

A PUBLICATION OF
THE RESEARCH CENTRE FOR EASTERN
AND NORTH EASTERN REGIONAL STUDIES,
KOLKATA (CENERS-K)



The Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs

JULIE BANERJEE MEHTA

THE FOOD OF RESISTANCE IN THE NOVELS OF CHINESE DIASPORIC WRITER JUDY FONG BATES

*The diasporic Chinese communities in Canada have displayed their acts of resistance in innovative ways by employing food to assert cultural agency and différance (the relationship between text and meaning). The novels of the Chinese-Canadian writer, Judy Fong Bates, perform resistance effectively. She was born in December 1949 in Kaiping, Guangdong, and immigrated to Canada with her mother in 1955 to reunite with her father in Allandale, Ontario. In her novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2004), and her memoir, *The Year of Finding Memory* (2010), she explores the fast-evolving Chinese-Canadian identity, and she confronts*

Julie Banerjee Mehta holds a Master's degree and PhD in English Literature and South Asian Studies from the University of Toronto, and another MA from Jadavpur University, Calcutta. A specialist in world literature, cultural and diaspora studies, she currently teaches postcolonial literature at Loreto College, Calcutta, and has taught at the University of Toronto and York University in Canada. She conceptualised and taught the course, "Asian Cultures and Literatures in Canada," endowed by the Canadian Senator and Chancellor Emerita, Vivienne Poy, and other courses on Asian Canadian Cultural History and Literature at the University of Toronto's Canadian Studies Program and Department of English for seven years. She has published on how food and language are employed by Asian diasporic writers to signpost identity and preserve memory in their adopted homelands. Dr. Mehta is the author of *Dance of Life: Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture* (2001), a cultural study about how diasporic efforts by displaced Khmer people preserved Cambodian culture when it had been silenced during the genocide in the 1970s. She is also co-author of the best-selling biography of Cambodian Prime Minister Strongman, with historian Dr. Harish Mehta. Her translation of Tagore's play *Post Office* was performed in Toronto by Pleiades Theatre in 2010 as part of the Indo-Canadian celebrations to mark Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's 150th anniversary and to celebrate the Year of India in Canada. She has just completed her first novel.

the dislocation, dysfunction, disempowerment and dispossession that is symptomatic of the larger Asian-Canadian immigrant experience through foodways. Her two works are animated by a momentous historical event: the implementation of the exclusionist immigration policy of the Chinese Head Tax that caused hundreds of Chinese-Canadians to suffer ignominy and shame.

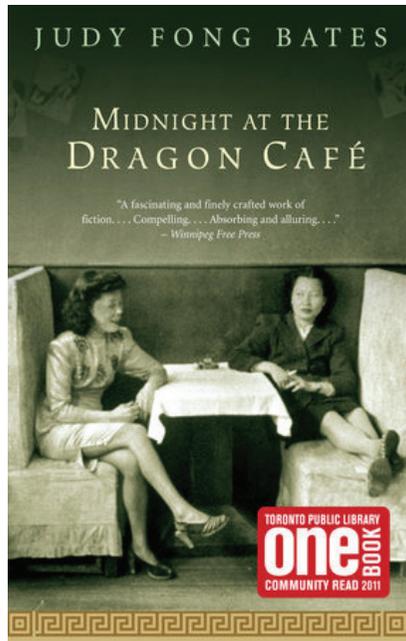
THE CHINESE NOVELISTS WHO HAVE MADE THEIR home in Canada have been shaping their cultural identity and resisting social hegemony by deploying foodways—these are the ways in which cuisines become mobile and travel across continents, and come to represent the cultural, social, and economic practices relating to their production and consumption. They are using foodways (that are located at the intersection of food in culture, traditions, and history) to raise community consciousness, and demand social justice, often implicating the Canadian state’s racist policies.

