Eating Identities

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Li-Young Lee is an ethnic Chinese without an upbringing in an ancestral culture, without a grounding knowledge of the Chinese language, and without the community of a Chinatown or a suburban Chinese American community. His condition of exile, however, has proved to be immensely productive of emotional intensity and imagination, and his poetics derives largely from his ontological condition as an exile, driven by the desire to transcend time and space by appealing to the metaphysical at the exclusion of the cultural and material. As if no material or cultural location were sufficient for his poetics and identity, he formulates a transcendentalism—one that has a strong affinity with the ideas of its American father, Ralph Waldo Emerson—in which the poet’s true self becomes God or the “universe mind” unfettered by cultural or ethnic allegiances (Marshall 134). As such the poet has no dialogue, as Lee claims, with his sociocultural composition (Marshall 132). His polemical disavowals of ethnic identification on the ground of transcendentalism, however, are in dialectic tension with his frequent use of ethnic signifiers in his poetry and memoir.

This tension in Lee raises the question that Stuart Hall asks of a Caribbean filmmaker: “From where does he/she speak?” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 392). Quite different from the popular idea of an intuitive knowledge of the self, Hall proposes that one’s cultural identity is constructed through his or
her semantic practices, and semantic practices are never stable and finished. He suggests,

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term “cultural identity” lays claim. (392)

The tension lying between Lee's quest for the Absolute and the necessity to speak from a material place constitutes a dynamic realm in which he operates as a diasporic Asian American transcendentalist poet, multiple selves that Lee attempts to unify with the lexicon of American transcendentalism. He would disagree with Hall, who argues, “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (392). It goes without saying that Lee cannot escape relying on cultural, material places from which to speak, but it is not easy to locate the place that is central to his poetics. In this chapter I argue that food serves as a central place from which Lee speaks, a locus that constructs and defines his sense of reality.1 It is the references to food and eating that enable his articulation of the universe mind and his identity as an exilic and transcendent poet. By centering on alimentary imageries and motifs, I also show that his ethnic self and the transcendental self are not mutually exclusive, as he tries to argue.

Food and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Exile

“Diaspora” and “exile” are two terms that have gained much purchase in post-colonial theory and U.S. ethnic studies, and they are often used interchangeably. Despite this practice, however, there is a subtle difference between the two terms. In Lee’s case, I believe that his family history and poetic sensibility make him an exile more than a diasporan. According to John Durham Peters, “In Jewish thinking, exile and diaspora are sometimes synonymous. The Hebrew terms galut and golah can be translated as both” (20). In spite of their historical affinities, these two terms do differ. Peters explains that in recent usage diaspora often lacks the pathos of exile, a term that is never without a deep sense of woe. Like exile, diaspora can be elective or imposed; perhaps the historical lack of zeal for returning to Jerusalem on the part of some Jews, grown comfortable in the diaspora, lifts the burden of homesickness from the notion of diaspora. […] The key contrast with exile lies in diaspora’s
emphasis on lateral and decentered relationships among the dispersed. Exile suggests pining for home; diaspora suggests networks among compatriots. Exile may be solitary, but diaspora is always collective. (20)

Peters’ observation is insightful into the solitary and woeful existence of the exile in differentiation from the collective nature of diaspora. He fails, however, to foreground the fact that colonialism and globalization have given rise to a different ethos or pathos of migration from those experienced by the dispersed Jewish community. In recent history both diaspora and exile entail a process of forceful removal from home. Migration in search of safety and of economic and educational betterment is by no means a voluntary choice. It is colonialism’s devastation of the spirit, the land, the cultures, and the histories of many non-European peoples that has offered more despair than hope, more suffering than well-being, and more abuse than power. Likewise, globalization has exacerbated the unequal distribution of resources, education, and power in the world. And the militarist neocolonialism in Afghanistan and Iraq makes daily life hellish for the locals. These are among the forces that push people out of their homes in search of better and safer lives.

Exile in the sense of estrangement or alienation from home is not solely reserved for immigrants. Internal exile, due to alienating forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion, is becoming a powerful discourse. Peters says it well: “Inasmuch as the world is cruel and its history one of oppression, we will always need a discourse of exile. […] Exile is an idiom available for the uprooted and abused, an insurgent rhetoric that can comfort the captives or petition the captors” (36). The discourse of exile, useful as it is in critiquing inhumane conditions, is as limiting as its offshoot, the discourse of identity politics. The nostalgia in exile for the one true home appeals to the desire for the fixity of identity and belonging, a fantasy that arises from the human condition of incompleteness.²

