

## “Eating Words”: Alimentary Motifs in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Poetry

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### Abstract

In diasporic literature, alimentary motifs tend to play oppositional roles in relation to nostalgia: either they are evoked to reify longing for homeland, or to disavow it. Closely linked to these roles, and especially pertinent to immigrant women, is also food’s function as critique of ideology. This essay explores food and food-related motifs in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s poems to elicit the paradox of nostalgia inherent in them, while also demonstrating their further complication of nostalgia as a concept.

### Keywords

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, poetry, food, food metaphor, nostalgia, diaspora

Let me begin with a brief outline of my interpretative strategy in order to clarify my position with regard to reading Shirley Lim’s poems in this essay. One contention associated with reading poetry is the medium’s profoundly personal nature, which potentially requires an undertaking of biographical criticism in order to establish meaning. In other words, the poet herself must be made a subject of inquiry if we were to interpret her work with a substantial degree of validity. Accordingly, intimate knowledge of the poet is fundamental to the task of interpretation; the greater our familiarity is with the poet’s, say, history and philosophy, the more accurate our interpretation will be.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Lim’s poems, this circumstance is further compounded by her own confession in an interview that her creative works often incline strongly towards the “autobiographical” (Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf 305). Of course, this author-centred approach is not the only way to read poetry, but to disregard it altogether, especially when appreciating Lim’s poems, is to risk compromising

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<sup>2</sup> Biographical, or authorial, criticism is purportedly one of the earliest methodologies developed for the study of literature, and predominated the discipline for the first part of the twentieth century until it was challenged and eventually supplanted by New Criticism (or Formalist Criticism). It was the Romantic poets who were especially popular with practitioners of this theory.

the legitimacy of the interpretation. Take her poem “Modern Secrets” (*Monsoon History* 45), for example: while a potentially diasporic experience is never explicitly expressed, apart from a reference to “Eating Yankee shredded wheat,” this should nevertheless be taken into account when interpreting the poem because of what the reader knows about Lim. To disregard it would incline the reader towards significant misreading, or result in failure altogether to formulate a coherent interpretation. On the other hand, to yield completely to this critical approach would significantly limit (or even deny) poetry’s (and literature in general) most important characteristic: the capacity to generate multiple meanings. As such, although the fact of Lim’s diasporic vantage point and her history as recounted in her award-winning memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), invariably inform my discussion, they will remain tangential to it. In other words and more to the point, my consideration of alimentary motifs in Lim’s poetry does not impute either a direct correspondence between the poet and her perspective on food and eating, or between my interpretation and her personal situation.<sup>3</sup> Instead, my objective is a modest one of locating Lim’s use of this motif within the broader context of diaspora studies that specifically addresses the symbology of food and eating.

This essay will focus only on Lim’s poetry, the literary medium for which she is best known, but is also the least studied of her work. Particularly pertinent are the poems collected in *Monsoon History* (1994) and *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Tell Us* (1998, hereafter *Fortune Teller*),<sup>4</sup> both of which include a considerable number of verses that directly or indirectly involve alimentary motifs. In the first movement, I explore the significance that food exerts on diasporic subjects in its simultaneous instigation of nostalgia and its disavowal. This paradoxical quality of food has been noted in diasporic scholarship, which will form the theoretical basis of my argument against which I will read Lim’s work. Following this, the second movement will consider poems that reflect another equally important role of food amongst immigrants, especially women. Because of the traditional association between them, food often becomes a powerful symbolic vehicle for women in diaspora to critique the cultural scripts defining their identities. Through the practice of eating and other alimentary activities, women could perform resistance against the ideological strictures imposed on them – a performance that is possible largely because they are also physically removed from that ideology. In several of Lim’s obliquely autobiographical poems, the mother-figure (and sometimes even the father-figure) is evoked alongside alimentary motifs to question the position of women (and men) within the Confucian Symbolic order, thus intimating as a result, its ideological hypocrisy and ethical ambiguity. My conclusion returns to the notion

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of food in *Among the White Moon Faces*, see Gunew 231.

<sup>4</sup> The poems in the second volume were written between 1991 and 1997.

of nostalgia, whose psychic trajectory I will complicate through a reading of Lim's poems in order to reveal an insidious quality inherent to it that makes disavowing it altogether impossible.

