Eating Identities

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She found enough barang to make up some noodles. Not all the necessary things, but enough: dried mushrooms and prawns, fish sauce, belacan—that beautifully fermented, fragrant shrimp paste that could just as well have been labeled “Essence of Malaysia.”

—Shymala B. Dason, “All the Necessary Things”

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. […] The abject confronts us […] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her.

—Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror

Most ethnic minorities in the United States desire to assert the constitutional “we,” a political identity that entitles them to rights and privileges granted to all American citizens. This constitutional “we” has often competed with the ethnic “we” in American history, with the former always wielding greater political and cultural power than the latter. The devastation to individuals caused by such competition often finds expression in rudimentary matters like one’s preference for or loathing of the foods, rituals, and family relationships specific to one’s ethnic community. A healthy and secure community does not agonize over its cuisine and rituals. On the contrary, by celebrating them a community fortifies its unity and identification. In the context of the ethnic identity of Greek Americans, Robert Georges comments that “in preparing and serving […] ‘Greek’ foods, my mother and other ‘Greek’ relatives display overtly their sense of their ‘ethnic identity,’ or their pride in it, and symbolically reinforce their ‘bonding’ with those present who share that heritage, while also distinguishing the ‘ethnically bounded’ from others present whose ‘ethnic identification’ has other national roots” (252). About the culinary habits of immigrant communities in the United States, Donna Gabaccia writes that “immigrants sought to maintain their familiar foodways because food initiated and main-
tained traditional relationships, expressed the extent of social distance between people, demonstrated status and prestige, rewarded and punished children's behavior, and treated illness" (51).

Food consolidates as well as demarcates eaters because what and how one eats engenders much of one's emotional tie to a group identity, be it a nation or an ethnicity. The famous twentieth-century Chinese poet and scholar Lin Yutang remarks, “Our love for fatherland is largely a matter of recollection of the keen sensual pleasure of our childhood. The loyalty to Uncle Sam is the loyalty to American doughnuts, and the loyalty to the Vaterland is the loyalty to Pfannkuchen and Stollen” (339). Such keen connection between food and national or ethnic identification clearly indicates the truth that cuisine and table narrative occupy a significant place in the training grounds of a community and its civilization, and thus, eating, cooking, and talking about one's cuisine are vital to a community's wholeness and continuation. In other words, the destiny of a community depends on how well it nourishes its members.

In this chapter I link the maternal with ethnic identity formation. Specifically, I look at the dynamics between enjoyment, the maternal, and ethnic identification as explored by John Okada and Joy Kogawa. I argue that enjoyment and the maternal occupy the same psychosocial space—the semiotic. To be more accurate, enjoyment is a manifestation of the maternal. A community whose fantasies (both linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions) about who they are suffer violation undergoes confusion, anguish, self-contempt, self-abjection, the loss of identification, and ultimately the devastation of the maternal. The community afflicted with such devastation faces cultural genocide and extinction. Both Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians faced this crisis not only during their internment at the end of World War II but also decades afterward. My concern here is how Okada and Kogawa differ in their portrayals of the maternal and to what extent these portrayals of the maternal affect the ethnic identification of their protagonists.

**Foodways and the Maternal**

Food is one of the “keen sensual pleasures of our childhood” (Lin 339), and such pleasures register in “the semantic void,” a term Žižek uses to describe a psychic space where lurks the (Lacanian) Real—enjoyment that is never exhaustively codified by language (*Tarrying* 202). In Julia Kristeva’s theorization of the semiotic in *Powers of Horror*, the Real is tantamount to *jouissance*, which Žižek translates as “enjoyment” and which Kristeva associates with the maternal. The semiotic space that an infant experiences, without demarcations of inside and outside, self and other, is the space of enjoyment, the mother-child symbiosis where “the rhythms and sounds of their bodies fuse into one” (Oliver
34). At this stage antagonism and ambivalence, which dog us in life, are still kept at bay.

Many linguists interpret the symbolic order as whole and complete, paternal in its logocentricism. In becoming a subject, however, the child must break away from the maternal in order to enter the symbolic order of language, a difficult process that, Kristeva believes, requires the abjection of the semiotic and the maternal, for the semiotic fundamentally disrupts and frustrates the symbolic order. Kristeva explains, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.” “The abject confronts us [. . .] with our earliest attempt to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language” (Powers 4, 13). The specter of abjection hovers over and penetrates all efforts to produce unity and completeness solely at the symbolic level.

Kristeva calls our attention to the fact that the maternal and by extension the feminine¹ are frequently associated with food as well as filth. The association of food with the maternal, however, should not be taken as an essentialist link between women and food, because the maternal in Kristeva denotes the modality of the relationship between a caregiver and an infant regardless of the caregiver’s gender. Kristeva’s thesis that the abjection of the maternal and the feminine is often made on the basis of their association with food and filth finds a solid illustration in the study of soul food by Doris Witt, who interprets the gendered meanings surrounding soul food and social reactions to it. She argues that “the debate over soul food was constituted by, and in turn helped constitute, many of the contradictions inherent in postwar attempts to revalue or reconstruct black manhood, especially Black Power efforts to control, to contain, and [. . .] to ‘abject’ the often fungible category of the ‘feminine’” (“Soul Food” 260–261). As she makes clear, the discourse of soul associates filth with femininity, particularly with lower-class black maternity. Witt further points out that the intraracial debate over soul food was volatile because of the underlying association of chitterlings with filth, with black femaleness, and with the fear of the “enslaved, enslaving black feminine within the self” (261). In linking black manhood’s fear of soul food with its fear of the feminine in itself, Witt suggests that to jettison the feminine is to disavow the self and in consequence to sabotage not only oneself but also one’s community.

