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A Psychoanalytical Approach to Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*

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The language of food abounds in contemporary immigrant and ethnic writings, and in reading this body of literature, one often feels compelled to make sense of the food references, particularly when they are so rich that even undergraduate students insist on slowing down to relish and digest them. This recognition of the pertinence of the table narrative, however, is infrequently accompanied by theoretical illuminations that go beyond the usual readings of symbols and metaphors. Overall, studies of food in multiethnic literatures seem to lack interesting lexica. In this essay, I offer a psychoanalytical lexicon to zero in on the crucial concept of desire in order to elevate pedagogy and interpretation of food in ethnic writings to the level of identity or subjectivity.

Let me begin with the concept of embodied ethnicity. Ethnicity is an amalgam of registers—intellectual, psychological, religious, linguistic, cultural, racial, and bodily. Body, being the manifest site of identities, is much more than a surface, more than a colored, physiognomic, and sexed surface that signifies identities. A deep dimension of the body is desire—deep because desire engages both body and mind as it dictates how the body performs identities and how the body fashions and modifies its surface. What is a better conduit between the body's surface and depth than food and drinks? As I have argued elsewhere, "Food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others" (Xu 2). Racial minorities in the U.S. are often tormented by the tension between the corporeal and the ontological, with the former experienced as confining and the latter expansive. Such ambivalence often expresses itself in one's relationship with food. Here I propose to illustrate how Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory on desire can assist us in understanding ethnicity as a bodily performance, which I venture to call an embodied ontology. Alimentary desires, disavowals, and disgust are precisely the windows to this embodied ontology.

To introduce Lacan's concept of the desiring subject to my graduate students, I use Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek, who offer a theoretical language to talk about desire and identity. With undergraduate students, I hesitate to directly introduce Lacan; instead, I tell stories about the mirror stage and the formation of the I. After that I assign Žižek's introduction to his *Looking Awry* (1997). In the following pages I will focus on one Asian American text in order to demonstrate how psychoanalysis of alimentary desires yields "deep" meanings of subject formation. Here I will draw chiefly from Lacan and Žižek.

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The particular text I will read is *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), a memoir by the Vietnamese American author, Bich Minh Nguyen, who chooses food as a stage where ontological drama is acted out, where desire, appetite, hunger, rejection of food, and disgust are symptomatic of tensions of a higher order. A literary text with rich culinary references often gestures toward a greater parameter of identity formation. It is never simply about which food characters find better tasting or more satisfying; the meaning of food in relationship to identity formation always lies elsewhere in places where it is most secretive and most vulnerable.

Nguyen's memoir dramatizes her coming-of-age journey in America. She arrived in Grand Rapids, Michigan as a toddler with her grandmother, father, older sister, and uncles soon after the Vietnam War ended. Her adaptation to a life in the American Midwest is narrated chiefly through the language of food. The first thing the reader notices is the chapter titles, all of which are food items like "Pringles," "Dairy Cone," and "Bread and Honey." In fact, in this memoir, food is the most dominant language to delineate an ethnic and female bildungsroman. The alimentary desires shaping the identity of the protagonist are a socio-economic index to her subject formation, rather than an expression of idiosyncratic appetites. In other words, the central character's longing for certain foods is a displaced longing for a certain way of being, her hunger a metaphor for social acceptance.

Eating is a means of becoming—not simply in the sense of nourishment but, more importantly, of what we choose to eat, what we can afford to eat, what we secretly crave but are ashamed to eat in front of others. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Nguyen directs our attention to what food longings signify and invites us to read them as a central trope for the protagonist's ambivalent relationship to American culture and to her self. Hunger bears its multivalent meanings in this ethnic female bildungsroman. In reading this text, it is crucial to pay close attention to the concept of desire, for here food desire/longing bears little relationship to physical hunger; rather their implications are ontological and psychological. In theorizing desire, Lacan points out that desire never belongs to the desiring subject in question. In his lecture "Kant with Sade," Lacan claims that "desire is the Other's desire" and that desire "must be formulated as the Other's desire since it is originally desire for what the Other desires" (658, 662). Lacan's tale of the desiring subject begins with the infant stage, marked by three key concepts—needs, demands, and desires. (These three concepts structure my narrative of Lacan for my undergraduates' benefits.) The infant is totally dependent upon an adult for meeting all its needs. While having all its needs met, it also learns to enjoy the act of demanding itself. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in interpreting Lacan,

> When we demand an object from somebody, its 'use value' […] becomes a form of expression of its 'exchange value'; the object in question functions as an index of a network of intersubjective relations. If the other complies with our wish, he thereby bears witness to a certain attitude toward us. The final purpose of our demand for an object is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but confirmation of the other's attitude toward us. (5)

