World, Rohini's plate of "colorful mess" contains an entire discourse of travel, tourism, and colonization. What stands in opposition to the "mess," in both its incarnations, as food and as chaos? Gleaming rows of silverware, the usage of which reached new and fanciful heights in the Victorian era. Just as the biscuit tin represents the efficiency of European colonizers to Rohini, the use of cutlery to manipulate the meat on the plate symbolizes the British ability to order the world to its convenience. Awed by what she perceives as Gladstone's dexterous control over both meat and the world, Rohini plans to bear the plantation owner's child, "swelling her body to the roundness of the globe which one day it would inherit" (155).

Miriam, the ex-slave, herself addicted to Cadbury's products and sweet biscuits, does not want the coolie woman to usurp her place in

the white master's household. Using a potent mixture of mara-bark, she drugs Rohini and takes her to the local medicine woman in order to induce an abortion. The East Indian coolie's first attempt to insert herself into the Caribbean propelled by a heady mixture of Huntley's sugar biscuits and elaborate Victorian silverware usage is successfully checked by the Afro-Caribbean woman. Just as Rohini's ability to bear the white man's child creates a potential friction between the East Indian and the Black population, her cooking can become an arena of ethnic conflict as well.

### The Coolie Woman's Kitchen

The discourse of food in Caribbean texts—of both Indian and African origins—pervades both literary and critical practices; non-Western foods, for instance, are often used to signify creolized cultures. In Dabydeen's fictions, Indian food functions to signify a non-European heritage *and* to specify a non-African/Amerindian ethnicity. But such a clean distinction is not always possible. In fact, as the following pages will suggest, Dabydeen's work is most successful at the moment of its failure to reconstruct a discrete India in the Caribbean. In the novel, the coolie woman's attempt to create a discrete Indian identity faces its greatest competition not from the patriarchal husband but from the ex-slave woman. There are intimations of writers as diverse as Eric Williams<sup>18</sup> and George Lamming<sup>19</sup> in Miriam's nineteenth-century voice when she forcefully reminds Rohini that

Albion is *we* land, *we* man and *we* story and *I* tell it how *I* want. I start the story and I kill it so *you*, Rohini, hush and listen, for you is only a freshly-come coolie. When I give you freedom to talk, then you talk, but I can wave my chisel any time and interrupt you and take over the story and keep it or throw it away. What right you have to make story? What right you have to make baby for Gladstone? Albion is a nigger, we slave and slaughter here, Albion is we story, and you coolie who only land this morning best keep quiet till you can deserve to claim a piece. (170–171)

Miriam and Rohini's ambivalent battle—a struggle that is centered around their mutual hatred of the colonial system *and* their mutual claim on the colonizer, Gladstone—reaches a climax when Rohini discovers that she is pregnant with the plantation owner's child. Miriam, who has played mistress to Gladstone for years before Rohini's arrival in Guyana and had aborted a number of fetuses conceived with Gladstone, is aghast that a newly arrived coolie woman can dare to bear the

master's child so publicly. Reproduction, for these two women, is quite clearly linked to making a narrative gesture, writing a history of Guyana. Before her arrival in Guyana, Rohini had rather assiduously avoided such narrative possibilities with liberal use of the kumari seeds her mother had secreted to her before marriage. The kumari seeds, literally translated as virgin seeds, are part of Rohini's inheritance from India. Dabydeen, we remember, opens his novel by cataloging those kumari seeds found in the ruined counting house of Plantation Albion.

In English texts, the link between food and pharmacy is an old one. For instance, in Gervase Markham's *The English hous-wife* (1653), one of the earliest published cookbooks in England, the chapter on food is nestled between pharmacy and perfumery.<sup>20</sup> The arrangement of Markham's book, which is characteristic of its time, indicates that in the zone between the curative and the cosmetic lies the discussion of food. In *The Counting House*, Rohini's Indian kumari seeds also function within this liminal zone. As a contraceptive device, the seeds are Rohini's protection against an unwanted pregnancy early in her marriage to Vidia. By the time Rohini has transported those seeds to the Caribbean, the reader already knows of their deadly potential. In order to facilitate the process of emigration, Rohini uses a potent mixture of kumari seeds to kill the cow in her in-laws' house. The inauspicious death of the cow, which transpires as smoothly as the young bride has planned, is read as an ominous sign and hastens the departure of Rohini and Vidia to Guyana, a land of rich promise deftly sketched by the wily recruiters of British India. Contraception, then, can both impede and hasten the creation of new life. Kumari seeds, as the name suggests, are not only curative in that they can defer conception or induce abortion, they are also cosmetic. These seeds, with their eponymous promise of virginity, can erase the past and help maintain the illusion of innocence, of a new beginning. When Rohini finally stops re-creating virginity through these grains, her pregnancy with Gladstone's child threatens to create a new history of the Caribbean, a history that Eric Williams will summarily relegate to the sidelines a century later. The discourse of Indian food products in the Caribbean, even in their pharmacological incarnations, refuses to conform to the identity politics of late-twentieth-century scholars. While inspiring the creation of a self-consciously Indo-Caribbean text, Rohini's kumari seeds and the Huntley's Dominion biscuit tin veer toward shared and fluid histories much more than toward the imagining of a discrete India in the Caribbean.

Despite the complicated genealogies of the kumari seed and Huntley's Dominion biscuits, the novel continues its attempt to invoke images of specifically South Asian food products to re-create the Indian

laborer's Guyana. For instance, the episodes of collision between the two worker communities of Plantation Albion, the freed Blacks and the coolies, are marked by consumption or preparation of Indian foods. One such collision, which is meant to cement the difference between the two communities, is the scene where Kampta, a creolized East Indian, is whipped publicly. The indentured laborers feast on rotis and potato curry and the Afro-creoles sell trinkets in the crowd which has been gathered to witness Kampta's punishment. The Afro-Caribbean and the Indo-Caribbean population commune in a grotesque lunch party where colonial violence mingles freely with West Indian rum and East Indian curry.

The remaining Sundays [of Kampta's whipping] became occasions of festivity, the coolies squatting in the grass and unwrapping rotis and potato curry whilst their children ran about with homemade kites. A nigger fiddler, glad for a taste of free food and rum, joined the picnic, slapping the frail backs of a few coolies in a show of instant camaraderie. The food jolted free from their hands or mouths. Pieces of potato lay on the grass and the nigger fiddler smiled maliciously as ants scrambled over them. (83)

Significantly, the encounter between the African and the Indian populations occurs against a backdrop of curried potatoes. In this passage the two rival communities both adopt and reject certain foods as the definitive marker of their racialized selves. The creole<sup>21</sup> adopts and resists the new tastes brought by the coolies to Guyana. While the Black workers are tempted to try the potato curry cooked by women such as Rohini in *The Counting House*, they are also scornful of the new tastes imported by these usurpers. At Kampta's whipping, Miriam tries a palouri (fritter) and spits it out in disgust, crying for coconut water to combat the piquancy of pepper. A scene such as this, of course, does less to cement static, antagonistic Afro-creole and East Indian cultures and, in fact, points to the very porousness of such lines of cultural distinctions. The coconut water in which the New World Afro-creole seeks refuge originates in tropical southeast Asia. The pepper which adds piquancy to the palouri would not have found a place in Rohini's kitchen if Dutch traders had not carried the New World product to India. And the humble potato itself, the base of the curry which the fiddler gleefully watches fall on the grass and be wasted on the ants, is also a vegetable introduced to Asia by traders who had voyaged to the Americas. No doubt Rohini and Miriam do not question the origins of spices or their familiar staples. Yet, when David Dabydeen attempts to reach back to an originary point in Indo-Caribbean history through a creative rewriting, the

thorny question of authenticity muddles neat categories. The very product which adds piquancy to the curry and marks it as East Indian in the novel was not native to India prior to the sixteenth century. The transformed ecology of nineteenth-century South Asia, however, had absorbed the New World product, and the once foreign chili pepper had transformed the taste of Indian curry markedly.