Žižek, in his discussion of the ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, performs psychoanalysis of “the most elementary notions about national identification” (Tarrying 200). He argues that “the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification”—the national flag, ideologies, the Lincoln Memorial or Tiananmen Square, national values, and citizenship. What also needs to be taken into account is “a shared
relationship” among the members of a given community toward “Enjoyment incarnated” (201). It is the enjoyment manifested in the way a community cooks and eats, the way it organizes initiation ceremonies and rituals of mating, the way its women mother their children, and so on. Thus, Žižek critiques the deconstructionist tenet that everything, Nation in particular, has no biological or transhistorical essence but is only a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices. Žižek contends that such deconstructionist “emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity effect to achieve its ontological consistency” (202), for a community’s relationship toward “Enjoyment incarnated” is structured by means of fantasies. Though constructed out of social and cultural materials, fantasies are more than the symbolic, or are excesses of narratives.2 By locating the implication of national identification in the nondiscursive or the semiotic, Žižek attributes issues of national or ethnic identity to the space of the maternal or the semiotic.

**Operations of the Maternal**

Readers of *No-No Boy* (1957) generally experience feelings of urgency and frantic depression. The sentences move at such a tempo that one’s heartbeat quickens as though catching the end of a sentence were paramount to the successful rescue of the suffering protagonist, Ichiro Yamada. John Okada’s breathless narration in Ichiro’s voice may make one wonder: Why is there such a race? From what is the text (Okada?) running away? The first American novel to treat the subject of the Japanese American internment, *No-No Boy* was born out of rage, fear, ambivalence, and revulsion—powerful emotions that persist at the tenuous border between order and chaos, reason and unreason, or in psychoanalytical language, between the symbolic and the semiotic. It seems that running away from chaos/unreason and into the shelter of order/reason is a fundamental impulse of Okada’s novel, with these two binaries at his time being the familial (mother’s) demand for loyalty to Japan oppositional to the social and cultural (American) demand for assimilation. Although Okada is ahead of his time in his unflinching description of the devastation inflicted by the internment experience on his community, he is nevertheless held hostage by the ideology of assimilation that inculcates a myth about the racial and cultural inferiority of U.S. ethnic minorities. This state of being a hostage is shown in his traumatic and painful portrayal of the mother figure, Mrs. Yamada, and in his impulse to reject and degrade the maternal, whose manifestations include food practices and rituals. In so doing Okada unwittingly rejects a vital component in his ethnic identity and heritage—enjoyment specific to the Japanese American community.
At the opening of the novel, Ichiro returns to Seattle after serving two years in a federal prison for answering negatively to both of the loyalty questions put to all men of Japanese descent. He returns to a home that is both broken and divided, with his mother clinging to the belief that Japan was victorious in the war, his father dominated by his wife painfully and bitterly keeping her belief intact, and his brother Taro dropping out of high school and joining the army to spite his parents. Part of Ichiro's confusion and pain, conveniently, finds an easy outlet in his agonizing hatred of his mother. "Ma is the rock," he cries,

that's always hammering, pounding, pounding, pounding her unobtrusive, determined, fanatical way until there's nothing left to call one's self. She's cursed me with her meanness and the hatred that you cannot see but which is always hating. It was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words which got me two years in prison and an emptiness that is more empty and frightening than the caverns of hell. She's killed me with her meanness and hatred and I hope she's happy because I'll never know the meaning of it again. (12)

Ichiro is aware of, but incapable of confronting, the role that the U.S. government has played in his suffering. His rage at the government is displaced not only by his hatred of his mother but also by self-blame. In the first half of the book, he is locked in the ideology of personal culpability in one's misery—"You're crazy. I'm crazy. All right, so we made a mistake. Let's admit it" (14). Madness is apparently the only thing he can blame, which is not exactly a logical explanation for the kind of "mistake" he has made. His impoverished language of self-indictment speaks volumes about his willful deflection of the real cause of his punishment and misery.

It is only after meeting Kenji, a wounded veteran who serves as a voice of reason in the novel, that Ichiro begins to complicate his hatred for his mother.

Right or wrong, she [...] had tried harder than most mothers to be a good mother to him. Did it matter so much that events had ruined the plans which she cherished and turned the once very possible dreams into a madness which was madness only in view of the changed status of the Japanese in America? Was it she who was wrong and crazy not to have found in herself the capacity to accept a country which repeatedly refused to accept her or her sons unquestioningly [...]? (104)

Okada's portrayal of the mother-son relationship points to the psychological violence committed by the ideology of assimilation and legalized racism. Ich-
iro’s tormented relationship with his mother offers a complication of Kristeva’s and Žižek’s interpretations of the mirror stage at which a child begins to develop its subjectivity. For Kristeva, this happens when a child identifies with the father and the symbolic order, and abjects the mother and the semiotic. For Žižek, in the mirror phase the child begins to see itself and the symbolic world as unified wholes, something neither one ever is. Although Ichiro enters the novel at age twenty-five, one can argue that he is very much like a child seeking selfhood. After two years in the camp and another two in a federal prison, he has experienced the destruction of his personhood. Now returning home from the prison, he is thrust into a world that makes little sense and in which he is nobody. A constant victim of verbal and physical violence, Ichiro feels powerless and naked in the face of abjection. In the opening of the book, he is spat on by his childhood friend Eto, who swears, “Rotten bastard. Shit on you, [...]. I’ll piss on you next time” (4). As his mother asks him questions, she uses “the tone of an adult asking a child” (13).