### **To Eat or Not to Eat? A Dietary Paradox**

Turning again to "Modern Secrets" in the following paragraphs, I will perform a close reading of it by way of establishing my essay's critical trajectory for this section. Despite its brevity, the poem encapsulates several salient points reflecting a paradoxical position that I wish to explore by framing my reading against various observations made in diaspora scholarship on food and eating. The following is the complete poem:

Last night I dreamt in Chinese.  
Eating Yankee shredded wheat  
I said it in English  
To a friend who answered  
In monosyllables:  
All of which I understood.

The dream shrank to its fiction.  
I had understood its end  
Many years ago. The sallow child  
Ate rice from its ricebowl  
And hides still in the cupboard  
With the china and tea leaves.

What I find remarkable about this poem, at least based on the meanings I am able to elicit, is how, it manages to offer two distinct, even oppositional, views about food and its relation to diasporic identity. This duality is immediately established in the first line, which could be read either as the persona establishing a topic of conversation with her friend, or as a feature of the dream itself. The rest of the stanza further reinforces this ambiguity, since the friend's answer could equally imply uncommunicativeness or response in Chinese, a largely monosyllabic language. The repetition of "understood" complicates what this term entails in the poem, and thus intensifies the ambiguity. In fact, its strategic placement at the first stanza's final line suggests that it could warrant either one of the following: is the persona stating that she understands what she dreamt (conversation) or is this experience of realisation part of the dream itself? If the latter, how do we appreciate the implication of this concurrent unfolding of, and conclusion to, a dream for the persona? The enigmatic image introduced in the last four lines is the cipher that draws the two readings into conflict. When considered psychoanalytically, the image's three key features – the sallow child, hiding and most importantly, eating – which I read as a single

unit, become a potent signifier that bears multiple and antithetical meanings. Accordingly, I view this image as a repressed memory that has momentarily resurfaced during sleep, but in disguised form to avoid arousing uncomfortable feelings that could awaken the persona and reactivate the mechanism of repression. Of course, this attempt at disguising memory is never full proof, and a subject sometimes does recognise who or what an image truly signifies, to varying consequences. The girl and her act of hiding are a sublimated version of the persona and an experience whose memory has become repressed due possibly to its traumatic or forbidden nature. Central to this image is the act of eating; in my assessment, it is what motivates the child’s seclusion. As a bodily impulse associated with other carnal appetites like sex, eating, as such, would symbolise either danger or desire (and hence the hiding), both of which are, in truth, complementary qualities.

Reading the poem as a conversation and as a dream respectively will lead to very different conclusions about food and the diasporic identity. Implied in the former is the persona’s transcendence of her originary past and her comfortable adaptation to her new homeland, as evinced by her choice of food and her demonstrable ease being with a “friend,” which could be euphemism for an other turned ally. Not only is she unaffected by the monosyllabic replies, she is also familiar enough with this friend to relate her dream. The most important clues, however, is her retention of the use of English despite the dream’s linguistic rendering into Chinese, and what she reveals about her dream. The admittance that she “had understood its end” suggests her recognition of the image to be herself. But whatever it was that once haunted her no longer does. That part of her life is now “fiction” as a realisation of “its end/ many years ago” had brought closure to it and for her. Through alimentary motifs, the poem intimates how something that once signified danger/ the forbidden for the persona has since been reconfigured into something pleasurable. More importantly, in replacing a bowl of rice for “Yankee shredded wheat,” the poem is suggesting that this retranscription is achieved through the persona’s repudiation of her originary identity and homeland in favour of her adopted ones. The second interpretation, as noted, effects a complete deconstruction of the first. The fact that the persona dreams in Chinese despite having assimilated into a different social environment implies a cultural haunting that continues to impact her at an unconscious level. This is palpably expressed in the second stanza: even while realising in a dream that she has moved on from the past (“The dream shrank to its fiction.... Many years ago”), she remains unconsciously tied to it, as implied by the abrupt shift from the past and past participle tenses in the first four lines to the present tense in the fifth and sixth. More curiously, both realisation and sensation of restriction occur simultaneously within the dream to infer an on-going conflict within the persona’s psyche. Similarly, “Yankee shredded wheat” suggests that the

conscious part of the persona is not entirely inactive and is offsetting some of the repressed memory's effects. Importantly, the explicit reference to America in the alimentary motif reinforces the point of the persona's struggle with her diasporic position. In this reading, food retains its metaphorical association with the impermissible. Its constituent may be substituted (rice to wheat), but this only palliates the ego at the level of the conscious since the persona's desire, while repressed, will always remain, figuratively speaking, with her first dietary encounter.