This reinforces the infant's making of demands even when no pressing biological need is present. It often learns to behave as if it had such a need. Success and failure in getting adults to respond to demands train the child to do what is necessary to increase the success rate in getting adults' attention and response. Adults make demands on the child,

and the child finds it rewarding to meet some of these demands. The child finds it rewarding when it behaves so that adults, meeting its needs and responding to its demands, see their own desires being partially met. The child is rewarded in identifying what it is these adults desire and then in behaving so as to be taken to satisfy these desires.[1]

As the conceptual world—a register Lacan terms the "symbolic order"—ushers the child into the world of representation structured by signs, rules, morals, laws, codes, taboos, etiquettes, etc., children acquire the competence in conceptually desiring many different sorts of things. They develop desires not only for objects that will meet their biological needs, but even more importantly desires to fulfill the desires of the people surrounding them. The child usually does not know that many of its desires for objects (toys, games, and praises) are really desires to satisfy the desires of the Other (its parents at first). As with demands, it is the desiring and not what is desired that becomes most important. Žižek remarks, "the realization of desire does not consist in its being 'fulfilled,' 'fully satisfied,' it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such" (7). The demands and desires of adults initiate the child into a normative world of commitments and entitlements, conceptual perceptions and actions flowing out of practical reasoning. Soon it is not just the desires of the child's own parents that determine its desires; it learns to desire what the whole conceptual, normative world wants the child to do. Because adults have so many conflicting desires, neither their desires nor the desires of children to satisfy the desires of adults can ever be satisfied. The conflict ridden lives of adults become those of children. Often people behave in terms of desires of which they are not even conscious. Desiring to satisfy the desires of others, however, the child constantly ends up asking, "What do you want me to do?" Tamise Van Pelt explicates, "The linguistic fate of the speaking being is to be unable to articulate need save as a demand that empowers the Other as a repository of love. The residue of inarticulable need returns from this Otherness as desire" (154). To put it more plainly, what one desires is really for the sake of others—others' acceptance, others' admiration, others' approval and love.

Robert Brandom articulates this truth without using any psychoanalytical vocabulary. In explaining the normative, he offers an account that understands "what is good (and so rewarding) in terms of what is desirable, what is desirable in terms of what is desired, and what is desired ultimately in terms of what is pursued" (42-3). In buttoning desire to pursuit, Brandom joins Lacan and Žižek in de-individuating the concept of desire and directing our attention to the dialectic of the social/individual formation of desires. Although one tends to misrecognize one's desires as originating from oneself, one in fact unconsciously locates power in the Other. Alain Vanier in explicating Lacan puts it similarly, "The subject […] is animated by a desire for recognition. This desire finds its meaning in the Other's desire, precisely because the aim of the desire is to be recognized by that Other" (11).

The psychoanalytical discussion of desires frames my teaching and interpretation of the alimentary language in Nguyen's memoir. *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* portrays the young protagonist's harrowing experience in Americanization, which manifests itself through her libidinal investment in American food. The culinary differences between her family and her peers, from the refugee child's point of view, represent the ontological distance between her and other Americans, a distance so vast that it can never be fully

bridged. The child protagonist experiences heightened sensitivity toward her culinary difference over other race related markers of difference, such as skin color, hair color and texture, or facial features. To assimilate into the culture of Grand Rapids and to gain acceptance of neighbors and schoolmates, Bich chooses food as a means to her end.

The opening chapter of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, titled "Pringles," juxtaposes the longing for this uniquely American snack to the mysterious absence of the mother figure in the life of the child protagonist. By such juxtaposition, Nguyen invites the reader to consider food longing in the context of the primordial trauma over her mother's absence. Mr. Heidenga, sponsor of the Nguyen family, invites them to dinner at his house, a year after their arrival at Grand Rapids. It is important to note that the narrator is a toddler at this time. Recalling the event much later, Bich remembers her speechless observation of how Heidenga's daughter, Heather, eats Pringles—an observation fraught with longing, sorrow, and humiliation. She recalls only

> staring and silence, and Heather Heidenga […] opening a canister of Pringles. Anh and I were transfixed by the bright red cylinder and the mustache grin on Mr. Pringles' broad, pale face. The Heidenga girl pried off the top and crammed a handful of chips into her mouth. We watched the crumbs fall from her fingers to the floor. […] She shoves her hand into the can of Pringles and said, "Where is your mother?"
>
> Anh and I made no answer. We had none to give. (3-4)

The poignant emotion in this scene, captured by "staring and silence," is the awe at a food so different from anything the refugee child knows, so much more alluring than the familiar cooking of her grandmother, Noi. The white child's question about the refugee children's mother at this moment accentuates the inchoate hunger the protagonist experiences. Her longing for Mother, for food, for love, and for normalcy become instantly entangled and displaced in Mr. Pringles, which in turn is endowed with a fetishistic power connecting the white child's ease with her fashionable looking mother, who provides the snack. The "staring and silence" of the refugee child constitutes an instance of the mirror stage, in which the refugee child comes to (mis)recognize itself by gazing at the other—the white child. In such gazing, the other's plenitude exposes her own inadequacy, and the presence of the white child's mother deepens the absence of her (the refugee child's) mother. Freud might want to view this moment as scopopholiac, in which the pleasure of gazing at the white child and the bright canister of Mr. Pringles informs the ego formation of the gazer, particularly because the gaze compounds pleasure with envy and inferiority. This very first food scene serves as a linchpin between food and self-(mis)recognition in this memoir.