Ichiro cannot form his identity by looking at himself from the place of his mother because she is shattered like a mirror by her madness, her love having been turned into an irrational pride over her and her son’s loyalty to Japan. Okada impresses upon the reader that Ichiro’s mother’s fervent allegiance to the old country splits her American-born son into halves. Ichiro cries, “I don’t understand you who were the half of me that is no more and because I don’t understand what it was about that half that made me destroy the half of me which was American” (16). His rejection of his mother, however, doesn’t engender an identification with his father, for his father “was neither husband nor father nor Japanese nor American but a diluted mixture of all” (116). In other words, the Japanese father, emasculated and decultured by U.S. racism, is no longer in Ichiro’s mind the unquestioned lawgiver, the unified symbolic order. In Žižek’s terms, Ichiro’s effort is doomed to fail because it depends on the false assumption that there could be a rational symbolic order, a unified self. Given that presumption, woman has to become that order’s irrational other, even as woman is the traumatic, irremovable kernel that makes impossible any manly master signifier. Thus, Ichiro’s mother, Mrs. Yamada, is given many symptoms of a madwoman.

Without the usual mechanism for seeking a working identity, Ichiro is doomed by a perpetual identity crisis. This explains why Okada is unable to give his protagonist a resolution. The best he can offer Ichiro Yamada is a “faint and elusive insinuation of promise” for a community (251). Okada’s novel suggests that when the maternal sphere of a given community becomes embittered and violated, there is little hope for the community as a whole. The mother figure in No-No Boy is described as a “rock,” one who blocks her son’s path to selfhood and wholeness—“the woman who was only a rock of hate and fanatic
stubbornness and was, therefore, neither woman nor mother” (21). Okada’s unwitting degradation of the maternal robs the mother figure not only of femininity but also of motherhood, dehumanizing her into a cold, hard, and hateful vessel of fanatic nationalism. She is now empty of love and nourishment. Bryn Gribben identifies Mrs. Yamada’s insufficiency in the cans of evaporated milk that she repeatedly lines up and knocks down (Okada 139): “The metaphor of the evaporated milk works to indicate how the mother is constructed as a lack even if she has something to provide. [...] She can provide, but what she can provide has been deemed ‘lack,’ an evaporation of nourishment” (Gribben 39). Such characterization of Mrs. Yamada dictates that her creator kill the mother character in order for the son to grow and become a man. “You’re dead,” Ichiro speaks to the body of his mother, “and I feel a little peace” (Okada 187). Mrs. Yamada’s suicide serves as the peak of the rising action, and only from that point on does Ichiro begin his process of healing. The evening of his mother’s funeral, Ichiro and Emi go dancing in a bar, an occasion described by Jinqi Ling as “a symbolic celebration of life after Ma’s suicide” (“Race, Power, and Cultural Politics” 371). It is at the bar on the dance floor that Ichiro’s path toward (ir)resolution begins with such reflections as “I’ve got to love the world the way I used to. I’ve got to love it and the people so I’ll feel good, and feeling good will make life worthwhile. There’s no point in crying about what’s done” (Okada 209). The injunction to feel good and to love the world remains hollow as Ichiro is unable, even at the end, to love himself; such love of self would become possible only if he embraced his heritage and its unique forms of enjoyment.

The disturbing portrayal of the mother and the use of her death as an instrument for character development suggest the author’s own bitter ambivalence toward his ethnic community, an internalization of racism most Japanese Americans failed to escape between the 1940s and 1960s. That the mother figure is devoid of tenderness and love and that the father is soft and weak disrupts a most important stability in Japanese culture. What denigrates the maternal in Okada’s novel lies in the unwitting but unrelenting presentation of Mrs. Yamada as an unapologetic social man, a woman who has become an incarnation of a patriarchal ideology, a guardian of Father’s law, which in this case is fanatic nationalism. Thus, she is “neither woman nor mother,” but a “dried and toughened” embodiment of antagonism (10). Such denigration of the maternal denies its properties of sexuality, tenderness, intimacy, nourishment, and music, all that which Kristeva names the “semiotic chora,” all of which are vital for a community’s growth.

Okada’s inability to resolve Ichiro’s identity crisis also lies in the absence in the 1950s of an alternative discourse to American assimilation or Japanese nationalism. Ichiro’s entrapment in the dark schism between these two dis-
courses “keeps his own voice contradictory and problematic” (Ling, “Race, Power” 375). The same thing can be said about the author and many people of his community as well. According to Žižek, “The [shared] nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment” (Tarrying 202), which is central to the cohesion of a given community, is the psychosocial space that gets structured by means of fantasies, uncircumscribed by language. This “nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment” is the space of the semiotic, of the maternal. The “bad” mother occupying the central place in No-No Boy signifies an ethnic community going awry, a community at the brink of destruction. With the denigrating portrayal of the mother figure, the novel offers its reader a glimpse of the trauma that its author has undoubtedly attempted to suppress. Ichiro’s hatred of his mother and loathing of things Japanese allegorize Japanese Americans’ profoundly painful ambivalence toward their ethnicity and the impossibility of coming to terms with their rejection by America, the country of birth for many of them.

Okada’s powerful picture of the effect of racism, centering on the mother-son relationship, therefore, is also ironically complicit with the very object of his critique. At the level of discursive consciousness, Okada is remarkably successful in challenging racial myths in his characterization of Ichiro and Kenji and in critiquing the discourses of fanatic nationalism (embodied by Mrs. Yamada) and American assimilation at all costs (represented by Bull and Taro). At the nondiscursive level, however, or within “the semantic void,” Okada, in his unease with Japanese forms of enjoyment, proves vulnerable to the racism that reduces the Japanese Americans to the abject Other. Along with the rejection of the mother figure comes the rejection of the eating habits particular to her culture. Hence comes the denial of the enjoyment vital to the survival of the Japanese American community under siege.