The oppositional interpretive positions embodied by the alimentary motifs in "Modern Secrets" patently mirror, but also deepen and complicate, the paradoxical conditions affecting the individual living in diaspora: nostalgia for, or disavowal of, homeland.<sup>5</sup> Nostalgia, as Kathleen Stewart posits, is a:

narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them in the mode of "things that happened", that "could happen", that "threaten to erupt at any moment". By resurrecting time and place, and a subject *in* time and place, *it* shatters the surface of an atemporal order and a prefab cultural landscape. To narrate is to place oneself in an event and a scene – to make an interpretive space – and to relate something to someone: to make an interpretive space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents." (Stewart 252; emphasis in the original)

In other words, nostalgia entails a complex process of reengineering history through wilful forgetting and memory revision until the subject arrives at her *desired* interpretation of a *specific* time and space that will *relate* her to a social referent (event, person) that *accords* with her current motivations. And for diasporic communities, one of the most potent means to evoke nostalgia is food. Food, in this case, becomes the language of which Stewart speaks, and through it, the diasporic subject can effect a vicarious "return" to her *version* of homeland. Speaking specifically of the diasporic context, Anita Mannur contends that food and food-related activities are capable of installing nostalgia that enables the transformation of the "ineffable into an idealization of the past" (Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia" 12), and the reification of the subject's cultural and ethnic belonging at the same time. Through food, the diasporic subject can manage immigrant memories, reconnect with a community whose membership she has relinquished, and cope with her interstitial status that simultaneously motivates her desire for, and disavowal of, identification with the dominant group.<sup>6</sup> The claim, for example, to the inferior quality of ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> This paradox is most notable amongst the Indian diaspora. For discussions, see Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia" and *Culinary Fictions*.

<sup>6</sup> See also Ann Goldman's study.

food (the social referent) when it is prepared and served in the host country is often an expression of nostalgia, albeit indirect, that simultaneously also inscribes authenticity (overt motivation) onto the same food when it is prepared “back home” (the desired interpretation of a specific time and space). Additionally, this claim to cultural authenticity is frequently a subtext of an undeclared longing for and loyalty to (covert motivation) the homeland.

“Modern Secrets,” when interpreted as a dream, would reflect such a stance, especially with regard to unconscious nostalgia.<sup>7</sup> Despite her diasporic position, the persona continues to secretly long for the homeland, as palpably intimated by both her dream in *Chinese* and the image of the girl eating *while* hiding. Moreover, it is arguable that in this reading, the persona herself is initially unaware of her secret; so encrypted is this desire in the unconscious that it can only emerge in a dream and in altered form. But just as recognition dawns on her, the dream comes to a halt, as indicated by the poem’s abrupt ending that leaves the dream unfinished. The persona is possibly jolted from her sleep because she has come too close to a memory that is impermissible to her conscious. That she insists on Yankee shredded wheat and speaks in English even while inhabiting a dream in Chinese, suggest a powerful conflict lodged within her ego, which is desperately attempting to manage her repressed memory. Having failed however, it forces the persona to awaken, but not before catching a glimpse of her primary desire, which will always be symbolised by girl eating a bowl of rice in a cupboard that stores china and tea leaves – a stark signifying chain figuratively leading the persona all the way back to the homeland.

More explicit in the evocation of nostalgia is the poem “Greenhouse effect in New York” (*Fortune Teller* 54-55). Ensnared at home in New York with her “husband away in Finland,” the persona is awakened one night by “humidity [that] is near tropical,” which triggers thoughts of homeland. The alimentary motif is introduced in, and predominates, the second stanza. When the persona makes herself a cup of “instant” coffee, her longing for home intensifies as its vapour begins to evoke memories of mountains in Sumatra, of “*my* Malacca Straits” (my emphasis) and of plantations in Southeast Asia. In the final stanza, the persona – “husbandless,” revelling in the heat and intoxicated by the aroma of coffee – admits that she is once again her “usual self” and has “returned to normalcy.” Implied in this confession is an uneasy sense of belonging to a different culture and of assuming a diasporic identity, which makes her feel unusual. Clearly, the persona remains profoundly tied to her homeland where she had left her “usual self” behind. However, that morning,

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<sup>7</sup> Unconscious nostalgia can sometimes significantly affect a diasporic subject’s endeavour to assimilate by bidding her ego to an object-cause of loss (homeland) and thereby preventing it from identifying with a new love-object. This crippling experience is what Ann Cheng (2002) terms racial melancholia.

through the efficacy of heat reinforced by the scent of a beverage, the persona can effect a vicarious return home and be her true self again, if only for a while.