I argue that for Fong Bates in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, food and the performative acts of cooking and eating are much more than signposts of cultural identity in the Chinese-Canadian diaspora. The culinary fictions are deployed to create discourses of struggle and subversion by Fong Bates, and others, as they unpack the imperialism and domination they had once encountered as colonial subjects and which they must still endure. The diasporic narratives can be read against Edward Said theorising in *Culture and Imperialism*: “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.”¹

The body of Fong Bates problematises my exploration further because she is transnational, diasporic—and female—and she challenges masculinist discourses and establishes feminine agency. Her fictive constructions are often irreverent, provocative and pose a challenge to the “multiculture” policy of the patriarchal Canadian state, although her criticism is at times nuanced. The representations of foodways in her fiction frequently interrogate issues of power, perception and identity within the spatial dynamics of a “new homeland.” By destabilising domestic spaces, where food is meant to signify a certain zone of “belonging and comfort,” Fong Bates, constantly blurs racial, sexual and generational borders to suggest a muddying of purity and

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993, xiii).

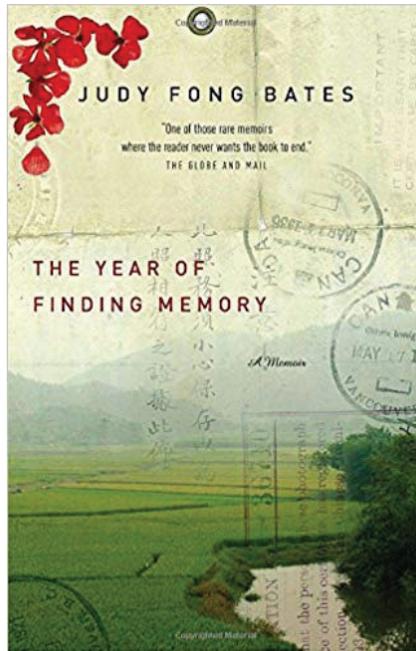
homogeneity. What seems to emerge is a highly complex, Asian-Canadian chutnified identity which is constantly in flux, and in a state of becoming (rather than being). Like the very idea of being “Canadian,” the diasporic Asian identity is being revisited, wrested, reconfigured and constantly contested in the writers’ articulations of home.



Informed by the vexed historical context of immigration in Canada, in this paper I focus on literary representations of racialised, non-Western immigrants whose cultural presence on the contemporary culinary and literary landscape of Canada has created a palpable tension across the genres and is configuring a new definition of a certain Canadian diasporic cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and essentialism, on the other. The situations of encounter are often racial. They are also rewriting the Canadian literary canon, where writers like Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry and Shyam Selvadurai as well as Judy Fong Bates, Anita Rau Badami and Shani Mootoo are making more than cameo appearances. With the Anglo-Canadian writers Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, Thomas King and Timothy Findlay, works by the visible minority writers are

slowly being read by a larger Canadian readership—an act of subversion in itself that is both empowering and abiding of the visible minorities.

These stories from the fringes talk back to the centre and these voices, in their own tongues, are breaking through the ceiling of a white Canadian literary canon. Brown and yellow, curried and chopsueyed, they are all asserting their identity as Canadian writers, much in the way that Homi Bhabha had configured nearly two decades ago when he wrote: “The political and theoretical genealogy of modernity lies not only in the origins of the idea of civility, but in the history of the colonial moment. It is to be found in the resistance of the colonized populations to the Word of God and Man-Christianity and the English language”²



When the Chinese diasporic writers like Fong Bates invoke and evoke a distinctive culinary litany, they frequently omit detailed explanations of unfamiliar terms—thus bok choy is given no English explication in Fong Bates’ *Midnight*. Chum-chum is not described by Mootoo even once in the short story: “Out on Main Street,” nor chholey bhaturey explained by Rau

2 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 56.