In No-No Boy, the moments of enjoyment, with their therapeutic power for Okada and his protagonist, are distinctively non-Japanese. The only significant picture in this novel of wholeness and harmony in a Japanese American family, curiously motherless, is Kenji’s last supper with his family before he leaves to die in the veterans’ hospital in Portland, Oregon. Kenji’s father, walking home from the market, feels glad that he has bought “such a fine roasting chicken” from the market and thinks, “There was nothing as satisfying as sitting at a well-laden table with one’s family whether the occasion was a holiday or a birthday or a home-coming of some member or […] even if it meant someone was going away” (126). The entire family feasts on the roasted chicken, the American salad that Kenji’s sister Hanako has made, and for dessert the lemon meringue pie that his brother Tom has purchased from a bakery, and the utensils they use are forks, not chopsticks (128). After dinner they sit in the living room and watch a baseball game on television, and the snacks are “coffee and milk and pop and cookies and ice cream” (130). Despite the fact that Kenji
and his siblings are no less troubled about their ethnic identity than Ichiro, this dinner scene nevertheless presents a fine picture of successful assimilation by the “patriotic” Japanese Americans. Given this prominent culinary scene, no reader of *No-No Boy* can miss Okada’s point that Kenji’s home life is the healthiest one in the entire novel.

In contrast, Okada gives Ichiro a Japanese home life, where foodways are strictly ethnic with chopsticks and “eggs, fried with soy sauce […] boiled cabbage, and tea and rice” (12). His home is one where his mother waits for the ship from Japan to take them home, where letters from the old country are read aloud, and where Japanese competes with English, as “his parents […] spoke virtually no English” (7). Okada fills this very Japanese home with destructive conflicts, intensifying self-loathing as well as ethnic pride. In opposition to his parents’ food preferences, Ichiro associates with home “the life giving fragrance of bacon and eggs sizzling in a pan” (39). Their different culinary desires bespeak a somatic manifestation of difference between the first generation and the second generation. Such conflict of desires seems to be widespread, for “the young Japanese […] thirst for cokes and beer and pinball machines or fast cars and deluxe hamburgers and cards and dice and trim legs” (34–35). Anita Mannur remarks succinctly, “Food was a visible way to mark ethnicity and difference” (“Food Matters” 210). To dedifferentiate oneself in the eyes of the mainstream culture, one is compelled to disavow one’s ethnic foodways, and such disavowal exacts a very high emotional price. In discussing the relationship between emotions and eating habits, Gabaccia remarks, “Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort” (6). The change of taste in these Japanese American characters, particularly during the years of “enclave eating,” is an unquestionable consequence of social and cultural coercion.

Okada’s choice of the menu for Kenji’s family versus that for Ichiro’s is significant. In *No-No Boy*, the juxtaposition of the relative harmony present at the dinner table of Kenji’s home to the alienating and alienated lunch at Ichiro’s home serves to demonstrate the symptom of the most detrimental form of racism—self-loathing. This ugly feeling is evident in the narrator’s gaze at Chinatown as Ichiro and Kenji enter it—“the ugly street with the ugly buildings among the ugly people which was a part of America and, at the same time, would never be wholly America” (71, emphasis mine). Self-loathing in this case expresses itself not only in one’s hatred of one’s own being but also in one’s revulsion of the significant markers of one’s ethnic community. The consequent self-sabotage resulting from such hatred and revulsion manifests itself
fully in the drive for assimilation at the cost of self-erasure, particularly unre-
lenting in the cases of Freddie and Bull. Freddie, another “no-no boy,” seeks
self-destruction to vent his hatred for being a “Jap.” Ichiro sees in Freddie the
potential damage he is capable of against himself—Freddie “who, in his hatred
of the complex jungle of unreasoning that had twisted a life-giving yes into an
empty no, blindly sought relief in total, hateful rejection of self and family and
society” (241–242). Bull, a Japanese American himself, displays his hatred of
“Japs” by humiliating his fellow men and flaunting his red-haired girl in front
of the Japanese American young men in Club Oriental. Near the end of the
novel, Freddie picks a fight with Bull in the bar. In his frantic getaway, Freddie
drives his car into a wall and kills himself.

This tragic event around the Club Oriental in Chinatown is placed side by
side with a high moment occurring in a bar away from the ethnic ghetto. On
the dance floor he thinks, “There’s a place for me and Emi and Freddie here on
the dance floor and out there in the hustle of things if we’ll let it be that way.
I’ve been fighting it and hating it and letting my bitterness against myself and
Ma and Pa and even Taro throw the whole universe out of perspective. I want
only to go on living and be happy. I’ve only to let myself do so” (209). Stan
Yogi points out, “The dance floor becomes a metaphor for America, and danc-
ing becomes a metaphor for the constant cooperation and respect necessary to
maintain a truly pluralistic nation” (242). As Okada designs this moment to
be the most critical one where a space opens up for reconciliation, he intro-
duces another scene of healing. A Caucasian man, “slightly drunk,” approaches
Ichiro and Emi. Contrary to Ichiro’s anxious anticipation of insult, the man
says, “I saw you and want to buy you both a drink” (210). After offering dif-
ferent interpretations of the man’s motive, Ichiro and Emi happily settle on the
universalist closure that “he saw a young couple and liked their looks and felt
he wanted to buy them a drink and did” (211). These moments of enjoyment
possess the power of healing precisely because they are divorced from these
characters’ ethnic background and because they reiterate universalist values
that are part and parcel of the ideology of assimilation.