Paradoxically, the same motivation that intersects food and nostalgia can also upset it. Food can be symbolically evoked to resist nostalgia and problematise cultural authenticity, as implied by my reading of “Modern Secrets” as conversation. Here, the substitution of an ethnic food for a Western one could represent not merely assimilation but a shift in loyalty altogether. For diasporic subjects like the persona who harbour a strong adaptive inclination towards self-reinvention, cultural authenticity is purportedly the culture with which they choose to identify, and not the one in which they were born but have since repudiated. In the poem, this repudiation is once again represented by the final image, with the implication that the persona has left the remnants of her homeland precisely where it should be – in the past – and there it remains (“still in the cupboard”) till this day (and hence, the shift to the present tense). The inference here is that the persona, while acknowledging the past, is no longer knotted to it; she has transcended, if not severed altogether, ties with her homeland to achieve closure, enabling her thereafter to fully embrace a new identity and belonging. Similarly, the persona in “Learning to love America” (*Fortune Teller* 74) also declares allegiance to her adopted country through alimentary motif. Although unclear if her education is in progress or has already taken effect, it is obvious that America is now her home “because,” among other reasons, “I have eaten fresh artichokes.” Still another poem that can be read, to a point, as insinuating resistance to nostalgia *via* food that bears unmistakable traces of homeland is “Mango” (*Fortune Teller* 26). Two days after taking note of the price of mangoes “at the New York A & P,” the persona is back in her homeland, driven by her brother “home through narrow, rewritten Malacca.” She tells us in stanza three that she is eating

... a green mango. Solid,  
sour, it cuts the back of the throat, torn,  
taste, like love grown difficult or separate.  
*More chilies, more salt, more sugar,*  
*more black soy* – a memory of tart  
unripeness sweetened by necessities.<sup>8</sup> (emphasis in the original)

Eating the fruit, in a sense, becomes a reminder of an unhappy past that nostalgic retranscription (“sweetened by necessities”) can only mitigate incompletely. In this regard, the persona seems clearly suspicious of nostalgia’s narrative propensity to distort the past, therefore inciting her to subtly repudiate it. The final stanza is presented in a form of a question:

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike ripe mangoes, which are sweet, unripe ones are sour and considered a delicacy in Malaysia when eaten together with a sauce comprising black soy, sugar, salt and dried chilies.

Where do we go from here, carrying  
those sad eyes under the mango trees,  
with our sauces, our petty hauntings?

Following my analysis of the previous stanza, I interpret these lines as further reinforcing the persona’s wariness towards nostalgia. The question seems to impute an unhealthy quality to nostalgia in terms of installing within the subject a pointless yearning for something irretrievably lost, which, as a result, plots her in perpetual sadness. Despite acknowledging the sheer difficulty of separation (“like love grown difficult or separate”), the persona nevertheless poses this question as if to compel the reader, but more possibly herself, to weigh the cost of nostalgic entanglement. In the end, although the poem does not clearly state the persona’s position, the reader could infer from its treatment of an alimentary motif and its general tone, both apprehension and disavowal of nostalgia.<sup>9</sup>

A converse, yet complementary strategy of resistance against nostalgia identifiable in some of Lim’s verses is the expressed declaration of adherence to an acquired diet. Food, in this regard, is recalibrated into a kind of intermediate belonging where the diasporic subject can then “reposition [herself] and become rooted in unfamiliar and often hostile environments” (Dusselier 337). The poem “Bread and cheese” (*Fortune Teller* 40) is a clear exemplification of such an approach. The persona, “new to the city” and “always poor,” tells us that “With money in the bank I buy/ bread and cheese for supper.” The third (and last) stanza reads as follows:

Bread and cheese will keep me  
walking past windows full  
of reflections. Coats and boots  
merging into transparencies:  
crystal, silver, diamonds.  
My reflection also hovers,  
surface among surfaces, while  
in my pocket mumble  
the remnants of bread and cheese.

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<sup>9</sup> Clearly, this nexus between nostalgia and cultural authenticity imbues food with a counteractive reference. As Mannur (2007) suggests, a middle ground would then be to serve up food that maintains a close resemblance to the original but is nevertheless adjusted to suit present circumstances (and taste buds). This will not only sustain nostalgia, but may potentially tamper it and thus, strengthen the subject’s identification with her new home. As neither/nor and both/and, such food becomes a cultural product unique to diasporic identity and history that bears the trace of its ethnic predecessor while remaining identifiably different in order to reflect a new and separate heritage. Consequently, the original dish will gradually lose its claim (always suspicious in the first place) to cultural authenticity as it becomes replaced by a new product that authentically reflects the cultural identity of its transnational consumers.