Badami in *Can you Hear the Nightbird Call?* Many of the Asian-Canadian writers are doing away with glossing, when they speak of unfamiliar dishes, often challenging the reader to “go figure” what the untranslated/untranslatable words mean in the text, making the linguistic opaqueness an act of resistance in itself. Bill Ashcroft’s *The Empire Strikes Back* remains an excellent theoretical scaffolding on which to build the literary impulses of a newly emerging Asian-Canadian diasporic literary phenomenon as we begin to grapple with the connective tissue that sutures language to cultural agency. As Ashcroft explains:

The gradual discarding of glossing . . . has . . . released language from the myth of cultural authenticity, and demonstrated the fundamental importance of the situating context in according meaning. While the untranslated word remains metonymic and thus emphasizes the (posited) experiential gap which lies at the heart of any cross-cultural text, it also demonstrates quite clearly that the use of the word, even in an English-language context, confers the meaning, rather than any culturally hermetic referentiality. Ultimately the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word and thus the receptor culture, the higher status.³

In the writings of contemporary Asian-Canadian novelists such as Rau Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, Fong-Bates in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, and Joy Kogawa in *Obasan* the blots, ellipses and lapses in the history of Canada—the Komagata Maru, the Chinese Head-Tax, and the Japanese Internment—are evoked to give voice to the struggles of the diasporic Asian communities. Refugee reality statistics in Canada continue to underscore a hard line approach towards immigration policies: of the forty-two million refugees that the United Nations processes every year, Canada only accepts 20,000 refugees, amounting to 0.5 percent of the total population of Canada—a blip on the larger landscape of global intakes. Of the total refugees seeking a safe haven in Canada, sixty percent are refused, and some

3 Bill Ashcroft, et al, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 2002), 65.

of them deported are killed on return to their lands of origin (Online sources on Canada, accessed in 2011).

Fong Bates is a significant force in the Asian-Canadian diasporic movement as the author of three books—a collection of short stories, *China Dog and Other Stories* (1997); a novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2004); and her most recent book, a memoir, *The Year of Finding Memory* (2010). The last named is a gripping story that began as an exploration to understand why her father had committed suicide. The story is about retrieving her past through tracing her father's footsteps, and her journey back to Taishan, her village in the bustling cities of Southern China's Four Counties. In many ways it is also a story about vanishing borders in the age of globalism by virtue of the transnational spaces it straddles half-way across the planet.

Fong Bates confesses: "My father lived the history of the Chinese Head Tax and my father did discuss the Chinese Head Tax, but I never began looking into it then. Now, when I look back, the penny drops: my father was a very bitter man. Su-Jen's father Mr. Chou is very much like my father."⁴ It is a poignant story, hauntingly told, and remained on the bestseller list for fiction for several weeks in 2010 on Canadian national dailies. It is *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, however, which has consumed the public imagination with its strong anchors in the Chinese-Canadian identity and the novel directly confronts the dislocation and dysfunction that was symptomatic of implementing an exclusionist immigration policy by imposing the Chinese Head Tax.

Since the 1880s, some 15,000 labourers were brought from China to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, though they were only paid a third or one-half less than their coworkers. This immigration into British Columbia (BC) was large enough—some 3,000 Chinese, when the 1871 census counted only 33,586 in the province—to arouse concern. The legislature used a strict law to virtually prevent Chinese immigration in 1878. However, this was immediately struck down by the courts as *ultra vires* (beyond the powers of the provincial legislative assembly), as it impinged upon federal jurisdiction over immigration into Canada. The Chinese Head Tax (about \$ 500) was a

4 Julie Mehta, Interview with Judy Fong Bates, November 2011.

fixed fee charged to each Chinese person entering Canadian territory. The high levy was an anomaly at best, and a travesty at worst, because that was the amount a Chinese worker earned in a whole year. The tax was purposefully kept so high so fewer Chinese would be able to enter Canada.

When writer Judy Fong Bates' father, Fong Wah Yen committed suicide by hanging himself in his basement, she found amongst his papers a green certificate with the words Dominion of Canada: "For thirty-three years when he travelled between China and Canada, his head-tax certificate reminded him that he was unwanted in this country."⁵ The infamous head-tax was first levied after the Canadian Parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 and was meant to discourage Chinese people from entering Canada after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The tax prevented Chinese workers from immigrating altogether, but did not deter business people, clergy, educators, students, and other categories. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947, regulations prohibiting families with children over the age of eighteen from joining fathers in Canada remained in place. The repeal was only half a victory. From 1947 to 1957, when the regulations were also repealed, only 500 families were reunited in Canada. Fong Bates recalls that her father spoke to her many times about the head-tax and was extremely bitter about it: ". . . his voice bitter. 'Only the Chinese had to pay this money. No one else. Five hundred dollars to get into this country. Five hundred dollars I had to borrow.'"⁶

