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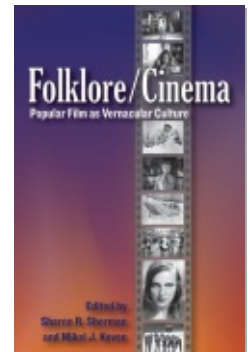
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Beyond *Communitas*

*Cinematic Food Events and the Negotiation of Power,
Belonging, and Exclusion*

LUANNE ROTH

MANY CLASSIC STUDIES of foodways by folklorists and other scholars have effectively shown the sophisticated ways that food functions to foster *communitas*, a heightened sense of group cohesion. Owing to the ethnographic tradition of representing cultures in a decidedly celebratory manner, as well as the tendency for individuals and groups to perform self-consciously, it follows that most depictions of food within communities adhere to this paradigm of *communitas* (cf. Humphrey and Humphrey 1988). Recently, a few studies have moved beyond this positive function of food behavior to consider how food may be employed simultaneously to reinforce hegemonic or patriarchal structures as well as punish, cajole, or otherwise negotiate power relationships.

Looking at cinematic portrayals of food events may be particularly revealing because, as mimetic devices, they represent aspects of food behavior not generally included in extant ethnographic and autoethnographic representations of foodways. Indeed “scenes which suggest happiness, comfort, or fulfillment are exceptional among Hollywood productions,” observes film critic Parley Ann Boswell. “In American movies, food and dining are most often associated with crisis, frustration, conflict, or emptiness. No matter what the food, or what the meal being presented to us, Hollywood shows us not how Americans celebrate an abundance of food, but how this very abundance of food exposes other yearnings and other needs of American culture” (1993, 9). Approaching popular American films through an ethnographic lens, I rely on folkloristic, feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial theories for insight. Beyond the obvious examples of “food films,” those employing food as a central thematic device, I examine mainstream popular films for the brief, subtle, yet powerfully resonant moments when food symbolizes racial and cultural identity and, more significantly, negotiates power, belonging, and exclusion.¹

In this schema, the foreign Other—like the “disgusting” foods the Other is presumed to eat—manifests as the *abject*. Presented cinematically as defiled and polluting, the Other must be expelled, a process painfully evident in Tony Kaye’s *American History X* (1998). In this and other films, there exists a simultaneous desire to consume the Other. A negotiation of this conflict is exemplified in Joel Zwick’s *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and John Hamburg’s *Along Came Polly* (2004), where the Other is confronted (and confined) safely at the *ethnic* restaurant—a mediating site that, in the final analysis, reinforces colonialism and complicates traditional approaches to foodways.

Abjecting the Other in *American History X*

People being equated with the food they eat, of course, is not a new idea. In light of the worn adage, “we are what we eat,” most people can quickly rattle off a number of foods associated with their own families and communities; food in this sense clearly functions to create *communitas* and ethnic identity. The flip side of creating *communitas* through food is that it often does so by defining alterity—what is outside, what is foreign—we are what we don’t eat. Hence, people can also, if asked, recall stereotypes about the food of other groups, especially that of “foreigners” (Kalčík 1984).

Historically, food has been one of the primary means by which the other is posited as inferior, and it constituted an integral part of the social construction of race during the early colonial period. Africans, for example, were seen first and foremost as bodies, and perceived bodily functions differentiated the traveler from the native (see, for example, Fanon [1952] 1967, 111–14; Pratt [1992] 1998, 52; Spurr 1993, 22; and Turner 1993, 9–32). The construction of the Other, above all, as a body positions it as an embodiment of filth, something that needs to be abjected. The more “foreign” people are considered, the more likely their food behavior will be considered repulsive, immoral, or barbaric. The reverse is also true: the more a group’s food is perceived to be repulsive, immoral, or barbaric, the more likely the people who eat (or are presumed to eat) it will be seen that way. Whether it involves rumors about “man-eating” Africans (e.g., Fanon [1952] 1967; Turner 1993) or endogamic, cannibalistic Asian American immigrants (Kalčík 1984), real or imagined food behavior has been used to justify the colonization of many nations and cultures and otherwise express racism and hatred.

Several processes of othering via food and the mouth are exposed in *American History X*, a powerful film that reveals the world of Derek

Vinyard (Edward Norton), who is trying to salvage his ruptured family after serving a three-year prison term for involuntary manslaughter. Employing a flashback narrative structure, the film traces the ripple effects of Derek's racism and the tangled web of the neo-Nazi movement in Venice, California, which have now spread to his younger brother, Danny (Edward Furlong).

The movie opens with the nondiagetic sound of a sorrowful trumpet playing over a sunset beach. The solo gradually becomes a duet and then choral vocals and an occasional snare drum roll. The peaceful moment ends as the next scene unfolds. We see three Caucasian characters—Danny trying to sleep while his brother Derek and girlfriend Stacey have loud sex beneath a swastika flag in the room next door. Outside the window, three African American men conspire to steal Derek's pickup truck. Alerted by Danny, Derek grabs his gun and shoots without hesitation, killing one man, wounding another, and firing repeatedly at the fleeing getaway car. The choral music swells resplendently, creating a powerful counterpoint to the slow-motion images of Danny's horrified reaction and Derek—proud and almost radiant—sporting his swastika and barbed wire tattoos. After several scenes that take place in the present, the film returns to this flashback scene. The brutal manner in which Derek murders the already-wounded man (Antonio David Lyons) is significant. At gunpoint, Derek orders the man to place his open mouth—the oral cavity that becomes a preoccupation in later scenes—on the curb's edge. "Now say 'good night,'" Derek exclaims, as his boot stomps down on the man's head. The next image is withheld; we can only hear a ripping sound as the camera cuts to Danny's stunned expression and then returns to Derek, who spits in disgust on the dead man and walks away. "The sound of the kid's head splitting open on the curb went right through me," recalls Danny.