Dabydeen, as well as some other writers from the Caribbean, continues to invest curry and its associated spices and smells with the sign of East Indian difference. Dabydeen's project of writing a coolie history and reinscribing a forgotten South Asian culture rests on female production of particular foods. If women are to be the keepers and producers of culinary and cultural traditions, then how does the association of coolie identity with the East Indian woman's kitchen affect interracial relationships within the Caribbean?

Another form of cultural production in Caribbean, the calypso, offers some possible answers to this question. In his writing about twentieth-century calypsos, the West Indian scholar Gordon Rohlehr argues that an Indian feast, especially one at which East Indian women were present, often turned into an "arena of ethnic confrontation" between the creole and the East Indian. In calypsos, the "Talkarie" [cooked vegetables] became for the Afro-creole the thing to which the "alien Other" [East Indians] could be "comically reduced."<sup>22</sup> In the lyrics of such artists as Atilla, Executor, or Fighter, which Rohlehr mentions, the rejection of East Indian food by an Afro-creole man is complicated by his sexual desire for an East Indian woman. In Invader's 1939 calypso, "Marajh daughter," the protagonist is clear about his intentions regarding the East Indian woman:

I want everybody to realize  
I want a nice Indian girl that is creolize  
I don't want no parata or dhal water  
I want my potato and cassava  
Crab, callaloo, and of course I want my manicou  
And how about my stew pork and pound plantain too  
I want my own vermouthe and whiskey  
And they must agree to maintain my family . . .<sup>23</sup>

While the abjuration of dhal water and parata is no doubt a commentary on perceived Indian frugality, a stereotype that exists in Guyana and Trinidad even today,<sup>24</sup> Invader's final line betrays his protagonist's real interest: the East Indian family's wealth. The complex economic rivalry between Asian and African groups in Guyana during the twentieth century, and particularly in the post-independence decades, is re-

iterated in the calypso artist's shrewd lyrics and in Dabydeen's fiction. The Indian feast (or even a picnic at a public whipping in the case of *The Counting House*) is a particularly charged scene where the accusations from disgruntled Afro-Caribbeans regarding East Indian plenitude and frugality collide upon the figure of the Indo-Caribbean woman. *The Counting House*, rather disappointingly, resorts to the age-old tactic of charging Rohini with the responsibility of safeguarding the so-called Indian traditions while also portraying her as a vulnerable, sexually promiscuous, and ultimately unreliable custodian of that Indianness. The kumari seeds that Rohini secretly imports to Guyana may prove to be her only resistance to the thankless task of preserving an India in the Caribbean.

*The Counting House*, nonetheless, attempts to recreate an authentic Indian voice from the debris of forgotten artifacts through the strategic use of Hindustani words. In fact, the great majority of Hindustani words used in the text are related to food or cooking. What are the exigencies of a fiction in which the dialogue in Indo-Guyanese English is littered with Hindustani words for food such as "palouri" (fritter), "channa" (chick peas), "roti" (unleavened bread), "massala" (spices), and "jilabie" (syrupy, fried sweet)? As important, what impact does the transliterated Hindustani word have on a Caribbean anglophone text? From the moment it styles itself as a narrative derived from records left in a colonial office, *The Counting House* places great emphasis on the significance of the written word. In the novel, Miriam and Rohini understand the value of learning to read the colonizer's languages—English and Latin—as they roam in the Gladstone graveyard, scrutinizing gravestones. They are both drawn to one particular Latin engraving: "Sunt Lachrimae Rerum"—a phrase that remains untranslated throughout the novel. For the coolie and ex-slave alike, the translation of the Latin phrase into English seems to be a key to grasping the power of the family that owns the fruit of their labor. In such a context, the untranslated Hindustani stands in peculiar opposition to the untranslated Latin on the pages of the novel: The Englishman's tears (borrowed from Virgil's Roman Empire) confront the Indian coolie's comestibles via the medium of a third language, English.

When Indian spices and cooking utensils<sup>25</sup> are carried across the *kala pani*, the words used to describe them travel alongside. Rohini and Vidia's curries are accretive products, reflecting the impact of centuries of trade, travel, invasions, and colonization, but they remain distinctively alien in colonial Guyana and cannot be separated from their South Asian signifiers. The last vestige of nineteenth-century India in the Caribbean, then, seems to lurk in words for describing a taste, a

vegetable, a sweet, or a recipe. And women are most often presented as the guardians of these recipes, the preparers of dishes bearing non-English names. Dabydeen's representation of the East Indian woman's kitchen as a repository of migrant culture in this novel is an echo of earlier feminist essays by Indo-Caribbean women. Here is Rajkumari Singh in her attempt to retrieve an ethnic identity from her grandmother's kitchen:

Surely you cannot forget Per-Agie our great Coolie-grandmother squatting on her haunches, blowing through the phookni to help the chuha-fire blaze so that your parents and mine could have a hot sadha roti and alu chokha before they leave for the fields! Can't you hear her bangles tinkling as she grinds the garam massala to make her curries unforgettable? Does not your gourmet's nostril still quiver with the smell . . . the one and only unforgettable smell of hot oil, garlic, onions, pepper, geera, to chunke the daal that was and still is a must in our daily diet? . . . Daal, rice and baigan choka, or coconut choka, or alloo choka . . . All this they gave to us and more. In return for our HERITAGE what greater tribute can we pay them than to keep alive the name by which they were called. COOLIE . . .<sup>26</sup>

At the linguistic level, a distinctive feature of the English (or even the patwa) used to describe Indo-Caribbean experiences, as seen in Singh's rallying cry, is the frequent use of a Hindustani gastronomic vocabulary. In her exhortation to keep the coolie grandmother's memory alive, many of those words, such as "baigan" or "geera" could have easily been written as "eggplant" or "cumin" without sacrificing the meaning. But, for Singh, the "baigan" and "geera" are far more evocative than "eggplant" or "cumin" because they are fossil sounds bearing the impression of over a century-old Indo-Caribbean presence.

Despite the remnants of a selective vocabulary derived from Hindustani words, the East Indian woman risks becoming a nearly invisible figure, confined to cooking the roti and curry which serve as a symbol of far-away India. While Indian masala acts as the line dividing the Afro-creole from the East Indian, Rohini, who grinds those spices, is silenced by the textual strategies of *The Counting House*. Dabydeen's novel, while ostensibly attempting to give a voice to Rohini, finds itself unable to articulate that experience in the first person. Of the three sections of the novel—"Rohini," "Kampta," and "Miriam"—only the last one is narrated in the first person. Miriam, the ex-slave woman, confides to the reader her inner thoughts about the "freshly-come coolie" or about her secret recipe for substituting mara-bark for cinnamon to poison the white mistress of the plantation. But Rohini's Indian rec-

ipe remains largely untold, just as her newly arrived coolie language remains largely unheard on Dabydeen's page, barely leaking out in the form of a few culinary tidbits.