Yet exile can be an attitude quite free from woeful nostalgia. Edward Said has offered a model of the exilic intellectual, à la Adorno, Swift, and Naipaul, who is blessed with a double perspective, disallegiance, and ironic distance. Said describes this figure of the intellectual as “a shipwrecked person who learns how to live in a certain sense with the land, not on it” (Reader 378). To live with the land is to be open to strangeness, which one doesn’t attempt to dominate and domesticate. To live with the land is also to carry home in memory, to not lose hope, the sense of wonder, and critical acuity. This intellectual in exile does not hopelessly seek belonging, either in the impossible return to the “true” home or by giving in to the assimilatory impulse of the new locale. Rather, he or she experiences “the fate [of exile] not as a deprivation and as something to be bewailed, but as a sort of freedom” (380). Such an exile is free
from the fantasy about true arrival or return and assimilation. Thus, an exilic
displacement renders one a marginal person, “undomesticated” and “unusu-
ally responsive to the traveler rather than to the potentate, to the provisional
and risky rather than to the habitual, to innovation and experiment rather than
the authoritatively given status quo. The exilic intellectual does not respond to
the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing
change, to moving on, not standing still” (380–381).

Lee is such an exilic intellectual in that what fuels his poetic engine is not
a nostalgic, despairing search for an origin as the ground for self-definition.
Rather, it is his recurrent conceit of “the winged seed” that serves as a self-
representation, one that generates poetic and critical energy, and this conceit
has everything to do with food. Interestingly, “diaspora” is composed of “dia”
(through, throughout) and “spora” (spore, sperm), a notion suggesting a strong
affinity to Lee’s “winged seed.”3 Contrary to its connotation of ungrounded-
ness, however, the seed trope turns out to be deeply grounded in Asian history.
He has taken the seed trope from “the garden of nutmeg” in Song of Songs,
which his father evoked in a Thanksgiving message.

East of you or me, he [father] claimed, east of even the last man from China,
lived a sentient perfume, an inbreathing and uttering seed, our original agent.
[. . .] it is the mother of spices; the song of songs [. . .] both the late wine and
our original milk, it is a fecund nard. And there go forth from this vital seed
figures distilled a day, or a year, or a century [. . .]. An ark, all fragrance, is our
trove, the Seed, stringent past jasmine. “We are embalmed in a shabby human
closet,” he said. “Get out! Get to the garden of nutmeg.” (The Winged Seed 90)

Born out of the allegory of the garden of nutmeg, the seed trope surrounds
itself with food references, patently olfactory in this sermon. The pungent fra-
grances of nutmeg, mace, cardamom, cumin, pepper, fennel, aniseed, and the
like perfume ointment, heal the body, flavor wines, preserve and season meats,
vegetables, and fruits. In the West spices have been vital to medicine, cosmet-
ics, cuisine, and religious and official ceremonials ever since the conquest of
Alexander forced the East into contact with the Hellenic world.

The history of the spice trade is a portal into the violent history of colo-
nialism. Lee’s seed trope carries with it the memory of that history. The garden
of nutmeg is said to originate from “east of even the last man from China.”
This rhetorical gesture is not an expression of ethnic pride but a reminder of
the actual spice traffic and its attendant violence. His father’s sermon impreg-
nating “the Seed” “with the suggestion of movement points not only to the
complex beginning of the Old Testament but also to the colonial destruction
of the spice gardens in the Orient. In reading the same sermon, Walter Hesford
points out that “[t]he preacher’s words evoke the sensuous garden of the Song […] to create spice perfumed gardens, to transfer us to another time and place, another way of being” (41). In this complacent tone, Hesford aligns the readers with the Western subject who glorifies such transportation to another time and place, forgetting that it is not so much the passion to know others as the greed for the lucrative spice trade that lured European adventurers to the East Indies.

The Spice Islands, part of today’s Indonesia, became irresistible to the Occidental world as early as the beginning of the 1500s. One can say that the dangerous voyages from Europe to the Spice Islands were the precursor to the Western colonization of Asia. Giles Milton writes, “Nutmeg […] was the most coveted luxury in seventeenth-century Europe, a spice held to have such powerful medicinal properties that men would risk their lives to acquire it” (3). At the beginning of the spice trade, “ten pounds of nutmeg cost less than one English penny.” In London it was sold at “a mark-up of a staggering 60,000 percent. A small sackful was enough to set a man up for life, buying him a gabled dwelling in Holborn and a servant to attend to his needs” (6). The ruthless, sometimes bloody, competition among the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, and the English traders escalated the price of spices and resulted in rampant violence against each other as well as the islanders. Writing about the Dutch ship Mauritius, which set sail in the spring of 1595 for the Spice Islands, Milton recounts what happened upon its landing. “Angered by the escalating price of spices,” the crew of the ship went on a rampage. “What followed was an orgy of destruction that was to set the pattern for the Dutch presence in the East Indies. The town was bombarded with cannon fire and prisoners were sentenced to death” (61). In the context of British history, it is the spice trade that called for the formation of the East India Company, which played a tremendous role in the opium trade and in the process of colonizing Asia, particularly South Asia.