Her older colleague, the compelling Japanese-Canadian writer Joy Kogawa, forged a new path, creating a genre of diasporic Asian-Canadian writing with *Obasan* (1981), an internationally acclaimed story of how a Japanese-Canadian family was dispossessed and brutalised by the Japanese internment in Canada, where more than 22,000 Japanese were forcibly held in internment camps following the attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941. The living conditions in the Canadian camps were so poor that the citizens of wartime Japan even sent supplemental food shipments through the Red Cross. Kogawa's family suffered the fate that many Japanese did during

5 Judy Fong Bates, *The Year of Finding Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 2010), 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 6.

the internment. Obasan is a testimony to that suffering. The “stone bread” that the protagonist Naomi’s uncle bakes and eats throughout the novel as a Japanese-Canadian is testimony to the pain and suffering of a people and a part of their history in Canada they do not wish to forget.

On May 23, 1914, the Komagata Maru reached Vancouver and anchored near Burrard Inlet. Both the Indians and the Canadian authorities had been waiting for it. The Canadians wanted to send the ship back to where it had originated. The Indians, on the other hand, had lawyers, money and other provisions, like roti, ready to help the passengers like one of the characters, Harjot Singh, in Rau Badami’s novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Using the trope of cultural markers in her novel—the roti, naan and paratha—that appear in the Sikh-family run café, Delhi Junction, Rau Badami invokes a strong cultural consciousness among her Vancouver-based characters and among readers in Canada and elsewhere who know the Indian bread and its powerful connectivity between the land and its people. Rotis swaddle in their folds the agrarian economy of the Punjab and the identity of an entire race. For this South Asian diasporic Canadian writer, wheat is the currency of life and roti awakens familial, communal, and cultural memory. The ubiquitous roti is the crucial cultural symbol that unites hyphenated Canadian-South Asians in their diverse histories of arrival and settlement in Canada. Fearing them as “brown people” and as wage competitors, the predominantly Anglo-Canadian population responded to their growing numbers in Canada, which in 1908 stood at 5,000 people, most of them in British Columbia, with much hostility. Between 1909 and 1943, only 878 South Asians were allowed to enter Canada (Statistics Canada). Wenying Xu writes: “Each culture’s foodways always already function in its system of representation as signs of sophistication or civilisation over against others engaged in ‘crude and barbaric’ food practices. In its variant ways of transferring Nature to Culture, therefore, cuisine inculcates eaters with a deep-seated (corporeal) sense of diversity and hierarchy within their social group and over against other groups.”⁷

7 Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 4.

Midnight at the Dragon Café is a bildungsroman of an the young girl Su-Jen/Annie, who comes to Canada as a new immigrant, grows up in the small town of Irvine, Ontario in the 1950s and 1960s. This is a also an account of a Chinese girl who is renamed and struggles to find her hyphenated identity. Swinging between a Canadian identity during the day (Annie, while at school and learning to speak English), and Su-Jen, a Chinese persona at home, Annie-Su Jen has to cope with her inflexible “Chinese” mother’s deep dark secret of an affair with her step-brother, even as Su Jen witnesses her old, Chinese father’s gargantuan efforts to give her a better life in Canada. Her mother, Lai-Jing is the personification of cultural rejection and exile. Su-Jen’s step-brother, in his twenties, is Lee Kung, a son born from a common father, Hing-Wun Chou (the owner-partner of Dragon Café, the provincial Chinese restaurant), but a different mother, who dies during the Maoist Revolution, while in China.