These lines, according to one reading, reveal the persona's acute awareness of her disenfranchised status: her own reflection superimposed against the expensive apparels and jewellery adorning the display windows of shops is a jarring representation of their unattainability as she is reminded of her poverty by the crumbs of her meal in her pocket. Alternatively, however, the stanza can also imply an aspiration. That the persona notices her own reflection mingling amongst these luxury items may be indicative of a goal towards which she aims as bread and cheese fuel her pursuit. If we contextualise this second reading within a diasporic perspective, it would further imply an assimilative desire. Somewhat like the persona in "Modern Secrets" who stresses the term "Yankee" for self-conviction, the persona in this poem declares her partiality toward bread and cheese – food commonly associated with the West – to indirectly communicate her desire for belonging. In other words, the poem seems to suggest that "what you eat" is tantamount to "who you are (or wish to be)."

### Food as Critique of Ideology

As a launching point into my discussion for this part of the essay, I consider a poem that concurrently establishes my argument and effectively illustrates how Lim's poetry is capable of infusing words with a quality evoking the senses:

The shape of words  
 in the mouth is thick,  
 like *jok* – rice, ginger, chicken stock.  
 In print, round yet narrow,  
 Virgin lying flat, feet  
 together, precise.  
 In the mind, a bitter  
 square, peoples clashing,  
 not yet a holocaust. (*Fortune Teller* 36)

A short, nine-line verse, "The shape of words" concentrates on an alimentary motif, congee, which is a diet traditionally associated with the Chinese people. In the poem, this is unmistakably implied by deploying the Chinese pronunciation to identify it and to evoke both its gustatory and imagistic effects.<sup>10</sup> A staccato-sounding, single syllable word, *jok* (pronounced "chook") also bears a certain phonetic harshness due to beginning and ending with an unvoiced fricative (ch) and a plosive (k), respectively, thus producing in a vigorous, abrupt sound. This linguistic quality, I argue, vicariously arouses a sense of thickness in the mouth; additionally, the word's onomatopoeic

<sup>10</sup> The word here is based on Cantonese pronunciation.

suggestion of a swift, forceful accent also conjures an image of “clashing,” and hence, of a struggle. In written Chinese, the ideograph for *jok* [粥] is derived by combining the characters for rice [米] and for bow (and arrow) [弓]. As described in the poem, this indirectly – and broadly – intimates a shape that is either rotund with a narrow strip running down through the middle when the word is written, or squarish when it is mentally envisaged. It is this disparity in intimations that point to the word’s multiple significations, two of which are a virgin in repose on a divan (written), and war (thought). A common ground underpinning both, however, is desire (respectively for sex and for power; the latter would further extend the term’s symbolic reference to include land/territory). Admittedly, the poem is not specifically talking about one particular word, but is instead expressing a simile (“The shape of words/ ... is thick,/ like *jok*), but as demonstrated, the peculiarities of the word that correspond with the rest of the verse’s intimations strongly point to the alimentary motifs’ prominence. Notably, by the time a second comparison is drawn, simile has given way to metaphor: the shape is no longer likened to, but is, a “virgin lying flat” and to “people’s clashing,” yet all the while retaining an association to the pictograph for congee. In this way, a signifying chain involving a continuum of appetites is established. In terms of texture, visualisation and thought, language, as the poem implies, may evoke disparate impressions that are fundamentally united by a comparable sensation, which indirectly also transforms this sensation, in turn, into an ideological signifier that intersects cultural and historical memories. In shifting from an invocation of gustatory consistency to an image (virgin) and to, finally, an abstraction (conflict), *Jok* becomes a palimpsest that concomitantly insinuates the objectification and subjugation of women by a profoundly patriarchal social system, and the craving for authority and distinction that can lead to discord and loss. Through food, not only is the metonymical link between women’s repression and men’s will-to-power clarified, but reveals as well the status of women as valuable commodity within patriarchal economy.