Consequently, the sight of Mr. Pringles leads the protagonist to a reluctant flashback of the difficult journey on the sea to America, in which the mother is glaringly missing and the care-taker of the eight month old Bich and her two year old sister is the father. The shortage of food best typifies the despair on this journey. On the ship, "there was not enough rice or fresh water, and all around us children screamed and wailed without stopping" (6). There is the memory of getting half an apple to share among the family of six, and the resourceful father who barters "for a little powdered milk for" the children with lessons on how to play poker (7). As far as the girls can remember, their lives begin with hunger, shame, and dis-ease. Mr. Pringles' significance is patent because it introduces the refugee children to America where hunger and eating may or may not

have a causal relationship. To these children, their ability to have candies and snacks signify the arrival at America and at freedom from necessity. "We couldn't get enough Luden's wild-cherry-flavored cough drops, or Pringles stacked in their shiny red canister, a mille-feuille of promises. […] Mr. Pringles was like Santa Claus or Mr. Heidenga—a big white man, gentle of manner, whose face signaled a bounty of provisions" (14). Pringles potato chips are the first material attraction that initiates Bich and her sister Anh into the myth of America as the land of plenty. Furthermore, in Bich's mind her father's American sponsor Mr. Heidenga conflates with both Santa Claus and Mr. Pringles, acquiring magic power through such conflations, and Mr. Pringles, Santa Claus, and Mr. Heidenga thus become the trinity of the big Other, who provides "a bounty of provisions" *if* one behaves. This trinity of white, male, and benevolent figures ushers the Vietnamese children into the Symbolic order (the conceptual world) through manufacturing desires and their gratification.

What makes *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* a fascinating text is the fact that alimentary desires clearly gesture toward their ontological significance. Nguyen's account of her childhood obsession with food makes a powerful statement that, whereas physical hunger can be satisfied by candies, chips, and plenty of rice and beef in America, the other kind of hunger, that for belonging, for acceptance, and for love is nearly impossible to appease. She observes that other Vietnamese families "were anxious for" their children "to fit into Grand Rapids and found the three quickest avenues: food, money and names. Food meant American burgers and fries. Money meant Jordache jeans and Izod shirts. Names meant a whole new self" (48). Reinventing the self, however, further deepens the already divided self. "They created two lives for themselves: the American one and the Vietnamese one […]. Out in the world they were Tiffany and David; at home they were Truoc and Doan. The mothers cooked two meals—*pho* and sautés for the elders, Campbell's soup and Chef Boyardee for the kids" (48). Nguyen makes it clear that culinary desires/habits are deeply pedagogical of one's cultural identity, and one's achievement of this identity is by the exclusion of people who practice different foodways.

Bich, our young protagonist, cannot change the fact that she looks visibly other, and being an Asian in America, particularly in the Midwest, she will always be perceived as a foreigner. But in appetite and consumption she believes she is able to transform herself, recognizing the ingestion of American foods as the most accessible path to belonging. To her disappointment, however, the more she consumes them the more hungry she becomes.

> I kept opening the refrigerator and cupboards, wishing for American foods to magically appear. I wanted what the other kids had: Bundt cakes and casseroles, Chee`tos and Doritos. My secret dream was to bite off just the tip of every slice of pizza in the two-for-one deal we got at Little Caesar's. The more American foods I ate, the more my desires multiplied, outpacing any interest in Vietnamese food. (50)

As if they conspired against her plan of self-reinvention, neither her grandmother nor her step mother cooks "real" American food. Her Hispanic stepmother Rosa does things differently from mothers of her white schoolmates. Rosa "sprinkled wheat germ on grapefruit and bought maple sugar oatmeal over peaches and cream. These small differences accumulated within my growing stockpile of shame and resentment, as if

Rosa herself were preventing me from fitting in and being like everyone else" (52). The author's choice of the word "shame" clearly attaches moral value to foodways. Not only are culinary differences from the mainstream/Midwestern fare experienced by her as alienating and shameful but also as outside one's own control, for one is dependent on others in supplying food. Bich remembers, "I scowled at almost everything we ate, even Noi's pho, shrimp stews, and curries [which she used to love]. I wanted to savor new food, different food, *white* food. I was convinced I was falling far behind on becoming American and then what would happen to me? I would be an outcast the rest of my days" (52, my emphasis). Because of the impossibility of placating this ontological hunger, Bich's relationship to the foodways of her culture deteriorates to that of disavowal and repugnance. "No one at school knew how I really ate" (56). She hides her ethnic foodways as if they signify filth and immorality.