On the one hand, Okada’s presentation of Japanese enjoyment as either
absent or detrimental to identity formation in the United States truthfully pic-
tures the atrocious impact that institutional racism had on Japanese Americans
in the 1940s and 1950s. On the other hand, his presentation also reveals the
extent to which he and his people have internalized the repugnance toward
forms of enjoyment specific to their ethnicity. However, these forms of enjoy-
ment are the very expressions of the maternal, and it is the maternal that has the
power to sustain a community at a time of deep trouble and to nurture it back
to health. Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, dealing with the same topic and era, reveals
exactly this truth. Her unapologetic presentation of Japanese enjoyment, such
as food and the ritual of communal bathing, resists the abjection of people of Japanese descent in North America. The deeply feminine and maternal sensibility, projected via poetic language and dream motif, present in Kogawa’s narrative is anchored in the embracing of enjoyment, of the maternal. Unlike *No-No Boy*, which must kill the mother so that the son can begin to resolve his identity conflict, *Obasan* charts the journey of its protagonist, Naomi Nakane, from repression to knowledge that is aided by the maternal, and her completion is signaled by her return to the maternal.

*Obasan*, centering on the mass relocation of West Coast Japanese Canadians during World War II, begins with Naomi Nakane’s visit to Obasan (Aunt) upon receiving the news of Uncle’s death. Raised by Aunt and Uncle since the relocation, Naomi is haunted by questions regarding her parents’ disappearance, particularly that of her mother, who had gone back to Japan before the relocation and has never been heard from again. Uncle’s death, bringing back the rest of the family—Aunt Emily and brother Stephen—becomes the occasion for memory, revelation, and truth, much of which Naomi is reluctant to face. The rest of the novel is narrated mainly from Naomi the child’s point of view.

The most prominent alimentary trope in this novel is “stone bread,” a black loaf made by Uncle, which Naomi finds on Obasan’s kitchen counter. This food item interestingly reverberates back to the recurrent description of Mrs. Yamada as a “rock” in *No-No Boy* that signifies the death of the maternal sphere when it ceases to nurture. The rock figuring for Mrs. Yamada becomes stone bread in *Obasan* figuring for Uncle. Both rock and stone bread are products of persecution, poverty, and powerlessness, as Uncle makes stone bread out of leftovers, such as oatmeal and barley, carrots and potatoes, after the family is relocated/displaced to Alberta, a dust-stormy beet country (13). Stone bread and the hardened Mrs. Yamada, however, differ in signification: she is completely devoid of the maternal quality while the stone bread maintains that quality by being both stone and bread, for Uncle’s existential modality is largely maternal in his gentleness, kindness, patience, silence, and quiet suffering. He is stone because he is stoic; he is bread because he is nurturing and loving.

Sau-ling Wong’s reading of the stone bread constructs a multifaceted interpretation ranging from the personal to the religious. What is relevant to the thesis of this chapter is stone bread’s metaphorical and metonymical relationship to Aunt Emily’s package of relocation documents and family correspondence, which can reveal the truth that Naomi wants but is unable to stomach (*Reading Asian American Literature* 20–21). Handing Naomi the package, Aunt Emily says, “Read this, Nomi [...] Give you something to chew on” as she is “eating a slice of Uncle’s stone bread with a slab of raw onion” (43). Unlike Aunt Emily who has a “tough digestion” (43), Naomi fears the truth about Mother’s disappearance and silence (for reasons I explore later); rejecting the stone bread
as food is figuratively a rejection of knowledge: “If you can't even break it, it’s not bread,” Naomi says (16). One may argue that knowledge and truth seem to belong to the symbolic order, but the kind of knowledge Obasan offers is so tragic and overwhelming that it borders upon unreason made unspeakable and unbearable by repression and death. Uncle’s death, however, shocks Naomi into action. As she reluctantly opens up and reads Aunt Emily’s package, the stone bread becomes transformed into wafers symbolizing the inner change in Naomi. “In Aunt Emily’s package, the papers are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei’s silver box—symbols of communion, the materials of communication, white paper bread for the mind’s meal” (217). Wong remarks, “The thick, hard stone bread, having broken down into paper-thin wafers, is ready to be absorbed. The mystery that propels Obasan’s plot is finally solved when the letters disclosing the mother’s fate are read to the now middle-aged children” (Reading Asian American Literature 21). The trope of stone bread is instrumental to Naomi’s rebirth from her long years of emotional paralysis.

In Obasan expressions of resistance to racism and its internalization center on enjoyment or pleasures specific to Japanese culture. At the time of relocation, Stephen, Naomi’s older brother, is old enough to feel the shame of being Japanese, of being regarded as the enemy of the country of his birth. The feeling of shame is intensified by a Somerville game, The Yellow Peril, a Christmas gift to Stephen. It is a game about war: “Over the map of Japan are the words: ‘The game that shows how a few brave defenders can withstand a very great number of enemies’” (181). The game pits fifty small yellow pawns against three big blue checker kings: “To be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken” (181). Stephen’s powerlessness and shame over the fact that the Japanese Canadians have suddenly become enemies of the state and are shipped in cattle cars to forlorn places finds concrete expression in his rejection of Japanese food. When offered a rice ball by Obasan, Stephen scowls, “Not that kind of food” (136). After that, Obasan learns to pack two kinds of lunch—one for Naomi of “two sticky rice balls with a salty red plum in the center of each, a boiled egg to the side with a tight square of lightly boiled greens,” the other for Stephen of “peanut-butter sandwiches, an apple, and a thermos of soup” (182). In time Stephen rejects nearly everything Japanese. The child Naomi sees in Stephen “Humpty Dumpty—cracked and surly and unable to move” (136). She seems to understand that it would take an enormous effort to make Stephen whole again: “If I could take all the rice pots in the world, dump them into a heap, and tromp all the bits to glue with my feet, there would be enough to stick anything, even Humpty Dumpty, together again” (137). Naomi instinctively knows that Stephen’s healing will require all the power of alimentary comfort that their community can offer. But unfortunately, Stephen no longer eats rice.
In contrast to the repugnance toward Japanese forms of enjoyment in *No-No Boy*, Kogawa presents several Japanese Canadian characters in *Obasan* as clinging to their ethnicity even at the most difficult time by continuing their food and ritual practices. Naomi remembers the warm dinner being prepared as snow falls outside the two-room hut at the Slocan: “The miso shiru, smelling of brine and the sea, is on the stove [...]. [...] The dried fiddleheads with their slightly tough asparagus texture have been soaked and are cooking in a soy sauce base with thin slivers of meat and mushroom. Salty, half-dried cucumber and crisp yellow radish pickles are in a glass dish” (157). This Japanese dinner prepared by Obasan welcomes Uncle home from an internment camp, restores family, and regenerates kinship. Such an enjoyment is unmistakably linked with the maternal that possesses the power to heal, to give and defend life, and to restore sensuality.