Most of the film's story, in fact, unfolds via either Danny's recollections, shown in black-and-white flashbacks, or events in the present. For submitting a history paper that proposed Adolf Hitler as a civil-rights hero, Danny has a makeup paper assignment that requires him to analyze the events surrounding his brother's incarceration. Through stream of consciousness, he recalls several food-related moments. For example, at a basketball game—between the white guys and the black guys—a black player (Antonio David Lyons) "plays the dozens" on a morbidly obese white-supremacist player, Seth Ryan (Ethan Suplee), calling him a "fat, pale, pasty, pastrami-eating, cracker motherfucker." The same player, who is later killed, knocks Derek down during the game, giving him a bloody lip. In the Vinyard family living room

shortly after, Seth crashes in a chair, complaining loudly about starving as he reaches for handfuls of jelly beans, throwing a black one, as if repulsive, onto the floor. These scenes, though brief, draw attention to connections between food and race.

In her analysis of the conflicting discourses surrounding soul food, Doris Witt confronts "the discrepancy between filthy 'matter' and filthy 'actions'" (1998, 260), theorizing where the "disorder" of nonwhiteness is situated in terms of food. Is it in the person (who eats the food)? In the act (of eating)? Or in the object of action (the food itself)? (265). Exploring such key "ontologies of blackness," Witt finds that those stigmatized elements "have been thought to reside not in black bodies but instead in foods said to nourish those bodies" (260). This problem of where filth and foreignness are located manifests itself several times in *American History X*.

Accounting for the way Derek became *the* Skinhead, one scene shows a flashback of him holding a pep rally for his white followers in a parking lot across from a neighborhood supermarket, now owned by "some fucking Korean." Calling immigrants "social parasites," "criminals," and "border jumpers," the charismatic leader preaches about the way "they" have taken over "our" country and "our" jobs, giving "decent, hard-working Americans...the shaft." The supermarket becomes the battlefield. The terrorist group, wearing stocking and ski masks as disguises, rushes into the market, shouting and smashing everything in sight, including the workers (who appear to be Latino) and food, with baseball bats, fists, and feet. Forty-pound bags of pinto beans are slashed open with knives as if they are human bodies; the gutted bags pour their contents onto the floor "like a fucking piñata"—a symbolic display threatening further brutal acts.

A dark-skinned female worker (Francine Morris) cowers behind the cash register as the vandals tear the place apart. When they discover her, three masked men hoist her screaming and struggling body onto the counter, separating her legs and otherwise positioning her as if to gang-rape her. One of the men says soothingly, "It's okay, sweetheart...I'm not going to hurt you." We hear the other men saying things such as, "This bitch stinks," "Get some cleaning products on her," and "She smells like fish and chips and guacamole." The camera cuts quickly back and forth between the scenes of food items being destroyed and the men's degrading treatment of the woman. The men force what we take to be Mexican food items (hot sauce and salsa) into her mouth, followed by what appears to be applesauce and cow's milk, which they also smear over her face. The camera lingers uncomfortably in a close-up of the viscous

whiteness, dripping in slow motion from the woman's mouth, then cuts to Seth standing at the door, clutching a nightstick in one hand and what appears to be a large plastic hamburger in the other while the gang runs out of the store.

This rape-by-food scene is ripe for analysis. In addition to the willful destruction of the Other's food, symbolizing the Other's body, is the suggestion that the consumption of certain "stinky" foods is associated, however erroneously, with foreignness. Following Joel Kovel ([1970] 1988), Richard Dyer writes, "Non-white people are associated in various ways with the dirt that comes out of the body, notably in the repeated racist perception that they smell..., that their food smells, that they eat dirty foods—offal, dogs, snakes—and that they slaughter it in direct and bloody forms. Obsessive control of faeces and identification of them as the nadir of human dirt both characterize Western culture: to be white is to be well potty-trained" (1997, 75–76). Focusing on the connection between the color of excrement and skin, Kovel explains "the central symbol of dirt throughout the world is faeces, known by that profane word with which the emotion of disgust is expressed: shit...when contrasted with the light colour of the body of the Caucasian person, the dark colour of faeces reinforces, from the infancy of the individual in the culture of the West, the connotation of blackness with badness" ([1970] 1988, 87).

The men's insults to the female grocery-store clerk employ food names, particularly those deemed smelly and disgusting. Thought to eat disgusting cultural foods, the woman becomes disgusting herself and must be purified before she can be safely approached. Threatening to pour cleaning products on her (we do not see whether they actually do so), the men force into her mouth first Mexican foods and then various "white" foods, smearing them on her face. We hear the attackers saying, as they rub in the liquids, "Hey, this is a great color on you," "You could get a white woman's job, bitch," and "Moving up in the world, huh?" Such comments reveal their attempt to make her more white and graphically illustrate how the Other's perceived stinkiness, filthiness, and badness may be countered, symbolically at least, with pale/white/American foods because "to be white is to have expunged all dirt, faecal or otherwise, from oneself: to look white is to look clean" (Dyer 1997, 76).

In contrast to the handful of male workers attacked, the woman is the only one violated on such a personal and degrading level. In the sad reality of war, women are often raped and sexually abused by members of the conquering group as a symbol of their dominance. Even in the postwar period, the violation of women symbolizes the West's

penetration of foreign markets. Traise Yamamoto argues, for instance, that the “unstated structure of heterosexual mastery reveals itself if we look at what are frequent descriptions of the present economical need to ‘penetrate the Japanese market’” (1999, 22; emphasis in original). Common American phrases, such as “the opening of Japan,” contain images of “forced penetration” that are repeatedly utilized in such American institutions as the military, government, and media, all of which employ the “language of rape in the postwar period” (23). On the battlefield of the supermarket, therefore, the men penetrate the woman through her oral cavity as a way of expressing anger and hatred over the nonwhites in America. And if the connection to rape still eludes the viewer at this point, the inescapable allusion to male ejaculation is underscored as the white fluids drip out of the screaming, gagging woman’s mouth.