It is clear that Bich's demand for "white" food is not really a physical hunger or craving; it is experienced as such due to the symbolic meaning of food and its power to normalize the eater along the lines of class, race, and gender.

> In differentiating foodways, we often believe that our food not only tastes better but is also more healthful and cleaner than others'. Our assessment of other food practices operates from our sense of order—edible versus inedible food, appropriate versus inappropriate place of cooking, clean versus dirty food, and so on. Our system of ordering culinary matters socializes our taste buds and metabolisms, which in turn stand in the front line of demarcating the border between them and us. Such demarcation is never simply a line drawn between good and bad cuisine or even clean and filthy food. It always informs the construction of a moral judgment of a particularly social group. Those who eat "filthy" food are believed to indulge in filthy ways. (Xu 6)

Bich's sense of alienation from the world she lives in is deeply rooted in racial differences manifested in alimentary matters. Her desire for "white food" directs the reader's attention to the socioeconomic environment that instructs the child's social, class, racial, and national demarcations via dietary habits. It is worth quoting again Žižek's insight, "the final purpose of our demand for an object is […] not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but confirmation of the other's attitude toward us" (5). Our tendency to judge others by their dietary habits in ontological and moral terms informs the refugee child's efforts to assimilate into the dominant American culture via culinary demands. Nguyen reflects, "now I knew what real people ate. And in my mind I used that term; *real people*. Real people did not eat *cha gio*.[2] Real people ate hamburgers and casseroles and brownies. And I wanted to be a real person, or at least make others believe that I was one" (56). The melancholia in Bich's desperate cry to be "real" lies precisely in its indeterminacy, its vagueness, and its doom. How can cooking and eating a particular kind of food make one real or unreal? Real to whom? Real for what purpose? The secret pang is her preconscious knowledge that she is unable, perhaps permanently unable, to be a "real" American, if being real equates with being white.

Bich's melancholia is most palpable in her obsessive cataloging of and insistent craving for American foods and snacks, as if these were foods for mind and soul, as if they were the same as the American oath of allegiance, American history, American literature, and the American Constitution, which she must read and memorize in order to become a "real" American. The degree of her obsession warrants this long quote.

> I had memorized the menu at Dairy Cone, the sugary options in the cereal aisle at Meijer's, and every inch of the candy display at Gas City: the rows of gum, the rows with chocolate, the rows without chocolate. I knew the Spartan packs of Juicy Fruit as well as the fat pillows of Bubble Yum, Bubbalicious, Hubba Bubba, Chewels, Tidal Wave, the shreds of Big League Chew, and the gum shaped into hot dogs and hamburgers. I knew Reese's peanut butter cups, Twix, Heath Crunch, Nestle Crunch, Baby Ruth, Bar None, Oh Henry!, Mounds and Almond Joy, Snickers, Mr. Goodbar, Watchamacallit, Kit Kat, Chunky, Charleston Chew, Alpine White, Ice Cubes, Whoppers, PayDay, Bonkers, Sugar Babies, Milk Duds, Junior Mints. Bottle caps, candy cigarettes, candy necklaces, and wax lips. Starburst, Skittles, Sprees, Pixy Stix, Pop Rocks, Ring Pops, SweeTarts, Lemonheads, Laffy Taffy, Fun Dip, Lik-m-Aid, Now and Later, Gobstoppers, gummy worms, Nerds, and Jolly Ranchers. I dreamed of taking it all, plus the freezer full of popsicles and nutty, chocolate-coated ice cream drumsticks. I dreamed of Little Debbie, Dolly Madison, Swiss Miss, all the bakeries presided over by prim and proper girls. (50-1)

In this long catalog (or shall I call it litigation?), we sense tumultuous emotions that border on rage—"I dreamed of taking it all"—not only directed to these commodities and the obscene excess of capitalist commodity/consumer culture but also to the "prim and proper girls" who bear the iconic image of American sweethearts with their pink cheeks, curly blond hair, wide blue eyes, freckled noses, and innocent happiness. The achieved effect in Nguyen's listing of all the American sweets is repulsion, critical through irony of the immigrant child's wish to be "real" by desiring and devouring these American sugar-bombs.