There are several different subversions being practised in this story of alienation and diasporic dilemmas about identity and empowerment. One of the most compelling tropes is how food is used by the newcomer Lai-Jing to powerfully critique white Canadian hegemony and fight any attempts of forcible acculturation. Young Lee-Kung’s coming from Owen Sound to Irvine follows close on the heels of Lai-Jing’s arrival at her husband’s restaurant with Su-Jen/Annie, from China. What follows is a remarkable battle that Lai-Jing fights on several fronts, when confronted by White Canadian culinary culture. Lee-Kung joins their father Chou, and begins to manage the “Chinese” kitchen that made ubiquitous Chinese food and the White-Canadian staples which most of the lo fon (white Canadian) customers devoured: “Lee-Kung carried on in the kitchen, cooking the same fish and chips, clubhouse sandwiches, hot chicken and hot beef, and the Chinese dishes like sweet and sour chicken balls and egg foo yongs and chow meins. When we first arrived and my mother saw the “Chinese” food that was served to the customers, she was shocked. “The lo fons,” she said, “I guess they don’t know much about food. She didn’t think much of Canadian food either. It took her a long time to get used to seeing a big slab of meat served on a plate for one person . . .”⁸ In

8 Judy Fong Bates, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004), 78.

her seminal study on issues that beleaguer Chinese identity in Canada and its problematic cultural history, *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small town Canada*, Lily Cho points out that in the context of Chinese identity and identification in Canada eating Chinese food signposts the importance of “a moment of violent incorporation with all of the cannibalistic connotations that accompany the moment of consumption.” Honing in on the idea of sweet and sour pork, she claims that eating Chinese in Canada “is a repetition of the cannibalistic scene where the desire for violence is both preserved and repressed. It is at once an enactment and a disavowal of violence.” Sweet and sour pork, *goo lo yok* (ghost man’s meat, or White man’s meat, in a village dialect close to Cantonese), or sweet and sour anything, for that matter, gestures towards the creation of a Chineseness specifically manufactured for the White Canadian, a surrogate for the “authentic, timeless and unchanging other of settler colonial consuming desires.” Cho maintains that:

In thinking that he is eating Chinese, the settler colonialist will actually consume *goo lo yok*, Whiteman meat, a version of him, and will engage in a moment of symbolic self-cannibalism. Serving back to the settler colonialist his own excessive desires, the story deflects the violence of colonial identification and incorporation from the Chinese subject and back towards the settler colonial one. This narrative suggests a way in which the Chinese migrant escapes the dialectic of self-otherness. Chinese migrants did not need whiteness or Europeanness to define them. Right from the beginning, there was another register of emplacement (Cho 2010, 39).

As Cho suggests in her thoughtful and path-breaking study, the gooey, shiny, orangey, “plasticity” of sweet and sour pork places it in a paradigmatic geography that is inauthentic and suspect, and certainly “un-Chinese.” As she maintains: “After all, we all know that this isn’t Chinese food. It is Chinese and not Chinese, at once impossibly full of ethnic meaning and yet strangely meaningless in that excess.” This discourse of un-Chineseness also carries in its belly a subversive narrative where the “native informant,” the Chinese restaurateurs Lee-Kung is using their agency to deprive the white Canadian from the “real” Chinese experience—something the Canadian cannot fight and win, since he lacks the episteme of Chinese culture. As Lee-Kung reveals to Su-Jen: “You know what your mother calls the Chinese food

on the menu? Fool-the-lo-fon food.”⁹ Cho is lucid in her statement that the menu in Canadian Chinese restaurants “functions on this order, delivering or serving up palatable Chineseness at the same time that it jeopardizes its own authority as a text of Chineseness. Chinese food on the menu betrays the version of Chineseness that White communities can consume, revealing more about Whiteness than Chineseness.”¹⁰ (Cho 2010, 70-71). The decision by Chou and Lee-Kung to serve the White clientele at the Dragon Café familiar items to the white Canadian palate (like chow mein and sweet and sour pork) reveals to us the acts of manipulation that diasporic minorities perform, thereby deciding how much and what kind of Chineseness should be made accessible to the white Canadian.