“The shape of words” brings together the twinned thematic preoccupations that, importantly, inform much of Lim’s poetry. As my reading suggests, the nuances invoked by the poem’s alimentary reference belies another level of significance, which is to problematise ideology. In this way, its deployment of food and foodways as motifs not only links subject to personal memory (family, home), but to broader cultural and historical memory as well. Because of food’s traditional association with women, it would invariably carry greater resonance for the female immigrant: through food, she either remains bound to the traditional and cultural scripts of her ethnic identity and homeland, or discovers a strategic means to renegotiate with, or question and even circumvent, them. As consistently demonstrated in literature and memoirs written by diasporic writers, women frequently deploy food in symbolic ways to

situate themselves in history – a right which they have been denied in their original (patriarchal) communities. Through food and engagement in alimentary activities (cooking, serving, and of course, eating), immigrant women, to quote Graham Smith out of context,<sup>11</sup> assert the “value of individual remembering” that reinstates connection to the homeland, and exercise at the same time “the capacity of the individual self to contest and critique cultural scripts or discourses” (Smith 78).<sup>12</sup>

Lim is, of course, not unaware of patriarchy’s crippling influence on men as well. In several evidently autobiographical poems, Lim uses the memory of her father to attack the excessive and sometimes unrealistic expectations that Confucian ideology places on men. In “Father in China” (*Fortune Teller* 19) the juxtaposition between the fatty foods that the persona’s father loves to consume and his gaunt physic, subtly reveals his history of hardship and suffering. This paternal configuration is very disparate from the one in “Father from Asia” (*Fortune Teller* 23), in which the father-figure, according to one interpretation, is a personification of the Confucian Symbolic order. This father also enjoys eating, but his food is his offspring. That he is situated at the “center of the world” suggests the extent of influence he exerts over his dominion. Ultimately, he is a “dangerous father” from whom the persona “must back away” if she were to break free from his dictates, and whose presence she thereafter “dare[s] not remember.”

However, it is the poems involving women that Lim reserves for her most trenchant critique of patriarchal ideology; some of them, moreover, deploy alimentary motifs in order to intensify their force when engaging fraught ideological questions. As with “The sound of words,” these poems also invest language with a certain sensorial quality to make their point. Take, for example, the single stanza “Brinjal” (*Monsoon History* 11), which is the equivalent of eggplant in South and Southeast Asia. Here, the gender and sexual innuendos are hardly disguised as the poem ascribes femininity to the vegetable (“... ovaloid female,/ pendulous...”) and compares it to the hymen (“impenetrable/skin like first sex”). Although a parallel is also drawn between the brinjal and the

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<sup>11</sup>Smith’s essay primarily focuses on oral history. However, his view on memory and oral history shares many interesting theoretical confluences with the way food relates to diasporic memory.

<sup>12</sup>Such a position may be directly gestured, such as in Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days* (1991), or subtly asserted, as in Lan Samantha Chang’s elegant novella, *Hunger* (1998), in which food and rituals of eating become imbued with relentless mourning and serves as a Chinese couple’s means, albeit unconscious, to paradoxically disavow nostalgia and resist assimilation. Food, as this narrative’s ironic title suggests, symbolises the fundamental loss that characterises immigrant history, signifying on the one hand, kinship and historical continuity with the homeland, while contradicting this on the other by also reminding the exiled couple of an impossible return. As a result, every alimentary-related activity in *Hunger* is rendered an experience of cultural haunting that critically highlights the two immigrants’ fraught negotiations with incompatible ideological spaces, thereby perpetuating their state of unbelonging.

phallus, this is done in the rather curious manner of placing the said lines in brackets, as if they are merely an aside that, whilst interesting, should not detract the poem from its chief comparison. As the poem reaches the end, it seems to be making an insidious prediction that the brinjal’s ripeness portends the imminent and inescapable exploitation that marks its future:

... these water-smooth firm-toothed  
veggies, names jingling like slave anklets  
In rattan baskets heaped, abused  
By kitchen women, slapped into newspaper wrappers  
In the market this morning, fresh talents!

These lines, however, potentially accommodates another level of interpretation addressing the status of women in societies that primarily view them as possessions. Like brinjals, these women are symbolically reduced to chattels for bartering the moment they reach puberty. In an economy inflected by gender and sexual hierarchies, these women (“fresh talents”) must perform their ascribed roles as daughters, wives and mothers; as inferred in the earlier lines, these include providing men with sexual gratification and directly, a lineage. And as if echoing an Irigaray observation,<sup>13</sup> lines sixteen and seventeen suggest that a woman’s worst enemy are very often other women whose lifelong subscription to a feminine ideal defined by patriarchy has turned them into an unwitting reinforcement of the status quo. Line fifteen draws the reader’s attention to the phonetic quality of brinjal by likening it to the sound of “jingling”; framed against the overall ebullient tone of the poem, this assertion at once expresses not only the women’s subjugation, but their infantilisation and trivialisation as well by a social system that is unequivocally biased towards men. Women, in other words, are merely desirable, wonderful and ultimately useful commodities to be traded in a male-oriented marketplace that has no regard for their subjectivity.