Self-reinvention through consumption is inevitably subject to class delimitation as well. What image one wants to project for the benefit of others is often produced out of the dynamics between race and class. In Bich's case her desire for American fast food is met only when Burger King offers a free Whopper Junior in a one-day promotion to anyone who chants the sales pitch, "Whopper beat the Big Mac." Her father takes the entire family to a local Burger King. "He was practically cackling, as though being here with our free Whoppers signified some true victory" (55). However, this venture into American fast food, instead of engendering a sense of belonging, further deepens Bich's feeling of marginalization because "other kids scorned Burger King. McDonald's was the cool thing. […] They even had birthday parties in the McDonald's playroom" (56). The emotional energy invested in food as a marker of American identity consumes Bich, who agonizes, "They didn't know how much time I spent thinking of dinner, of stolen popsicles, of ways for a Whopper to rise up and beat, once and for all, the Big Mac" (56). It is the bachelor uncles, unfettered by family responsibilities, who alleviate her "fast food sorrow" by taking her and her siblings to McDonald's once in a while (56-7).

To be normal in the child's mind registers with racial and class characteristics, which she observes in others, particularly in her neighbors, the Vander Wals. Bich's friendship with Jennifer Vander Wals is fraught with race and class envy and resentment, because Jennifer represents the inaccessible: white middle class American life that Bich misconceives as normalcy. Unlike Bich's working stepmother, Mrs. Vander Wals is a homemaker; other than giving "occasional piano lessons, she spends "most of her time cleaning" and cooking. "She served lunch at noon and dinner at six o'clock, and in the

afternoon she baked Toll House cookies" (61-2). "Toll House Cookies," title of Chapter 5, captures what homemade cookies symbolize to the immigrant child. The first time Bich tries this cookie, she thinks,

> it was like no cookie I had ever had. It was crumbly and rich, the chocolate chips bearing no resemblance to the pinpoints found in Chips Ahoy. In our house, cookies came from Keebler, Nabisco, or more frequently, the generic company whose label shouted "COOKIES" in stark black letters. […] the idea that a person could create such a thing at home was a revelation. And then, a desire. I wonder how many more layers of discovery stood between me and true Americanness. (57-8).

Toll House Cookies symbolize wealth, leisure, and female domesticity, all of which are elements essential to the hegemony of American normalcy.

The insatiable desire for this so called American life torments the young narrator. "I hated, more and more, how I felt around her [Jennifer Vander Wals]: how I dreamed of Shake 'n Bake, how she shook her head at the chilled lychees that Noi brought out to us on the hottest afternoons" (70). Her favorite dishes that Noi cooks become the very evidence of their strangeness and thus her shame. The judgment of their cuisine becomes judgment of their life style. "Jennifer was afraid of Noi's food. *Pho,* stewed beef and eggs, shrimp curry, noodle dishes with *nuoc mam*[3] and coriander" (65). The author's choice of word in "afraid" illuminates the psychic trauma the child experiences in seeing one's favorite food rejected. What results in this trauma is a painful relationship to one's own cuisine and a reprehensible hunger for the dominant foodways. Bich reflects retrospectively, "I knew the cookies would stay with me forever, echoing with each successive one I might eat and learn to make, each chocolate chip a reminder of the toll, the price of admission into a long-desired house. How I wanted such entrance through cookies, through candy and cake, popsicles, ice cream, endless kinds of dinner. I wanted all of it, and hated to be hungry" (71). Clearly, hunger here means much more than physical hunger; it is one for inclusion in and acceptance by the white American middle class.

As an adult introspecting about her cravings, Nguyen gains insight into the nature of desires, and this insight begins with her reflection on Buddha. She notices that the food items her grandmother places in front of the Buddha statue are all fruits. "Except for holidays it was the same thing day in and day out—lunch was dinner, dinner was breakfast. My father had tried to explain that Buddha believed in simplicity and having as few things as possible. […] I couldn't comprehend that. […] I didn't know what it was not to want" (193). This reference to Buddha invites my students and me to construct a cross-cultural moment on desires. The memoir's title, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, suggests the battling of two modes of being—perpetual craving for more versus contentment with having one's basic needs met. Buddhism attributes pain and suffering to humans' endless cravings to feed illusions of self-worth. Henry Ruf explicates the famous four noble truths in Buddhism.

> (1) Life, as people generally live it, is filled with suffering. (2) A sense of self and self-worth, grounded in cravings for control and social status, is the cause of this suffering. (3) These cravings and senses of self and self worth can be distinguished. (4) There is a practical eightfold path that will lead to such an

> extinction, a resultant end of suffering, and a life of joyous living in which one simply is what one is rather than what one craves to do and be. (107)

Suffering in this context means the kind we inflict upon ourselves because of our sense of self or self-worth, and this kind of suffering is not inevitable, unlike physical pain and suffering. Tanhā is a key concept in Buddhism, which literally means "thirst" and whose figurative extension denotes "craving" and "desire," the social and sensory kind that can never be satisfied, because the cycle of craving and desire is driven by comparative evaluations in which others are always more beautiful, more successful, more popular, more intelligent . . . than one's self. This is where Buddhism and Lacanian psychoanalysis find common ground. Just as Lacan believes that all desires are desires of the Other, socially constructed and perpetuated, so does Buddhism argue that Tanhā causes suffering because it is dictated by others and for the benefit of others' judgment. Ruf remarks, "Craving for social status leads us to crave approval from others and thus to crave to do whatever we think will please them. As Lacan has recognized, so much of our desiring is a craving to satisfy the desires of others. Often the other whom we try to satisfy is the anonymous other of social norms that we are supposed to obey" (109).