The reiteration of the swing door that forms an unstable border and divides the public space of the restaurant from the private space of the inner lives of the Chou family offers a reading that suggests this same kind of cultural resistance by a minority community to lay bare what is the core of its identity—a Chineseness that inexorably belongs to its own. The resistance extends to Lai-Jing and Lee-Kung cooking and consuming traditional Chinese dishes with impunity—not merely as a statement of racial distinction but also as an act of insurgency against Lai-Jing’s husband Chou, who stands for all that is good and wholesome but also represents the older generation of lo wah kew, Chinese men who came to China to break out of their cycle of poverty. Servile and poor, they paid head-tax and were subject to a defunct judiciary and the horrors of racism. Father Chou, representing the older Chinese immigrants who were resigned to their fate and attempted to acculturate in small ways to be more acceptable to the White Canadian “host” population, is “built on memories of my own father” says Fong Bates.¹¹ In *The Year of Finding Memory* Fong Bates confesses that the Chinese were considered “undesirable, perhaps even subhuman.”

Growing her own Chinese vegetables in her white Canadian patch was one of the few pleasurable and empowering acts by Su-Jen’s mother. Every

9 Ibid, 139.

10 Lily Cho, *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 70-71.

11 Julie Mehta, Interview with Judy Fong Bates, November 22, 2011.

spring Lai-Jing looked forward to planting her Chinese garden. She would have saved some seeds from previous years or would buy seeds from Pock Mark Lee's mobile Chinese grocery: Bok choy, fuzzy melons, snow peas, and winter melons were her prized produce.

Lai-Jing feels exiled in Canada, but as the reader soon begins to realise she also feels superior. The fact that almost at the moment of her arrival she articulates that the White Canadian knows little about nutrition and food, suggests an assertion that her Chinese culture is a more "informed" one. Her superiority comes not from a misinformed cultural arrogance but from a place of pride and an intricate and intense knowledge of her own tradition. As Su-Jen observes: "For her here were two things that were essential to a meal. One was rice, and the other was soup. I think she understood that lo fons substituted potatoes and bread for rice, but the thought of a meal without soup was unthinkable."¹²

The idea of belonging to a certain community is blended with what the community consumes and how it consumes it. Lai-Jing's insistence that soup be the mandatory mantra for every meal at the Chou household is her way of establishing a Chineseness that is reflected in her active resistance to learn English. A spirit of solidarity is created at meal times within the Chou family. And though it might be a fractured spirit, with Su-Jen's mother and step-brother having an affair in the household, the cultural value accorded to eating together under most tense conditions, keeps that sense of family intact at least on the outside. The precision and love that were ingredients in her mother's kitchen still resonates with Su-jeu when she confesses that whenever she eats wilted greens with amaranth drizzled with soy sauce and sesame oil years afterwards, when she is an adult, she still tasted "a hint of soil, reminding me of my mother's garden."

As Mary Lukanuski explains, nostalgia is often influenced by psychological and ontological formations of foodways:

How food is consumed is a powerful method of further defining a community . . . A sense of order, place and discipline is created: the tacit understanding, beside any divine command, is that without such regulations

12 Fong Bates, *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, 70.

the community would fall victim to its individual appetites. Once members of the community were pursuing their own desires, the community would disintegrate.¹³

The traffic of food from without to within the body also seeps into the discourse of difference. Su-Jen's observation as a young girl that "however warm it was no one in my family sweat like some of the lo fon customers who come into the restaurant," incorporates an otherness. Further juxtaposition of the white body and what it ingests becomes an interesting location for signposting Chinese physiological superiority:

My parents commented on the men, dripping with moisture, and the women with the dark, wet patches spreading under the arms of their blouses. My mother also complained that the lo fon aunts and uncles smelled different, stranger than we Chinese. My father said it was because they drank too much milk and their bodies had more hair. I asked him how he knew. "Look at their arms. Look at Hardware Store Uncle," he answered.¹⁴

For Fong-Bates, food is a smorgasbord of complexities and one that she uses deftly to visit the ingestion-digestion-excretion metaphor in order to distinguish between lo fon food habits and their consequent body smells. In her short story "Eat Bitter" that appeared in her first book, *China Dog and Other Stories*, the character Hua Fan learns of the same sort of gustatory craving and physiological manifestation in lo fons from her Elder Uncle, as Su-Jen does from her parents in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. Trying to explain why lo fon smell so different, Elder Uncle goes straight to the point: "The lo fons eat a lot of something called cheese. It stinks and has a taste that is even worse. It coats your mouth and you can't get rid of the taste."¹⁵

Early in the narrative Lai-Jing is very clear about the importance of balancing a diet according to the principles of yin yang, and warns Su-Jen about eating too much of "heaty" lo fon foods. She looks at the White Canadian diet with derision and urges her daughter to remember the serious pitfalls of adopting Western food habits. Lai-Jing lives on the border that separates the

13 Mary, Lukanuski, "A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness," in *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 113.