In a recent cultural representation of the East Indian woman originating from another island with a large Caribbean population, Britain, the bhangramuffin singer Apache Indian's<sup>27</sup> song "Arranged Marriage" brings together some of the discourses on sugar and femininity, and attempts to locate the nineteenth-century coolie woman's descendant within the syrupy spirals of a popular South Asian dessert, the "jilabie"—an untranslated word in Dabydeen's novel.<sup>28</sup> With a pronounced sense of satire, the self-styled Indo-Caribbean sings: "Me wan gal sweet like jelebee."<sup>29</sup> While reading *The Counting House*, we must watch for its intersections with other forms of Indo-Caribbean cultural expression in order to gauge the complex irony of being "sweet like jelebee" for the female descendants of those coolies who toiled in Caribbean sugar estates.

## Notes

1. Samuel Selvon, "Three into One Can't Go—East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian," in *India in the Caribbean*, ed. David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (Warwick: Hansib/University of Warwick, Centre for Caribbean Studies, 1987), 18.

2. Mahadai Das, "They Came in Ships," in *India in the Caribbean*.

3. David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, introduction, *Across Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (Warwick: Warwick University Caribbean Studies and Macmillan Caribbean, 1996), 1.

4. "East Indian" is the term most frequently used in the Caribbean context to indicate a South Asian heritage. Although the term bases itself on a genealogy of ludicrous misnomers and can lead to typically comic conjunctions such as East Indian West Indian, I have retained "East Indian" throughout this essay to refer to peoples and cultures in the Caribbean associated with places that are now called India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. My term for the literature of the East Indian community, once again taking my cue from scholars such as Dabydeen and Frank Birbalsingh, is "Indo-Caribbean."

5. In *From Pillar to Post*, the Guyanese novelist Ismith Khan says, "[My family came to Guyana] because of the Indian 'Mutiny' when Indian soldiers were called upon to shoot on fellow Indians. Some soldiers rebelled and turned their guns on the British instead. My grandfather was one of these rebellious soldiers. Consequently, he was on the run from the British authorities. I know that my family left from Kanpur Railway Station, but I don't know how they made it to Guyana" (139). For the complete interview, see *From Pillar to Post: The Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*, ed. Frank Birbalsingh (Toronto: Tsar, 1997), 139–146.

6. There is undoubtedly a history of degradation associated with the term "coolie" and in some parts of the Caribbean it continues to carry all the viciousness of a

150-year-old invective. Nonetheless, in more recent years, scholars, writers, and activists have begun to revive the term in order to assert the East Indian presence, indentureship and all, in the Caribbean. In "I Am a Coolie," *Heritage 2* (Georgetown, Guyana, 1973): 24–27, Rajkumari Singh writes: "Not only in the Guyana context must COOLIE be given new meaning, but in every land of the Caribbean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the seas of the East, in Africa and Europe. Proclaim the word! Identify with the word! Proudly say to the world: 'I AM A COOLIE.'" In this essay and elsewhere, I use the term "coolie" in this spirit of reappropriation and resistance.

7. Anne Wilson, *Food and Drink in Britain* (London: Constable, 1973), 267. Wilson also attributes the decrease in spice usage to the availability of fresher meat due to modifications in livestock management and improved transportation systems.

8. Singh, "I Am a Coolie."

9. Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen, "Issues of Difference in Contemporary Caribbean Feminism," *Feminist Review* 59 (Summer 1998): 79.

10. The following essays offer a range of views on this topic: Aruna Srivastava, "Images of Women in Indo-Caribbean Literature," and Verene A. Shepard, "Indian Women in Jamaica, 1845–1945," in *Indenture and Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience*, ed. Frank Birkbalsingh (Toronto: Tsar, 1989); Ramabai Espinet, "Representation and the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Trinidad and Tobago," in *Indo-Caribbean Resistance*, ed. Frank Birkbalsingh (Toronto: Tsar, 1993), and "The Invisible Woman in West Indian Fiction," *World Literature Written in English*, 29 (1989): 2, by the same author; and Jeremy Poynting, "East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience and Voice," in *India in the Caribbean*.

11. Vidia's fictional return to India may have ended in a fatal disaster, but the actual coolies who did try to go back after their period of indenture did not fare much better. For a historical account of those return voyages, see Marianne Soares Ramesar, "The Repatriates," in *Across the Dark Waters*. The novelist, it should be noted, quite conspicuously kills his male Indian protagonist Vidia, surely something of a reference to Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, to make room for a female Indian voice in Guyana. However, the reader can never comfortably quell the suspicion that Rohini's female East Indian voice is perhaps too constrictively locked in resistance to that of the male writers from the Caribbean.

12. David Dabydeen, *The Counting House* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), xi–xii. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

13. In her discussion of the Huntley and Palmers biscuit tin, Anne McClintock writes: "In the flickering magic lantern of imperial desire, teas, biscuits, tobaccos, Bovril, tins of cocoa and, above all, soaps beach themselves on far-flung shores, tramp through jungles, quell uprisings, restore order and write the inevitable legend of commercial progress across the colonial landscape." McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 219, where this argument is elaborated.

14. See Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

15. Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 155.

16. In chapter 5 of *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*, Goody notes that some of the innovations in biscuit production, especially those at Huntley and Palmers, led to

the development of a secondary industry which specialized in trade machinery. He writes:

In 1859, these firms [Huntley and Palmers, Carrs, and Peek Freans] sold 6 million lbs of their products. Changing eating habits in the shape of earlier breakfasts and later dinners led to a further increase in consumption, and by the late 1870s the figure had risen to 37 million lbs a year. Huntley and Palmers had become one of the forty most important companies in Britain, and within fifty years their biscuits were distributed not only throughout the nation but throughout the world. As with the early canning industry, much of the production of biscuits had first of all been directed to the needs of travellers, explorers and the armed forces. Such produce sustained sailors, traders and colonial officers overseas; only later did industrial production impinge upon the internal market in England or upon the local market overseas, eventually becoming part of the daily diet of the population. (157)

17. Many of the female indentured laborers were single women fleeing their ancestral villages to escape social stigmas such as pregnancy before marriage. In fact, the novelist V. S. Naipaul's grandmother was one such unmarried mother who crossed the *kala pani* to the Caribbean.

18. In his authoritative work *From Columbus to Castro*, Eric Williams devotes only fourteen out of five hundred and fifteen pages to Indian indentured laborers. Given the fact that Williams's own island, Trinidad, boasts an Indo-Caribbean population equal in number to the Afro-Caribbean one, this oversight is ironic indeed. See Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492–1969* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

19. See, for example, George Lamming, "The Indian Presence as Caribbean Reality," in *Indenture and Exile*. This paper, based on Lamming's personal recollections of his childhood in Barbados, only affirms the invisibility of East Indians, an invisibility which is further subsumed under the author's call for a pan-Caribbean identity.

20. Gervase Markham, *The English hous-wife* (London: Printed by W. Wilson for E. Brewster and George Sawbridge, 1653).

21. In a recent publication, Patricia Mohammed writes that, in East Indian communities in the Caribbean, the term "creole"—a historically slippery word—is used exclusively to refer to peoples of African descent. See Patricia Mohammed, "Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean," *Feminist Review* 59 (Summer 1998): 29–30.

22. Gordon Rohlehr, "Images of Men and Women in the 1930s Calypsoes: The Sociology of Food Acquisition in the Context of Survivalism," in *Gender in Caribbean Development*, ed. Patricia Mohammed and Catherine Shepherd (Mona, Jamaica: UWI, Women and Development Studies Project, 1988), 235–309.

23. Invader quoted in Espinet, "Representation and the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Trinidad and Tobago," 49.