Like the food on which the woman gags, this scene is hard to swallow. What makes it particularly intriguing are the attackers’ statements about the need to *clean* the victim. The more I reflect on this scene, the more I cannot escape Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as an analytical tool. Abjection is the primary form of repression, according to Kristeva, that occurs prior to ego development. Before abjection, the infant exists in a state of *chora*, where the child “experiences itself...as being one with all” (1982, 13). Abjection is the moment that makes the dichotomy between the ego and the object possible. It is the infant subject’s initial attempt to establish a corporeal schema separate from the maternal body, first enacted by the infant spitting out the mother’s milk. This moment is “a violent, clumsy breaking away” from the state of undifferentiated *chora* with the maternal prior to the formation of the “I” (1982, 13). Having established the self via this expulsion, the abject then comes to threaten the “clean and proper body” and thereby becomes loathsome and disgusting. The process is complicated, though, by the concomitant experience of dread and attraction. If we could just expel the abject and “get it over with,” that would be one matter. But because we must continually live with the abject, because we cannot escape it completely, “the abject is fascinating, bringing out an obsessed attraction” at the same time it creates “dread of the unnameable” (Young 1990, 145).

While the primal Other for Kristeva is the maternal, her theory leaves room for positing the foreigner (or racialized Other) as abject as others have done, for “defilement is what is jettisoned from the symbolic system” (1982, 65).² Kristeva argues, by implication, that the constitution of Western hegemonic identity, the “symbolic order,” requires abjection in some form. Something must be “othered” in constructing the hegemony’s identity. If, as Kristeva claims, “abjection is coextensive with social

and symbolic order," then wherever a social system exists, we can expect to find abjection (1982, 68), and we see this idea illustrated in *American History X* through the murder-by-mouth scene and two rape-by-food scenes. Like the primal abjection Kristeva describes, the threat of the foreign Other's presence, resulting in the possible disintegration of the boundaries of the nation-state self, is experienced as frightening. The supermarket no longer offers comfort as the white gang's neighborhood store because foreigners now own it. While foreigners are recognized as a threat to subjectivity, they are simultaneously desired and feared, and necessary for the preservation of the nation-state self.

It is no accident that, in films such as *American History X*, this process of abjection manifests itself so frequently via alimentary images, considering that "food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva 1982, 2). Although the abject is associated with filth and disgust, Kristeva reminds us, "It is...not lack of cleanliness...that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, 4)—like the border-jumping, foreign woman in the grocery store. Hence, the woman becomes the abject—desired by the men, yet standing outside the white colonial system, making that desire disturbing. To survive this psychological crisis, the men transform her into filth, allowing them to "clean" her so they can then "consume" her without risk of defiling themselves.

This rape-by-food scenario becomes especially poignant when a similar one occurs in the following scene, taking place during a family meal. Thanks to food scholars, we understand how the family meal—a microcosm of family dynamics—socializes, educates, expresses and plays out relational and power dynamics. James Bossard suggested long ago that the family meal is the family "at ease" (1943). Just as often, though, it is the family battlefield (Belasco 1989; Roth 2005). As a symbolically charged occasion, the family meal manages to operate—like other family dynamics—largely unself-consciously until a change is introduced. Boswell challenges the assumption that "in American films...home cooking should tell us that all is well in these American homes." This is rarely the case, she notes: "When we see entire families sitting around a table eating a home-cooked meal, we are almost never made to feel comfortable. In Hollywood productions of the last 20 years, home-cooked food and family dining scenes have been used to highlight unhealthy aspects of the American family" (1993, 17).

In this particular disrupted family meal at the Vinyard home, the attending family members include the recently widowed mother, Doris

(Beverly D'Angelo), oldest brother Derek, middle sister Davina (Jennifer Lien), and younger brother Danny. They sit around a formal dining-room table the evening before Derek commits murder. Joining the family are two nonfamily members: the mother's new boyfriend, Murray (Elliott Gould), who, we quickly learn, is Jewish, and Stacey (Fairuza Balk), Derek's skinhead girlfriend. Here the family meal serves as a judicial court where people evaluate and judge each other, debate contemporary issues, make important decisions, and negotiate relationships. The already tense table conversation quickly becomes heated with the highly charged issue of race—the Rodney King case—being debated. We see Derek expressing his racist doctrine, cheered on by his sycophantic girlfriend; Davina becoming increasingly shocked and frustrated by the racist attitudes; and newcomer Murray trying to be the mediating voice of reason but clearly disturbed by the direction of the conversation. As the tension between the “liberals” and the “racists” rises, Doris touches Murray's hand several times in comfort, but then she explodes briefly, slamming her open hand on the table and saying, “Can we just drop this Rodney King thing?” She pauses, takes a deep breath, then forces a smile and asks sweetly, “Who'd like some dessert?”

But the arguing resumes immediately. When it becomes heated again, and Stacey begins to rant, Davina interrupts to ask desperately, “Can I please be excused?” Her mother quickly answers yes to forestall further escalation. But Derek, having stepped into his deceased father's shoes, immediately overrides his mother, asserting his presumed patriarchal dominance. “No, you cannot,” he commands Davina; “You need to stay until you learn some fucking manners!” Davina retorts, “Who the hell do you think you are?” and stands to leave. Derek physically blocks Davina; when she attempts to get around him, he grabs her by the hair, yanking her back and forth. Grabbing a handful of roast beef from the table, he shoves it into her mouth, yelling, “You need to learn some fucking manners” until she cries and chokes, gasping for breath.

After this explosion, Derek turns triumphantly to Murray, ripping off his shirt to expose his white-power tattoos and yelling,

My family...my family....You're not a part of it, and you never will be....You don't think I see what you're trying to do here? You think I'm gonna sit here and smile while some fucking kike tries to fuck my mother? It's never going to happen, Murray, fucking forget it; not on my watch, not while I'm in this family. I will fucking cut your shylock nose off and stick it up your ass before I'll let that happen. Coming in here and *poisoning my family's dinner* with your Jewish, nigger-loving, hippie-bullshit. Fuck you, fuck you, asshole.