Nguyen frequently employs the trope of culinary desire to describe her persistent anguish of alienation and her struggle to fit in. My students found the language of food cravings couched in that of rage, as though the young Nguyen recognized the source of her pain to have come from the coercive powers of others. Let us observe how the language of culinary desires slides toward that of rage and revenge.

> […] I could hardly name all the different meals I wished to have. Dinners of sirloin tips and Shake'n Bake. Beef Stroganoff and shepherd's pie. Jeno's pizzas and thermoses of SpaghettiOs. Great squares of Jell-O bouncing through the air as they did in the commercials; Bundt cakes; chocolate parfaits; rounds of crusty lattice-topped pies. I wanted all the dinners from Little House on the Prairie, all those biscuits and salt pork, grease seeping into the fried potatoes. I wanted every packaged and frozen dinner from the grocery store; Noodles Roni, Hamburger Helper, Hungry Man, Stouffer's, Swanson, and Banquet. All the trays with separate compartments for Salisbury steak, whipped potatoes, and peas. I wanted to take it all, hoard it, hide it away. If I were a spirit, I would fill myself with meals culled from the city around me. People in their pretty houses would sit down to dinners of nothing. They would take their eyes off their plates for just one second and the food would be gone. They would open their refrigerators: empty. Their pantries would be cleaned out. Cupboards bare, the doors swinging open to emphasize the blank space. I would take from restaurants: Brann's, Big Boy, Charley's Crab—all the white American meals I longed to try. If I were a spirit, I would eat more than enough to get me through the night. (193-94)

The fantasy of stealing others' food, robbing others of their dinners, and stuffing herself with all that she can lay her hands on is clearly not about satisfying her hunger and needs. This angry fantasy constitutes an insight that it is others' norms and judgment that hold great power over her sense of worth and that cast her as an outsider. The palpable anguish in the child protagonist's voice seems to initiate an awakening to her obsessive investment in American cuisine as a site of Americanization and inclusion, and the angry fantasy promises what Ann Anlin Cheng calls "the conversion of the disenfranchised person from being subjected to grief to being a subject speaking grievance" (7). In

Buddhism the first step toward freedom lies in the knowledge of the source of suffering in the social. A well known Buddhist aphorism further sheds light: bitter ocean boundless ahead; turning around to find the shore. Perhaps, one can say that in "speaking grievance" Nguyen moves toward the true knowledge and the shore of the boundless bitter ocean.

This movement is implicit in Nguyen's diction describing her desire for certain foods. The two modifiers of "white" and "American" for meals indirectly point to the national ideal of American citizenship as white and its coercive power exerted on racial minorities at the site of subject interpellation by the hegemonic culture, particularly by the ideology of assimilation. The performance of the ideal citizenship by the racial minorities is ironically the very process of racialization, a process in which the subject learns to pivot self-recognition from the matrix of color/race/ethnicity. Nguyen's harrowing experience in substituting culinary assimilation for social and cultural belonging is a vivid dramatization of this process, and feelings of inferiority and inadequacy are the predicable consequence. According to Anne Anlin Cheng, this process of racialization serves the dual purpose of exclusion and retention, for the retention of the Other is the necessary condition for the construction and maintenance of the national Self. She writes,

> Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively posting the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. (10)

Located at the heartland of America, Nguyen and her family always occupy the position of the Other despite aspiring to and practicing American middle class values. Owning properties, listening to American music, and joining a Brownie troop can't change their physical appearance, religious faith, foodways, and linguistic habits, all that which set them apart from the white citizens of Grand Rapids. No matter how hard Nguyen tries, she and her family are always different from "how *real* people lived" (139, emphasis mine). This discourse of "real" Americans defined against the *others* racializes the child refugee and inculcates in her a melancholic identification with the national ideal. Her melancholia finds expression in fantasies like "I became convinced that I had once been a sad and lonely blond girl who lived in a cold mansion isolated on a moor in England" (183). The feeling of isolation is reinforced by the books she reads. "Girls like Jennifer Vander Wal and Holly Jansen could legitimately pretend to be Anne of Green Gables or Jo March, but a Vietnamese girl like me could never even have lived near them" (163). However, melancholic identifications never surrender to realizations of impossibilities.