One of the Japanese enjoyments vital to the sense and sensuality of ethnic community is the ritual of communal bathing. Robin Potter is insightful in seeing the manifestation of the maternal in such a ritual. He writes, “That bathing is a time of utmost bliss for Naomi reveals a close identity with the Mother and with the semiotic. When the language of F/father has interceded in usual communication, these scenes serve to unite the daughter to the pleasures of the (infant) body, to regenerative processes, to the real and primal M/mothers” (130). That nudity is accepted as natural in the bathing ritual, untouched by the Judeo-Christian language of sin and impurity, reminds us indeed of Kristeva’s mother-child symbiosis before the separation from and abjection of Mother by the demand of the symbolic.

The bath is a place of deep bone warmth and rest. It is always filled with a slow steamy chatter from women and girls and babies. It smells of wet cloth and wet wood and wet skin. We are one flesh, one family, washing each other or submerged in the hot water, half awake, half asleep. The bath times are like a hazy happy dream. (*Obasan* 191)

Kogawa’s language of the senses strongly evokes the primordial, preverbal world where bodily pleasures dominate an infant’s consciousness, where Self is indistinguishable from the Other—“one flesh, one family.” Žižek insists that our suppressed memory of the Real or *jouissance* lurks in the unconscious: “it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire” (*Looking Awry* 17). The bath times compared to “a hazy happy dream” recall the fetal sleep of the child in the mother’s womb.

Unlike *No-No Boy*, which is peopled mainly by men, *Obasan* presents the world of women. For Naomi there are three mother figures: the mother who is missing; Grandmother Kato, who delivers the “freeing word” in her letters.
from Japan; and Obasan, the surrogate mother who raises Naomi and Stephen. As Potter observes, Grandma Kato’s language is that of “the body, of murmurs, gaps, and bliss; of survival, not of power structures” (129). The same can be said of Obasan. These three women constitute the sphere of the maternal in which Naomi is both frustrated and comforted by silence but, more important, sustained by intimacy, nourishment, tenderness, and love. Another bath scene of Naomi and Grandmother Kato serves “to salvage the remnants of a time during which neither the mother nor the child have experienced separation and abjection” (Potter 131).

She urges me down deeper into the liquid furnace and I go into the midst of the flames, obedient as Abednego, for lo, Grandma is an angel of the lord and stands before me in the midst of the fire and has no hurt, neither is a hair of her body singed nor has the smell of fire passed her. She is sitting directly beside the gushing boiling hot-water tap and the steaming froth plunges around her bony buttocks. […] I will suffer endless indignities of the flesh for the pleasure of my grandmother’s pleasure. […] My body is extended beside hers and she makes waves to cover my shoulders. Once the body is fully immersed, there is a torpid peace. We lie in this state forever. (58)

The hot bath, elevated with an allusion to the persecution and divine intervention in the biblical history of the Jews, merges the bodily and the spiritual, the semiotic and the symbolic, the East and West, allowing the Real (pleasures) to bubble up to frustrate the codified world, the world of rules, order, and asymmetrical binaries. Its power to cleanse, to heal, and to commune is vital to the preservation of the identity, dignity, and hope of the Japanese Canadians. Kogawa seems to offer us a lesson that the best defense for an ethnic community against gross injustice and denigration lies in the embracing of its enjoyment, for an ethnic community, as Žižek proposes, “exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices” (Tarrying 202).