Fucking Kabala-reading motherfucker. Get the fuck out of my house!³ (*emphasis added*)

Like the black jelly bean and the supermarket workers, the Jewish boyfriend threatens the “clean and proper” body of the Caucasian American family and is considered, therefore, to be filthy and disgusting. The boyfriend is abjected from the sanctity of the family, just as the foreign woman and African American man were abjected in prior scenes. Family systems theorists Michael Nichols and Richard Schwartz explain, “Family structure involves a set of covert rules that govern transactions in the family...altering the basic structure will have ripple effects on all family transactions....Whatever the chosen pattern, it tends to be self-perpetuating and resistant to change” ([1984] 1998, 244). If one group member shifts within the family structure (in this case, because of the father’s death), the others fill in the absent space and/or pressure deviating members to return to earlier roles—hence, Derek steps into the space left by his father. Note, for instance, that after this violent eruption, Derek stops calling his mother Ma and begins calling her Doris instead.

The change in family roles also affects Davina. When she does not obey Derek’s orders, he asserts his patriarchal authority by disciplining her. With physical force and food, he teaches her manners. Dyer explains, “There are special anxieties surrounding the whiteness of white women *vis-à-vis* sexuality. As the literal bearers of children, and because they are held primarily responsible for their initial raising, women are the indispensable means by which the group—the race—is in every sense reproduced” (1997, 29). By attacking his sister, Derek proves his dominance not just over Davina but also over Murray, and Derek’s verbal attack on his mother, “How could you bring him to my father’s table?... You disgust me” follows suit.

Significantly, Derek uses roast beef to choke his sister, instead of green beans, dinner rolls, or dessert. Recently, feminist scholars have addressed the more than metaphorical connection (at least in Western cultures) between killing animals and raping women. As several scholars have argued, meat eating inherently involves sexual politics—meat is identified with maleness, masculinity, virility, and strength (see Adams 1994; Twigg 1983). Therefore, meat symbolizes male dominance in this cinematic scene, becoming a celebration of patriarchy itself. And in light of Dyer’s observation about white women reproducing “the race,” it is no accident that Derek penetrates his sister/daughter’s mouth with meat—a hypermasculine symbol that powerfully communicates his dominance. That he exerts his power by penetrating her oral cavity is also not accidental. Near the end of this scene, the mother, in despair,

crouches over the curb in front of the house—foreshadowing the place where Derek will enact the brutal murder-by-mouth later that night.

Mary Douglas has discussed that the oral cavity is believed to be highly vulnerable, especially during times of stress. Explaining why certain groups of people approach foods more cautiously than others, she suggests that minorities are more likely to be suspicious of food cooked by outsiders and more protective of their body orifices. “Food is not likely to be polluting at all,” in fact, “unless the external boundaries of the social system are under pressure” (1966, 126; see also Angyal 1941; Turner 1987, 1993). Moving beyond the either/or of Douglas’s model, in *American History X*, we see members of the minority being violated but also members of the dominant group (white males) feeling threatened and fearing defilement and poisoning by nonwhite outsiders. By tying together these three parallel incidents of people being violated through the oral cavity, Tony Kaye’s *American History X* blatantly portrays how this perceived vulnerability relates to processes of othering and abjection. As I will show, these dynamics are at work in other forms as well.

Othering, Abjecting, and Continuing Colonialism in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Along Came Polly*

Beyond the explicitness of race relations in *American History X*, abjection and processes of othering play out in other recent popular films, albeit in more subtle forms. I turn next to Joel Zwick’s *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and John Hamburg’s *Along Came Polly*, both romantic comedies where food functions as the main vehicle to express difference (and otherness). However, if the Other’s food is initially viewed with suspicion, it is eventually embraced in ritual spaces (i.e., ethnic restaurants) as a sign of adventurousness and cultural capital.⁴

My Big Fat Greek Wedding is a love story narrated in the first person by Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos), the second-generation daughter of an extended Greek family. Toula recollects her childhood in Chicago fairly quickly through food scenes in a way that parallels the overall narrative structure of *American History X* (e.g., flashbacks and voice-overs). All of the early food events depict Toula being embarrassed and othered because of her family’s “weird” Greek foodways. For instance, Toula describes how her family celebrates a traditional Christian holiday:

Christmas...? What’s it like? Well...I’m Greek, right? Okay...My mom makes roast lamb; my dad and uncle fight over who gets the lamb brain; my Aunt Voula forks it with a fork and chases me around, trying to get me to eat it because it will make me smart...

My whole family—is big and loud, and everybody’s always in each other’s lives and business. Like you never have a minute alone to just think because we’re always together, just eating, eating. The only other people we know are Greeks...because Greeks marry Greeks, to breed more Greeks...to be loud, breeding Greek eaters!

Toula recounts other memories of ways her family foodways have caused her to feel othered. “When I was growing up,” Toula explains, “I knew I was different. The other girls were blond and delicate. And I was a swarthy six-year-old with sideburns. I so badly wanted to be like the popular girls...all sitting together, talking...eating their Wonder Bread sandwiches.” Here we see the young Toula (Christina Eleusiniotis) at school, resignedly eating her lunch of moussaka at a table by herself, while at the next table, the popular girls—white, blond, thin, pretty—are eating sandwiches, the all-American food. The girls make fun of Toula’s lunch; one deliberately mispronounces it “moose ka-ka” (feces), establishing the boundaries between self and Other by associating the Other’s food, and therefore the Other, with filth. This is similar to what happens in *American History X*, except that in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, we share Toula’s awareness of the ways her family’s foodways help to constitute and maintain her as Other.⁵

Like Danny in *American History X*, Toula also recalls being socialized over family meals. For example, Toula sits at the kitchen table with her siblings while her mother, Maria Portokalos (Lainie Kazan), prepares food. “My mom was always cooking foods filled with warmth and wisdom,” Toula says in the voice-over, “and never forgetting that side dish of steaming guilt.” At this, her mother chastises Toula’s baby brother, “Nikko, don’t play with your food. When I was your age, we didn’t have food.” Next, we see Toula as a twelve-year-old (Marita Zouravlioff), sitting at the kitchen table while her father, Gus Portokalos (Michael Constantine), lectures to the children about the history “of our people” over breakfast. “Nice Greek girls,” Toula is told regularly throughout her childhood, “are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone until the day we die.”⁶ Destined to have her future as a woman determined this way for the rest of her life, Toula despairs. Moreover, members of her family repeatedly point out that, at thirty, Toula is virtually unmarriageable.