Reading “Brinjal” and many other poems in light of Lim’s religio-cultural background and personal history, it is almost certain that the system criticised by the poem is Confucianism.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is arguable that a number of Lim’s poems identify Confucianism’s ideology as their principle target of criticism,

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<sup>13</sup> In *Speculum of the Other Women*, Irigaray writes that “Really successful femininity cannot lay claim to being ideal or confer an ideal upon itself. It lacks a mirror *appropriate* for doing so. The narcissistic ideal for a woman will have been and theoretically is still the man she desired to become. Narcissism and her pact with the ideal would derive from phallic domination, which woman has the task of supporting. Whence the fact that she will choose the man she would like to have been. And this, essentially, would satisfy the man’s interests, for he would not have to step out of his *gender, ideally*” (Irigaray 105; emphasis in the original).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the representation of Confucianism’s patriarchal inflection and its regulation of gender, sexuality and kinship within Chinese communities in Lim’s fiction, see Ng, *Intimating the Sacred*.

whether directly or otherwise. In “Pantoun for Chinese Women” (*Monsoon History* 6-7), this social system’s devaluation of the female child is shockingly accentuated when the birth of a girl is particularly disdained by her own grandmother who “will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood” – rituals announcing the happy arrival of a new-born. More oblique but no less forceful in its attack against Confucianism is “In Cities, Some old Women” (*Monsoon History* 5), which describes how “old women, very old at sixty,/ Seventy, eighty,” after a lifetime of servitude, are left with only “Toffees and sweets in the larder,” a “clean kitchen” and phobia of “everything” as compensation for their unwavering adherence to the its ideological script.

Even more distinctive in its autobiographical allusion is the poem “Hands” (*Fortune Teller* 5; 15-16), in which the mother-figure potentially recalls Lim’s own,<sup>15</sup> and whose presence is intersected with the alimentary tropes to serve as criticism against the subordination of women within the social unconscious perpetrated through Confucianism’s moral code and cultural practices. “Hands” links dietary and scatological motifs to etiquette in order to demonstrate the ideological strictures circumscribing women that ultimately render them offensive, obscene embodiments. The custom dictating the use of the “right hand” to eat, the “left hand to wipe the backside” and both “hands to serve tea,” reflects strict social conditioning and, in the case of women, also denotes a subjective position that locates them along a continuum of bodily needs and functions (eating, defecating) and subservience (serving tea).<sup>16</sup> In this way, a woman’s biology and social role are collapsed into a single referent to suggest that her existential function is equal to servility. This point is, in fact, forcefully brought home in the final line’s metaphor of “a ring [inferring constancy] of obedience.” That the poem begins with “My mother taught me” before recounting the custom not only implies a woman’s traditional role as bastion of etiquette, but also as the ideological system’s most dedicated devotee. Like the grandmother in “Pantoun,” the mother in “Hands” both upholds and perpetrates the Law of the Father, ensuring that her daughter adheres to the cultural script designed for them. It is a script, as the food metaphor in lines two to four suggests, that will moreover inscribe a woman with the signifier of “shame,” as if her very existence is always already a mark of her people’s perpetual ignominy, which thus justifies her subservience to the alleged superior sex. The following three lines revolving around the trope of defecation, in fact, further reinforces this point by suggesting that being born a woman is somehow

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Lim’s mother’s influence on her poetry and pursuit of literature, see Ng (2008).

<sup>16</sup> This custom, strictly speaking, is actually a Malay one. But within the Peranakan community, or Chinese who have largely adopted Malay cultural practices while retaining an allegiance to Chinese beliefs and traditions, this custom would bear the added ideological weight ascribed by Confucian ethics as well.

her fault, and thus necessitates self-denigration when she is made to cut, once a week, the “thick yellow paper squares” she uses to clean herself. Interestingly, the poem’s tropic chain indirectly echoes Julia Kristeva’s insight on abjection. Like food and faeces, women, according to Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1982), are embodiments of the abject because she disrespects borders: her body is a “leaky” vessel that exposes what is meant to be kept in and hidden (menstruation), and thus is a potential contaminant vexing the propriety and purity of the Symbolic order. Yet, her presence cannot be altogether disregarded because the same leaky body is also life-giving and the means by which the order perpetuates itself. As such, she must be tamed and contained by being made neither seen nor unseen, but ob/scene. In this theoretical light, it is therefore possible to read the poem as a criticism not only against the Chinese symbolic order’s repression of women, but its hypocritical stance with regard to the gender as well.