In discussing the amniotic deep in Obasan, Christina Tourino points out that this maternal site of reproduction is the highly contested one between “ethnic family” and the Canadian government (134). She argues that “abortion of that reproduction is the novel’s central metaphor” (134), as evident in the crisis of regeneration among the female characters (two stillbirths for Obasan and the childlessness and celibacy of both Naomi and Emily). The amniotic space “as alternatively nurturing and destructive” pictures the barely living state of the Japanese Canadian community during and after the internment, of which Naomi’s suspended state serves as an apt metonymy (137). Despite the fact she has been surrounded by the forces of Mother, not only in the maternal space
constituted by the women in her family but also in the poetic language and
dream motif that Kogawa lavishes upon this character, she remains traumatized
and repressed until the end of the novel, when she is returned to the maternal.
The sources of her trauma and repression are what she considers abandonment
by her mother and the memory of sexual molestation by Old Man Gower. When
she recalls Gower’s repeated molestation and a similar encounter later with a
boy named Percy in Slocan, Naomi faces her ambivalence—“I am filled with
a strange terror and exhilaration”—with a painful question: “When does this
begin—this fascination and danger that rockets through my body?” (73). Here
in a dream Naomi links her sexual trauma with the plight of the three mother
figures. In this dream, three Asian women lie naked in the muddy road guarded
by rifle-bearing soldiers. When one of them touches her hair, she wiggles her
body “seductively”; she is “trying to use the only weapon she had—her desir-
ability” (73). Naomi reflects, “This is what a punished dog feels—this abject
longing, wretchedness, fear, and utter helplessness. She lay on the edge of nau-
sea, stretched between hatred and lust” (73–74). That the desperate, abject
seduction doesn’t save the women from mutilation and death is traumatic to
Naomi, for she has rationalized her “cooperation” with Old Man Gower by
thinking that “the only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive”
(73). Kogawa travels deep into the wounded psyche of Naomi by picturing
similar scenes where the victim is, wittingly or unwittingly, complicit with the
perpetrator, such as the chicks approaching the hen that pecks them to death,
highly symbolic of the Japanese Canadians’ trust of and persecution by the
Canadian government (70). Naomi can’t separate her sexual molestation from
her mother’s “abandonment.” Both experiences fold in the double image: her
mother’s leg she clings to is “a flesh shaft that grows from the ground,” echo-
ing the sexual foliage in Gower’s garden where hornlike fiddleheads grow (77).
The image further complicates Naomi’s reasoning of Mother’s disappearance:
“The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body [. . .]. But here in Mr. Gower’s hands
I become other—a parasite on her body [. . .]. My arms are vines that strangle
the limb to which I cling [. . .]. I am a growth that attaches and digs a furrow
under [. . .] her skin” (77). In Naomi’s subconscious, it is her secrets with Mr.
Gower that have injured Mother and caused her to disappear. “The secret is
this: I go to seek Old Man Gower in his Hideaway. I clamber unbidden onto
his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the center of my body is
a rift” (77). In her childhood dreams, Naomi sees the “rift” yawning apart like
a chasm between two mountains, forever separating her from her mother, and
separating her from her own motherhood. Tourino is right in her interpretation
that “Kogawa connects Naomi’s abuse by Gower to the abuse of the Japanese
Canadians by white Canada in that both interrupt Japanese Canadian procre-
ation” (146).
The traumatic separation from Mother, facilitated by Gower, initiates Naomi into the symbolic, an order whose maxim is reason. In her waking life, Naomi has questioned repeatedly why Mother has left her and Stephen and why Mother never writes. In questioning Mother, she has accused Mother of abandonment. In demanding an answer, she has judged Mother. After Naomi learns the truth of Mother’s departure, of her disfiguration during the bombing of Nagasaki, of her injunction not to tell for the sake of the children, and of her silent, lonely death, Kogawa evokes the metaphor of the Grand Inquisitor to free Naomi from the entrapment of the symbolic that demands answers and explanations for what cannot be rationalized.

The Grand Inquisitor was carnivorous and full of murder. His demand to know was both a judgment and a refusal to hear. The more he questioned her, the more he was her accuser and murderer. The more he killed her, the deeper her silence became. What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment will he be released from his own. […] At the age of questioning my mother disappeared. Why, I have asked ever since, did she not write? Why, I ask now, must I know? Did I doubt her love? Am I her accuser? (273–274).

In structuring the plot of _Obasan_, Kogawa makes a liberal deployment of the maternal, and the semiotic operates fruitfully in the novel. This is evident not only in Kogawa’s poetic and sensory language but also in the major motifs of dream and intuition and their significant role in the novel’s resolution. Even before Naomi is finally allowed to learn about her mother’s tragedy through Grandma Kato’s letters, she is visited by a dream that prepares her for the final knowledge. In her dream,

> the maggots are crawling in [a kitten’s] eyes and mouth. Its fur is covered in slimy feces. Chickens with their heads half off flap and swing upside down in midair. The baby in the dream has fried-egg eyes and his excrement is soft and yellow as corn mush. His head is covered with an oatmeal scab, under which his scalp is a wet wound. (188)

One may wonder why Kogawa evokes food metaphors to paint such a horrific scene. I think that the juxtaposition of filth and decay to food is highly symbolic of the maternal that disobeys the divide between the pure and impure, for mother’s milk and blood both nourish and disgust. This socially constructed and reinforced divide between food and filth characterizes the ambivalent relationship
of the symbolic with the maternal in that the symbolic order both comes from and retains the maternal. As the symbolic can hardly keep at bay the threat of contamination by the maternal despite its insistence on order and law, so is food highly unstable, continually threatening to become dirt. “Delicious food is only hours or days away from rotting matter [...]. As a result, disgust is never far from the pleasures of food and eating” (Lupton 3). Kogawa's commingling of food and filth metaphors presents an apocalyptic vision in which the symbolic has collapsed into the maternal, which orchestrates the primal scenes of birth and death. Kogawa's apocalyptic scene folds nearly perfectly into the picture of nuclear devastation that Grandma Kato paints in one of her letters.

Beneath some wreckage, she saw first the broken arm, then the writhing body of her niece, her head bent back, her hair singed, both her eyes sockets blown out. [...] Grandma Kato touched her niece's leg and the skin peeled off and stuck to the palm of her hand. [...] Men, women, and in many cases indistinguishable by sex, hairless, half clothed, hobbled past. Skin hung from their bodies like tattered rags. One man held his bowels in with the stump of one hand. [...] one evening [...] she sat down beside a naked woman she'd seen earlier who was aimlessly chipping wood to make a pyre on which to cremate a dead baby. The woman was utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies, and maggots wriggled among her wounds. (284–286)

And this woman turns out to be Naomi's mother. Naomi's dream serves as a premonition that imparts knowledge in a way that is often deemed by the symbolic order as irrational or superstitious. In Obasan there are abundant moments of dreams and intuitions whose images echo those appearing at the climax, where the protagonist gains the full knowledge of her mother's suffering and death. Instead of being shocked into psychosis, Naomi, having been prepared by earlier visions, moves beyond shock and begins the process of healing soon after: “I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life. I close my eyes. Mother, I am listening. Assist me to hear you” (288).