We can read some feminist coding into Toula’s character at this point, perhaps a strategy of feigning incompetence (Radner and Lanser 1993), because we never actually see her demonstrating traditional forms of “female competence” (e.g., preparing food). Given the stated purpose of Greek women, Toula’s failure to cook is significant. “It’s like

she don't want to get married," remarks Toula's bewildered father.⁷ But this incompetence does not save her from a life of serving food: "Nice Greek girls who don't find a husband work in the family restaurant...day after day, year after year." Toula desires a career and a life outside her overly determined Greek identity. In the restaurant, she stands behind the counter, lifeless, wearing thick glasses and a drab brown waitress smock that matches her equally drab hair. "I wish I had a different life," she laments. "I wish I was braver or prettier or just happy. But it's useless to dream because nothing ever changes."

Of course, things do change. To achieve the heterosexual resolution that classic Hollywood cinema demands, Toula's narrative leads her to meet Ian Miller (John Corbett), a Caucasian-American, vegetarian, literature professor. Ian walks into the restaurant one day, past the Greek landscape painting that covers one entire wall, and sits down with his professor friend, Mike (Ian Gomez), who is examining a photo of a woman. "You set me up with her already—I already met her," Ian says dismissively, confusing this woman with others. "They look the same—They're all the same, Mike." As he finishes, he notices Toula, standing—like his "own private Greek statue"—to take his order. This brief encounter between Toula and Ian unwittingly inspires Toula's metamorphosis from frumpy to beautiful, a transformation that occurs virtually overnight (even without a fairy godmother). The rest of the film, as the title promises, traces the hilarious ordeal of planning a wedding amid two very different families where the Greek side more or less dominates.

Because this film is not *My Big Fat Anglo Wedding* (there are already plenty of those), we do not learn much about the Miller family's foodways, but we do glean that Ian's parents, Harriet and Rodney Miller (Fiona Reid and Bruce Gray), are Caucasian, upper-middle-class members of the North Shore Country Club and exemplify the classic sense of Victorian aesthetics. The first introduction of Toula to the Millers is awkward, to say the least. At the formal dinner table, during strained, albeit polite, conversation, the Millers reveal they are unfamiliar relating to nonwhite people in such a personal setting without a servant/employee relationship existing: "So you're Greek then?" Mr. Miller asks. Then Mrs. Miller turns to her husband and asks, "Rodney, didn't you have a receptionist who was Greek?" "No, Harriet," he answers, "she was...." They ponder this for a moment, considering Armenian, until they come to the conclusion the receptionist was not Armenian or Greek; she was, in fact, Guatemalan. They smile smugly at having recalled this detail, and we see Toula recoiling at the implication that, as far as the Other goes, "They're all the same."

Foodways theorist Lucy Long sets up a model for establishing difference and othering based on the boundaries of what is considered edible versus palatable: "The difference between the realms of edible and palatable is perhaps most clearly seen in how we use them to evaluate other eaters. The eater of the 'not edible' is perceived as strange, perhaps dangerous, definitely not one of us, whereas the eater of the unpalatable is seen as having different tastes" (2004, 33). While we do not know exactly what the Millers consider edible or palatable, we can observe the outer boundaries of their food system by what they refuse to eat and by what they find unpalatable or disgusting about the Portokalos family's food system.

When Ian's parents first meet the Portokalos family, over what is supposed to be "a quiet dinner" with Toula's parents, the entire extended family is present (twenty-seven first cousins plus aunts and uncles), along with a lamb roasting on a spit on the front lawn (from which people take meat with their fingers), amid hearty drinking, dancing, and laughing. What is normal and celebratory for the Portokalos family completely inverts the Victorian restraint that the Millers consider normal behavior. As the Millers are led to a love seat in the Portokalos living room, Aunt Voula (Andrea Martin) sits down beside them and proceeds to tell a story about a lump that grew on her neck, had to have a biopsy, and was found to contain the teeth and spinal cord of her twin. As these last words leave her mouth, a tray of food is thrust in front of the Millers—"Spanakopita! You hungry?" Their disgusted response is triggered by the close proximity of the twin-bearing-lump story to the food offered them inside the Portokalos home. They are soon intoxicated by the countless shots of the liquor ouzo being pushed upon them by their future in-laws, who are eager to liven them up. The subjective camera reveals the Millers' dizzy and confused point of view while Mr. Portokalos brings another tray of food to them: "You like some meat? Some Greek meat, very good, very good." The Millers look away in disgust as if the thought of eating the meat makes them want to vomit..

We see several alimentary scenes in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when the Other is aware of being othered, as well as the inverse—when the Other is *othering* members of the dominant culture. For instance, when Mrs. Miller nervously presents an elegant, but restrained, bundt cake as a gift, Mrs. Portokalos receives it politely, asking, "What is it?" After several attempts, she ultimately is incapable of correctly pronouncing the name of this strange item from the Miller food tradition.⁸ Furthermore, Mrs. Portokalos fails to identify the symbolic significance of the gift because she is unfamiliar with the larger system of food traditions which

explain it. "There's a hole in this cake," she whispers to a female relative, interpreting the gift as flawed, and she later emerges proudly with the cake, which she has "fixed" by filling the hole with a flowerpot.