> Deep down I thought I could prove that I could be a more thorough and competent white girl than any of the white girls I knew. […] I pursued all the British books on the library's Literature shelf, working to understand the language and cadence of *Great Expectations*, *The Return of the Native*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, though I often came away feeling moody and dissatisfied, a cloud coming over the landscape of my imagination. I spent several months trying to speak in a British accent—modeling it on Julie Andrews's in *Mary Poppins* and Haley Mills's in *Pollyanna*—and used it at home whenever my sisters spoke to me. I made myself over into the *whitest* girl possible. (163, my emphasis)

Furthermore, the author's melancholic identification is also dramatized by the description of her insatiable hunger for American food that ironically impoverishes her. Ponderosa's buffet, for example, serves as a metaphor for the copious amount of food that fails to nourish. "I look back on Ponderosa and the years that unraveled after it, and I mourn the false hope of those vats of food. How slick they became, how glutinous the portions, cold on my cold plate. So much emptiness in so much possibility" (219-20). Be it food for the mind or food for the body, the American and/or British fare only deepens the child's feelings of alienation and self-loathing.

In distinguishing mourning from melancholia, Freud describes the latter as pathological because the melancholic ego is unable to displace its object-choice and move on to a new object relationship. Interestingly, he does so by employing the language of eating; "the ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic state, is by devouring it" (250). Ironically, the ego's situation of being stuck and therefore impoverished also proves to be perversely nourishing, for as Anne Anlin Cheng points out, "The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it" (8). Although for Nguyen the object-choice (the national ideal of America) is not exactly lost/dead and thus cannot be mourned for, its infinite enticement and permanent inaccessibility keep it both within and beyond desirability, resulting in both hopefulness and despair. Her obsessive investment in alimentary distinctions and desires is a concrete manifestation of this powerful paradox. This cycling of desire and despair is no other than the boundless bitter ocean that Buddhism instructs us to forsake and the psychic landscape that Lacan paints as central to our subject formation.

Lacan's theorization of desire always being desire of the Other presents this predicament as uniquely human, both inevitable and irreversible due to the social nature of human existence. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches the ways to break the spirals of desire and despair, craving and suffering. The eightfold path is the way (the yoga) to extinguish Tanhā and its cravings. It consists of right understanding, right aspiration, right speech, right behavior, right livelihood, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right absorption. These eight ways are: (1) understanding of the four noble truths; (2) aspiring for enlightenment as we weaken and eliminate our socially constituted desires; (3) speaking truthfully, not lying to protect one's self-worth, and not tearing down someone else in order to build up oneself; (4) meeting one's ethical obligations, refraining from actions harmful to others, and living compassionately; (5) earning one's living in a way that does not harm others, like trade in weapons, prostitution, slavery, poison, etc., (6) making all efforts to extinguish Tanhā; (7) being mindful of one's words and deeds and constant self-evaluation and self-criticism; (8) being absorbed in Nirvana living, free from cravings and comparative sense of self and self-worth.[4] Ruf explains, "The eight practices […] come as a package, and we must engage continually in all eight of them at the same time until at last our cravings are ended, our socially constituted and personally endorsed Tanhā form of life and sense of self and self-worth are extinguished. […] The eightfold path demonstrates the optimistic and anti-nihilistic character of Buddhism" (113).

Buddhist optimism is instrumental to Nguyen's journey toward a hybrid identity that recuperates the immigrant's past, for the young protagonist does arrive at a moment of enlightenment. At the end of Chapter 13, Bich steals a plum from the Buddha statue and eats it. She stares at the plum's pit. "It was an eye. I realized. A wrinkled, wizened

eye. […] I left the plum's eye in the plum tree. It was gone the next time I climbed up there. I imagined it carried off by the wind, or by my ancestors' spirits, coming to collect the meager offering I had left behind" (196). Bich associates Buddha with ancestral spirits as his statue stands side by side with the portraits of her diseased ancestors who share the offerings of fruits. In this image of the eye lies a subtle epiphany of wisdom beyond description. It is as though by stealing and eating Buddha's plum she had eaten the spirit of Buddha, whose eye stares back at her. Now this scopophiliac moment turns the refugee child into the object of gaze; gazes from Buddha and her diseased ancestors impart wisdom. Bich experiences this moment as nurturing and reassuring, which contrasts with other moments in which she is the object of gazes that convey ridicule, judgment, and discrimination. Furthermore, situated in the multicultural tradition of absorbing the sacred and powerful by eating the other, Nguyen's humanization of the plum's pit is resonant to the aphorism, "we are what we eat," evoking the truth that the one who eats is at one with what is eaten. For instance, in the Christian Eucharist, communicants, by eating Christ's body and drinking his blood, discover themselves assimilated to the one whom they assimilate and recognize inwardly. Bich's consumption of Buddha's plum transfers to her the noble truths symbolically and therefore transforms her.