The semiotic or the Real is a domain in which unreason, like the undergrowth of a forest, dominates its space. What is considered dreamy, illogical, absurd, filthy, or ungrounded often governs or creates tension in our waking, rational life, and this is precisely Lacan's anti-Cartesian thesis: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (166). Kogawa uses the power of unreason without hesitation in the portrayal of the maternal forces (Japanese food, communal bathing, dreams, and intuitions) that assist the pro-
tagonist in her journey into “the underground stream”—the unconscious, the suppressed—to eventually emerge in the “brooding light” (295).

Naomi’s journey from repression to understanding is thus made possible by the maternal and urged on by the power of the word embodied in Aunt Emily. Naomi’s deliverance from repression comes at the end, when she willingly embraces the maternal. Naomi puts on Aunt Emily’s coat, “warmer than [her] jacket,” and visits the coulee Uncle used to take her to every year on the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki (296). Unlike before when she has preferred to stay on the top of the slope, listening to the sound of “muddy river sludge along its crooked bed,” Naomi this time wades through the coulee grass: “I inch my way down the steep path that skirts the wild rose bushes, down slipping along the wet grass where the underground stream seeps through the earth” (296). She lets the river wet her pajamas and coat and the mud clog her shoes, fully submerged in the deeply buried knowledge of Mother’s departure, love, silence, and death. In such a symbolic action, Naomi submits herself to the semiotic, the maternal where sounds, sensations, smells rule: “The perfume in the air is sweet and faint. If I hold my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am” (296).

In comparison, the maternal operates quite differently in No-No Boy. There the maternal forces are either controlled (such as the choices of food) or rejected (the traumatic portrayal of Mrs. Yamada and her suicide). In addition, Okada’s language and plot remain heavily rational throughout, with their emphasis on the conflict centering on whether Ichiro is American or Japanese and on the distinction between sanity and insanity. The reins Okada wields over the power of the maternal, as I’ve pointed out earlier, are symptomatic of ethnic insecurity caused by racism and its internalization. His unease with his ethnicity, vividly portrayed in Ichiro, Kenji, Freddie, Bull, and others is a powerful criticism of U.S. culture.

In critiquing No-No Boy for its vulnerability to racism at a deep level—the Japanese forms of enjoyment and the mother figure made abject by racism—I am not denying the fact that Okada has, to a large measure, broken free from the hold of the racist ideology. He brilliantly shows the dark abyss between two equally devastating models—that of Freddie’s self-contempt and self-destruction and that of Kenji, who has served in the U.S. Army but whose war wound robs him of his manhood inch by inch (symbolized by the amputation of his leg) until it kills him. Ironically, Kenji, the “sane” voice and the war hero in the novel, speaks his last words fraught with self-loathing: “I got to thinking that the Japs were wising up, that they had learned that living in big bunches and talking Jap and feeling Jap and doing Jap was just inviting trouble” (163). His final advice to Ichiro is, “Go someplace where there isn’t another Jap within a thousand miles. Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese.
Anything but a Japanese. After a few generations of that, you've got the thing beat” (164). In presenting both Freddie (a no-no boy) and Kenji (a yes-yes hero) as irreparably maimed by the experience of internment, Okada effectively pictures the inhumanity of racism and the great challenge in constructing positive ethnic identification at his time.

As I am arguing that the denigration of the maternal and the unease with Japanese forms of enjoyment in No-No Boy reveal Okada’s own ambivalence toward his ethnicity, I must also point out that Okada has done a superb job in portraying the Buddhist funeral for Mrs. Yamada as an occasion when a non-mainstream ritual is practiced with the effect of forging the community. When the community comes together to mark the passing of one of its members, with the burning of incense, the banging of “an urn-like gong,” and the holy chanting, a transformation takes place in Mr. Yamada (191). Ichiro, uneasy with the too ethnic funeral, becomes aware of the change in his father, feeling “the presence of his father beside him like a towering mass of granite” (193), an image in sharp contrast to the frightened, feeble man, whom Ichiro also describes as “a goddamned, fat, grinning, spineless nobody” (12).

With Obasan coming twenty-four years after No-No Boy, Kogawa has the advantage of having witnessed movements against racism and toward ethnic recognition, particularly “the redress movement” of Japanese Americans. Kogawa’s security in Buddhism and Japanese forms of enjoyment reflects the general ethos of a budding multiculturalism in North America. To acknowledge the relatively friendly cultural milieu does not diminish Kogawa’s amazing accomplishment in Obasan. Making a comparative study of both No-No Boy and Obasan addressing their different approaches to the maternal and ethnic enjoyment and using the strength of psychoanalytical theories expounded by Kristeva and Žižek can shed light upon issues of ethnic identification that provide a powerful critique of interpretations where the symbolic or the superstructure rules.

Food and rituals, as manifestations of the maternal, are unmistakably gendered feminine in this discussion. Ethnic identification, viewed from the perspective of the maternal, is understood not as an individual’s will to identity but as a communal endeavor to secure its members’ comfort and pride in belonging. Food and cooking rituals, however, can also be masculine and masculinizing. Ethnic identification and masculinity, fraught with tension in Asian American culture and literary tradition, are the subjects of the next chapter, in which I explore how an ethnic masculinity becomes constructed in selected works of Frank Chin via food, cooking, and eating. If this chapter has misled the reader to assume the essentialist connection between women and food/cooking (which I have tried to avoid), chapter 2 challenges that assumption by introducing a male chef.