That night after the party, Mr. and Mrs. Portokalos discuss the disastrous first encounter between the two families. Exasperated, Mr. Portokalos says to his wife, "They look at us like we're from the zoo. This no work. This no work, Maria. They different people. So dry. *That family is like a piece of toast. No honey, no jam, just dry. My daughter... my daughter gonna marry I-an Miller. A xeno, a xeno with a toast family. I never think this can happen to us. I try to put a little marmalade. Oh no, they don't like. They like themselves all dry and crackling*" (emphasis added). Here we see the Other aware of being othered—like animals in a zoo—and also talking back with his own characterization of the Millers. As with the American schoolgirls eating Wonder Bread sandwiches, we see American food and Caucasian Americans themselves being compared to foods that are bland and dry, and so entrenched in their blandness that even Mr. Portokalos's charming efforts to sweeten them up with "a little marmalade" fail miserably. They like being that way, Mr. Portokalos concludes; they like being plain and dry—"a toast family." One can make a great deal, therefore, of how the Millers are characterized by the Portokalos family—through *absence* (e.g., the hole in the cake, the rejection of meat, the lack of flavor/texture/moisture, and the refusal to be sweetened up) (see Dyer 1997, 80–81).

In contrast to his parents' fear of the Other and their food, Ian appreciates cultural difference. Reenacting the ethos of the colonizing travelers of a previous century, he rebels against his family, his culture, and his family's foodways.⁹ If Toula desires distance from her overdetermined status as ethnic Other, Ian desires contact with that very Other. Bored with his own nonethnic, normal background, Ian unconsciously responds to his exoticizing impulses, finding himself overwhelmingly attracted not only to the exotic spices at the Greek restaurant but to Toula herself, even before her metamorphosis. To some extent, Toula demonstrates, via her joke about herself as a Greek statue, that she recognizes the fetishizing role of the ethnic restaurant and Ian's cravings in terms of culinary tourism—"the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other" (Long 2004, 21; see also Heldke 2001).

A similar dynamic of culinary tourism plays out in *Along Came Polly*, set in New York City, when Reuben Feffer (Ben Stiller)—a Jewish man obsessed with cleanliness and safety—strives awkwardly to become semifluent in the foodways of Third World cultures to win the love of the worldly Polly Prince (Jennifer Aniston). Wearing mostly suits and ties,

Reuben is a senior risk analyst for a life-insurance company, someone who makes his living by assessing the relative dangers of various activities. Claiming that his mother is responsible for making him “afraid of everything,” Reuben blots the excess grease off pizza, hates spicy food, and avoids dirt of any kind. This preoccupation with cleanliness is foreshadowed in the opening scenes of the film. Amid the white, sparkling formal tables, white wedding cake, and white flowers, we see Reuben as a groom making his final inspections before the ceremony begins, for example, reminding the chef about various family members’ food allergies. In spite of his careful planning and risk assessment, Reuben manages to lose his perfect wife, Lisa (Debra Messing), on their honeymoon at St. Bart’s island to Claude (Hank Azaria), the sexy nudist foreigner with a heavy French accent.

Flashing forward two weeks, the film shows the depressed Reuben running headfirst into both risk and filth. Several scenes illustrate his encounters with filth, beginning with a pickup basketball game, when his opponent’s flabby, sweaty, dark, and hairy body repulses Reuben—shown in a slow-motion close-up rubbing against his face. Also his best friend Sandy Lyle (Philip Seymour Hoffman), an overweight Caucasian American, whom Reuben describes as “the most disgusting person I know,” is constantly doing and saying distasteful things.¹⁰ When he meets a former junior-high classmate, Polly, Reuben unwittingly confronts risk and dirt again. A tattooed, free-spirited drifter, Polly is employed for the moment as a catering waitress. Although she is supposed to be serving the guests at an art opening, we see Polly overturn conventional ways of treating food, for example, by taking an hors d’oeuvre from a tray, putting it partially in her mouth to eat, then getting distracted and putting it back onto the tray while her female associate jokingly fondles a loaf of French bread as if it were a phallus.

These scenes signal Polly as a “big eater”—a person who has a fearless, adventurous, and unrestrained attitude toward eating, lacks proper social boundaries, and is associated with dirt. Several other incidents portray Polly as a person with blurry boundaries, for example, when she finds her keys in her freezer, when Reuben learns that her only bathroom is next to the kitchen (separated only by a thin door), and when he mistakes Polly’s pet ferret for a rat, a common symbol of filth and decay. During Polly’s second appearance, Reuben secretly watches her from across the street, grimacing to witness her drop food on the sidewalk, inspect it briefly, pick off a few pieces of debris, and then eat it. Later, Polly eats mixed nuts from a bar with her fingers—an act of defiance—because Reuben has just finished reciting the statistics of how many people have

handled the nuts and how many people do not wash their hands after using the bathroom. "I like to live life on the edge," she explains.

Despite his fear of filth, the way his sensitive stomach may be impacted by eating unfamiliar, potentially contaminated food, and his best friend's blatant, cautionary, "Just pray to God she doesn't go ethnic," Reuben lets Polly (after she insists) pick the place for their first date. In fact, Polly does "go ethnic"—the restaurant turns out to feature Moroccan cuisine, and the couple sit on the floor and eat with their hands. Polly, showing her adeptness at eating ethnic food, scoops it into her mouth, letting some slip through her fingers and back onto the communal dish. Recounting the past years of her life, Polly explains that she has "bounced around a lot," living in many places (e.g., Morocco, Austin, Istanbul, Sri Lanka, Portland, Costa Rica, and Buffalo, to name just a few). Polly is positioned, because of her association with certain exotic places and people, as someone who has gone "ethnic."

Sweating profusely, his sensitive stomach rumbling threateningly, Reuben pretends to like the spicy food to impress Polly, but after dinner, at her messy and cluttered studio apartment, he has an embarrassing flare-up of irritable bowel syndrome in her nonsoundproof bathroom (beside the kitchen), where he spends a long time trying (unsuccessfully) to avoid passing gas aloud. To make matters worse, there is no toilet paper with which to wipe, and the toilet gets clogged, overflowing when flushed. Reuben launches into prayer: "Oh God, I beg you please, if you make this water go down, I will sit at your feet, and I will serve you for all of eternity. I'll adopt a Somalian kid, or I'll work in Calcutta, or I'll..." But in spite of his deal-making attempts, the water begins to overflow onto the floor. Desperate, Reuben uses the only objects within reach to try to unplug the toilet—a hand towel (embroidered by Polly's grandmother) wrapped around Polly's brand-new two-hundred-dollar loofa sponge (from Sweden)—soiling objects that were designed to help clean the body.