### **Conclusion: The Insidiousness of Nostalgia**

The various symbolic purchases afforded by alimentary motifs in diasporic literature directly and frequently overlap, thereby layering the text with interpretive richness. As a vehicle that figuratively induces/disavows nostalgia and instigates a critique of ideology, food is certainly effective in locating the diasporic subject in history. However, what sometimes results is a feeling of ambivalence in terms of the subject’s relationship to food as well. In the end, it seems that even the act of resisting attachment to homeland *via* culinary adjustment ultimately implies a nostalgic intent – a situation that curiously parallels the refashioned cuisine’s circumstance of being still haunted by its parent dish. Such a dilemma is identifiable in Lim’s poetry, in which longing and disavowal are equally gestured, sometimes even in the same verse. For example, in “Learning to love America” (*Fortune Teller* 74) the persona loves America not only because she has “eaten fresh artichokes” but also because she has “a strong American boy” for a son. She further elaborates:

because to have a son is to have a country  
because my son will bury me here  
because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

These lines tellingly reflect the extent to which the persona is still very much influenced by Confucian ideology, which not only regard filial piety as the most esteemed of virtues, but places the highest premium on sons not only because they signify lineage continuity, but also because only sons can preside over the funeral rites of a parent and perform ancestral worship. Hence, in expressing love for her adopted home because “countries are in our blood,” the persona seems to have disregarded the fact that she has kinship ties as well with her

homeland, whose blood she also bleeds. As a result, the poem becomes ambivalent in terms of how it positions the diasporic subject's sense of identity and belonging, confusing in the process a "homing desire" (which translates into an ability to make *anywhere* home while maintaining a healthy, critical stance with regard to belonging) with the "desire for home" (which situates the subject in perpetual nostalgia, thus frustrating assimilation).<sup>17</sup> Possibly complementing this poem is "Lost name woman" (*Fortune Teller* 42), in which the question "who will feed you when you die?" is posed to several Chinese women identifiable only by the American State where they now reside in diaspora, one of whom is the "San Francisco China woman" who "drinks only Coca-Cola." Based on each individual's description in the stanzas leading up to the question, it is apparent these women's namelessness implies their relinquishment of attachment to their homeland and its corresponding ideology to completely assimilate into their new home and identity. But in doing so, they have also abandoned the Confucian imperative of kinship, especially the importance of male offspring with regard to ancestral worship. The poem's rather contemplative and sombre mood suggests that the endeavour to reinvent oneself in diaspora will always be accompanied by grief. This is because assimilation will always also involve mourning for that which must inevitably become lost in the process, such as kinship ties and one's originary self. In fact, it seems that the more deliberate one's alimentary activities are to effect resistance against nostalgia, the stronger will be her installation of nostalgia as it is gradually repressed deeper into, and finally becomes encrypted within, her unconscious.

Nostalgia, as such, is not so much disavowed but merely managed and made "palatable" through food that concurrently satisfies the subject's (often unconscious) yearning for homeland and (often conscious) identification with the adopted one. In this regard, as Stewart postulates, is nostalgia engendered in a manner that helps the subject relate to two distinct sets of social references at the same time. Such a negotiation, however, also reflects a self that is divided. Arguably, whether it is food eaten "on an everyday basis, [or] at less frequent and often more lavish festive occasions" (Janowski 4), its powerful entrenchment in particular history, culture and tradition – all of which are indices of home – would invariably surpass its resistive capacity. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between food and kinship evident in almost every culture merely serves to strengthen the ties, be it symbolic or literal, binding the diasporic subject more tightly to her homeland. These are fundamental ties that no event of displacement and relocation can sever. Food, in other words, is

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<sup>17</sup> These are conceptual tools developed by Avtar Brah to understand the different ways subjects occupying "diaspora space" (Brah: 632) negotiate with their belonging. Distinct from diasporic space, diaspora space implies an identification with diasporic logic even though the subject in question is not living in diaspora.

often so profoundly infused with strong emotional parameters linked to the memory of kinship and home, that to render it symbolically invulnerable to nostalgia is more or less impossible. Intimacy between body and food invariably becomes reconstellated as intimacy between (familial) bodies, and in this way, food will always serve to remind the subject about an “understanding of bodies as multiple and as always engaged with other bodies and entities” (Probyn 216), thus mooting any gesture towards resisting nostalgia.

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