24. In Janice Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988), the Black students resurrect the stereotype of miserliness when they deride the East Indians by calling them "Coolie water rice." Meanwhile, the East Indians retaliate by calling the Afro-Caribbeans "Pork-Eater" and "Black Pudding Lady."

25. It is really the spices and utensils (alongside cooking methods) which make the coolie's cuisine distinct. The rest of the ingredients are mostly locally procured.

26. Singh, "I Am a Coolie."

27. Bhangramuffin music combines Jamaican ragamuffin influences with Punjabi bhangra folk rhythms and samples from Bombay film music (which itself is a mongrel of sorts). A welder from a working-class neighborhood, which includes both Asians and West Indians, in Handsworth, U.K., Steve Kapur first appeared on the British music scene in the early nineties under the name Apache Indian. His stage name made references both to his Punjabi roots and to his artistic influence, the Jamaican ragamuffin singer Super Cat, who was also known as the wild Apache. See George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994), for a musicologist's perspective on rai, reggae, ragamuffin, and bhangra music in the migrant communities of France and Britain. Chapter 6 of Lipsitz's book includes a more detailed discussion of Apache Indian. Also see John Hutnyk's argument about the misinterpretation of Apache Indian as symbol of cross-over popular music in "Hybridity Saves?" *Amerasia Journal* 25, 3 (1999/2000): 39–50.

28. See Vera M. Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993) for an extensive discussion of the intersecting discourses on sugar and femininity in nineteenth-century Cuban literature.

29. Apache Indian, "Arranged Marriage," rec. 1991, *No Reservations*, Island Records Ltd., 1993.

## The Border as Barrier and Bridge: Food, Gender, and Ethnicity in the San Luis Valley of Colorado

CAROLE M. COUNIHAN

We are the porous rock in the stone *metate*  
squatting on the ground.  
We are the rolling pin, *el maíz y agua*,  
*la masa barina. Somos el amasijo.*  
*Somos lo molido en el metate.*  
We are the *comal* sizzling hot,  
the hot *tortilla*, the hungry mouth.  
We are the coarse rock.  
We are the grinding motion,  
the mixed potion, *somos el molcajete.*  
We are the pestle, the *comino, ajo, pimienta*,  
We are the *chile colorado*,  
the green shoot that cracks the rock.  
We will abide.<sup>1</sup>

Gloria Anzaldúa 1987, 81–82

Gloria Anzaldúa uses strong images of foods and cooking to define Chicana identity. “We are . . .” the poem chants again and again—the stone *metate*, the rolling pin, the *comal*, the coarse rock, *el molcajete*, the pestle—common tools of many Chicanas’ once daily labors. “We are . . .” the poem sings—*el maíz y agua, la masa barina, lo molido*, the hot *tortilla*, the *comino, ajo, pimienta*, the *chile colorado*—the enduring grains and pungent spices that sustain body and soul in Chicano communities. In Anzaldúa’s poem, women labor hard, they sustain life, they hunger, and they “will abide.” She links survival, women, and cooking in her poem, affirming the centrality of food in women’s lives.<sup>2</sup>

Following Anzaldúa’s poetic lead, this essay uses food as a window into Hispanic female identity and relationships in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. It examines how a *Mexicana*<sup>3</sup> named Bernadette<sup>4</sup> living in

the small town of Antonito in southern Colorado sometimes crossed and sometimes crashed against gender and ethnic borders through commensality and its negation. For Bernadette, for *Mexicanos*, and for many people all over the world, commensality signifies intimacy, equality, and inclusion; and not eating together signifies distance, hierarchy, and social exclusion (Mauss 1967). Eating habits express cultural identity and mark cultural borders (Counihan 2004). Food borders are sometimes a bridge and sometimes a barrier between ethnic, class, and gender groups.

This essay takes a feminist anthropological approach to food.<sup>5</sup> Because food is so often the domain and language of women, focusing on it emphasizes their importance. Because women are sometimes obligated to cook for and serve others, food can be a channel of oppression. Yet because cooking, feeding, eating, and fasting can be significant means of communication, food can be a channel of creativity and power. Many women speak eloquently and avidly about food, and they reveal important memories and feelings. I have been collecting food-centered life histories in diverse field settings for twenty years (Counihan 1999, 2004). I have found that they can provide a voice for women who have not had a chance to speak publicly and provide a weapon against the silencing that has always been a central weapon in women's oppression. The challenge to feminist ethnographers is to work with diverse women and to use their voices in empowering ways.<sup>6</sup>

This essay is based on the food-centered life history of Bernadette gathered as part of an ongoing ethnographic project I have been conducting since 1996 in southern Colorado with my husband, anthropologist Jim Taggart (Counihan 2002, Taggart 2002, Taylor and Taggart 2003). I have tape-recorded interviews with nineteen women and four men centered on food production, preparation, consumption, and exchange. I have asked about past and present diet, methods of food preservation, important recipes, everyday and ritual meals, healing foods, breast-feeding, and food exchanges.<sup>7</sup> Antonito is in a poor rural region almost entirely devoid of study.<sup>8</sup> The stories of diverse women like Bernadette are important because they contribute to understanding the enduring *Mexicano* culture in the Southwest and show the race-ethnic, class, and gender obstacles people have run into and sometimes overcome.

### Food and the Geographic Context

Bernadette was born and raised in Antonito, a town of 900 just six miles north of the New Mexico border in the southern San Luis Valley. Approximately the size of the state of Connecticut, the San Luis Valley

stretches across southern Colorado from the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the east to the San Juan Mountains in the west, and from the New Mexico border north eighty miles to Saguache. The valley lies between 7,500 and 8,000 feet and has a high desert climate with little rainfall, extremely cold winters, strong westerly winds, and a short growing season—all of which have contributed to limiting the valley population to approximately 40,000 inhabitants.

Only one hundred and ten miles north of Santa Fe, Antonito is on the northern edge of the centuries-old Hispanic presence in the Southwest, two miles southeast of Conejos, the tiny county seat, and three miles from Guadalupe, the oldest Hispanic settlement in the area, settled in 1854.<sup>9</sup> Unlike those towns and the surrounding hamlets of San Antonio, San Rafael, San Miguel, Ortiz, Las Mesitas, and Mogote which were agro-pastoral settlements along rivers, Antonito was established in an arid spot as a commercial center and railroad depot in 1881 when the Denver and Rio Grande railroad came from Alamosa en route to Española and Santa Fe and laid out a town site. Many contemporary *Mexicano* residents came to Antonito—or their parents or grandparents came—from one of the surrounding riverine hamlets and have roots in an agro-pastoral tradition.

Bernadette's mother, for example, grew up in the hamlet of San Antonio, where her grandfather and uncles were sheepherders. She moved to Antonito after marrying Bernadette's father, who came to Antonito as a young man from Walsenberg, just over the Sangre de Cristo mountains east of the San Luis Valley. He worked in a grocery store and her mother oversaw the household and the five children. They had fruit trees and a big vegetable and flower garden—with spinach, rutabagas, turnips, carrots, onions, potatoes, beans, peas, cabbages, tomatoes, and corn. They raised and slaughtered pigs, chickens, and occasionally an orphaned lamb, and they preserved the meat by drying it into jerky, freezing it, making sausages, and curing ham.<sup>10</sup>

Today ranching and agriculture are marginal occupations except for a few large landowners; unemployment is high; and Antonito's few businesses are struggling to survive. The town has a locally owned supermarket, two liquor stores, one video rental outlet, two auto repair shops, two gas stations, four modest gift shops catering to the meager stream of tourists, a bank, bar, pharmacy, hardware store, Laundromat, post office, and discount store full of random goods.