This hilarious sequence of slapstick events actually suggests a psychologically complex trajectory for Reuben. That is, he is forced to deal with the abject—to surmount his fear of filth—before he can fully develop his subjectivity. Although Reuben's culinary risk-taking has some negative consequences (e.g., diarrhea, gas, vomiting), he tries ethnic food again and again, and he even begins to like it. In the penultimate scene of the film, Polly tries to reject Reuben, saying dismissively, "You're a nice, safe, conventional guy." Reuben protests, "I don't think that's who I really am. Since we've been together, I've felt more uncomfortable, out of place, embarrassed, and just physically sick than I have in my entire

life. But I couldn't have gone through all of that. I couldn't have thrown up nineteen times in forty-eight days if I wasn't in love with you." Reuben proves his love for Polly, and that he is now in touch with the abject, by eating peanuts handled by an unclean-looking street vendor and rubbing some of them on the ground to underscore his point, disgusting both Polly and the vendor. Reuben has directly confronted the abject, therefore, by handling his own feces and the Other's dirt.

Having resolved for the moment this psychological crisis, Reuben is free to pursue culinary tourism like Ian in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. It is no accident that both characters grow to become food adventurers and that, in both cases, this development is made possible through the mediating site of the ethnic restaurant. For many westerners, eating the Other's food is the ultimate form of *cultural capital*—the social status gained by having a sense of familiarity with the exotic, appearing worldly and well traveled. There is confusion, Heather Schell writes, "at least in the world of images, between a cuisine and the people associated with producing it" (2001, 205). Hence, food becomes a metonym for the people who make it, and we tend to believe that eating it teaches us something about the culture: "We believe that they somehow imbue the food with their ethnicity. It's their presence in the food that teaches us about the culture when we dine" (207–8).

On the one hand, Warren Belasco argues that the explosion of ethnic restaurants in the United States has resulted from young white people reacting against the middle-class, hegemonic values of a culture symbolized by American food. In this model, eating foods (especially spicy ethnic food) is a form of protest against America's cultural imperialism. Ethnic food represents an alternative set of values involving tradition, continuity, authenticity, and pluralism (1989, 2–3)—all of which contrasts with the dominant culture's bland, overly processed, unnatural foodways. On the other hand, what Belasco views as a tactic of resistance should be read instead as a strategy enacted from a dominant position, rather than a marginalized one. bell hooks specifically challenges the manner in which this sort of culinary tourism belies power relationships, stating, "When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relation with the Other" (1998, 183).

This so-called culinary tourism or adventure eating, according to Schell, is "strongly motivated by an attitude bearing deep connections to western colonialism and imperialism" (2001, 217; see also Heldke 2001).

Read this way, incorporating colonial foods into the European/American diet becomes a method of “consuming” and containing the colony (Narayan 1995), and therefore “colonialism continues in the United States in the newly fashioned guise of neocolonialism” (Projansky and Ono 1999, 151). While a desire for new lands, goods, trade routes, Christian converts, and slave sources prompted European colonizers to explore and eventually control nine-tenths of the globe (Young 2003, 2), in our current zeitgeist, the desire to grasp human nature unadulterated by the West sends food adventurers on a parallel mission for “authentic” encounters with the Other via food. Reenacting the colonial impulse to dominate the Other, adventure eating—a form of cultural food colonialism—is motivated by a “deep desire to have contact with—to somehow own an experience of—an exotic Other as a way of making [oneself] more interesting” (Schell 2001, 217).

In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Ian acknowledges this perceived transformation by encounters with the Other, telling Toula that he “came alive” when he met her: “Here’s some news about my life to this point. It’s boring. Then I met you...and you’re interesting—you’re beautiful and fun.” “The commodification of otherness has been so successful,” writes hooks, “because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (1998, 181).

How does the Other’s food move so quickly from being disgusting and filthy to desirable? If the self needs the abject to feel secure, then how is this abject overcome, resulting, for example, in such a dramatic increase in ethnic restaurants in the West? In the symbolic system of American foodways, the abject frequently takes the shape of ethnic food. The ethnic restaurant’s goal is to combine exotic details of the foreign culture with known ones from the dominant local culture, making the customer feel more secure, “making the unfamiliar appear familiar” (Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002, 257; see also Long 2004). In this system of “staged authenticity” (MacCannell [1976] 1989, 1), the customer plays the role of tourist, wanting to feel at home while somewhere else. To create this feeling of safety, the most “offensive” or “disgusting” traditional food items are expunged from the menu, striking a balance between what is familiar to members of the culinary mainstream and what is exotic (see Molz 2004).

In addition to the food itself, the milieu of the ethnic restaurant is saturated with symbols that reassure the Westerner, the classic example being images of beautiful native women, dressed in traditional costumes

and engaged in domestic activities—the epitome of Homi Bhabha’s “synchronic essentialism” (1983, 24)—fixed in time as powerful, non-threatening “signifiers of stability” (24).¹² By relegating the Other to a nostalgic, precontact time, consumers are empowered to transgress boundaries safely to satisfy their desires. Ethnic restaurants, therefore, become “interstitial spaces” (Bhabha 1994, 5), ritual mediating sites that allow the elaboration of selfhood (individual and group). It is within these interstitial spaces that the abject is surmounted—rendered safe—tipping the scales of the desired/repulsed continuum in the direction of the former, making the Other palatable and, in fact, desirable. As ritualized mediating sites, ethnic restaurants facilitate the transformation of the abject into a safely consumable Other. Put another way, the abject is abjected from the ethnic restaurant.

We see this dynamic play out in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* when the Other’s food is safely consumed in the restaurant, but within the Other’s home, it threatens to become disgusting again, whereas in *Along Came Polly*, the ethnic restaurant does not really rise beyond its filthy status for Reuben; he learns, rather, to embrace that very dirt. “Filth,” Kristeva reminds us, “is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*” (1982, 69). The ethnic restaurant becomes a safe space for hooks’s “ritual of transcendence”—“a movement out into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage. The direct objective was...to be changed in some way by the encounter” (hooks 1998, 184). Hence, both Ian and Reuben (as well as Polly) transform themselves by consuming the Other’s food/body.