Significantly, immediately following this chapter, Nguyen begins to depict Bich's disillusionment with the American foods she has craved. First goes Denny's. "I thought I would never get tired of Denny's, but after only a few weeks I grew irritated at the watery spaghetti noodles and unwavering menu" (200). Then it is Ponderosa.

> We grew tired of the same ribeyes and baked potatoes. […] I began to realize that the steak wasn't so much tender as it was fatty. And not so much char-grilled as it was artificially flavored. I began to eye the uniform grill marks with suspicion, and to chew slowly to discern the real flavor of beef. (211)

This disillusionment is accompanied by the awakening that "it tasted nothing like the beef Noi sliced and stir-fried, dipped into *Pho*, and seared with garlic" (211-12). Bick's journey home via her return to her "native" foodways serves as the sign for the return to her cultural roots. In the last chapter, Bich, now a student at University of Michigan, travels back to Vietnam with Noi and an uncle. There she gains awareness of her libidinal investment in American food, which she has constructed as a defining marker of American citizenship that bears class as well as racial prestige.

> When I think of Grand Rapids I think of how much time I spent trying to make real the dream of the blond-haired girl with a Betty Crocker mother and a kitchen to match. […] I dreamed of the day when I would be a grown up at last. Then, I thought, I could eat whipped cream and SpaghettiOs every day. […] I thought I could make myself over from the inside out. (245)

Just as her harrowing efforts in assimilating into the mainstream America is portrayed through her relationship to food, so is her rescue, her return, achieved by the culinary path.

> In truth, everything that was real lay right in front of me. Oranges after dinner; pomegranates in winter; mangoes cubed off their skin. […] when I scorned her (Noi's) food, reaching for Jays potato chips or Little Debbie snack cakes, she did not scold my wayward desires. She knew I would *return* […]. I *returned* to her in

> meditation […]. I *returned to* her when I woke early in the morning to the sound of her wooden mallet grinding shrimp and pork for *cha gio*. (274, my emphasis)

My students noted the repetition of "return" in this passage and saw that Bich's return is signified by a new realization of what "real" is. Real people and real food are what she has always had at home, which she has spurned in the effort to assimilate into the Midwestern mainstream.[5] Returning home registers intellectually as well as viscerally. Bich now participates in the real.

> I've watched her (Noi) countless times rolling them out for a party or for the Tet.[6] She sat on the dining room floor, mixing the ingredients with her hands. She grated a mound of carrots, her fingers flying. She knew just how much fish sauce and black pepper and mung bean noodles to use. When the mixture was ready I tried to help shape some *cha gio*: a forkful of the filling on a triangle of *banh trang* spring roll wrapper; the left and right corners folded in; a quick roll and it all came together, smooth and slim, sealed with a dab of egg yolk. (247-48)

Bich's return to Vietnamese food centering on the making of it sets a sharp contrast with her early obsession with American processed food and fast food. Her participation in the making of *cha gio* dramatizes a different foodway whose ethics is fortifying family and community through culinary know-hows, practice, and sharing. It is through this culinary journey that Bich arrives at a self-knowledge and newly acquired confidence.

Nguyen's rite of passage is a culinary text that gestures toward a greater parameter of identity formation. She observes insightfully that in school, "a student was measured by the contents of her lunch bag, which displayed status, class, and parental love" (75). The foods she longs for—Pringles, Toll House Cookies, Chef Boyardee—symbolize various self-expressions and modes of being that are inaccessible to her, a refugee child. The hunger for American food and fast food serves in this memoir as a central metaphor for the tyranny as well as the impossibility of being American normal. It is through the table narrative that Nguyen succeeds in concretizing the protagonist's ambivalent relationship to American culture and to her self.

Reading texts with rich culinary references offers my students and me a vocabulary to resist the everyday language of dualism between body and mind and to talk about embodied ethnicity in a fruitful manner. The above discussion of Nguyen's memoir, I believe, offers a useful lexicon to ascribe ontological significance to the seemingly simple and natural subject of alimentary desires or appetite. Deborah Lupton remarks that cooking and eating "are the ways that we live in and through our bodies" (1). Indeed, who we think we are has everything to do with what and how we eat. Attentiveness to the embodied ontology occupies the central place in any discussion on race/ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

Notes

[1] I thank Henry Ruf for sharing these ideas in a working manuscript.
[2] Vietnamese egg rolls.
[3] Fish sauce.
[4] It doesn't serve my purpose to further elaborate on the eightfold path. For details, please see Henry Ruf's *World Religions in a Postmodern Age*, 105-30.

[5] Here "real" has no relationship with the Lacanian Real. At this moment Bich overcomes her earlier obsession with "real people" and "real food" in distinction with immigrants and immigrant foodways.
[6] Vietnamese New Year based on the lunar calendar.

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