Today poverty is widespread in Antonito and Conejos County, which is the second-poorest in Colorado (Aguilar 2002). Lucky are those who work for public entities or the nearby Perlite mine, for they draw regular salaries. Many people work for minimum wage in the service econ-

omy in the city of Alamosa, population 8,000, thirty miles north. Many others get by on odd jobs, baby-sitting, trading in used goods, public assistance jobs, and welfare. In the summer there is a modest tourist economy due to hunting, fishing, and vacationing in the nearby San Juan mountains and to the popular Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad which runs trains between Antonito and Chama, New Mexico.

Antonito has three restaurants and two Mexican food stands (as well as a soda fountain in the pharmacy). Named Dos Hermanas, the Dutch Mill Cafe, Stefán's, the G-6, and Lee's Texaco, they are all owned and run by *Mexicanos* and they serve similar food—a mix of Anglo food like beef, burgers, steaks, and chicken fingers, with Colorado Mexican cuisine like fajitas, burritos, enchiladas, tacos, tamales, green chili, red chili, beans, and red rice. (Lee's Texaco also sells pizza.) These eateries serve as meeting places for residents, tourists, and travelers.

The population of Antonito in the 2000 census was officially 873 people, 90 percent of whom were Hispanic<sup>11</sup>—of both Spanish and Mexican descent—and the remaining 10 percent consisted of European Americans of diverse ethnicity and provenance. The cuisine of Antonito—its widely shared practices of cooking and eating—shows a strong Mexican influence, modified by the cold, dry climate. Potatoes, beans, and chili with flour tortillas or bread have long been the staples of the diet, supplemented by vegetables, game, fish, beef, pork, and mutton. In many conversations with *Mexicanas* in Antonito, food has emerged as a compelling topic and center of social relations.

### Food and Female Identity

A major constituent of Bernadette's and many *Mexicanas*' identity was cooking and feeding. Bernadette said, *The responsibility of providing food was instilled in us. Because I saw it when my grandmother did it for my grandpa, I saw it when my mother did it for my daddy, and I saw that it was my duty too. That's the cultural thing that you have to do. Now I've seen it, I know I do it, and my sister Virginia does it for her husband.* For Bernadette cooking was not only an obligation but also a pleasure: *I love to cook, like for my little ones, my nephews, until they say, "Oh, Aunt Bernadette, we can't eat any more, we can't eat any more." I like to cook everything. Everything. And if I can find a new recipe, I'll try it—anything, you know. I just love cooking.*

But not all women cooked or enjoyed it. Sometimes they rejected the role and the perceived servitude that went with it. Bernadette said, *But my sister Anna, who's the baby of the family, she doesn't cook. She says, "And if he ate, he ate. And if he didn't, he didn't." And she's not going to get*

up. *You know, she's not going to do it.* Most women in Antonito, however, shouldered domestic duties as their lot and relied on reciprocity with female relatives for help and support. Sharing food chores, recipes, and childcare provided important ways for women to forge familial and extra-familial relationships.

Bernadette expressed connections to her mother and daughter through their macaroni, which was one of her favorite comfort foods. *Oh my mom made the best. She used to boil the macaroni, and then while it was boiling she'd add milk, canned milk, and then she would put the cheese, and then she would crush up all these soda crackers, and she would put that on top, and then she would stick it in the oven, so that the cheese would melt into the crackers, and then salt and pepper.*

*And there is another way to make macaroni. My daughter Gloria makes the best. She fries the macaroni and she toasts it. And then after it's getting toasty she adds water, and then she lets it get soft, and then she puts tomato sauce, and she fries hamburger, and then she puts in the hamburger. She puts the macaroni, she puts fried hamburger, tomato sauce, and she sprinkles cheese. Oh, that little girl is getting good.* Bernadette took both pride and pleasure in her mother's and daughter's cooking and kept alive cultural traditions and a female-centered family identity (see Beoku-Betts 1995).

Another food that expressed family identity for Bernadette was deviled eggs. She said, *I was thinking it's really funny how whenever we get together, the Vigil clan, it seems like that's all we eat—deviled eggs! For whatever occasion—bring on the deviled eggs! Isn't that weird? I was thinking maybe it's a comfort food. It's associated with the warmth of a family. Deviled eggs themselves mean we're all getting together, as a family, as a unit, and that's one of our good foods that we're going to share. You know, it's like a comfort.*

Food also represented cultural identity for Bernadette: *To me, I'm Mexicana. I associate myself with being Mexicana. Because I speak Spanish, I speak the language. And then I eat the food. I have the customs. So, to me that falls into the category of being a Mexicana. I can't classify myself as anything else.* Although we were talking in English, Bernadette used Spanish to define her preferred ethnic identifier, “*Mexicana*.” She admitted that others in Antonito did not like that word because they said, “We aren't Mexican—we're American.” But many use *Mexicano* to mean not Mexican but what they are: citizens of the United States born to families of Spanish and Mexican origin. Bernadette continued, *So we're all Mexicanos. And where in the heck do we get the frijoles and the tortillas and all that if it wasn't from the Mexicanos? We all eat the same tortillas. We all eat the same way. So what's the big difference between Hispanic, Mexicano, and Spanish?*

Bernadette used food both to enact her Hispanic ethnicity and to demonstrate her multiculturalism. When Jim asked her in Spanish about her family background, she said, *Somos Mexicanos, Irish, Jewish, y todo está—we're Mexicanos, Irish, Jewish, and all that*. Bernadette was *Mexicana* on her father's side and a mix on her mother's side, with both Irish and native Navajo or Cheyenne ancestors. She wasn't sure about her Jewish heritage but thought it might have come down on both sides. Claiming diverse ethnic ancestry was not uncommon in Antonito, where many people professed a Spanish or Mexican core with strains of French, English, Irish, Scottish, Lebanese, Navajo, Apache, Pima, or other ancestors. The extent of cultural diversity needs to be explored further—its factual basis and its meaning. Is claiming multiple ethnicities a way to partake more fully in the national culture and combat the oppression of being *Mexicano*?

Bernadette revealed her openness to other cultural traditions through the array of foods she fondly described in her interview. These included Puerto Rican rice, green chili, red chili, macaroni, her grandmother's meat-ball soup with dill and onions, rice pudding, elk, rabbit, enchiladas, lasagna, sweet-potato-corn-flake-marshmallow croquettes, Chinese chicken, and potatoes—fried, mashed, and abundant.

Potatoes were the most basic food and staple crop of the San Luis Valley. Bernadette loved them: *And me—I'm a potato person. As long as I have potatoes, I'm all right. My sister Virginia said, "That must be the Irish in you." Because of that potato famine when they all came, they didn't have any potatoes. I go, "I guess so," I go, "Because I've got to have them."* Potatoes symbolized the Irish, but they were also central to the San Luis Valley-style Mexican-American cuisine that was the heart of Bernadette's culinary passion. She said, *To me the best food is fried potatoes, green chili, or red chili, and sometimes tortillas if you know how to make them*. Bernadette's comfort foods similarly revealed her *Mexicana* core. She said, *To me comfort food is fried potatoes, mashed potatoes, maybe green chili. Green chili is a comfort food for me, because I like it on anything. Red chili, that's good too. Macaroni*.

Red and green chili were at the heart of San Luis Valley and northern New Mexico cooking, and Bernadette described them in detail: *Oh my green chili, here's how I make it. First of all, I . . . cut the pork into little cubes. Then I put some oil in a frying pan, and I fry the pork with a little bit of flour. Then you put your garlic in and your onion, and then you put your green chili, the fresh ones, chopped up. . . . Then you add some water and let it boil. Yeah, and then you get that Bouquet Secret, that browning stuff, and add a little bit of that, just a dash to give it a little bit of color. And then you put your green chili in there*.

*Green chilis will be coming in August. You can buy them by the bushel or you can buy them by the sack, I think it's twenty pounds. I buy two sacks. Two. Honey, I roast my own. It's a hot job. When you get your green chili, you soak it in water. And then you spread them evenly on the rack in the oven. And make sure your oven is at 400 degrees because it needs to be hot. And you give them about four minutes on one side and then you turn them, and keep turning them, because you don't want to burn them. If they burn, you've lost them, and they're too expensive to lose, so you've got to be real careful. Then after you get them out of the oven—as hot as they are—you get them and you stick them in a baggie and toss them right in the freezer.*

*Now the red chili. What I do is I buy the lean meat, lean hamburger. You fry it, put your onions and your garlic and then put your chili powder. But you've got to be careful what kind of red chili you buy. Because the one that's already prepared for you—you don't know what's really in the prepared one. So if you buy it rojo, which is just plain simple toasted in the oven, then you can put your own stuff into it. And if you want to make your own chili, you can get these ristras, they're called ristras de chile colorado. Or you can get them in the bags, and just clean them and soak them, and stick them in the oven. But you've got to watch real good too, because they'll toast wicked, and once they're burned, oh, you get the most awful taste. So you just toast them real light, and then you put them in a blender if you want to, and you add your seasoning to that, and you get the wildest, hottest red chili. You can use comino, and you can use, maybe a little bit of cilantro—maybe, but not very much. And garlic for sure, and salt, and that's about it.*

Bernadette's description of red and green chili revealed the importance of preparing food correctly, at home, with care and foresight to maximize quality and minimize cost. She shared with poet Gloria Anzaldúa a culinary culture where key foods were symbols of women's identity, strength, and survival.

### Food and Ethnic Relations

Eating together forged social connections; not sharing food marked social distance. In Antonito, for much of the twentieth century, Anglos and Chicanos rarely ate in each other's homes, and then usually only within similar class ranks. One reason for scarce interactions was that there were very few Anglos in the largely Hispanic town. In Bernadette's high school class, there were only two Anglos out of forty students. She described the ethnic character of her town: *Antonito is basically Hispanic—you might feel like an outsider because you're almost the only white people that are here. Besides you and Peggy Jones—and I never considered Peggy anything but Peggy. There was never an issue with me about being*

*white or not white. We're all Hispanic, I mean everybody here. There wasn't a big issue about being white—or whites against us. But you know, even with the few white people that were here, they would try to put the Hispanic people in their place. Because they did have the better jobs. They were better educated.*

Many of the few Anglos in Antonito attained upper-class status because they were white, they were relatively wealthy, and they were land-owners, professionals, and politicians. Bernadette implied that they lived relatively separately from *Mexicanos*, most of whom were of modest means. Anglos and *Mexicanos* interacted in the public sphere of commerce and work, but most did not share meals in each other's homes, and those who did defined it as an exception. There was some social mixing between Anglo and *Mexicano* children around school and sports. Bernadette remembered Anglo as well as *Mexicano* school friends dropping by her house because they knew there was always a pot of beans on the stove and plenty of tortillas. This pot of beans, however, marked the ethnic border as both bridge and barrier, for the Anglo children crossed to come to her house, but she did not traverse it to eat at the Anglo children's houses.

Food sometimes successfully united Anglo and Hispanic women in public places, for example at church suppers and the like. Bernadette described the cooperative cooking of *Mexicanas* and Anglo women when their children all had a religious retreat in the local Theatine Fathers' seminary prior to their confirmation. The mothers prepared all their meals and snacks for two days and had such a great time together that the priest had to come and tell them to quiet down because they were disturbing the children. Cooperative cooking and eating forged temporary ties across ethnic boundaries between women.

But foods associated with mourning the dead marked ethnic borders that Bernadette found difficult to cross. When a Hispanic friend or relative died, Bernadette often cooked food for the bereaved family. She said that typically the mourning family held a big meal at the church hall or at home after the funeral. Some people had sandwiches of cold cuts, but if they really wanted to make a good impression, they had a big dinner of turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, gravy, ice cream and cake. I asked if people ever cooked Mexican food and she said maybe beans and green chili, but not usually home-made tortillas or enchiladas because they took too much time.

I asked Bernadette if Anglos had similar funeral customs, and she described a local prosperous Anglo family's funeral. Since she was a friend of the family, she roasted a couple of hens and made mashed potatoes, potato salad, muffins, and cupcakes, which she brought to her friend's house. But at the post-funeral meal, they just served little tea

sandwiches, salad, and cake—not the big meal *Mexicanos* had. Bernadette wondered if she had committed an impropriety by bringing food. This occasion underscored the different commensal customs of Chicanos and Anglos. Funeral food linked Bernadette to her Anglo friends but also created barriers between them when she found herself unsure about the culturally appropriate behavior for their funerals.

### Food and Class Relations

*Mexicanos* expressed sociability and social equality by sharing food, and marked class differences and borders by not eating together. People in Antonito defined class according to wealth and education. Bernadette described the higher class thus: *Some of them had a little more money. Their parents were better educated. Education played a big deal, a great deal. Their mothers were volunteers, they would do this; they would do that. They would be involved in a lot of school activities. They would help with the nuns. They were more involved in the church. Things like that.*

*Mexicanos* from the laboring classes rarely ate in the homes of the wealthy *Mexicano* landowners and professionals unless they were working for them, in which case the offer of a meal marked the employer's good will (Taylor and Taggart 2003, 85). Bernadette described the class barriers she encountered by telling a food story: *I was in Girl Scouts. The mothers that thought they were better would know that my mother was a good cook. So they would call and say, "Well, Bernadette is in the Girl Scouts so please bring us five cakes," or, "Please cook us four pies. But since you're not elite like us, just bring us the goodies, but don't come, don't try to associate with us." That kind of attitude.*

*And my daddy saw that one time. They played that on my mom one time, Beverly Garcia, did, she was my Girl Scout leader. She called up one day on the phone and she told my mom, "Would you make us four cakes?"*

*And my mom goes, "Sure." You know, Mexicana, "Okay, whatever."*

*And my daddy asked her, "Why are you making four cakes?"*

*And my mom said "Because the Girl Scout leader wants Bernadette to take four cakes for the Girl Scout meeting."*

*And my dad told her, "Why aren't you going to take them?"*

*My mom replied, "Well no, she's going to take them because they don't want me. I don't go because they don't invite me to go."*

*And my dad said, "Well that's going to stop right here." So he waited for Mrs. Garcia. And he didn't let my mom bake the cakes. And when Mrs. Garcia came for the cakes he said, "I don't think so. If my wife isn't good enough to associate with you, then you're not good enough to eat her cakes."*

*And that ended that. That was one thing about daddy, boy, you didn't mess with him.*

Bernadette's father refuted the class subordination expressed through making food for others but not eating with them. Class hierarchy has been perhaps more important than ethnic division in Antonito because segregation has kept the races largely apart, but class divisions have been continually reenacted. Bernadette and others lamented the lack of unity among her people and their infighting;<sup>12</sup> food sometimes brought them together at church suppers, weddings, and funerals, but at other times kept them separate.

### Food and Gender Relations

The gender division of labor around food defined separate but complementary roles for men and women. In some homes, the cultural assumption that women serve and defer to men by feeding them became a means of reinforcing gender inequality. Food lay at the heart of Bernadette's relationships with men and sometimes enabled her to cross the borders of their differences but at other times loomed as an oppressive barrier. Bernadette's first husband, José, was Puerto Rican and originally from New York, though she met and married him in Pueblo, Colorado, two hours northeast of Antonito on the other side of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. She met him at a dance after she had gotten "*thin, real thin*" for the first time in her life after a period of misery and homesickness. She had never dated anyone before and she romanticized José as the gorgeous and suave stranger. She quickly married him, and then had a daughter Gloria. But soon the marriage became increasingly awful as José slid into alcoholism, drug dealing, and violent abusive behavior.

Bernadette's narratives about her marriage used food imagery to communicate both the attraction and the aversion she felt for her husband. His Puerto Rican food was different and appealing. Cooking and eating it were ways she participated in her husband's culture: *I tried to learn a lot—because it's just a really delicious kind of food. That's the only thing I got out of that Puerto Rican culture, you know. It's just really, really good food, and the way they add their herbs and their ingredients, that's what caught my eye. Because they use a lot of different herbs for a lot of different things, which we never did. We just used the basic. Not them.*

*On the better side—we would get together on weekends, and it was just the most wonderful time, it was just fun. When he was in a good mood, it was a lot of fun. We would go to the park in Pueblo, or to a private home, and the*

guys would dig a hole in the ground, and then they would go and get branches of trees with a lot of leaves on them. And they would dig a hole, put the leaves inside the hole, and then they would get heavy-duty aluminum foil and put that on top, and then they would go and get a pig, a dead pig, you know. They'd clean out the pig real good, and they'd put a stick in him, and they'd rub him down with oil, and I remember with garlic, fresh garlic, and then they would use some kind of chili, like a red chili, and put that on top, and then they'd cover up the pig with more aluminum foil. But on the bottom they would put charcoal, and then the aluminum foil, and then the pig, and then more aluminum foil. They would do that the night before. And then that pig would be roasted—the meat would be just falling off. Oh, it was wonderful!

And then they'd make pastelitos, little pastry pies—and I can't find anybody to give me that recipe—but it is one of the best recipes, it is just wonderful. It's like what we call in Spanish *empanaditas*, to them is *pastelitos*. But this was not made sweet, this was made with a meat, the pork meat, and then it was made with some kind of bean, garbanzo bean, I think it was, and some other things, but I just can't find that recipe.

Bernadette appreciated and tried to learn Puerto Rican cooking but unfortunately she describes her husband teaching her with abuse and dominance. *I learned the hard way how to make rice, let's put it that way. That's about the basic thing. José used to show me, he used to tell me, this is how you make the rice, . . . but if I didn't get it right, oh, he'd beat me, until I got it right, really. That's how you learn the hard way, eeh, he'd give me a good one. And it was a brutal kind of way, but hey, I learned how to cook rice, let me tell you. . . . And if the food wasn't done the right way, he'd throw it, it would be all over the ceiling. Then I thought that I was the only one going through that, but I wasn't. There was another little gal, and she had the same problem with her husband. She would cook and she was a good, good cook, and he'd just toss it against the wall if it wasn't just the way he wanted it. And you couldn't very well tell them, "Make it yourself," because you know we were so leery of them, that, hey, we'll learn, we'll learn.*

*But that's how I learned to make rice, because he'd make me—one night, he made me make eight bowls of rice until I got it right. Now I think all the tears in between, all the tears and all the fear, but that's how I learned how to make rice. I got it right.*

Food not only stood for the incompatibilities and power imbalance between Bernadette and her husband, but also for all that was wrong in his life: *I think that when things weren't going his way, and he wasn't happy with the food, that was the way that he showed that he wasn't happy. Because he . . . wasn't happy with his life to begin with. . . . I think all of that emotion was in him, and I just met him at the wrong time. He was just like a little*

*volcano waiting to erupt. He had quite a temper. And I think that food was his way of getting out his anger when things weren't going the right way. And with the food, if it was any little bad way, he'd get mad, if it didn't come out just the way he wanted it.*

José used Bernadette's inadequate cooking as a reason for abusing her. Although she tried to please and forge ties with him by cooking Puerto Rican style, he refused her offering. Rather than allowing food to be a bridge between them, he used it to shut her out. His behavior illustrated how culturally sanctioned expectations that women defer to and serve men through feeding them could threaten gender equality and sometimes justify violence.<sup>13</sup> José's abuse became so great that Bernadette decided she had to leave: *I didn't want that kind of life for my daughter. I thought no. I would rather live alone. Like there's that saying, mejor sola che mal acompañada—better alone than in company with somebody that's bad and evil.* She eventually divorced José. Their incompatibility over food reflected and symbolized deeper barriers in the marriage.

Several years later, Bernadette crossed another cultural border when she made her second marriage to an undocumented Mexican migrant worker named Manuel. Again her stories described food as both a bridge and a barrier to cultural communication: *I found that when I married my husband from Mexico, it was the same way, their cooking was really good, with different spices. It was the darnedest thing, because when I went to Mexico, it was the most wonderful experience, it was wonderful. And one evening my mother-in-law wanted to drink some tea. And I thought, "Oh, let's get the tea bags out," you know.*

*But she goes, "No, we have to go and look for our own."*

*I go, "Okay." So we took a hike up a hill, and she was just picking a—it was like a branch of a little tree, and she picked certain branches, you know, from the ground. They weren't roots because they were already out, and then she got them, and we took them down and we washed them, and we boiled them. And they made the best tea, but I'll be darned if I can remember what the name of it was. And it was just really, really good. So we just had tea, and I thought that was just great, I thought it was just so wonderful.*

In this story and others, Bernadette used food to express her appreciation for Mexican culture, yet also its foreignness. Eventually, however, Manuel's foreignness became too much for her; the border became a barrier. He was kind to Bernadette and her daughter but had trouble finding work, got depressed, did not speak much English, and depended on Bernadette for too much. As she got more and more debilitated from an incurable physical disease, she found it harder and harder to deal with him and his needs. Bernadette described the end of the relation-

ship: *Finally, I just thought, "This is it. I'm sorry, I just can't live with you any more."* I told him, *"I just can't put up with you."*

*He was always, "Teach me this, teach me that." I was in so much pain. And I just couldn't do a lot of things—oh, it was just getting to be a hassle. And then, I felt it was my job to get up with him at six o'clock in the morning, or five, fix him his breakfast, his lunch, even though I had to drag myself. And he told me, "Don't get up." But I had to; it was just something that I felt I had to do. So I would get up and make him breakfast and stuff like that, but it was a killer.*

*And then finally I told him, "No, it's just not going to work." So we went and we got our divorce.*

Here again, Bernadette used the language of food to describe her incompatibility with this man whom, like her first husband, she had crossed a cultural border to marry. His neediness and her nurturance were reflected in her feeding him. Repudiation of feeding him represented her decision to take care of herself rather than of a man who was not giving enough back to her. In both marriages, food became an expression of failed gender relations and the pitfalls of the traditional domestic division of labor when not accompanied by gender equality. With José, Bernadette's food work was the site of her oppression. Food was Bernadette's voice, and her husband tried to silence her by controlling her cooking, by forcing her to make it his way, and by shattering her creations against the wall. With Manuel, feeding was a different source of oppression; Bernadette was exhausted by taking care of Manuel, when she herself was becoming more in need of care. In both cases, the reciprocity essential to gender equality was missing.

Where reciprocity and food-sharing have been possible, Bernadette has crossed race ethnic, class, and gender divides. But such reciprocity was relatively rare and unlikely unless women had strong socioeconomic positions by virtue of education and earning power as Bernadette did not have. Not having attained reciprocity with a man, Bernadette lived alone. She still loved cooking and was continually recreating ties with the women of her family—her mother, daughter, sisters, and sisters-in-law—through food-sharing. Perhaps Bernadette's experience reflected Margaret Randall's words, "Now I cook as a woman, free at last of that feeling of enslavement with which a male culture has imbued the process of preparing food" (1997b, 120). Perhaps her cooking was empowering because she cooked freely and received esteem for her labors through reciprocal relationships with her female relatives.

## Conclusion

Food and talking about it have been both bridge and barrier between Bernadette and others, including myself. Conversations about food where she was the expert and I the acolyte enabled us to build connections across our race-ethnic and class differences. But there remained a distance between us symbolized by the fact that although Bernadette and I shared food gifts many times, we have not yet eaten a meal together. A border still exists which has not been crossed by commensality.

Similarly, our distance is both marked and mediated by our ongoing efforts to find a satisfactory way to get her story into print. When I wrote an earlier draft of this essay (Counihan 1998), I gave her a copy and asked for her feedback. She had some problems with it that revealed her uncertainty with my rendition of her as well as the waves caused by her speaking out. Her Anglo brother-in-law told her not to let me publish the article and not to do any more tape-recorded interviews with me. Was his effort to silence her an effort to control the stories told and the reality described? Bernadette's sister and daughter also told her not to let me use her words. They disparaged her and said she sounded stupid. Although cooking and eating together were important for the women of Bernadette's family, they tried to silence her food narrative, perhaps reflecting their own low assessment of the value of women's work and words.

Bernadette's relatives' criticisms caused her to feel uncertain about my essay and triggered a discussion that led to revisions. She felt that certain passages made her sound ignorant, and she wanted me to edit them to be more grammatical, less repetitious, and more true to her vision of herself. To protect herself from her relatives' disgruntlement, she asked me to use pseudonyms, and she chose the name Bernadette after the saint who, she said, was visited by the Immaculate Conception and made seven prophecies. Bernadette said she was proud of her interviews because they were something she could leave her child and grandchildren, but she also feared that her words would come back to hurt her. Getting her words into print in a way that she found fulfilling was an ongoing process that depended on the continuing interaction between us. Our struggles over voice mirrored the larger challenges of defining gender, ethnic, and class power in the United States. They showed that conversations across class, ethnic, cultural, and regional borders are challenging but possible and important. The food-centered life histories of Bernadette and other women in her community can keep alive their *Mexicano* culture and dignify their experiences against

prevailing ideologies that would devalue them. Like “the green shoot that cracks the rock,” they “will abide.”

## Notes

I presented an earlier version of this essay at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (Counihan 1998) in the session “The Border Counts: Subjugating Signs and Transnational Agitation.” I thank Miguel Díaz Barriga and Matthew Gutmann for organizing the session and Patricia Zavella, the discussant, for her thoughtful comments. I thank my husband, anthropologist Jim Taggart, for sharing fieldwork and data with me and for commenting on several earlier drafts. I thank sociologist Mary Romero for suggesting the San Luis Valley as a possible fieldwork site and for commenting on an earlier draft. I thank Arlene Avakian and Barbara Haber for suggestions for revisions. Finally I give thanks to Bernadette for allowing me to tape-record her stories and for giving me permission to write about her.

1. *metate*: grinding stone

*maíz*: corn

*agua*: water

*masa barina*: flour dough

*somos el amasijo*: we are the kneading, the dough

*somos lo molido en el metate*: we are the flour in the grinding stone

*comal*: flat pan for cooking tortillas

*somos el molcajete*: we are the mortar

*comino, ajo, pimienta*: cumin, garlic, pepper

*chile colorado*: red chili

2. As I was making final revisions to this essay, I learned of Gloria Anzaldúa's death on May 15, 2004, due to complications of diabetes. May her words and her courageous spirit live on.

3. I use *Mexicanas/os* in this paper to refer to people of Spanish and Mexican descent residing in Antonito. This is a term many in Antonito use. Some use “Hispanic,” “Spanish,” or “Spanish American,” and some, especially younger people or those involved in political activism, use *Chicana/o*, a term which other people hate. In northern New Mexico, some people identify themselves as *Hispanas/os* (Madrid 1998) but these terms are rarely used in southern Colorado. See Elsasser, MacKenzie, and Tixier y Vigil (1980, xv) for the terms used in northern New Mexico.

4. All informants' names in this essay are pseudonyms.

5. Some feminist studies of food are Adams 1990, Avakian 1997, Bordo 1993, Brumberg 1988, Bynum 1987, Charles and Kerr 1988, Chernin 1985, Counihan 1999, Counihan 2004, DeVault 1991, Paules 1991, Randall 1997b, Thompson 1994, and Zavella 2001. On feminist anthropology, see Behar and Gordon 1995, Moore 1988, Sacks 1974, and Wolf 1992.

6. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) has eloquently demonstrated the importance of finding a voice in coming to power. Some women who have found a powerful voice through food writing are Fisher 1954, Esquivel 1992, and Randall 1997a. Writers who have explored food as women's voice are Beoku-Betts 1995,

Bruch 1988, Brumberg 1997, Bynum 1987, Counihan 1999, 2003, 2004, Thompson 1994, and Zafar 1999.

7. I did two interviews with Bernadette in English, which produced over one hundred pages of transcriptions and Jim did two interviews with her in Spanish which produced over fifty pages of transcriptions.

8. Notable exceptions are Taylor and Taggart 2003 and Deutsch 1987. Deutsch says, "Written History of . . . Chicanas or Hispanic women in Colorado [is] virtually non-existent." On the San Luis Valley culture and ecology see Peña 1998. See Zavella 1991 on the need to document Chicana diversity.

9. Deutsch (1987, 17) says that settlers came to Guadalupe from Abiquiu in Rio Arriba County, northern New Mexico. The southern San Luis Valley was long the territory of the Ute Indians (Marsh 1991, Osburn 1998, Young 1997) and was settled in the mid-nineteenth century by Spaniards and Mexicans from Old and New Mexico (Deutsch 1987). Anglos arrived in ever greater numbers in the late nineteenth century with the U.S. military (sent to vanquish the Utes), the Church of the Latter Day Saints, homesteading claims, and the railroad. On Hispanic and Anglo landownership, use, acquisition, and loss in southern Colorado, see Gutierrez and Eckert 1991, Martinez 1987, and Weber 1991.

10. On the food traditions of the *Mexicanos* of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, see Cabeza de Baca 1949, 1954 and Deutsch 1987. On southwestern cuisine, see Bentley 1998.

11. Population figures come from <http://dola.colorado.gov/demog/history/allhist.cfm>, consulted 2/1/03.

12. Joe Taylor used the metaphor of "crabs in a bucket" to describe the ways *Mexicanos* in Antonito fought with each other and kept each other down (Taylor and Taggart 2003: 91).

13. Adams (1990), Charles and Kerr (1988, 72), DeVault (1991, 143–144), and Ellis (1983) note that men often use dissatisfaction with food as an excuse to abuse women.

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