If food reveals the difference between Reuben and Polly in *Along Came Polly* and especially the initial polarity dividing the two families in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, food, finally, becomes the means by which the families find themselves able to come together at the wedding banquet. Mr. Portokalos’s knowledge of the Greek etiology of words succeeds in establishing a connection. He compares the families to the difference between apples and oranges. The root of the word *Miller* is the Greek word *milo* (apple), he explains, and *Portokalos* comes from the Greek word *portokali* (orange). “So, here tonight,” he declares, “we have apple and orange. We all different...but, in the end, we all fruit.” With this speech, the intercultural conflicts appear to dissolve, and a happy-ever-after ending ensues.

Food in the comedies *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Along Came Polly*, as with the drama *American History X*, expresses distrust about other cultures and the fear of being contaminated/soiled, while these films also depict the simultaneous impulse to consume the Other.

Because food events in such popular cultural “texts” negotiate gender, culture, and race, as well as familial dynamics, we can employ film to work out theories—showing how processes of othering, abjecting, and colonizing are enacted through food traditions. Such analyses of food behavior forge promising new directions for further research into the interrelationship among food, identity, and power dynamics—in ways that move beyond food traditions creating *communitas*—toward a theory of the ways food behavior and ideology can also negotiate power, belonging, and exclusion.

Notes

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1. See the Web site, www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/foodmovies.html, for a fairly recent filmography and bibliography of food in the movies. See also Zimmerman and Weiss 2005.
2. See hooks 1998; McAfee 1993; Moruzzi 1993; Witt 1998; and Young 1990
3. Later in the film, a flashback to another family meal that occurred before his father was killed shows Derek being socialized to be racist within the context of a peaceful, happy-looking, nuclear-family meal—the epitome of middle-class white America. Derek, as a high school-age student, talks admiringly about Dr. Sweeney, a teacher who has assigned Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for a black literature unit. The father’s (William Russ) face turns sour, and he sarcastically refers to “affirmative blacktion” and asks, “Now you gotta trade in *great* books for *black* books?” His father’s critique of affirmative action sets the stage for Derek to scapegoat minorities for his father’s murder (by a black man) while on the job as a firefighter in Compton, a predominantly black area.
4. Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli’s definition of an ethnic restaurant as “a restaurant whose sign board or publicity clearly promises the national or regional cuisine of another land” (2002, 252) suggests that the label is self-applied. Ethnic restaurants are not simply places to eat but become symbolically and politically charged: “The term ‘ethnic’ refers to outsiders, people who come from far away and who are foreign to the mainstream culture. Groups in control are never ethnicities; they use ethnic distinctions to organize social and spatial marginalities...and to legitimize a sort of negative integration of minority groups” (252). Hence, restaurants such as Denny’s, Country Kitchen, Cracker Barrel, Perkins, and McDonald’s are unproblematically presumed to be all-American-style restaurants although they are not marked as Anglo or ethnic in any way (see Dyer 1997). That ethnic distinction is almost invariably reserved for the category of other, usually nonwhite groups of people.

5. Toula's voice-over provides a context for interpreting the scope of her family's "weirdness." They live in a "normal, middle-class Chicago neighborhood of tasteful, modest homes." The Portokalos house, however, is "modeled after the Parthenon, complete with Corinthian columns and guarded by statues of the gods."
6. Dan Georgakas's review "My Big Fat Greek Gripes" criticizes *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* on a number of levels: "The Greek Americans offered in the film, even allowing considerable latitude for satire, are at best fifty years out of date. The major plot element, the cultural shock of outmarriage, is actually now the cultural norm as more than seventy percent of all Greek Americans outmarry....The notion of insular and culturally naïve Greek Americans is belied by the reality that the percent of Greek Americans who graduate from college is consistently among the highest of all ethnic groups in America" (2003, 37).
7. It is also significant that, following the flashback scenes from her childhood, we never see Toula eating in the remainder of the film, which functions as a sort of female competence, according to feminist scholars (e.g., Bordo 1998).
8. H. David Dalquest designed the aluminum bundt pan in 1950. It is derived from the German word *bund* (a group of people); the *t* was added for copyright purposes. At the height of its popularity, the culinary mainstream of white America considered the bundt cake (a moist cake baked in the fluted tube pan) to be the sophisticated dessert of choice for birthdays, weddings, and other special occasions. "The beautiful, easy cakes," however, "quietly fell from fashion" several decades later (Wolf 2005).
9. As the Millers' only child, Ian is a vegetarian, in opposition to both the dominant American meat-eating culture and probably also the Miller family foodways. It seems safe to assume this based on the tendency for film to treat vegetarianism (like ethnicity) as different, whereas meat eating (like whiteness) is considered to be the norm. A number of scholars have noted how the choice to become vegetarian in the West is often seen as a sign of resistance against the family system and the dominant meat-eating culture (see Belasco 1989; Roth 2005; and Twigg 1983).
10. For example, Sandy eats frosting (intended for the wedding cake) directly from the decorating tube, squeezes the excess grease from Reuben's pizza—"the best part"—onto his own piece, advises Reuben to spank women during sex, and reports that he just "sharted" ("I tried to fart, but shitted").
11. Although I have not sufficiently theorized gender into my analysis, it is important to note Aihwa Ong's 2003 discussion of the way the non-Western woman becomes the "vehicle for misplaced western nostalgia" in relation to the way ethnic restaurants use images of women to portray ethnicity. I am reminded, for instance, of Gayatri Spivak's discussion of how the Third World subject is represented within Western discourse (1988), the mechanics of how the Other is constituted, and Edward Said's discussion of the way the Other is often portrayed as female ([1978] 1994).

Filmography

- Along Came Polly* (2004). 91min. John Hamburg.
American History X (1998). 119 min. Tony Kaye.
My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002). 95 min. Joel Zwick.

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