14 Fong Bates, *Midnight*, 91.

15 *Ibid.*, 85.

mainstream White and the minority Yellow, and prefers to err on the side of her Chineseness, actively rejecting crossing over to the other side. This is the kind of self-alienation that is reflected in Said's idea of travellers: "There are many sorts of travellers, some live on the borderline, the border between two states . . . The States could be feeling and thought, private and public. They have a foot in each camp. These may be migrants who don't want to give up their own culture or assimilate with the new group."¹⁶

In *Midnight*, Lee Kung as rebel within the Chou household is manifested through desire on several levels. His having an affair with his father's wife, Lai-Jing, his step-mother and Su-Jen's biological mother, is the central act of insurgency in this work. And it is strongly under-girded in his creation of the Boston Cream Pie which signposts a generational conflict within the Chou household between father and son. But the Boston Cream Pie is more than an assertion of Lee Kung's ushering in a new order where he challenges the older Chinese ethic of "keep your head down and work, work, work." The Boston Cream Pie, in its inherent hybridity, is a register of a new Chinese-Canadian agency where a Chinese cook in a small town greasy-spoon restaurant is able to create an essentially Western dessert that shatters the myth of lo fon supremacy in Western culinary creations. The muddled identity of the Boston Cream Pie itself adds an interesting layer to our exploration of hybrid identity in the novel. Historical trivia tells us that cooks in New England and Pennsylvania Dutch regions were known for their cakes and pies and the dividing line between them was very thin. This cake was probably called a pie because in the mid-nineteenth century, pie tins were more common than cake pans. The first versions might have been baked in pie tins. Boston Cream Pie is a remake of the early American "pudding-cake pie." With the personifier Queen, Fong-Bates nimbly inverts the symbol of power from lo fun to the Chinese, and hands the sceptre to Lee-Kung:

The Boston Cream Pie sat behind the glass sliding doors. On the top shelf of the stainless steel cooler behind the Formica counter, like the queen of desserts for everyone to see. My mother said that it made the restaurant a little classier now that we were serving something so exotic -- a cake filled

16 Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson (MIT Press, 1991), 360.

with vanilla pudding, iced with soft peaks of whipped cream and decorated with maraschino cherries. The first time my brother gave me a slice, I ate the whole thing in three mouthfuls. I almost swooned, the flavours and textures blending so sweetly together, melting in my mouth, more delicious than anything from Dooleys' Bakery.¹⁷

Theorising foodways in diasporic Asian literature in Canada is a field wide open, and therefore the road untravelled beckons. Unlike American theorists of food such as Wenying Xu (*Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*), Anita Mannur (*Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*), Krishnendu Ray (*The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*) and Maxine Hong Kingston (*Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*), Canadian studies on diasporic representations of food in Asian-Canadian writing is now only beginning to be mined. Lily Cho's seminal work *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* has been one of the first most comprehensive, rigorous and skilful explorations of Chinese cuisines in Canada. With a growing interest in diasporic Asian Culture and the push from many cultural initiatives like the annual Asian Heritage Month seminars, conferences and cultural festivals in major Canadian cities, there is at least an acknowledgement that food is a crucial component of cultural imagination and its performance in the Asian-Canadian diaspora. With the publication of the formidable tome *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History* conceptualised by Canadian historian Franca Iacovetta, the first consummate publication about food histories of different immigrant communities in this nation, the Canadian academy will hopefully seek out more spicy morsels embedded in the literary articulations about food in the narratives of subversion and citizenship by Asian-Canadian writers, to understand better the reality of embattled, immigrant lives in Canada.

¹⁷ Fong Bates, *Midnight*, 79.