In historical reality the garden of nutmeg helped initiate European colonialism in Asia, whose present-day consequence is the demographic movement westward, thus creating the ever-increasing population of the diaspora. In mythological reality the garden of nutmeg represents the Garden of Eden, from which all humans are exiled. The senior Lee’s desperate cry at the end of his sermon—“Get out! Get to the garden of nutmeg”—speaks of the powerful longing for home in both senses (home on earth and home in heaven), which can be sustained and gratified only by turning to religion, myth, and lore. Lee’s choice of the seed trope thus aptly allegorizes his and his father’s lives, which are filled with longing, movement, and search. One might argue that the senior Lee’s exile from China and Indonesia has little relationship to European colonialism. Although not a direct catalyst for his exile, colonial legacy bears a
heavy responsibility in China’s antagonism toward the West, an antagonism that resulted in a series of political movements purging Western capitalist ideologies, of which the Lees were among the casualties. In the case of Sukarno’s regime, it was the anti-West campaign that resulted in the imprisonment and exile of the senior Lee, whose only “guilt” was having taught Shakespeare and Kierkegaard. In the seed conceit Lee represents his father’s as well as his own wandering in the postcolonial world—the seed is “born flying,” “to begin its longest journey to find its birthplace, that place of eternal unrest. From unrest to unrest it [is] moving. And without so much as a map to guide it, and without so much as a light” (Seed 92). Having been transported to unknown places, the seed knows no destination but only the journey itself.

Lee’s conception of himself as a winged seed and his poetry as winged seeds is a precious inheritance from his father, who had given up a series of identities before he brought his family to the United States. As John C. Hawley notes, the senior Lee “had to invent himself throughout his adult life”—from Mao Zedong’s private physician to a philosopher, a doctor, and a vice president of a university in Indonesia, an evangelical preacher in Hong Kong, and finally a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania (192). The senior Lee’s ability to adapt and reinvent himself anywhere he happened to be finds an apt expression in the trope of the winged seed. “Seed,” a notion endowed with the powerful evocation of the cycle of life, takes on extraordinary meanings in his life rifted by several lives and deaths. Lee writes in his memoir, “I remember, as long as I knew him, my father carried at all times in his right suit-pocket a scarce handful of seeds. Remembrance, was his sole answer when I asked him why” (Seed 33). The poet adopts the seed trope as a traveling and protean identity for himself. “I was one of those seeds,” he writes, “my father kept in the pocket of his suit” (Seed 56). To be a winged seed entails movement, possibility, and hybridization. Despite its destiny of constant movement, it carries hope, promises new flowering, and secures regeneration in a distant land. Lee captures the connotation of this trope in a powerful image of dandelion seeds. “I could witness hundreds of dandelion seeds float slowly over the valley, each carrying a spark of the late sun, each turned to gold by what it bore from one side of the river to the other” (Seed 36). This image of dandelion seeds as Lee’s self-representation suggests that he carries within himself the seed that is his father, and from it comes his renewing sense of self, his elegant songs, and his own fatherhood.

Lee’s seed trope bearing the memory of the colonial beginnings fraught with grand dreams, plunder, and violence sets out to be a political trope, lending itself to Said’s conceptualization of the intellectual in exile. The seed trope, as a self-definition, points to both the politics that necessitates exile and the politics that operates the exile’s positioning in a new place. Lee imagines the seed to have come from violence while meditating about his father. “Did he say
seed is told, kept cold, scored with a pocketknife, and then left out to die, in order to come into further seed, speaking the father seed, leading to seed […] a road we sow ahead of our arrival?” (Seed 46–47). Despite its violent beginning, the seed multiplies itself and sows a path into the future. In this lyrical imagining of the seed, he discloses the exile’s violent partition from home and kinsmen, promises memory and father’s legacy, and offers a utopian impulse. For in the seed “may be growing the flower that will overthrow all governments of crows or senators. […] This seed revises all existing boundaries to proclaim the dimensions of an ungrasped hour. This seed carries news of a new continent and our first citizenship” (Seed 36). Here Lee’s notion of citizenship challenges the ordinary meaning of a national, political identity and envisions the “first citizenship” of a utopian world that has revised “all existing boundaries” for the better. In such “a new continent,” such categories as exiles, insiders, outsiders, nationals, refugees, immigrants, or illegal immigrants would cease to exist. Impelled by this utopian telos, his seed/exile can never wallow in what Said calls “an uncritical gregariousness” (“The Mind in Winter” 54). Although an American citizen, