Resistances

Women's studies scholarship and women's activism have not always considered women as active agents of resistance to our oppression. Early proponents of women's studies, who had worked hard to legitimize women as a valid category of scholarship, at first focused on the similarities among women's lives—women as victims of an all-encompassing patriarchy. Women of color critiqued this approach both in women's activism and in the academy, often citing the critical role of race and class in their lives as well as the centrality of women of color to resistance movements in their communities, and women of color continue to produce some of the most exciting scholarship in the field. As women's studies became more acceptable in many fields, even de rigueur in some, feminist analyses have become much more complex and nuanced, including a greater focus on women's resistance.

The essays in this section look at women in three very different sites with very different approaches, but they all view women's resistance within the contexts of gender, national, and ethnic oppression. Laura Lindenfeld's analysis of the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* questions the extent of the resistance to gender and sexual norms in a work that purports to celebrate women's social and economic independence in a story of two women's commitment to each another. She also explores how viewing this film sates her appetite for both popular culture and food, but only with a heavy overlay of guilt. Analyzing another film, the Indian work *Spices*, Beheroze F. Shroff argues that women's use of the chili pepper represents both the oppression of women under colonialism and patriarchy and women's resistance to domination by Indian men and the colonial domination of Indian people by the British. Eating and cooking, for a group of Armenian American feminists interviewed by Arlene Avakian, are ways to maintain their sometimes tenuous hold on their ethnicity and a way to assert that identity with non-Armenians. These essays complicate notions of resistance, recognizing it but never celebrating it outside of the context of the very real power of patriarchy, colonialism, and genocide.

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Women Who Eat Too Much: Femininity and Food in *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Laura Lindenfeld

I never cease to be amazed how many conflicting feelings and experiences I have in relationship to food and eating. I am able to bask in the glorious pleasures of the culinary, to relish in the delights of food, only to find myself—still after so many years of contemplating this very issue—experiencing residual feelings of guilt. Sometimes those feelings are less than residual and in fact more prominent. I always imagine that I should be able to deal with this cycle so much better, that consuming food should become simple, nonproblematic, pleasurable, guilt-free. I find myself puzzled over the difficulty of coming to simple terms with food and eating. After all—I have studied the feminist literature that addresses women, food, and bodies. I have taught classes on food culture and American identity. I have written and thought about this topic endlessly, and I should know better than to attach my value as a human being to the amount of chocolate mousse cake that I've eaten. In my efforts to better understand what seems to me to be a ridiculous method of self-torture, I have turned—of all things—to film. Watching films, I have noticed, provides me with a similar cycle of pleasure and guilt. How is it that I am able to immerse myself in the narrative world of a mainstream film and find pleasure and even at times empowerment in something that simultaneously feels troubling and wrong to me? My guilty pleasure in consuming film closely echoes the sentiments I experience around food. I enjoy it, but. . . .

As a scholar whose efforts strive toward dissecting media products in order to understand better how they shape hegemonic understandings of self and other, I find that this essay has proven particularly challenging. Watching film, like eating, is laden with various issues for me. Constantly calling myself to awareness of what lies behind the products I consume—whether it be food, film, furniture, or clothing—has become almost habitual, and I am not quite certain what happens to plea-

sure in this constant struggle for awareness. The film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991) poses an interesting puzzle for me, as it is seemingly progressive in its treatment of race, gender, and sexuality. Yet each time I have "consumed" this film it has felt like the guilty pleasure of eating foods that are "wrong." The fact that this film looks at the relationship between gender, race, food, and power makes it an especially fruitful starting point to enter into this discussion.

In her essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," bell hooks explores the commodification of Otherness in mass culture, emphasizing how often "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture."[1] She expresses her concern about the way contemporary media focus on race and Otherness and describes discussions she has had with people who regard this seemingly progressive type of representation as positive. hooks writes, "After weeks of debating with one another about the distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, students in my introductory course on black literature were convinced that something radical was happening, that these issues were 'coming out in the open.' " She concludes strongly, "we cannot, however, accept these new images uncritically."[2]

This essay is a response to hooks's challenge to critically analyze both my pleasure and my discomfort. *Fried Green Tomatoes* offers various alternatives for women in relationship to food. At the same time, however, it takes back with one hand what it gives with the other by deemphasizing and negatively reinscribing some of the subversive tendencies it exhibits, especially in its treatment of race. While working through the subversive, utopian possibilities this film offers about women, eating, and identity, I will look at the ways in which it simultaneously supports the status quo. Through a close reading of the film, the following pages walk through my consumption of *Fried Green Tomatoes* on terms that, as hooks writes, "begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations." In this sense, this framework of analyzing my relationship to this film provides me with a method to map out and challenge the pleasure that I, as a heterosexual white woman, am able to experience in viewing it. In closely taking apart my pleasure in this film while simultaneously addressing the critical voices I hear while watching it, I wish to shed light on how this critical act might feed my understanding of the interconnectedness of consumption, pleasure, and guilt. To follow through with hooks's challenge, I analyze this cycle of pleasure and guilt in order to better understand, as hooks writes, "how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible" by critically taking my relationship with this film to

task.[3] In focusing this analysis around my own spectator position, I will map out the ways in which *Fried Green Tomatoes* undermines many of the possibilities of change that the film appears to offer.

My reading of *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a result of how I, as a viewer, have negotiated my relationship with this film to be a means of personal empowerment despite the ways in which the film undermines much of what it accomplishes. In particular, I will focus on how representations of food and eating in *Fried Green Tomatoes* subvert standardized notions of gender and sexuality as well as the ways in which it questions patriarchal political structures and the inequitable distribution of food. Thus, I would like to illustrate the very oscillation I experience in viewing this film, drawing on moments of empowerment and pleasure only to then visit the flip side of this coin.

Based on the book by Fanny Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, a text that has become something of a cult classic among U.S. lesbians, the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* has received a fair amount of critical attention. A number of these essays focus on the intertextual relationship between novel and film, looking critically at the ways in which feminism, gender, race, and sexuality are treated in the transposition from written text to celluloid image. Jennifer Ross Church's essay "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*" questions how a film that deals with such a controversial issue as a cannibalized husband was able to make the successful leap from novel to film. Church emphasizes the influence that *Fried Green Tomatoes* had on the Hollywood film industry, writing, "How could such a quiet, female buddy movie attract a wide audience? Not even reviewed in most major journals and advertised largely by word of mouth, the film and video grossed over $42 million in the year following its release, prompting the movie industry to try to define and cash in on its audience."[4] Her essay goes on to question precisely what "the draw" of this film was, how it was able "to balance extremes and to touch on serious issues of sexuality, race, and modern-day alienation without losing any large segments of its audience."[5] In a similar fashion, Shari Zeck looks at the role humor plays in her essay "Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*." She draws on a comparison between novel and film to discuss the limitations of humor as a transgressive power in the film.[6]

My analysis of this film stems from Zeck's and Church's readings, both of which analyze moments of upheaval and change while also looking at hegemonic reinscriptions of race, gender, and sexuality.[7] Precisely the fact that *Fried Green Tomatoes* unexpectedly made the leap from novel to film makes it an interesting object of study. This is the point where I wish to begin my discussion. I view the popularity of the

film as intrinsically linked to its ability to present material that challenges cultural norms while also adhering to what Raymond Williams refers to as "emergent culture."[8] By "emergent," Williams means, "first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created. But there is then a much earlier attempt to incorporate them, just because they are part—and yet not a defined part—of effective contemporary practice. Indeed it is significant in our own period how very early this attempt is, how alert the dominant culture now is to anything that can be seen as emergent."[9] In this sense, the film, unlike the novel, carefully navigates the waters that lie between what Williams calls "effective dominant culture" and "oppositional culture,"[10] that is, it gives its audience enough newness and difference without running the risk of alienating a hegemonic reading of itself. In this sense, *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a relatively open text that allows for a certain degree of potentially empowering polysemic readings, readings that, however, to a large extent reinscribe effective dominant culture. As I will show, the power and creativity of the individual to create meanings of one's own, to which, as some would argue, media texts open themselves, are overshadowed by ideological elements in the film that affirm mainstream, hegemonic culture.[11] This film is able, as Church argues, to treat quite subversive material in a way that does not challenge mainstream culture *too much*, but rather just enough that the film, instead of running the risk of losing a mainstream audience, actually became a quite successful box-office hit.[12]

Fried Green Tomatoes is not a subversive, fringe text as is, to a certain extent, the book upon which it is based. It is mainstream, and despite its many problems, it has managed to offer me some comfort and empowerment in relationship to food and eating. Analyzing my own spectator position in regard to this film might serve as a means to think about how change becomes incorporated and ultimately usurped by mainstream culture. With each further viewing, the film becomes more and more regressive in my eyes, undoing much of the "feminist" work that it sets up, creating problematic issues around race, gender, and sexuality, and undermining its progressive narrative of food and eating. Nonetheless, the film has somehow managed to provide me with alternatives, and I am certain that this is a reflection of my own race, sexuality, and gender.

Fried Green Tomatoes, a film that in many ways attempts to challenge traditional gender roles and heterosexism, seems to challenge the stereotypical ways in which women and food have been represented in mainstream. The mainstream media creates laughter around women

who are "larger" than what hegemonic culture holds to be acceptable. Women who take up space and enjoy eating are equated with animals and positioned as the proverbial butt of jokes. Even among slender actresses, there exist few examples who are allowed to partake of culinary delights on the screen without being either demonized or sexualized. The options are lean at best. We are left to choose between unrealistically sculpted and stylized bodies or images of the marginalized, ridiculed fat woman. In her book *The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America*, W. Charisse Goodman discusses the dearth of positive large female characters in film:

> Of the approximately 70 movies I randomly surveyed—mostly mainstream commercial American films—only 17 had any large female characters at all in the script, most of whom represented the standard domineering mother figure, the comically unattractive women, the whore figure, and Bates as her *Misery* psychopath character. Only six of these 17 films presented a big woman as a positive figure, and of these six, only three—*Daddy's Dyin'—Who's Got the Will?* and John Waters' *Hairspray* and *Crybaby*—featured fat women as romantic figures and central characters.[13]

Certainly, the number of larger women allowed to occupy positive roles in mainstream film *and* enjoy food is incredibly small.

When women do eat in mainstream cinema, the situations that allow for this are narrowly defined. There are the lovely, thin goddesses whose eating serves to enhance their erotic attraction to men. *Flashdance* (Jennifer Beals), *Pretty Woman* (Julia Roberts), and *When Harry Met Sally* (Meg Ryan), to mention only a few, position, as Susan Bordo writes, "the heroines' unrestrained delight in eating . . . as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandon that will shortly be expressed in bed."[14] In all of these films, the heroines' bodies conform to contemporary ideals of female body norms, leaving us to assume that it's okay to eat, but only if one doesn't get fat and if the indulgence precedes heterosexual intercourse. The other circumstances, according to Bordo, under which, "[women] are permitted to lust for food itself [are] when they are pregnant or when it is clear they have been near starvation."[15] The possibilities appear bleak.

Mainstream representations of women eating are generally quite problematic, and I do not wish to imply that those in *Fried Green Tomatoes* are not guilty, as well, of perpetuating stereotypical and judgmental images. Rather, my focus here remains on how this particular film offers narratives of empowerment in the face of a culture that

perpetually bombards viewers with unrealistic, unhealthy, and dangerous images of bodies and food while it simultaneously contradicts this tendency.

Fried Green Tomatoes tells the story of two generations of southern women by interweaving the narratives with each other. Evelyn Couch, who constantly stuffs herself with candy bars to escape the dreariness of her everyday life and her dull marriage with husband Ed, meets Ninny Threadgoode, an eighty-two-year-old woman living in the same retirement facility as Ed's aunt. Through the many visits with Ninny, Evelyn hears stories of two women from the 1920s–1930s, Idgie and Ruth, as the camera cuts back and forth between past and present (1980s). Through the relationship with Ninny and the stories of Idgie and Ruth, Evelyn comes to recognize that she must take responsibility for herself and her life. Through narrative, visual, and acoustic parallels that link present and past, the film relates Evelyn's development and empowerment directly back to the stories that she hears about the women's pasts. The narrative technique of interweaving past with present provides a framework through which the viewer can compare and contrast Evelyn's story to the Idgie/Ruth narrative. Ultimately, it is the story of these women and their relationships to food and each other told through Ninny that help to heal Evelyn and empower her to challenge her relationship with her husband and with herself. Through these tales, she is also able to overcome a painful compulsive eating disorder and actually form a strong, healing connection with Ninny through food, so that food comes to play a central role in this narrative of self-empowerment and self-assertion.

Food is constantly present throughout the film, and much of the narrative is embedded in images of cooking and eating. Already in the first scene, the camera displays an image of the run-down Whistle Stop Café, the words "peach pie, pecan pie, blueberry pie, cherry and peach cobbler" written on the window and the "fried green tomatoes served hot" still legible but chipped and faded on the door. The camera alternates between medium shots of the café and of Evelyn as she stares longingly at the café and takes a bite into a candy bar. The viewer is already set up to contrast Evelyn's world of junk and fast food to the stories behind the aging, chipping remnants of Idgie and Ruth's café, an establishment, as the sign tells us, for "fine food at fair prices." The past becomes present to Evelyn and the viewer through the soundtrack. Rustling leaves turn into the sound of trains pulling through town as the camera tracks over the railroad line to emphasize the interconnectedness of past and present. The cinematography and editing have al-

ready established food as central link between the contemporary and the historical in this opening scene.

While mass-produced candy bars dominate Evelyn's world, Idgie and Ruth's is filled with sumptuous homemade pies, cakes, and southern home-style cooking, all perfectly beautiful and lovingly prepared. In the scene that depicts Idgie's sister's wedding, for example, the camera pans over a table of sweets that would leave even Martha Stewart filled with envy. The contrast between these two cultures plays itself out continuously throughout the film. Evelyn devours entire boxes of Krispy Kream Donuts while Idgie and Ruth connect over highly aestheticized, thoughtfully prepared picnics of homemade pies, casseroles, lemonade in mason jars, and fresh berries. The aestheticization of food in the Idgie/Ruth narrative positions eating and cooking as nurturing and healing, whereas Evelyn appears as ridiculous and even pitiful via her relationship with food. For Idgie and Ruth, food comes to signify community, connectedness, and togetherness. For Evelyn, who eventually develops a similar relationship to food, eating initially means alienation, loneliness, and pain. Representations of food mirror respectively the emotional and psychic space that the women in this film inhabit. Clearly, Idgie and Ruth's relationship is coded as "good" and "relational" while Evelyn's becomes "bad" and "destructive." Food becomes one of the means of facilitating viewer identification with Idgie and Ruth, thereby supporting the narrative that idealizes their relationship with each other as a means of overthrowing traditional power relations, a role that eating eventually plays for Evelyn and Ninny as well. The film thus comments on a culture that mass-produces meaningless food, and it causes the viewer to prioritize food, cooking, and eating that creates relationships and connectedness.

The film's challenging of stereotypical gender through representations of food and eating operates in a similar fashion. In various ways, food becomes a source of empowerment and a vehicle for positive change for all the women in this narrative. Idgie and Ruth's story takes place during the Depression, and the widespread scarcity of food for many in the United States at this time becomes an issue of basic survival. It is striking that Idgie and Ruth, rather than suffering from a lack of food, are actually able to gain economic independence through food and eating. Food, in this respect, is power, and these two women use their access to food to challenge political and economic hierarchies.

Idgie's character clearly defies traditional standards set for women. Already as a young girl, she refuses to wear feminine clothing and embodies the classic tomboy. Even as a young adult, the nonfeminine gen-

der role she inhabits (which, although irritating to many of the townspeople and her family members, everyone seems to accept in an almost utopian fashion) serves as the central signifier for her character. Idgie appears tough, strong, boyish, and utterly rebellious.

The "honey scene" displays Idgie's toughness and creates strong links between gender, female sexuality, and food. In this scene Idgie self-assuredly marches to a tree swarming with bees and fetches a piece of honeycomb for Ruth (and the viewer, who watches from Ruth's point of view) as she looks on in amazement and fear. At the same time, the film disrupts Idgie's tough, masculinized character by showing that she has the capacity to nurture with food, a traditional female role through which she is able to express her affection for Ruth. In this sense, Idgie's character challenges dualistic understandings of gender. She is not simply the tough tomboy but rather a gender conundrum, refusing some traditional female roles while taking on and playing with others. Most important, Idgie's ability to nurture while also rejecting stereotypical female defined roles questions how gender becomes defined.

The honey serves as a means for the women to express their sexual longing for each other and to subtly underline the lesbian relationship that exists between the two. Idgie, the "Bee Charmer," as Ruth calls her, hands the jar to the object of her affection, Ruth, who proceeds, framed in a medium long two-shot, to dip her fingers into the sticky, sweet, golden honey. Honey comes to signify the love and affection between these two women in this "quietly stated study of (un)requited lesbian love, of two women sharing friendship, obstacles and joys as their reliance on one another deepens over the years," as James Parish writes.[16] The place where this scene is situated in the film's plot underlines the connection between food and female sexuality. Although the film never explicitly represents sexual acts between the two women, Parish emphasizes how "the lesbian subtext remains a deliberate undercurrent to the main thrust of this comedy drama."[17] Ruth's birthday party immediately follows this sexually charged scene. The non-diegetic soundtrack plays a sexy African American vocalist singing the blues as the camera cuts from the two-shot of the women and the honey jar to a group yelling "Surprise!" Immediately, once again, we see a medium long shot of feminine Ruth and tomboy Idgie, who is now dressed in suspenders and tie. Holding a bottle, Idgie puts her arm around Ruth. The sexual overtones continue into the next scene where the two women swim in the lake, and Ruth emerges in a wet, almost transparent, honey-colored slip from the water and kisses Idgie on the cheek. At the end of the film we see yet again a jar of honey on Ruth's grave with a note from the "Bee Charmer" next to it, a sign of Idgie's undying love for her deceased

partner. Here, food represents sexuality, pleasure, and connection between women.

The film, in its humorous, light-hearted style, immediately frames this segment of the Idgie/Ruth narrative by cutting back to Evelyn in the present, who is unable to look at her vagina because she cannot take her girdle off at her women's group. The "source of our strength and our separateness" as the teacher of Evelyn's women's class refers to the vagina in this quite funny, ironically positioned scene (Idgie and Ruth apparently have no problems getting in touch with their genitals), is inaccessible to Evelyn, who is literally wrapped up in the garments of standardized femininity. Evelyn's body size, the result of her relationship to food, and her adherence to standardized gender roles stand in the way of her experiencing her sexuality. Thus the film comments on the relationship between women's sexuality and normative gender roles, linking these to each other through food.

Here the film undoes much of what it potentially sets up. In creating dichotomies of "good eating" and "destructive eating," it links "goodness" with thinness and fatness with lack of control and hysteria.[18] I imagine what it would be like to see Kathy Bates cast as Ruth, and Mary Stuart Masterson or Mary-Louise Parker as Evelyn. It is indeed essential to the plot that Ruth be an "attractive" female who meets the expectations of what counts as a beautiful body capable of manipulating men, and Bates clearly does not meet these standards. The choice to cast Masterson as Idgie and Parker as Ruth is anything but coincidental. Mainstream media's politics of body size and shape are extremely conservative. In the transposition from novel to film, for instance, Ninny's body size undergoes a substantial change. In the novel, she describes herself as a "big women. Big bones and all."[19] Jessica Tandy, cast as Ninny in the film, is a very slight, petite, small-boned woman who appears almost frail. An example out of Kathy Bates's career further exemplifies this tendency. After having played the role of Frankie on stage in *Frankie and Johnnie*, Bates was passed over for the film role for Michelle Pfeiffer, an actress whose appearance has helped to set contemporary standards for beauty and attractiveness. As W. Charisse Goodman writes, "This is typical. If the heavy woman has any consistent role in commercial American films, it is as the peripheral, asexual mother or 'buddy,' and rarely, if ever, the central, romantic character. Message to all large women: You're not sexy. The only beautiful woman is a thin woman."[20]

The lesbian subtext of the film undergoes a similar treatment. While the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) honored *Fried Green Tomatoes* with a Media Award explicitly for its positive rep-

resentation of a lesbian relationship, the representation itself remains quite vague.[21] As Rebecca Bell-Metereau writes, mainstream cinema takes "pains to establish the heterosexuality of the woman characters, even in the case of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, where the literary source presented the main relationship as lesbian."[22] As the film presents possibilities for difference, it also takes them away. Jennifer Ross Church emphasizes how "the film depends upon looks between the two women that can be interpreted in very different ways and upon a more mature, public proclamation of their love."[23] According to Church's analysis, the film clearly opens up different spectator possibilities: Ruth's "love" proclamation for Idgie in the courtroom can therefore be viewed as an affirmation of either a lesbian partnership or a nonsexual female friendship. It insinuates the possibility of sexual love and partnership between women, but it does so in a manner that is careful not to alienate a mainstream heterosexual viewing audience. The emphasis on both Idgie's and Ruth's physical beauty (their facial features, bodies, and anachronistic 1990s hairstyles adhere closely to the Hollywood standards of what is held to be "beautiful") further undermines the gender-disruptive tendencies the film attempts to set up. While Idgie, for example, is indeed tomboyish and tough, her outward appearance remains within the parameters of what mainstream heterosexist culture understands as beautiful.

As problematic as many of the representations of sexuality, gender, and food are, the film offers other transgressive and empowering images of gender and food. By subverting the traditional model of the woman as server and caretaker and turning the role of feeder into a means of overthrowing male dominance, *Fried Green Tomatoes* challenges traditional concepts of power. Food and servitude thus become sources of strength throughout the Idgie/Ruth narrative. In her book *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*, Marjorie DeVault argues that "feeding work has become one of the primary ways that women 'do' gender."[24] Performing the roles of cooking and feeding thus often serves as reaffirmation of gender roles, so that for many women this work "has become an apparently 'natural' part of the gendered self."[25] *Fried Green Tomatoes* displays woman as the classic feeder and server and then subverts this very role. Food—initially a means of entrapment for Evelyn, who relies on doughnuts and candy bars for emotional warmth—takes on strikingly different meanings when it is prepared, eaten, and served by Idgie and Ruth. As Evelyn is able to form a strong connection with Ninny, her relationship with food changes parallel to this development. This becomes a means of over-

throwing traditionally gendered power relationships, and cooking and serving represent acts of personal, social, and political assertion.

Fried Green Tomatoes critically displays the flip side of this coin. Evelyn Couch's life revolves around the classic "female" duties of serving and pleasing her husband. Suffering from "empty nest syndrome" now that her son has left home, Evelyn, married to the proverbial "couch potato," Ed, anxiously awaits his arrival home from work every day. Dressed primly and properly, she meticulously prepares meals and decorates the table with flowers for her husband, who prefers to dine alone in front of the television. To soothe her distress and deal with the anxiety she experiences over the loss of the traditional mother/feeder role, Evelyn turns to junk food as a source of self-nurturing. By dressing her in muumuus and good-girl southern belle clothing with carefully coifed curls, the film emphasizes Evelyn's inability to take action and deal with her life. She feels "so useless, so powerless," as she explains to Ninny. Her feelings of powerlessness revolve around food, as she is unable to recognize how fully she has given herself over to traditional gender norms. "I can't stop eating," she cries. "Every day I try and try, and every day I go off. I hide candy bars all over the house." The camera pans alongside her as she stuffs herself, carefully situating the viewer in Ninny's position. We look at Evelyn with a mixture of pity and humor, glad that we are not made to be "in her shoes." The cinematography cautiously provides us with just enough distance from Evelyn that we can empathize with her without having to fear *becoming* her.

In its treatment of Evelyn, the film takes back many of the possibilities that it offers for viewers. While Evelyn eventually becomes—despite her body size—an admirable, self-assured character, the ways in which the narrative, cinematography, and editing comment on her figure undermine the transgressive possibilities the film sets up. The fact that *Fried Green Tomatoes* even takes up the issue of representing a woman with a compulsive eating disorder and attempts to place it in a sociocultural and psychological framework distinguishes it from most representations of women and eating in mainstream U.S. cinema. Nonetheless, the representation of Evelyn positions overweight women in a negative light and reaffirms biologically determined theories about women's bodies and their relationships to food. When Evelyn breaks down and confesses to Ninny that she feels helpless and out of control, Ninny tells her that the onset of menopause and thus a hormonal imbalance are to blame for her distress. In effect, the film blames Evelyn's female anatomy and her aging process for what feminist eating-disorders specialists view as an effect of socially reinforced gender pat-

terns that make women believe they are sick if they like to eat.[26] In essentializing Evelyn's relationship to food and reducing it to biological terms, the film undermines many of the subversive moves that it makes, reinforcing hegemonic, patriarchal understandings of women's bodies as naturally flawed and therefore in need of correction.

The camera often positions Evelyn as an object of laughter. At times, this works to strengthen her character. The humorous characterization of Evelyn often facilitates empathy and understanding with her. When she begins to identify as "Towanda the Avenger," for example, who destroys the cute red convertible of two skinny young women who wrongfully steal her parking spot and make fun of her for her age and body size, I have repeatedly found myself rejoicing. But this humor, as Shari Zeck argues, is limited in its capacity to transgress. Zeck writes, "After all we have seen how in this film, moments of laughter, even when combined explicitly with gender transgression, are so readily recuperated by the gaze of a benign mother, a useless husband, and a feckless sheriff, suggesting how fragile humor as a weapon of rebellion can be."[27] The humorous elements are quite often judgmental and harsh. In a supermarket scene, for instance, the camera frames Evelyn next to a huge pile of dog food packages. As she exits the store, the camera shoots her in a long shot walking toward her car with the supermarket logo in bright red letters in the background, indicating to us that Evelyn is one of "The Beef People." In the next shot, a young man calls her a fat cow and causes her to drop her groceries on the ground. Once again, the film gives the viewer enough distance to empathize with Evelyn, while the humor keeps us from taking her problems all too seriously. Certainly, these representations are anything but subversive and transgressive. Rather, they serve to elicit laughter at the "fat woman's" expense, and American audiences, culturally prepared to find this humorous, instantaneously get the joke.

In contrast to Evelyn, for Idgie and Ruth food, cooking, eating, and nurturing serve as realms of empowerment, and here the camera has us view from and thus identify through their perspectives. Ultimately, it is through her relationship with Ninny and through food itself that Evelyn is able to empower and heal herself, but initially she provides a stark contrast to Idgie and Ruth. When Idgie rescues Ruth from her physically abusive husband, the two women move in with each other and open a restaurant, the "Whistle Stop Café." Indeed, almost everything about this space comes to represent subversion of traditional hierarchies. Here, women and people of color run the show, and the Ku Klux Klan of this small Alabama town does not like this at all. Unlike Evelyn who stuffs herself with Cracker Jacks, a not-so-subtle yet humorous link

to the traditional southern "cracker" good girl role that has been shoved down her throat, Idgie refuses to acknowledge threats by the Klan and continues to serve food to whomever she wishes. When warned by Sheriff Grady that she should stop "selling to coloreds," Idgie defiantly pokes fun at him and his friends "under those sheets" for "marching around in one of those parades you boys have. . . . How come they don't have enough sense to change their shoes?" She teases him, "I'd recognize those size 14 clodhoppers you got anywhere, Grady," situating herself on the side of her African American friends whom she consistently treats with friendship, warmth, respect, and dignity.

Ruth participates in transgressive gender behavior as well. She turns the role of the passive female into parody by consciously employing passive-aggressive tactics around food in order to challenge male dominance. From the beginning, she inhabits a traditionally feminine role. Yet as she grows in her relationship with Idgie, she begins to subvert serving into a form of conscious manipulation. In support of Idgie, who directly challenges Grady's (and thus the institution of the police's) authority, she bats her eyes and plays the "sweet" female as the camera cuts to a close-up of her interrogating him with a smile feigning sweetness, "Would you like some more pie, Grady?" Serving thus becomes a means of diverting Grady's attention away from the task at hand and undermining his power.

Ruth's character passive-aggressively assaults male figures—always with a warm, feminine smile—numerous times throughout the film. When the inspector comes to investigate the murder of her husband, Ruth once again masquerades in the feminine role of the subservient as a means of asserting power by suggesting, "Could I interest you in some pie?" in order to divert his attention from the task at hand. The mask of femininity serves as a shield against the male figures that unconsciously link femaleness with passivity. I certainly do not wish to imply that women rarely gain access to power through feeding. I would, quite the contrary, argue that this realm is one in which women traditionally have often been able to assert certain forms of power. My point is that representations in film rarely show food and cooking as forms of self-empowerment, and *Fried Green Tomatoes* consistently plays with these traditional gender associations. Food, cooking, and eating are the realms where this upheaval manifests itself, always in the context of women bonding with each other. Eating and food never stand in the service of appeasing men and appealing to their sexual desire as is so often the case in Hollywood cinema.

This paradigm becomes most strikingly apparent in the context of Evelyn's personal development. As harshly as the film treats her

throughout the initial parts of her story, Evelyn slowly emerges as a strong, respectable, attractive character despite her body size, and this transition manifests itself in part through her relationship to food. Indeed, it is precisely through food that she is able to find to herself. After attempting various diets, changing her clothing style to look more contemporary and upbeat, and exercising, Evelyn begins to take responsibility for her life. This is a mixed blessing. In order to find herself, Evelyn plays out roles prescribed by society that will supposedly "heal" her, and these focus on regulating her body.

As much as Evelyn's character regulates her body in an "appropriate" and "normal" manner, she does eventually break away from this regulatory discipline. Evelyn goes through various permutations of rebellion. During her "Towanda" phase, she serves her husband sushi, crudité, and crackers for dinner. He accuses her of trying to kill him with this food, to which she responds, "If I was gonna kill ya, I'd use my hands." As she develops a relationship with Ninny and with herself, her attitude toward food changes. Toward the end of the film, Evelyn seems "together" and happy. Her hairstyle and dress change so that she appears less as a caricature of a good girl gone awry and more as a well-balanced, content woman. This development culminates in her ability to eat the fried green tomatoes she has brought in to Ninny to celebrate her birthday. Problematic as the representation of Evelyn's character throughout the majority of the film is, the image of Evelyn biting into a fried green tomato, enjoying the food and the company of her female friend, and not experiencing guilt over the consumption of (heavens forbid!) fried food is quite striking. I cannot think of any other scene in contemporary mainstream U.S. cinema that represents a large woman—otherwise positioned as a "woman who eats too much"—enjoying food in the context of female friendship and bonding.

The image of Kathy Bates eating fried food and feeling comfortable in her body has had an empowering effect on me. The food fight scene in the Idgie/Ruth narrative provides an interesting example as well of how *Fried Green Tomatoes* comments on the ways in which women have been taught to identify around food and their bodies.

The food fight scene begins with cinematography and editing techniques that evoke classic food advertising, setting the viewer up for what appears to be a "beautiful" food scene. We hear the voice of Marion Williams singing "Cool Down Yonder" as the camera opens on a close-up of green tomatoes frying in a cast-iron skillet. Slowly, paced to the music, the film cuts to a stunning bowl of deep red tomatoes, followed by a shot of a luscious, dense bowl of chocolate icing being stirred by a spatula. Also in close-up, we see a bowl of eggs and then a shot of

glistening ripened blackberries. The food is perfect and simultaneously quite sexy in its simplicity, reminiscent of illustrations from *Gourmet* magazine. The camera then cuts from the kitchen to the restaurant space of the café, where we see policeman Grady, a classic emblem of patriarchal authority and white supremacy. As the camera cuts back to the kitchen, we see Idgie feeding one of the fried green tomatoes she has prepared to Ruth in a flirtatious manner. The scene gradually builds up the sexual tension between the two women, and it comes as no surprise that the most sexually charged and physical scene between the women in the film occurs in conjunction with food.

While this scene associates masculinity with the public restaurant space, the kitchen is clearly coded as female and private. As Ruth roles her eyes in the obviously "hot" kitchen (it is both physically hot and the sexual overtones of the scene emphasize its erotic "heat"), she comments to Idgie, "They're terrible." Idgie, to the words of the song "cool down" proceeds to splash Ruth in the face with a glass of water, "I just thought you needed a little cooling off." The loaded meaning behind this exacerbates the sexual tension. From a water fight between the two women, the scene progresses to a food fight. Idgie's hand reaches in a close-up into the blackberries that she then smears in Ruth's face. The women proceed to rub ingredients necessary for making fruit pie all over each other's bodies, holding and stroking each other with the food as they then fall to the floor. "We need to make a little paste," Ruth says as she strokes flour on Idgie.

The camerawork then forces a direct comparison between Ruth and Idgie's world of upheaval, connectedness, and female dominance by cutting to a medium close-up of Grady attempting to eat a perfect slice of cherry pie, only to be disrupted by the noise in the kitchen. The camera tilts from the plate to his face as he glares to the left of the screen toward the kitchen. His neat, orderly, masculine pie remains on its plate while their messy, chaotic, female pie becomes a tool for sexual play and intimate contact, and this is clearly upsetting to him. Here, policeman Grady is the outsider, and as the viewer, we are invited to participate in the jokes the women play on him. The film turns the tables and prioritizes the female over the male.

As Grady enters the kitchen, the women are rolling around on the floor. "What in the name of Christmas are you two doin?" he inquires, attempting to assert his dominance in a space that is clearly not under his domain. Idgie's response emphasizes the close connections that the film makes between sexuality, gender, and food: "She's trying to teach me how to cook." Cooking, clearly meant jokingly, is indeed a form of rebellion in this film, and it takes on various meanings. Cooking be-

comes sexual play that excludes men and thus serves as a direct challenge to male authority.

The women continue to challenge Grady's authority. When he states, "You betta stop this or I'm gonna hafta arrest you for disorderly conduct," Ruth laughs and says, "Well arrest us then." The camera then cuts back to the same exact shots we saw in the beginning of the scene. We see the hand stirring the harmless, aestheticized sweet chocolate frosting, yet in the next shot Ruth takes the metal spatula and smears the mixture down Grady's face. The simple kitchen tool becomes a symbolic assault weapon, humorously challenging male dominance and simultaneously foreshadowing the frying pan that later becomes an actual murder weapon. The play of subversion turns into actual upheaval as the "passive" domain of woman, the kitchen, becomes a real threat.

This scene challenges the association of femaleness with chaos, disorder, and uncleanliness and of masculinity with order and cleanliness in a striking manner. The film clearly prioritizes Idgie and Ruth's relationship with each other over patriarchal norms. Thus the cinematography and editing that position food as harmless and aesthetically pleasing (much in the same manner that female bodies are so often served up for male viewing gratification) subvert the narrative of food. The glistening chocolate turns into a symbolic weapon of assault, and the cinematographic narrative of "beautiful food" turns into a realm where female passion, lesbian desire, and the exclusion of men play themselves out. The visual elements of this scene support the ways in which the narrative otherwise challenges patriarchy through food.

The linkage of food with the political takes on a transgressive quality. Despite screenplay and novel author Fannie Flagg's statement that "It's not a political film at all," food becomes overtly political in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.[28] The whole town talks of "Railroad Bill," who jumps on trains and throws government food to the impoverished people living along the railroad tracks. It is indeed interesting that the townspeople assume this person to be male, when in fact, as we learn, it is Idgie herself. Early on in the film we see Idgie and Ruth out on one of their first encounters as they climb into a boxcar. As the train moves along, Idgie throws food to poor people living in a settlement camp. When Ruth points out that this is not Idgie's food to take, Idgie reverts to the biblical quote, "give unto others" as a means of justification for her theft, drawing on traditional values to support her subversive actions. A series of high and low angle eyeline matches between the desperate faces gradually becoming happy and Ruth and Idgie forms a visual connection between the women and the plight of the economically disadvantaged families. Providing food is Idgie's political act.

Similarly, food becomes a source through which Idgie and Ruth form bonds with wandering hobos like Smokey Nowhere who have no income, lodging, or food. We watch as the women take these vagabonds into their café, provide them with lodging, subsistence, and nurturing, thus attempting on a small, local scale to undo the politics of food distribution that the government practices. By feeding the economically underprivileged and throwing food off the train, Idgie plays a contemporary Robin Hood attempting to sustain the masses. She consistently identifies with and supports the underdog, and food is her weapon of choice for challenging social, economic, and racial inequalities.

Less overtly political yet equally significant are the bonds Idgie and Ruth form with African Americans through food and cooking. The film consistently affirms a connection particularly between Idgie and the African American characters through the narrative and the non-diegetic soundtrack. The non-diegetic soundtrack links Idgie and Ruth's experiences with African American culture. The film opens to a haunting African American female voice humming. Slowly the voice breaks into singing as we see Frank Bennett's car being lifted out of the lake. Sexy, bluesy vocals accompany the "love scene" by the lake, and the food fight scene in the café's kitchen plays itself out to the tune "Cool Down Yonder" sung by Marion Williams.

This association of the white female experience with that of the African American experience is, however, as Jennifer Ross Church argues, quite problematic. She states, "Just as the lesbian relationship remains largely undefined against a heterosexual background, black characters are placed against a white background, and the story relies heavily on stereotypes and familiar images to establish their identity. Like lesbianism, race is invoked for its emotional power yet is emptied of its content."[29] As Church points out, many of the scenes from the novel that explicitly represent African American communities in Troutville, the African American section near Whistle Stop, and Slagtown, a large neighborhood outside Birmingham, are absent from the film. These communities, have the "effect of grounding the black characters and making them seem more real, just as the consequences that black characters suffer as a result of their actions are more serious."[30] The film simply avoids these scenes.

I challenge this film on its insufficient representation of African American culture and myself on my ability to "enjoy" it despite this. The narrative as presented in the film represents African American characters almost solely in relationship to whiteness.[31] The "strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters," as Toni Morrison writes, is nothing new to the his-

tory of American narratives.[32] Just as the founding writers of the United States were able to "engage, imagine, and create an Africanist presence and persona" that served, among other things, as a backdrop against which whiteness could define itself, so does contemporary mainstream culture perpetuate this trope by viewing African American characters from outside their own perspective.[33] Ultimately, *Fried Green Tomatoes* focuses on how the African American characters support and rescue the white characters, a trope that by now has become so commonplace in mainstream film that one could refer to it as a "Whoopie Goldberg syndrome."[34]

What Church does emphasize in regard to race is that this film, despite the fragmented, stereotypical representations, "offers more freedom and possibilities to the white characters, who are not in danger of being redefined against a white norm."[35] This space of escape and change that develops between the female characters offers them possibilities for change. I question the need to represent freedom and possibility to one group of oppressed people, in this case women, at the expense of another, African Americans. *Fried Green Tomatoes* reinscribes what many feminist theorists have sought to challenge, namely the notion, as Elizabeth Spelman writes, of a "generic woman" which "obscures the heterogeneity of women and cuts off examination of the significance of such heterogeneity for feminist theory and political activity."[36] *Fried Green Tomatoes*, like many feminist texts written by white women that, as Audre Lorde writes, "ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone" faces what she calls "the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power."[37] Change and opportunity for white women can and must be represented alongside images that offer change and opportunity for other oppressed groups. Both my initial inability to recognize this dynamic and the filmmakers' blindness to racial dynamics reiterate what Ruth Frankenberg consistently emphasizes in her study of whiteness, namely that "in a social context where white people have too often viewed themselves as nonracial or racially neutral, it is crucial to look at the 'racialness' of white experience."[38]

The experience of white women becomes linked (albeit highly problematically) with that of African Americans in this film through food and cooking. Particularly the parts of the narrative that deal with the murder of Frank Bennett, Ruth's violently abusive husband, serve to form connections between Idgie and Ruth and Big George, Sipsey, and Naughty Bird, the African American characters who work in the café. Out of support for Ruth and Idgie, Sipsey murders Frank Bennett by

hitting him over the head with—of all things—a cast-iron skillet. The kitchen as a source of power and strength embodies itself in the image of Sipsey heaving the heavy skillet over the white, wife-abusing Bennett's head, literally overthrowing traditional hierarchies. The viewer learns of this only at the very end of the film so that one is left to assume that Idgie herself or Big George has killed Bennett, but certainly not the small, reticent Sipsey who constantly appears in the background but is hardly ever placed in center screen. The film, constructing and thus anticipating a "white" spectator, plays with viewers' expectations of which characters are important, as one is never led to assume that this small, unassuming African American woman might be responsible for Bennett's death.[39] In expecting that the viewer will get this "irony," the film speaks from a position of whiteness. We then see how Idgie, Big George, and Sipsey have bonded together over this secret in order to protect Big George (whom the white authorities automatically assume to be guilty) from an inevitable death sentence.

It is, of course, in the café's kitchen and food storage areas where this bonding process takes place. Through the bond forged between the African American characters and the women, white masculine dominance literally becomes an object of consumption. In order to get rid of evidence (i.e., Bennett's corpse), Idgie has Big George start the "hog boiling" season a little early, and the sexist pig Bennett becomes a barbecued pig, a "secret" that, as Sipsey states, gets "hidden in the sauce." Here, again, the film is anything but subtle as it cuts from Idgie performing in drag on stage with Grady dressed as a women to a medium close-up of a piece of raw meat into which a large cleaver cuts. The non-diegetic soundtrack comments humorously once again with the song "Barbeque Bess" sung by Patti La Belle. We then see that it is George who is preparing what we later find out to be Bennett's body for the grill. The diegetic soundtrack emphasizes the sizzling sound when the meat hits the hot grill. In the following set of shots, Idgie and Ruth serve plate after plate of "the best damn barbecue in the state of Alabama" to the inspector. Revenge is as sweet and tasty as the barbecue sauce, and I must admit that I have found myself rejoicing as patriarchy consumes itself.

The film consistently underlines a constructed similarity of experience between people of color and women without adequately differentiating between the forms of oppression that white women face as opposed to those of people of color. The inspector, for example, condescendingly refers to Idgie as "girlie girl" only to then call Big George by the racialized term "boy." In treating race and gender alongside each other in this fashion, the oppression of "women" comes to the

forefront at the cost of failing to represent the African American side of this tale. While Shari Zeck argues that "white women and African Americans are not opposed in this film, but rather they cooperate in ridding the world of evil white men," the film's lack of distinction between oppression faced by white women and by women (and all people) of color is one of the elements of this film that I find, in conducting a closer analysis, to be most alienating and unpalatable. *Fried Green Tomatoes* repeats the paradigm of analogizing racism and sexism, which, according to Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman "perpetuates patterns of racial domination by minimizing the impact of racism, rendering it an insignificant phenomenon—one of a laundry list of isms or oppressions that society must suffer."[40] This film's consistent comparison of the experience of white women with people of color offers "protection for the traditional center" and thus supports the privilege that hegemonic culture assigns to whiteness.[41]

I think of the many times, however, that I have viewed *Fried Green Tomatoes* and how easy it has been for me, as a heterosexual white woman who has experienced so many privileges because of my ethnicity and sexuality, to distance myself from the issues of race, gender, and sexuality that this film glosses over. In writing this, I cannot avoid the privilege I have been handed that I can so easily overlook when viewing mainstream films. Thus, I most certainly do not wish to redeem *Fried Green Tomatoes* from its treatment of race. In underlining similarities in experience between women, people of color, and economically disadvantaged social classes, the film perpetuates myths about different forms of oppression and fails to show how excruciating and yet how unalike the experiences of race, class, gender, ageism, heterosexism, and body size prejudice can be. By doing this, *Fried Green Tomatoes* fails to adequately differentiate the multiple forms of oppression that operate in a sexist, racist, heterosexist culture, and in doing so begs the question of how this film actually serves to reinscribe these as opposed to challenging them.

I find myself compelled to understand the position from which I encounter this film as a means of understanding how its narrative is able to speak to me in this manner. Without questioning my own positionality, delving into the issue of how the film has offered me possibilities for change loses its meaning. My position as a white heterosexual woman certainly has much to do with my experience of this film as potentially empowering. This is, after all, a story about white women finding ways to empower themselves. Despite all of its flaws and its need to consistently recuperate hegemonic ideals, I have been able to find these moments. I wonder, however, what it might feel like to watch

this film from a different position. What might it be like, for example, to watch *Fried Green Tomatoes* as a white male? Or as a person of color? What appears to my eyes as a form of empowerment might be experienced by another viewer as male-bashing or as terribly racist. The film was clearly produced and distributed with a viewer like myself in mind. Its marketing tactics underline the position of whiteness from which *Fried Green Tomatoes* operates. The film poster and video jacket, for example, feature pictures of the four central characters, all of whom are white women played by well-known Hollywood actresses. The narrative on the back of the video jacket states that this is "the story of a simpler time," and I have to question for whom the 1930s were a time of simplicity. Certainly the lives of African Americans living in the South at this time were anything but "simple."

Clearly, *Fried Green Tomatoes* offers forms of "newness" and change, but the emergent elements are contained within residual cultural patterns. This film, like so many of the cultural products that we create and consume, stands on the edge of creating change, yet remains anchored in residual cultural values, closely echoing what Raymond Williams states about the arts of creation and performance: "They contribute to the effective dominant culture and are a central articulation of it. They embody residual meanings and values, not all of which are incorporated, though many are. They express also and significantly some emergent practices and meanings, yet some of these may eventually be incorporated, as they reach people and begin to move them."[42] The way *Fried Green Tomatoes* treats gender stands in direct contrast to its treatment of race and how it caters to white, mainstream American audiences' desire to continually have African Americans serve as caretakers. In this sense, the film remains, to use Williams's term, residual.

Were this film to be produced now, almost fifteen years later than it was made (1991), I am certain that the lesbian relationship, for example, would be more prominently defined; representing lesbianism on television and in film has become "fashionable."[43] Perhaps, the African American figures might take on a more central role, but I believe the film—as does contemporary mainstream film—would still subordinate these characters. Like bell hooks, I wish to voice my concern over the degree to which emergent cultural forms become usurped by mainstream cinema as a new way to create objects of consumption while reaffirming hegemonic values. Seeking to understand the social, economic, and political consequences of such texts would prove a most worthy endeavor. The lucrative body of female buddy films that has been produced since *Fried Green Tomatoes*, many of which modeled themselves on this film, opens up some answers to this query.[44] The

oscillation between residual and emergent elements within the same media product appears to sell very well: it offers the illusion of difference, newness, and change but simultaneously reinscribes hegemony. It is also important to question whether a text that provides someone like myself with empowerment and opportunity necessarily fosters positive social change.

I return to the cycle of pleasure and guilt. There is no simple answer to this dynamic, but through writing, I have come more and more to realize the value of discourse as a means of understanding where pleasure comes from and what its ramifications are. The challenging and yet satisfying tasks of writing and teaching have become forms of sorting through, of digesting texts and claiming elements of empowerment while transforming guilt into responsible action. It is precisely this form of engagement that has allowed me to question my position in relationship to this film and go beyond the cycle of pleasure/guilt. With more critical awareness, perhaps we can create and consume cultural texts that foster growth and change without having to excuse themselves for making waves. The more I confront this dynamic, the less I experience guilt both in consuming films and in consuming food, and I am more able to recognize where my personal responsibility lies.

Notes

1. bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 181.

2. Ibid, 200.

3. Ibid.

4. Jennifer Ross Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," in *Vision/Re-Vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film*, ed. Barbara Tepa Lupack (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 193.

5. Ibid.

6. Shari Zeck, "Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*," in *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Shannon Hengen (Ontario: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 219–229. Zeck discuses the comical role that Idgie plays in the film. She writes, "The power of Idgie Threadgoode is not in the *isolated fact* that she tells tall tales or is a jokester. After all, we have seen how in this film moments of laughter, even when combined explicitly with gender transgression, are so readily recuperated by the gaze of a benign mother, a useless husband, and a feckless sheriff, suggesting how fragile humor as a weapon of rebellion can be[. . .]. To take the character as the joke itself is not to dismiss her transgressive qualities, but to understand the limits of that transgressiveness and to remind us of the important point: it is not just that Idgie is the tall tale teller, but rather that that

action's particular significance takes shape in the exaggerations of her gender identity, in turn tied to her continuous mourning" (224). James Robert Parish discusses the lesbian subtext of *Fried Green Tomatoes* in *Gays and Lesbians in Mainstream Cinema* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland), 1993.

7. One, in many ways, very interesting psychoanalytic reading of this film by Jane van Buren does a wonderful job of analyzing the "refreshing psychic space that bursts out of what we have come to accept as the dominant film discourse of male subjectivity," yet she never questions its many problematic issues relating to race, sexuality, and gender. Jane van Buren, "Food for Thought in the Film *Fried Green Tomatoes*," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 18, 2 (1998): 291.

8. Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in his *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 41.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 40.

11. John Fiske, for example, defines polysemy as a "multiplicity of meanings." He writes of television that a "program provides a potential of meanings which may be realized, or made into actually experienced meanings, by socially situated viewers in the process of reading." John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), 15–16.

12. In toto, the film grossed $80.1 million in U.S. box offices and $37.403 million in video sales. Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com, March 10, 2000.

13. W. Charisse Goodman, *The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America* (Carlsbad, CA: Guerze Books, 1995), 58.

14. Susan Bordo, "Hunger as Ideology," in her *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 110. Her previous sentence reads: "When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite."

15. Ibid.

16. Parish, *Gays and Lesbians*,147.

17. Ibid.

18. Susan Bordo explores the cultural associations of fatness with "the taint of matter and flesh, 'wantonness,' mental stupor and mental decay" (*Unbearable Weight*, 233).

19. Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 6.

20. Goodman, *The Invisible Woman*, 56. Some non-mainstream and non-American films provide striking contrasts to the body politics of Hollywood. *Antonia's Line* (Marleen Gorris, 1995), a Dutch film, features a large, well-rounded woman as its central character. She is allowed to eat, throw dinner parties, *and* be quite sexy and appealing. The Australian film *Muriel's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1994) is another wonderful example that deals directly with the protagonist's body size and her own issues of feeling unattractive. During the course of the film, Muriel is allowed to become sexual and beautiful. *Out of Rosenheim* (Percy Adlon, 1988), starring the German actress Marianne Sägebrecht, provides another striking contrast to standard American fare.

21. Parish, *Gays and Lesbians*, 87.

22. Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 251.

23. Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 194.

24. Marjorie L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 118.

25. Ibid., 119.

26. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English point out in *For Her Own Good* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 110–120, how theories that "guided the doctor's practice from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century held that woman's *normal* state was to be sick. . . . Medicine had 'discovered' that female functions were inherently pathological." In linking Evelyn's eating disorder to her female organs, the film underlines what Ehrenreich and English refer to as a "dictatorship of the ovaries."

Some of the literature that looks specifically at the relationship between the treatment of women's bodies and eating disorders includes: Patricia Fallow, Melanie Katzman, and Susan Wooley, *Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994); Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*; Laura Fraser, *Losing It: America's Obsession with Weight and the Industry That Feeds On It* (New York: Dutton, 1997); Morag MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies. A Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

27. Zeck, "Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 224.

28. Parish, *Gays and Lesbians*,149.

29. Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 202.

30. Ibid.

31. Zeck argues that the film is fairly sensitive in its treatment of African American characters. About the casting of Cicely Tyson as Sipsey, for example, she says that "while Sipsey may be narratively in the background, verbally silent, it's Cicely Tyson, perhaps the most celebrated actress in this much-celebrated cast, who is present to us visually" ("Laughter, Loss, and Transformation in *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 226–227). Similarly, she argues, "the subversive African American is linked to the gender subversive Idgie," pointing out that Sipsey contributes substantially to the humor of the film by telling two central jokes. "The first, a joke about white men who won't sit in a restaurant with black men but will 'eat eggs, shot right out of a chicken's ass' and second—'the secret's in the sauce' (and so is Frank Bennett)—hide power within their folksiness" (227).

32. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 52.

33. Ibid.

34. I thank Arlene Voski Avakian for this point, made to me in personal communication.

35. Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 203.

36. Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), ix.

37. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister outsider: essays and speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 117.

38. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

39. Toni Morrison writes, "the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (*Playing in the Dark*, xii). *Fried Green Tomatoes* constructs its ideal viewer in a similar fashion by assuming that the reader will view from a position of whiteness and racial unawareness.

40. Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman, "Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms)," *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgada and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 621.

41. Ibid., 622.

42. Williams, "Base and Superstructure," 45.

43. One need only look at "Ellen's" coming out on network television to see an example of how the commodification of sexuality has changed and shifted. This is certainly not to say mainstream media represents homosexuality in a positive manner. Rather, the parameters around what can be represented have shifted since the early 1990s, and *Fried Green Tomatoes* would most likely reflect this tendency were it to be filmed today.

44. As Jennifer Ross Church writes, the success of *Fried Green Tomatoes* prompted "the movie industry to try to define and cash in on its audience" ("The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 193). There have been a row of successful women's films since the early '90s. One of the most popular ones is *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993), which also deals with women's identity and food. In 1995 three lucrative films about women's relationships were produced: *How to Make an American Quilt* (Jocelyn Moorhouse); *Boys on the Side* (Herbert Ross); and *Waiting to Exhale* (Forest Whitaker). All of these films would lend themselves to an analysis similar to the one of *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Chili Peppers as Tools of Resistance: Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*

Beheroze F. Shroff

> Resistance . . . may be no more than a negative agency, an absence of acquiescence in one's oppression. The act of reading resistance can be an important political recognition.
>
> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*

> It is one of the paradoxes of Indian film, as of Indian life, that the woman is, on the one hand, victimized as a wife and, on the other, venerated as a mother. . . . Self-sacrificing, martyred, and ill-used by the husband, or by fate, she is shown as indestructible when it comes to protecting her sons. . . . Thus the implication is that a woman's only hope of salvation lies in becoming the mother of sons.
>
> Aruna Vasudev, "The Woman: Myth and Reality in Indian Cinema"

India has the reputation of churning out, on an average, two films per day,[1] and is generally considered the leading producer of films in the world. The Hindi language film has dominated the Indian distribution scene, and produced from one of the major film centers, namely Bombay, this body of films is often referred to as the "Bombay film" and more recently as Bollywood cinema. Analyzing the Bombay films in the post-independence years, Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy in their seminal study of Indian cinema write:

> The *formula* as dictated by exhibitor and distributor, called for one or two major stars, at least half a dozen songs, and a few dances. The story was of declining importance. . . . The subject matter with increasing concentration was romance. An overwhelming number of Bombay films now began with the chance acquaintance of hero and heroine, often in an unconventional manner and novel setting. . . . there was strong bias towards the *glamorous*. . . . Dance and song provided conventionalized substitutes for love-making and emotional crises.[2]

The commercial Hindi film with these formula elements also has been popularly referred to as the *masala* film, and with increasing emphasis on Westernization and "glamour," these films follow formulaic plots with recognizable icons such as the heterosexual love triangle—often rags to riches romances with song-and-dance routines. Thus Bombay as a major film center has been called Bollywood.[3]

In the 1960s and '70s, a series of independently made films, called the "New Cinema" or the "Parallel cinema"[4] appeared on the Indian scene. These films mostly funded by the Indian government body, the Film Finance Corporation, thematically and stylistically attempted to break away from the mainstream, commercial cinema aesthetics and themes. Ketan Mehta, who made *Mirch Masala* (translated in English as *Spices*) in 1986 falls under the category of "New Cinema.". But Mehta's work in this film and in his 1980 film *Bhavni Bhavai* (translated in English as *A Folk Tale*) skillfully bridges the gap between the *masala* film and serious, engaged cinema, which is how much of "New Cinema" was characterized[5] since many of the "New Cinema" films dealt with the problematic issues of caste, class, and gender inequality in postcolonial India. Mehta's use of *masala* in the title *Mirch Masala*, then, playfully references the "masala" Bombay Bollywood films (since he uses some of the elements of *masala* like the chase sequences, slapstick comedy, songs, and dances) inasmuch as the word "masala" refers to the chili peppers that he employs as the central metaphor and motif of resistance among the women of an Indian village.

In this essay, I discuss Ketan Mehta's imaginative uses of chili peppers as a trope that has multiple connotations. The first is an important aspect of the livelihood of the villagers—most women of the lower caste in the village are employed in a factory where chili pepper is ground and made into spices. The chilis in the film also symbolize women's sexuality from a dual perspective. "The male gaze" is embodied in the lusty and power-hungry *Subedar* (Tax Collector) and other male characters who view women as attractive spices to be consumed—in other words, women's bodies are viewed as commodities to be enjoyed. From the women's perspective, however, the chilis offer a literal and metaphoric form of resistance. Through the events of the film, the women learn to mobilize, get empowered, and collectively use the chili pepper against the patriarchal authority in that society.

Set in the 1940s, *Spices* portrays India under British colonial rule. The Subedar, the Indian representative of the British colonial government, visits different villages with his soldiers from time to time, plundering and pillaging and operating through corruption. As part of the economic corruption, women are exploited and become sexual objects

of the Subedar's pleasure. Among the women featured, Sonbai and Saraswati stand out as they challenge patriarchal oppression—Sonbai resists the dominant patriarchal power of the State, embodied in the Subedar, and Saraswati offers challenges to the patriarchal control of her wayward husband, the Village Chief, within the family.

The story revolves around the Subedar's unabashed and public demand for Sonbai from the village at any cost. Sonbai fleeing from the Subedar seeks refuge in the spice factory, where she and other village women grind chili peppers to make different *masalas* or combinations of spices. Denied his wish, the Subedar storms the spice factory, killing the old gate keeper Abu Miyan. However, the women jointly confront the Subedar and teach him a lesson.

The subplot involves Saraswati's acts of rebellion. As the wife of the Village Chief or *Mukhi*, Saraswati rebels against her subservient role. Her first act of rebellion is to lock the Mukhi out of the house when he comes home in the morning after spending the night with his mistress. As her second act of resistance, she enrolls her daughter in the village school, defying age-old taboos against educating women. Finally, Saraswati organizes a demonstration to protest the villagers' decision to hand over Sonbai to the Subedar. In this way, Mehta's film skillfully weaves the micro (family) and macro (state) levels of oppression as exerted on women, along with their resistance to this domination.

In the film, the powerful imagery of the chili pepper is interwoven with the women's struggles. Visually, the image evolves in the film from a plant growing on the vine, to a harvested cash crop laid out on the ground to dry in the sun. As the women then grind the raw chilies, the chili powder becomes the end product of women's labor.

The Subedar, almost salivating, regards woman's bodies in general and Sonbai's in particular as a spice to be consumed. When he demands that Sonbai be brought to him, the Subedar and Jeevan Seth, the spice factory owner, have the following exchange:

> SUBEDAR: "Well in that factory of yours, there's a certain spice that I like very much."
>
> SETH: "Tell me what spice Sir, I'll have whatever you want made up freshly for you."
>
> SUBEDAR: "You don't understand. There's a certain woman inside your factory. She's hot as a spice."[6]

The fact that Sonbai is a married woman is hardly a deterrent to the Subedar. His male desire to consume her female body mirrors the oc-

cupation of the land by the colonizer.[7] Here, the Subedar, as Tax Collector, also embodies the colonizer's power. Hence, resistance against the Subedar is also a struggle against colonial exploitation and conquest. Both Sonbai and Saraswati struggle to reclaim their bodies, a struggle in which eventually all the women of the village participate.

The filmmaker evokes the importance of chili pepper to the livelihood of the people cultivating the land by opening with a creation myth. The camera pans across the green fertile land, parrots fly as the camera tracks fields of chili pepper, and an itinerant minstrel's song echoes over this verdant landscape:

> After creating matter, man and mind
> God was bored
> So he sprinkled some chilis and spices
> and made the world more colorful

This creation myth extols the cosmic status of spices in the Indian psyche and evokes India as the land of spices that drew the colonizer to its shores. Later, in an ironic twist, the God who was bored and sprinkled the land with spices turns into the Tax Collector/colonizer who while playing god becomes bored and demands a particular woman's body which is characterized as a "hot spice."

After the opening creation myth, the credit titles appear on a close-up freeze-frame shot of the red chili pepper growing. This image of the luscious chili, red on the outside, spicy and explosive on the inside, prefigures its role as the chief ingredient in this narrative and emphasizes from the outset its double meaning—the sexual power of the women and their ability to use their power to resist oppression within the family and society.

The Subedar, a native dressed in colonial authority, along with his soldiers bursts upon the idyllic opening scene, disrupting its harmony with the thundering sound of horse-hooves and horse-neighs. As the camera starts to pull back, the entire frame is filled with the vibrant red color, foregrounding the red chili peppers spread out on the ground, drying in the sun. The low camera angle emphasizes the soldiers' trampling horses in the background. The peppers lying on the ground are trampled carelessly by the Subedar and his soldiers, who treat everyone and everything as an object to be trampled.

The underlying tension of the image with the red color of the chilis dominating the frame evokes the image of blood spilling, and the usual violence that follows in the wake of the Subedar and his men. As representatives of the colonizers, their presence evokes the pillaging of the land and the exploitation of the villagers. In fact the entire system of

taxation imposed by the British colluded with the existing feudal landholding system and worsened it by encouraging corruption among the local authorities such as the Mukhi. The women were at the very bottom of this system, exploited both economically and sexually.

Resistance to the Subedar and his pillaging soldiers is also set up immediately in the character of Sonbai, whose defiant actions in their first encounter lead him to refer to her later as a fiery and delectable spice. The Subedar and his men, riding at top speed, arrive at the river bank where women are at their daily task of washing clothes and collecting water. All the women flee, fearing the Subedar and his soldiers. Sonbai alone stands up to him and challenges the senseless stampede. She speaks up against the indiscriminate use and pollution of precious water resources: "My Lord, only human beings drink water here, animals over there."

A soldier attempts to silence Sonbai, but for the Subedar, the beautiful woman's words are perceived as an invitation into a game of seduction, because he knows that the power invested in his person is totally understood and accepted under threats and duress by all the villagers. Obeying Sonbai's wishes, he commands the soldiers to take the horses to the other side, while, excited by her defiance, he coyly responds to Sonbai: "Can this animal [meaning himself] drink here?" Sonbai stands her ground and meets his gaze, attempting to be an equal. Perhaps, she recognizes that the Subedar's attraction to her sexuality gives her the upper hand as she orders him: "To drink like a man, kneel and cup your hands."

She brings the Subedar to his knees, and in obeisance, he kneels and cups his hand to drink water from Sonbai's pot. While for Sonbai this is an act of resistance by a villager to the Subedar's unchallenged powers, for the Subedar the interaction is full of sexual tension. The reversed power dynamic—the woman/subject in command—the man/ruler submissive—undoubtedly titillates his sexual fantasies. For the power-hungry Subedar, Sonbai becomes a desirable sexual object that he will demand from the villagers at any cost, as if in a continuum with his tax-collecting duties. Just as he is entitled to gather taxes, he also has the limitless power to demand Sonbai's body or that of any woman he fancies.

The visual imagery of the red chili peppers and Sonbai's struggle against the Subedar form some of the key scenes in the film. The Subedar wants Sonbai because of her defiance; her resistance is a power that excites him. But in their second encounter when Sonbai has the upper hand, her power is perceived by the Subedar as an act of

transgression that violates his honor, and takes away from his role of playing God.

At his camp, the all-powerful Subedar habitually surrounds himself with village elders and village leaders, holding court like an emperor. He displays Western objects like the gramophone to show his power and his modern status to the rustic folk, impressing them with his material acquisitions. During one of his princely public shaving rituals, the Subedar interrupts the routine and accosts Sonbai, who is passing by the camp on her way to the river. The Subedar, in trying to convince Sonbai to spend a night with him, familiarly touches her face. Offended by this intimate gesture, Sonbai slaps him, but fearing reprisal she flees the scene. At this point, Mehta sets up an interesting intercutting of shots dramatizing the hunt for Sonbai, in which the red chili peppers play a key role, emphasizing their multiple meanings in connection with women and sexuality.

This is how the shots are set up: fleeing from the Subedar, and with the Subedar's soldiers on horseback in pursuit, a desperate Sonbai heads toward the village spice factory for refuge. Mehta cuts to the peaceful interior of the spice factory, where the other women of the village are at work. An older woman sprinkling water on a mound of chili peppers, smells one to evaluate its potency and comments: "They are very pungent." Another woman responds: "These will make a strong *masala*."

The very next cut shows the fleeing Sonbai falling onto the red chili peppers that have been laid out to dry in the sun. The overhead camera angle and the slow-motion speed of the shot once again evoke the image of blood spilled on the land onto which this pursued woman falls. The red color of her garments blends into the red of the chili peppers. Subsequent low-angle shots show the soldiers' horses trampling red peppers in a tight frame. The rapid intercutting here between a full frame of red chili peppers and Sonbai hiding in the mounds of the dark vermilion-colored dried peppers, or Sonbai actually running over the red chili peppers (in one shot the camera tracks her bare feet as she runs over a carpet of peppers) inscribes multiple meanings onto the chili peppers.

The filmmaker uses this intercutting together with the statement: "these will make a strong *masala*" to evoke several layers of meaning—the drama heating up, the hunt for and conquest of Sonbai intensifying, the playful reference to the chase sequences in the Bollywood "masala" films, and finally the evolving consciousness and imminent explosive empowerment that the women will experience in the concluding sequence of the film. Significantly this final scene unfolds within the con-

fines of the spice factory, where the women grind chili peppers to make different *masalas*. Throughout the film, through parallel cutting, the filmmaker moves between the two women, Sonbai and Saraswati. The potentially explosive power inside the red chili pepper extends to Saraswati's acts of resistance, which begin quietly within her family. Saraswati knows that her husband, the Mukhi, has a mistress, that he comes home whenever he chooses and basically keeps his wife as a servant to maintain his house and cook and clean for him. As part of her defiance against the traditional role of woman and wife, Saraswati enrolls her daughter in the village school, an all-male institution. With this act, Saraswati takes her challenge to patriarchal authority into the open, into a public space, very much like Sonbai.

The filmmaker interweaves the two women's defiant acts or explosive acts of rebellion. From the moment that Sonbai slaps the Subedar, she has posed a very serious challenge to his unquestioned authority and also to his unquestioned manhood. Similarly, Saraswati challenges the Mukhi's notions of masculine authority within the family and before the village. In an interesting scene, the village barber narrates Sonbai's humiliation of the Tax Collector to the jubilant Village Chief, who enjoys the Tax Collector's emasculation. However, in the very next moment, the smirk is wiped off the Chief's face when he is told that his own daughter is sitting in a classroom full of boys at the village school. The Village Chief's emasculation is similar to the Tax Collector's because both men feel publicly humiliated by women.

The filmmaker spends a considerable amount of time on the final sequence, where the struggle unfolds inside and outside the factory and finally comes to a head. The women workers inside the factory attempt to make sense of the events that have transpired because in order to protect Sonbai, they too are held as prisoners. While they are trapped inside, and are complicit in Sonbai's act of defiance, Saraswati operates from the outside. She brings food for the imprisoned women into the factory—significantly, the meal consists of a green chili pepper and a *roti* (flat bread). A green chili is the young plant that eventually becomes red. The women inside the factory who are as yet green chilis (politically) will evolve into red chilis (a spicier chili pepper) and develop their strength to fight back. It is important to note here that Saraswati, an upper-caste woman and the wife of the Village Chief, steps out of her caste and class as she extends a helping hand to the lower-caste women in the spice factory, an act of courage that links her own struggle with that of Sonbai and the other women.

That the women are aware of their status in society is obvious from the telling comments they make in response to the food Saraswati

brings them: "What a relief from the usual chores"; "Only a woman would think of bringing us *rotis*."

Inside the factory, the women also debate the issue of whether Sonbai should give herself up and not make the situation threatening to the entire village. They regard her resistance to the Subedar's demands as a self-serving and individualistic assertion, not thinking of the repercussions for the entire community. To add to the debate, an older woman in the factory relates a story from the past when the women of the village were raped and no one came to their rescue.

Unbeknownst to the women in the factory, another discussion about Sonbai is going on outside at a meeting called by the Village Chief and held on the front porch of his home. The meeting, attended by men only, has one surreptitious female audience member, namely Saraswati, who as the Chief's wife is present inside her home, a silent witness to the village men's inability to come to any decision regarding the Subedar's absolute and authoritative demand for Sonbai. Not cowed by her husband the Chief's anger and threats upon discovering his daughter at the village school, Saraswati once again decides to challenge him and the village men. She organizes a demonstration which takes the form of a popular women's street protest that involves the use of kitchen utensils, objects used by women in a private space—a stainless steel plate (*thali*) and a rolling pin (*latni*)—which become the machinery of expressing an antagonistic opinion in public. The women hold a loud demonstration, banging the rolling pins on the steel plates. Confronted by this act of defiance, the men of the village led by their Chief of course respond with the only tactic usually employed by them and displayed by the Chief himself in an earlier scene—violence. The women's action is brutally put down by the Mukhi and other men, but not before the women have made a statement about their disagreement with the men's decision to give up Sonbai to the Subedar. One can analyze Saraswati's style of protest as a strategy of covert resistance that James C. Scott delineates as "the powers of the weak."[8]

The Subedar, in a final show of power representing the authority of the State, storms into the spice factory, breaking down the old wooden doors. The drama surrounding the taking of the factory is shot from various angles by the filmmaker in order to emphasize the element of sexual assault, especially with the wide-angle shots showing the repeated attacks on the factory gates with a battering ram. In this violent encounter, the Subedar's men kill the old Muslim gate keeper, leaving the defenseless women inside to fight on their own. The death of the gate keeper becomes the catalyst of change in the consciousness of the women.

In a spontaneous act of resistance, the women use the only weapon they have against the Subedar and his men—the ground chili peppers. They blind the Subedar by throwing the peppers—the *mirch masala*—into his eyes. In her essay "Dialectic of Public and Private," Ranjani Mazumdar[9] points out usefully that "the factory which is the workplace and therefore the public space of the women is turned into the site of struggle and it is no longer Sonbai alone but also the others who decide to fight. The 'masala' (spice) that they make, the commodity that is produced for the owner of the factory, is used as a weapon in their final attack."

The women discover their power collectively—the power of their labor and the power to organize against their sexual exploitation and the oppressive colonial and patriarchal power structures in society. The sequence in the factory is a culmination of the process of the women's empowerment through the film; and as the final act of resistance, it is a very powerful and dramatic moment when the women hurl the ground chili pepper powder at the Subedar, blinding him. It is worth noting here that the action of the women in the factory has an interesting parallel in history. In their incisive essay "That Magic Time" on peasant women's participation in the uprising that was called the Telangana People's Struggle, Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha write: "Accounts tell us how two hundred peasant women stood together . . . and chased the police out of the village. Women encircled a police van, attacked the police with pestles and chili powder and secured the release of their. . . . activists."[10]

In the imagined terrain of *Spices*, in some ways, the women metaphorically blind "the male gaze" which looked upon them as a hot spice. In the final succession of shots, the Subedar is brought to his knees, reminiscent of Sonbai's first encounter with him, when full of his power as a man and a representative of the colonial power, he had flirted with Sonbai; at the level of metaphor, the women destroy the power of his lustful gaze, at least temporarily.

Using the red chili pepper as the central trope of women's resistance, *Spices* raises significant questions about that resistance. In the concluding sequence, Sonbai does not participate in hurling chili powder at the Subedar. Earlier, she had picked up a sickle as a means of self-defense, and amid slow dissolves of showers of red chili powder and the Subedar screaming in pain, Sonbai with her sickle stands still in the foreground. In the rather abrupt concluding freeze-frame shot, she is seen in a medium close-up shot with the sickle in her hand. Perhaps Ketan Mehta wants us to see Sonbai as the leader of a successful rebellion. But the last image demands of the viewer further questions about the issues of

power relations that govern women's lives. The successful act of resistance of the women does not end here. The use of the chili powder has helped them recognize themselves as powerful agents who have only just begun their work. The sickle in Sonbai's hand reinscribes the past history of similar peasant struggles onto the concluding freeze frame.

Notes

Epigraphs: Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12. Aruna Vasudev, "The Woman: Myth and Reality in Indian Cinema," in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 109.

1. "Since 1971 India has been leading the world in film production, and over the last decade or so the film factories have churned out an average of 800 films a year." Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 9.

2. Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 2nd ed. (New York and New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 155, emphasis added.

3. Kishore Valicha comments: "The parallel of the popular Hindi film with Hollywood is, besides being practically unavoidable, rather revealing. The Hindi film unquestionably borrows heavily from its Hollywood counterpart. But it is an interesting fact that it reworks what it borrows within strongly Indian conventions, transforming it to express typically Indian preoccupations." *The Moving Image: A Study of Indian Cinema* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1988), 39. In recent times critics such as M. Madhav Prasad in *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and others like Jyotika Virdi have undertaken a serious analysis of many of these films.

4. In "The Two Cinemas of India," Mira Reym Binford writes, "Although New Cinema is not a single cohesive movement with a clearly articulated political or aesthetic ideology, its film makers are linked by their rejection of commercial cinema's values, themes and stylistic approaches." In *Film and Politics in the Third World*, ed. John D. H. Downing (New York: Praeger, 1987), 148. Also see Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema*, 235–248.

5. For a discussion of *Bhavni Bhavai*, see Binford, "The Two Cinemas of India," 155.

6. All quotations from the film are taken from the English subtitled version on video (VHS), *Spices*, directed by Ketan Mehta, distributed by Mystic Fire Video in the United States. Unfortunately, the English translation does not do justice to the original words. The Subedar actually describes Sonbai as a "garam masala," which is a combination of particular, flavorful hot spices.

7. Several feminist scholars have undertaken a provocative analysis of the conflation of women's bodies with the land/nation. For further reading on this issue, look at Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. (London: Zed Books, 1986). Also see Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

8. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1985), xvi.

9. Ranjani Mazumdar, "Dialectic of Public and Private: Representation of Women in *Bhoomika* and *Mirch Masala*," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 26, 1991, 84.

10. Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha, "That Magic Time: Women in the Telangana People's Struggle," in *Recasting Women*, .188.

Shish Kebab Armenians?: Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identities among Armenian American Feminists

Arlene Voski Avakian

When I was growing up in Washington Heights, the New York City neighborhood that included a large Armenian American population and community, my family had few interactions with *odars* (non-Armenians). Once I entered school those boundaries were permeated, and I encountered mostly the children of other immigrants—Jews, Greeks, Roumanians, but also some real "Americans." My interaction with non-Armenians was limited at first due to my inability to speak English, but once having mastered the language I wanted to partake of what I identified as "Americanness" as fully as I could.

Some things I learned very quickly from the images around me. I knew it was best to have light skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, and while my dark hair and olive complexion fell short of that ideal I did know that I was white and Christian. My parents, though not interested in other aspects of assimilation, realized that being white was important to our success in this country and passed on to me and my brother, often in Armenian, American racism first about African American inferiority and about the Puerto Ricans whose movement into our neighborhood in the 1950s precipitated our move to the suburbs. Although on the edges of whiteness, I felt fairly secure since I was clearly neither black, Puerto Rican, nor Jewish.

Other aspects of becoming "American" were not so easily accomplished. I eventually made friends with non-Armenian children, and was able to observe them in their homes. I noted that their families mirrored the pictures in *Life* magazine and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and what I saw on TV and in the movies. The tables in those 1950s media representations were not groaning under the abundance of food I was used to, nor did they include marinated and broiled lamb, rice of any kind that was not served with an ice cream scoop, stuffed vegetables or grape leaves, and steamed brains or raw chopped lamb mixed with fine *bughlur*

and Italian parsley. While I was definitely not ready to give up *pilaf*, *dolma*, *lahmajoon*, *chee kufta*, or *shish kebab*, I also desperately wanted hamburgers, Wonder Bread, Velveeta, and the newest wonder of 1950s food technology, Lipton Instant Chicken Noodle Soup. Food was the one thing about my family I thought I could change easily. I was right about food being central to cultural identification, but I was wrong about being able to convince my family to eat "American" food. I was wrong, too, about identity being as simple as learning to speak English and partaking of American cuisine. By eating hamburgers and dehydrated soups and speaking English I could *pass* as an American, but actually *being* an American was far more complicated and, I eventually learned, was neither attainable nor desirable.

This essay explores how food practices are used in the development and maintenance of ethnic and gender identities and their interaction through interviews with Armenian American feminists. A daily material practice, cooking and eating, grounds the discussion of multiple, intersecting positionalities and resistances in lived experience that is at once concrete and symbolic. I argue that cooking and eating were central to the constructions of these women's ethnic and gender identities, continue to be significant, and can be used to transgress patriarchy and ethnic invisibility. These Armenian American women have deployed food practices to forge new identities which are both deeply embedded within their experience of being Armenian American women and consistent with their feminist, anti-racist, progressive politics.

Since what we mean by gender or ethnicity can no longer be assumed, I will first engage in definitions. White feminist activism and theoretical formulations of the 1970s posited a womanhood of similarities across time, space, and social formations.[1] Critiques came quickly from women of color and some lesbians arguing that race, class, and sexuality could not be subsumed under the all-encompassing banner of sisterhood.[2] By the 1990s these ongoing critiques along with the development of femmist/womanist theories by women of color and postcolonial, and poststructural theories marginalized essentialized notions of gender. Arguing against what she calls "biological foundationalism" Linda Nicholson, along with many other feminist theorists, posits that we can no longer make generalizations about gender, but must look at women in their contexts.[3] Advocating that feminists recognize that the body itself is socially constructed and that its meaning cannot be universalized but must be contexualized, she suggests that feminists "think about the meaning of 'woman' as illustrating a map of intersecting similarities and differences. Within such a map, the body does not disappear but rather becomes an historically specific variable whose meaning

and import is recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts."[4] Judith Butler argues that "what woman signify has been taken for granted for too long" and must be deconstructed in order to "release the term into a future of multiple significations." [5] For Chantel Mouffe the question is no longer how to "unearth" the category of woman. "The central issues become: how is 'woman' constructed as a category with different discourses? how is sexual difference made a pertinent distinction in social relations? and how are relations of subordination constructed through such a distinction?"[6]

If gender is complicated by intersectionality and fluidity, analyses of ethnic identity are just as complex. Feminist theory along with postcolonial and poststructural studies has opened many questions about identities that were once assumed to be in the realm of developmental psychology or sociological or historical studies on immigration. No longer concerned with assimilation patterns through the generations or debates about ethnicity as a primordial element, scholars in a wide variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields explore notions of hybridity, biculturality, community, nation, and diaspora.[7] Embedded now in contexts which are conceptualized as both complex and fluid, ethnic identities are tied to international, transnational, national, and regional contexts. Just as woman has been shown to be constructed within multiple and sometimes conflicting contexts, ethnic identities are also composed of multiplicities of gender, class, and race, all of which must be put within historical contexts and the specificities of local circumstances. Stuart Hall posits that while identities are currently and rightly being decentered, we must think about them as a process which, while never completed, can neither be abandoned.[8] Identities are never fixed entities, but "fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constituted across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions" operating within the specificities of particular histories.[9] Identities then are about what we might become, what traditions we might invent, what self we may narrate; they "are constituted within not outside representation."[10] Focusing on diasporan people, he argues that cultural origins cannot be thought of as an essentialized past that diasporan peoples can return to, but they also undergo processes of change as they are mediated by contemporary discourses. The past then is also constructed "through memory, fantasy, narrative memory and myth."[11]

Directly addressing the relationship between ethnic and diasporan identities and the possibility for resistance, R. Radhakrishnan argues for use of the term "ethnic": "Whereas the term 'diaspora' indicates a desire to historicize the moment of departure as a moment of pure rupture

both from 'the natural home' and 'the place of residence,' the ethnic mandate is to live 'within the hyphen' and yet be able to speak. Whereas the pure diasporic objective is to 'blow the hyphen out of the continuum of history,' the ethnic program is to bear historical witness to the agonizing tension between two histories."[12] Located both in the past and the present, he calls for ethnic people to be engaged in the "critical task of reciprocal invention . . . it is of the utmost importance that a variety of emerging post-colonial identities . . . establish themselves 'relationally' with the twin purposes of affirming themselves and demystifying the so-called mainstream."[13] The possibility of agency comes precisely out of the complexity of these intersections. Oppressed people experience pressure from the dominant group, but they are not without their own resources or their own histories. Even through the exigencies of slavery in the Americas, enough remnants of history and culture survived for W. E. B. Du Bois to formulate his notion of the double consciousness, creating the possibility for both individual and collective resistance. Consciousness of one's history outside of oppression and the resistance it can engender may be preserved in a variety of sites on a continuum from daily life to political revolutions.

I will now turn to the ways in which a group of Armenian American feminists conceptualize the construction, deconstruction, and reformulation of their gender and ethnic identities through focusing on the daily, material social practice of cooking and eating. The women belong to an Armenian American feminist group that I have been a part of since its inception more than five years ago. Self-identified as both feminist and Armenian American, we came together to explore our Armenian American identities within the context of our progressive anti-racist feminist politics. Although most of us do not participate in any of the traditional institutions of the Armenian community, we consciously claim our ethnicity and our feminism. Because this group of women has been consciously exploring their ethnic and gender identities and the connections between them more than five years, they are ideal for this exploration, and using cooking and eating grounds the discussion in a concrete daily practice that is both material and symbolic.

I held a group interview at the end of one of our regularly scheduled meetings as a kind of brainstorming session about the place of food in our lives, and then conducted individual interviews with eleven women, all but one of the group participants. The women range in age from their early thirties to early seventies. All are or have been professionals or are seeking professional careers, having just finished advanced degrees. Four were from working-class families, one participant's family

moved from working class to middle class during her teenage years, and eight were raised middle class. Most of the women would describe themselves as white, and the few who identify as women of color on the basis of the genocide or Armenians' Middle Eastern heritage readily acknowledge their white privilege in contemporary United States culture. Five of the women have children. Two identify as lesbians and one as bisexual. Six are either married (not all the same as the ones who have children) or have had a commitment ceremony or are living with a partner. All but one are children of Armenian parents; the one person whose parents are not both Armenian has an Armenian mother. All but four are daughters or granddaughters of survivors of the 1915 genocide. However, all are from Turkish Armenian families and feel connected to the trauma that resulted from that cataclysm and from the invisibility of a genocide not officially recognized by the United States.[14]

The material in the interviews clarifies and complicates. What is clear is that gender and ethnicity are not separated in either these women's experiences or reflections on them. Although I asked questions relating specifically to gender and ethnicity, I could not group the responses along gender and ethnic lines because they were so intertwined. For these Armenian American women, even those who are not descendants of survivors, the genocide, its denial, and the invisibility of Armenians and Armenian culture and history in mainstream American culture are central to their gender identities and their food practices. From the obvious issue of insuring the continuation of Armenian culture to experiences of eating disorders, cooking and eating and the issues they raise are grounded in the experiences of women who are Armenian American. Women had contradictory responses to the relationship of food practices to women's oppression. While most women do agree that cooking within the Armenian community has been compulsory for women and has signified and constructed their oppression, many also assert that their mothers and grandmothers created authority and control in their kitchens, which often became a space where they bonded with other women. These are not, however, generic women's spaces but *Armenian* women's spaces that some of the women in the study evoke in their current lives through cooking elaborate Armenian dishes or gathering to cook with friends. No longer compulsory in the lives of the women I interviewed, cooking has had its meaning subverted, and they cook to serve their own needs. For many of the women cooking becomes a vehicle to reclaim, proclaim, and enact a transformed Armenian American womanhood.

I will now look at the issues raised in the interviews, focusing on the

ways in which gender and ethnicity are intertwined, enacted, and resisted. Almost immediately the group discussion focused on body image and the pain women experience because their bodies deviate from the images that bombard them daily. Many women in this group identify their bodies ethnically, with almost half citing their ethnicity as the reason for their difference from the tall, long-legged, thin, narrow-hipped bodies projected by the media. While understanding that the ubiquitous ultra-thin models do not accurately portray any group of women, they nonetheless feel that Armenian bodies are heavier and shorter than the "American" norm. Some women even feel support from their families whose ideas about body image do not fit the American norm. Helen reports that her family "thought it was great that I had . . . a pretty good chest . . . at a pretty early age . . . I mean, I had somewhat of a curvaceous figure I guess, and . . . all my relatives thought that was so wonderful and I was going to be so beautiful. . . . I would say . . . I should be thinner. My mother and my grandmother and my great-aunt would say, 'oh no. You look beautiful.' "

For most of the women, however, their families added to their problems by continuing to overfeed them while chastising them about their weight. Lucy says, "they always want you to be thinner, but they always want to shove another *dolma* down your throat. . . . Eat! Eat! Get thinner! Get thinner! . . . it's so contradictory and you don't know what to do with it."

Most women think their family's high priority on an overabundance of food is directly connected to the genocide. All but two of the women agree that an overabundance of food was the norm in their families of origin. Even for working-class families, food was a priority. Emma's grandparents ate lobsters and steak at the beginning of the week even if that meant they had little money at the end of the week. Melissa says, "even if there wasn't a lot of money or lots of anything else, there was lots of food." Some daughters think that for their mothers, particularly if they were survivors of the genocide, the giving of food—feeding the family—was central to their self-esteem as mothers. Further, by feeding them Armenian food, which they considered to be healthy and contributing to the legendary longevity of Armenians, they would insure the survival of their husbands and children—perhaps even by extension, the Armenian people. The image of tables groaning with food is at odds with, and perhaps created deliberately to counteract both personal histories of hunger and images of starving Armenians. Joanne's survivor grandmother told her she had seen her parents killed and had to bury them when she was ten. She describes her survivor grandmother's relationship to food as resulting from her experiences in the genocide:

> I hesitate to use the word compulsion because that makes it sound pathological, but I feel that she is compelled to make a lot of food. . . . I think it is a survivor mentality. That you will survive if there is a lot to eat. And that's why she was so vigilant about watching what we eat, and even now, though she can't really see that well . . . she watches every bit that crosses my mouth. And she never thinks I eat enough, ever. . . .

Though neither her parents nor her grandparents were survivors, Debby connects her own compulsive eating to both the impact of the genocide on her family's food practices and the representation of women's bodies in American culture.

> The compulsiveness about eating, for me, is partly connected to sort of being—coming of age in this time and all the body garbage that a lot of women have—but also somehow that it came through my family's fear. All of the sort of psychology of our genocide experiences, that there was a lot of fear. Would there be enough? It was very unstated, but would there be enough? There always had to be enough. So there was an anxiety about food I think, as there was an anxiety about health and germs and safety in my family that I think is connected with this part of Armenian history.

While a history of genocide seems "always to be there," it is often not spoken about.[15] In some families food was used as a vehicle to communicate what could not be readily spoken. Emma related that her parents encouraged her to marry an Armenian, focusing on food as the main reason, but she feels that they had another, unspoken agenda:

> An Armenian will understand you more and the food was always part of that. This was part of it. You will eat the same food. They will understand the food you eat. That somehow if you married—I don't know, someone who wasn't Armenian you would be forced to eat corned beef and cabbage your whole life and you would never be able to eat pilaf and chicken. Or you would make pilaf and chicken and your husband wouldn't eat it and then, what would happen? The marriage would fail. How can you go through life . . . if someone doesn't understand your food, how can they understand you? But they didn't say, they won't understand your history, or they won't understand the suffering that your grandparents went through, they won't understand your language, or your culture.

In their current lives many of the women continue to prioritize food and are struggling to overcome what they describe as an unhealthy relationship to food. Three of the women self-identified as either

having had or still struggling with eating disorders, and two others regularly refused to eat dinner when they were children. By their own assessment, most of the women buy too much food, cook too much food, focus on food too much, and are unable to throw away leftovers.

Despite some of the difficulties associated with conflicting messages and overabundance of food, the majority of the women also strongly feel that the giving of food is an act of love, one deeply laden with Armenian cultural meanings. Counteracting the perception that women cook only to serve men, Victoria states that the giving of food is "a place of pleasing, of pleasing others, of pleasing oneself."

> It's an attentiveness to another that is actually very generous and caring . . . in this little prayer book there is something about the word "succor" that has to do with comfort and refuge and I think in a way, food sometimes, at least my understanding of it or my connection of it with Armenian identity, has been the place of refuge in a way. That it's this place of . . . knowing that something's being attended to that matters, and that you matter. And so that kind of attention, attentiveness which is why, for me, there is this spirituality part of it that, there is a kind of attentiveness and care that is not divorced from the act of cooking and food. And not everybody has that. I mean I have some friends who—it's torture for them to eat. I mean, they just don't even want to take time to do that. Whereas, I look forward to that, that it's a place of rest and refreshment and community.

Both in the group discussion and in the individual interviews many women describe experiencing a sense of joy and safety in cooking with their mothers and grandmothers. For some, eating was one of the few pleasurable activities their families did together. Even those women who experienced conflict around eating described the family table as a loving place, as a gathering place, particularly on holidays. Anne, who often refused to eat dinner as a way to exercise control over her life when she was a child, nevertheless also relates positive feelings about family gatherings around food. Her sister Anahid characterizes her relationship to her genocide survivor mother and food as a double bind—if she ate too much she was disgusting, but if she did not eat she was injuring her mother. Nevertheless, she also describes her family table when the extended family gathered as a place of joy, and that joy was connected to the stories the adults told when they were eating together:

> The food was wonderful in those gatherings, but it was really the gathering that was . . . important to me, . . . It was really the time when I felt the most joy, and the most vitality in the sense of vibrancy. . . . That was a time to share stories. And I can still hear what *Miam-*

> *horakour* [aunt, literally father's sister] . . . And the thing that Anne [her sister] and I talk about most is her laughter, and she, you know she [the aunt] and my father survived together. My father survived because of her. . . . *Laughing* . . . I can see myself lying down on her living room floor watching TV on a Saturday night and they gathered around the table and you could hear the laughter and the drones of the voices . . . probably some of the most important times growing up. So, I think the gathering was really, really important.

For many other women, cooking was the only time they heard their elders' stories. Emma's grandmother diced onions into bits and pieces while she told about her life, in bits and pieces.

> She would take a whole onion and hold it in her hand and cut it in slices one way and perpendicular another way and then finely minced . . . lots of stories were told in that arena. You know, the genocide stories were told there too . . . food was absolutely central and the conversations, the most important conversations that I have had with my family have happened in the kitchen, usually around cooking and food preparation.

Gathering around the kitchen to cook with mothers and grandmothers or around the table to eat with relatives provided not only stories, but a clarity about what it meant to be Armenian. For a number of reasons, Armenians in the United States often feel invisible. The Armenian population in this country is relatively small, and Armenians seldom see themselves reflected in the dominant culture. Moreover, the United States is complicit in Turkey's denial of the genocide, the central historical moment in modern Armenian history, by refusing to officially acknowledge it. Food as a marker of ethnic identity is often trivialized both by scholars and by community members. Armenians who are outside the community are derided by insiders as "shish kebab Armenians." Yet to the women in my study, food powerfully conveys ethnic identity. When asked to comment on the relationship of food to her ethnic identity, Victoria responds, "I don't know, I guess it's just so . . . it's kind of woven in there. I think of the cheorag that you make, the kind that you braid together and so, for me, my Armenian identity and food are braided together." Dorothy says Armenian food is "home." The confusion about who Armenians are, particularly in the context of the New England towns she grew up in, was clarified for her by eating Armenian food.

This intense relationship to Armenian food is often characterized by a protectiveness, a feeling of ownership laced with a fear that if non-Armenians cook their dishes, their cultural value would be threatened.

Dorothy was furious with a non-Armenian friend who cooked Armenian food. "I'd be bullshit when she would try to cook my food or that—it could never be as good as mine. I felt like I was being robbed of my—I don't know it was—what made us special I think." She says the food is "all we have left" and that we have to keep it to ourselves to protect our legacy. Joanne refuses to give out her own or her family's recipes, and will refer people to cookbooks because those recipes are in the public domain. For her the way the women in her family prepare food is "almost like it's this secret code that preserves family integrity and cultural integrity that I don't want to give away." In response to my question about whether her feelings were based on the fragility of the culture, her response evokes a connection both to Armenian women and to homeland. For her, cooking Armenian food

> is part of my Armenian women's lineage and it's like a sacred act being able to prepare this food that grandmother after grandmother after grandmother has prepared. . . . the fact that basically the same food is being preserved helps [me] feel connected, something that I as well as others have been distanced from and that is the homeland . . . and the same land where they lived.

Debby shares a sense of ownership of Armenian cuisine and is also enraged by what she sees as appropriation of and erasure of Armenian food by the natural foods movement.

> Do people know Molly Katzen? She wrote *The Moosewood Cookbook* which was, when I was in college that was the college students' cooking bible. Here were all my "granolier" than thou college friends of mine who were reading this book and every dish in there that could be Armenian was either Greek or Turkish. . . . I have never seen in any of her cookbooks any mention of Armenians or Armenian cooking or Armenian food. It makes me really, really pissed off. So there are my friends making these things that they claim are Greek or Turkish and it made me really angry. It made me feel really invisible.

Helen was not so clear about her ownership of Armenian cuisine when she traveled to Turkey with her non-Armenian husband whose parents currently live there. She knew intellectually that many Armenian dishes are also eaten by Turkish people, but when they were presented as unequivocally Turkish she was confronted with the complexities of cultural processes in the context of genocide. Is the dish Armenian or Turkish? Is what she knows as that Armenian dish fixated at 1915, the date of the beginning of the genocide?

> We stayed with my husband's sister and she has a maid who cooks—and of course to her it was Turkish. It was really bizarre. Some of the names were the same . . . but over the seventy, eighty years since the genocide, they have taken different paths—essential elements were there. So they would say we're having *manti* . . . and then they would serve me this *manti* but it wasn't *manti*, but it was and so then I'm thinking to myself what is the real *manti*? To her this is the real *manti* because she's never heard of any other kind of *manti*. But then what is the *manti* that I know? I think what I know is probably the way it was made in 1915 and the way she's making it is the way the dish has been evolving in Turkey since that time. . . . It's not that they've appropriated it. It's that the thought of having appropriated hasn't occurred to anyone there. So I can't go there and say how can you appropriate it. There is nothing for me to say. It is just a cuisine that is held in common. And yet, I feel that it's not right that it be owned by this other woman who doesn't know anything about the Armenians. Who knows, her grandfather probably massacred my grandfather and there she is making this food that I feel is owned by . . . Actually, I can't own it.

The issue of Turkish influences in Armenian cuisine and other cultural forms may come up from time to time, but most of the women are clear about what Armenian food is. Many actually use it to overcome their ethnic invisibility, proclaiming an Armenian identity through cooking for non-Armenian friends and colleagues. Debby prepared Armenian food when it was her turn to cook when she lived with friends during college, but was frustrated in her attempt to become more ethnically visible to her house mates.

> I would spend hours preparing these meals for this group of 15 people. It was like—first of all it was my way of trying to make myself visible and gift them and show *odars* [non-Armenians] what Armenian culture was and who I was . . . but I kept having this like—you didn't get it. There was no way. They didn't know enough about what it meant to me to get it. . . . I think it is about invisibility though and trying to—you finally have something that—this is Armenian. Growing up nobody knew what an Armenian was, right? And finally your food is finally getting value and you want to claim ownership to it.

Debby's Armenian identity was obscure to her peers partly because she was not raised in an Armenian community. While she likes people to know that she is Armenian, she is also sensitive to being exoticized by non-Armenians. Yet even those who grew up in ethnic communities attest to the importance of food to their identities. Raised by parents

involved in the large Armenian community in eastern Massachusetts, Helen identifies food as a "pillar" of her ethnic identity.

Anahid's use of food with non-Armenians both evokes her deceased father and allows her to be more fully present with her non-Armenian friends. She made *shish kebab* for the first time in her life when she was in her fifties for her friends.

> I think I wanted to be more engaged . . . it was something about bringing my father there, you know. And that certainly was one of the best ways I knew to do that. And I had been thinking a lot about him lately—I mean at that time. I had been thinking a lot about missing him and—a lot about my relationship with him. And so I think he was very present.

For many women, food has this power to evoke spirits of both individual people who have died and "the people." Anahid's sister Anne also speaks lovingly about her parents preparing *shishkebab* together, and like Anahid she cooked it for the first time only after their parents died. For Anne, the recipe itself is precious.

> A couple of years before my mother died, I asked her how to make *shish kebab* and I had written it on a scrap paper and it's in my recipe box. . . . I am very connected to them by that little piece of scrap paper, just all the memory that brings back.

Dorothy, whose grandmother lived with her parents when she was a child and was the adult who provided both the daily cooking and the parenting for the children, feels close to her now deceased grandmother whenever she cooks. Her sister who is a caterer says she thinks of their grandmother every day while she is cooking. For Debby, "cooking Armenian food . . . is almost devotional. It honors the memory of my grandmother. When I cook her food it brings her back to me and it honors her."

Cooking and eating can also encapsulate collective memory. For Victoria, cooking Armenian food means

> you're savoring [in] some sense the generations that are not at the table, but they're there. . . . And food and cooking, even though time is important when you cook, you enter into this other kind of timeless realm because it's so connected to recipes and the people who have done it before you. . . . I don't know how to express it, Arlene, but there is something rare about it, and people either understand it or they don't. . . .

But there are dangers for women in giving these gifts. Saying that she gives Armenian food to non-Armenian friends and colleagues as an

offering, Victoria is mindful to take care that they not make assumptions about her cooking for them on the basis of her gender.

> I actually like to do in larger groups of people who aren't Armenian . . . it actually allows me to be there in a way. It's another form of being present and sharing something that's important to me. And I think in whatever ways people approach it, that they actually appreciate it and so, so anyway, all that kind of caring and attention is important to me. I think the thing that I find hard, that I am learning maybe to do differently, is that I don't want it taken for granted, that if I am going to offer it's always an offering. It comes out of a generosity of spirit, and not out of a sense of duty.

While these women bring their Armenian ethnicity into their non-Armenian lives through cooking, some women also experienced the transmission of Armenian culture through food within their families of origin. Emma says that teaching their grandchildren about Armenian food was vitally important to her grandparents.

> It totally mattered to my grandparents that—what they cooked and that they taught us how to cook. It mattered to them more, I think, than telling us where they lived and who their parents were. Or maybe they couldn't talk about that but they talked about the food.

Transmitting the culture to children through food, particularly for women who are not connected to other aspects of Armenian community life, was a particularly highly charged subject for the three women in the group who are married to non-Armenian men. They are conscious that cultivating their children's Armenian palates has taken on meaning far beyond the particular foods. Two of the women are married to Jewish men, and they both feel at a disadvantage because Jewish culture is much more visible than Armenian culture in mainstream America. Also, for women who have progressive politics, the conservatism of the Armenian community makes connections with it difficult, if not impossible.

> So much about having a child has made me look at my Armenianness, and I often feel ripped with this fear and anxiety and guilt that it's going to be lost. It is all going to be lost because his father is not Armenian and he's, you know, half. So there is this anxiety that Haig won't get it. That it will be lost. And when I think about what can I give him—I am not going to drag him to Armenian church. I hated that as a kid. And I don't connect with it now. What am I going to give him? It always comes back to food. It absolutely comes back to food. . . . I have to be careful because it seems so loaded, but it also

> seems like the only thing I feel good about—that I understand, that I know, that I can give to him, that I can pass down confidently. So it matters to me that he eats the lentil soup. I wanted him to eat my *dolma*. He spit it out the first thing. *Laughing.* And I just have to say, it's okay. That's not a personal rejection, but I want him to know the food. I want him to know more than just the food, but it's a place for me to start.

Despite their current positive feelings about Armenian food, some of the women were embarrassed by what their families ate. Joanne's mother filled her lunch box with a sandwich made with pita and sometimes, for a special treat, gave her a piece of *paklava*. While she loved to eat this food at home, Joanne did not want it at school. Dorothy's joy at finding a *yalanchi* (stuffed grape leaves) in her lunch box was cut short when she offered a taste to her best friend who pretended to taste it, made a disgusted sound, and ran into the bathroom making vomiting noises. Dorothy said she learned then that the food she ate was "bizarre." Emma's parents strongly demarcated their lives into the public/non-Armenian and the private/Armenian. Having friends over for dinner broke those boundaries, and she was embarrassed because of her parents' difference, which centered on food.

> When I was in school I could blend in, but at home it was kind of obvious that we were different—that we ate different, that our house smelled different, we didn't really sit down to eat—kind of like the Woody Allen meals, like everyone is kind of talking over each other. No one is really listening. There is never really one conversation. And it felt uncivilized. It felt like we were peasants, like who are these crude . . . people who are eating this different food and everyone's talking at the same time. . . . I feel like my cover has been blown.

Melissa's family used Armenian processes to preserve meat, and she feared that neighbors would smell the meat as it was drying. One of her favorite after-school snacks was *jajik*, a cold soup made from yogurt, but she could not eat it if a friend came to her house because she was embarrassed. Clearly, the "differences" between these women and their "American" peers were not felt as a neutral, multicultural experience, but one in which they and their families were the "uncivilized" others.

Other women felt proud of their Armenian cuisine. Ruth, who lived in a large Armenian community in Massachusetts, grew up knowing that everyone loved Armenian food because even *odars* came to Armenian picnics to get the food. While she was generally proud of the food, she also did not want to admit that her family ate *chee kufta*, an Armenian version of steak tartare. Victoria's Armenian mother regularly

made two dinners, an Armenian one for herself and her children and a non-Armenian one for her WASP husband, who did not like Armenian food. Yet, Victoria was always proud of Armenian food and now often makes it at public events connected with her professional position. Anahid, Anne, Lucy, and Debby grew up feeling lucky to have Armenian food. Some of these women grew up in Armenian communities, and others lived in WASP areas. Some of them are in their thirties, and others are in their fifties. Some have wonderful memories of dinnertime, and for others eating with their families was painful. It is not possible to attribute pride or shame about Armenian food to any one factor.

Also contradictory and complex are the women's attitudes about the relationship between cooking and women's subservience in their families and in the Armenian community. All agree that women in their families of origin were expected to serve men, and that they were judged by their cooking skills, though they were only rarely complimented and often criticized for not achieving what was expected of them. Elizabeth, a woman in her seventies, said she resented everything about being married, including cooking. While she provided nutritious food for her family, she rarely spent the time it would take to make Armenian specialties. Perhaps reflecting her mother's open anger about being forced to cook, Elizabeth's daughter Ruth's attitude toward Armenian women's cooking duties focuses on subservience.

> Like some women never have time to eat. Like all the women in Armenian families would often eat on the fly and they didn't always even have enough time to sit with their families became they were running around serving. It wasn't done the way you'd want it to be done. And I think the preparation of the food was resented more than it was enjoyed and then the food itself was not relished. You were too exhausted to relish it.

Other women also talked about women serving men. Discussing the gender interactions in her family, Dorothy said:

> The men would just sit down at the table and the women would start filling the table up with food and the men would start eating as soon as the food hit the table. And so all the men would be there first and get served first. I think in an unconscious way it showed a form of subservience. I mean even though it was a way to show love, I think it was also the role. I can't explain it. But to this day it's like the men get taken care of first and foremost.

Yet, when pushed to say that her mother was subservient to her father, Dorothy is less clear.

> I mean, I think the subservient thing was that the men got taken care of and even though my mother was very powerful and mouthy, which she was, my father dominated by his anger and also it was just the rule. You just saw that the men—whatever the men said or wanted was truth. So, yeah, I think it did seem like a *form* of subservience. [My emphasis]

Victoria related that she had not tasted the white meat of turkey until she was in her twenties because her brothers, father, and uncles were served first, and by the time the platter got to her the white meat was gone. She was upset by what she identified as the subservience of the women when she was a teenager.

> When I was a teenager, it bothered me that we, as women, were running around in the kitchen and the men were out, sitting out there and, you know it was to make sure that everything was done for them. . . .

Speaking about her grandmother's cooking, Victoria's assessment is now more complex.

> She knew just how to do things easily and quickly and when you walked in on her doing that she would often be singing, sometimes she'd be singing hymns or . . . when she thought she was alone. So she loved and relished that time and so for me, actually, it's also connected with prayer, which may sound kind of funny, but it's this thing that sometimes you do that's what you lose yourself in or sometimes solitary. And it's also this offering. It's for the people [for] whom you're making it. And I have mixed reactions to that, that it's both pleasure to offer that to others and the subservience piece that you mentioned.

Relating her feelings about cooking directly to feminism, Joanne comments on gender and cooking, also noting that despite her feminism and noticing that there was a clear division of labor around cooking she did not associate it with women's subservience.

> In terms of gender it just became very clear who—how the division of labor went in terms of food. I don't think that I placed a value on that. That it was bad or good. When I started to become aware of liberal feminism, when I was a teenager, having to prepare food automatically became a bad thing in my mind, but in my experience, preparing food was always a positive thing. . . . I don't think I ever associated food preparation with negativity. . . . I obviously enjoyed doing it even though I had all these other issues around food and eating. [She had an eating disorder.]

Though she describes her mother as a typical Armenian *harse* [bride], implying that she was totally subservient to her husband and his family, Melissa's assessment of her mother's relationship to cooking is complex. Her mother was expected to cook regularly not only for her own husband and children, but also for her mother-in-law and brother-in-law, who lived in a full apartment with a kitchen on the second floor of their house. The then-single brother-in-law also felt free to invite friends for dinner on a regular basis.

> My uncle used to always have his friends over and so there would be like all these single men that my mother would also be cooking for. So . . . it was insane. I mean from my perspective, I had a blast, because they were playing with me, you know, but you know, from her perspective she was just working and working and working. And she still has a tendency to do that, like we go to visit my brother's, she will be working and working and working. She almost seems like tied to the kitchen and it's sort of like the most comfortable place for her to be but also the place that she tends to resent being the most, you know. It's very, it's a very odd thing.

For Joanne, her grandmother was able to exercise control in the kitchen, and she guarded that space with a vengeance.

> With my grandmother, it [the kitchen] was definitely a woman's domain . . . And I remember, very distinctly, one time—sometime about 15 years ago we were at her house in New York for Thanksgiving. My grandfather had recently died and my father went into the kitchen to start doing the dishes and she threw a tantrum. You are not to do that. This is women's work and afterwards she said, in her inimitable way, men who go in the kitchen are sissies. . . . So, I think she felt violently territorial about it because that was the only place she had freedom in the house, from my grandfather. . . . He would never have ventured to come in. I think that was where he had no control. That was her place of control. And my mother talks about her preparing meals to excess. And she would say, Ma, you don't need all this food and her mother would say, no this is . . . I think she had complete control. I am sure she was given a budget and observed that budget to a certain extent, but other than that, he had no input. And I think it was a point of pride in her to able to serve these elaborate meals to him and please him, in that sense, and please the family.

For other women, cooking together creates a woman's space. While very critical of the rigid roles that relegated women to cooking, Ruth also thinks that the preparing of food provided an opportunity for women to be together, a practice she continues in her current life.

> I see it [preparing food] as a way to bring people together to socialize. That's how I think of it even now. It did that for Armenian women in my family because they often did things together before a big event, and so they would chat about whatever while they were preparing food. But there was also such a work ethic that I am not sure these particular women would have felt okay about just sitting down over a cup of tea and talking. I think they would have had to have been doing something. . . . I am not sure it was ever even conscious on their parts that this was the way they were going to get to visit, by preparing food together, because it was just part of the fabric of their lives. Maybe it was their version of how they combined activities because they had to do this, they had to do that and they were busy and so they would visit because they were preparing food.

Women gathering together to cook was a particularly joyful part of Anahid's childhood. Her mother was a survivor and depressed most of the time. She resented daily cooking but enjoyed sharing the tasks with other women.

> My mother was very depressed, so doing it [cooking] alone was, I mean, I think that she came to life when . . . not necessarily just with our family, but when those women were present and they were working together and they were preparing something together. I could hear her . . . I mean those are some of the times when I can really hear her laughing. . . . She would come to life too at the beach where there were those women and they would be cooking together or preparing food together.

For Joanne, cooking women are powerful, and that women's power is her legacy. Done alone or with a group of women, cooking is both powerful and sensuous.

> I mean there was passion around food. I think that . . . from my adult mind, in relation to gender, food and the power of women are very closely connected. I mean that's where I can see all of my foremothers showing their passion—being able to be completely alive in food preparation.

Joanne is currently in a committed relationship with a man who also loves to cook, and they argue about who will do the cooking because they both love it. She carries on the tradition she identified in her foremothers.

> And then I gradually learned to cook myself and took such great pleasure in it that—it just felt like my whole being was present when I was making food. It still does now. It is one of the few things that I

> do where I don't get distracted. I am just so immersed in it. . . . the sensuousness and the art of it and the physical touches of it. I love preparing food. *Laughing*

Also feeling sensual about food, Anahid wonders if her passion is channeled into food rather than into sexuality. "I think the way sometimes I can use food, or the way I've been—the way food has been used in my family, anyway, has been more in the service of being asexual rather than being sexual."

While many of the woman value cooking and love the *idea* of cooking, many do not cook regularly, and while they felt that cooking was a creative expression for their mothers and grandmothers not many of them expressed it as an important vehicle for themselves. Because all the women are professionals or have recently completed advanced degrees, they are less limited than their grandmothers and even their mothers in their life choices. A notable exception to the pattern is Melissa, a musician. Her modes of cooking are connected to her musical expression. When she was first composing, her major focus was on experimentation, and she felt then that cooking was a highly creative act. She never used recipes, and her husband at the time complained because she never cooked anything the same way twice. Currently, cooking has another meaning for her: "now, when I cook, it's more for nourishment because there is that feeling of—ah, washing grains, I can breathe, you know. I can relax . . . Psychological nourishment." As a young woman she associated artists with decadence: "you know there was just something macho about it that had to do with being an artist. *Laughing.*" Her attitude toward artists in general and her own craft has changed, and along with it her cooking.

> Although I am still interested in experimentation, I am also very interested in getting it right. Or getting a certain effect . . . I am much more interested in . . . harmonies, tonal qualities, you know, I may discard them, but I am more interested in them than I was before. Before I was like, I didn't want anything to do with that part. I just wanted to be as creative as possible. And so, now I am more interested in like, how do you cook the rice just right.

Melissa considers cooking to be a skill and values what she learned from her mother. And when the women of previous generations came together to cook food for holidays or family outings, they also shared their skills. But these skills were not usually recognized by the men in their lives. Many women talked about the criticism the women in their families endured about their cooking. Lucy's father consistently com-

plained about her mother's cooking, whether it was Armenian or American; the Armenian food was always compared to what they had in the old country. She learned that her mother was a good cook from how other people, mostly non-Armenians, raved about her food. Despite her mother having to cook because she was a woman, and her father's criticisms, she feels that she learned about a particular kind of power from her mother's cooking.

> I learned that there is a lot of power in technical skills. That food is like a technical skill, like other kinds of technical skills. And that there is a lot of power and respect that goes along with having mastered those skills and not everyone does. So even though my father was just his unusual self, I knew that other people regarded her as being sort of a very good cook and came to her and asked her stuff about how to prepare things and asked her to prepare things for parties that they were having. And I know for a while she toyed with the idea of opening a catering company with a friend of hers.

Ruth feels that the women in her family took pride in their skills, but that what they cooked was

> often taken for granted. I rarely saw a man appreciate what had been prepared. I rarely heard someone say, this *yalanchi* is delicious. You might, however, hear a criticism—oh, it's a little too dry this time. It's a little too oily. . . . Women complimented other women, but I think I got the sense early on that it didn't count as much as what the men said.

Dorothy had the experience of everyone criticizing women's cooking, and she also felt a competition among women around food preparation when she was a child.

> And there was a lot of criticism about food. We'd go to my aunt's in Worcester and we'd be coming home and they'd go, "that wasn't lamb, that was mutton." *Laughter.* I always thought that mutton must be a dog or something. I just thought, oh my god they served us mutton, and all they meant was that it was tough, you know. . . . We would eat all weekend, you know. We'd have chicken and *pilaf*, and leg of lamb and *geragour*, and I don't know how my aunt did it. But I think she loved it when we came over, but it was never good enough. And I notice that now.

Leisure time among the women I interviewed is in short supply. In their current lives some find joy in cooking, but not in everyday meal preparation. Making a distinction between duty cooking and recreational cooking, Debby reported:

> I don't do the daily cooking. . . . Dan [her husband] cooks every day . . . at four o'clock when I come home from work, the last thing I want to do is put dinner on the table. I am exhausted and cranky. . . . See, I love to cook for special occasions. I like to bake. I like to do holiday cooking. I like to make things for people. But I don't like to do—to put it on the table. I guess I don't want it to be a chore, you know. And I am lucky enough to be married to someone who loves to do it daily. . . . But the way I love to cook and this is . . . in some ways like the way my mother cooked, is—you know on a Sunday afternoon, I'll turn on the radio and play wonderful music and I'll spend the afternoon cooking. And maybe I'll have a friend with me but maybe I won't. And that's very relaxing for me to do. I think . . . it's not so much that my mother did that, but it takes me back to those times with her and my grandmother. It makes me somehow feel like I have that time back. I think that my mother had trouble getting dinner on the table when she came home weary from work and it was hard for her. . . . So maybe there's some part of me that thought I want to save this so it will always be special and fun for me and not have to ever do it as a chore.

Although her father did cook, for Debby he did not do the same kind of cooking as her mother who had to "get the dinner on the table." It was her mother who did the "duty cooking." She wants to keep the joy in her cooking, "the spiritual sense of this as something wonderful in life . . . what life has to offer."

Anahid also makes the distinction between daily cooking, which her mother resented, and cooking for "gatherings." While she no longer has much time to have those "gatherings," she wants to make time for them in her life again because they make her feel "rooted in someplace that felt, probably, very comforting and vital."

For Emma the cooking itself is comforting. Upon hearing of the death of a peer, also a young woman in her early thirties, she cooked for an entire weekend.

> The kitchen is a comfortable place for me. It is a place where I feel good at what I do. . . . So, as I was there chopping the onions and crying from the onions, and really crying about the onions because it was too much to cry about Louise, I was thinking about my grandmother and how maybe it really was easier for me to deal with the sadness if I was doing something—if I was creating something. If I was, you know, something about food. This was going to be the food to nurture my son, you know, my family, me. So it was kind of about life and keeping me busy and feeling competent.

Many of the women's lives are too busy for them to do the kind of cooking they want to do. Ruth does take her turn cooking in the cooperative house she has lived in for many years, but she does not do the kind of cooking she would if she had more time.

> Well, my belief system is one thing, what I put into practice is another. I think that food and the preparation of food is really important and I think it's a lost art and practice in many respects. . . . I probably would, if I had time . . . like I would probably make *yalanchi*. I do that occasionally . . . And I keep the recipes and I share it. And occasionally, if there is going to be a social gathering, if there needs to be like something for a community works benefit or something where we need to make it and I've got my mother doing it, we'll get a few people and we'll do it here at our house and get some help, because it's too much for one person to do—*yalanchi*. So, that's been one thing we've done over the years, is to prepare things together that are labor intensive, kind of make it a social event at the same time. . . . And I like preparing foods as a group. It's a lot of fun. You know, you can talk about anything. Talk politics too.

As feminists, most of the women are concerned that what they do in the kitchen is appreciated and not expected from them because they are women. Some women also struggle with their tendency to judge themselves in terms of how well they can cook.

> It is a kind of compulsion. You know my mom would get very anxious before people came over for dinner, like for holiday meals—to the point where she would actually get some chest pains. . . . She wouldn't be able to breathe because of the pressure, and anxiety. And I have really worked around that because it's important for me to have people around. I want people over, but I don't want to—she made herself sick over it. So when people came over I used to feel that I needed to have everything ready so people would walk in and I would be relaxed and that was part of the show. It was like—and I did theater—having people over for dinner is like a well-constructed theatrical performance as far as me and my family were concerned. Because you wanted to have it look easy.

Food, cooking, and eating are carriers of a patriarchal culture, yet these feminists claim these food practices as their legacy as Armenian American women. Armenian food evokes memories of individual people and "the people," particularly important for Armenians because of the genocide and its invisibility. They deploy cooking as a way to define themselves ethnically both for themselves and to others outside of an Armenian context. For those who were not raised in an Armenian com-

munity or whose parents did not participate in Armenian events, Armenian cuisine often represented their only clarity about being Armenian. Even those who were deeply immersed in Armenian activities, however, identified food as important to their sense of themselves as Armenians and a way to convey their ethnicity to non-Armenians. Some have used cooking Armenian food as a gift, an offering of caring, friendship, and love while mindful of the dangers inherent in an activity so closely connected to women's subservience.

This group of feminists view their identities as Armenian American women as constructed through the intersection of *all* of the issues we discussed. Their sense of themselves as Armenian American women is impacted by Armenian history in Turkey, Armenian ethnicity in the United States, and their analysis of Armenian culture as a patriarchy. The genocide and Armenian invisibility in this country shapes their lives as much as their inability to participate in the Armenian community because of their assessment that women must continue to be subservient to men. They do, however, insist on their right to claim their ethnicity and to enact it in their own ways, resisting both Armenian invisibility within the United States and women's limitations within the Armenian community.

Notes

1. Ann Oakley, "A Brief History of Gender," in *Who's Afraid of Feminism: Seeing through the Backlash* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

2. The literature of women of color critiquing white feminism is voluminous. A few important titles include: Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: Signet, 1970); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981); Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1981); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984); June Jordan, "Report from the Bahamas," in *On Call: Political Essays* (Boston: South End, 1985); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Braidotti et al., eds., *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis* (London: Zed Books, 1994); and Amrita Basu, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

3. Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting 'Gender,'" *Signs* 20, 1 (1994).

4. Ibid.

5. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

6. Chantel Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in ibid., 373.

7. The literature on ethnic, national, and diasporic identities is also vast.

8. Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul DuGuy (London: Sage, 1996), 2.

9. Ibid., 3.

10. Ibid., 4.

11. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 226.

12. R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 175–176.

13. Ibid., 176.

14. The government of Turkey officially denies the genocide. The United States Congress is complicit in this denial by failing every year, to pass a resolution designating April 24 to commemorate the survivors. In 1996 Canada officially recognized the genocide, and in 1998 France followed suit, both over the strenuous objections of the Turkish government.

15. Research on holocaust survivors shows that many survivors cannot or will not talk about their experiences. For some this silence came from fear of themselves or their children being identified as survivors or Jews; others felt that no one wanted to hear about the horrors they had suffered or, if they did, could never understand, and still others wanted to put the past behind them in order to start new lives. See Aaron Hass, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) and *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and William B. Helmreich, *Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). The research on Armenian Americans shows a similar pattern. See Donald Miller and Lorna Miller, *The Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Oral History of the Experience of Survivors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). My own research on Armenian American women and the genocide also shows that many families did not talk about their experiences, yet felt they knew something terrible had happened to their parents if they were survivors or to the Armenian people if they were not. Many women spoke of always knowing about the genocide. Arlene Avakian, "Surviving the Survivors: Daughters and Granddaughters of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," forthcoming in Proceedings of Armenian Women's International Association Second International Conference, Paris, 1997, AIWA Press.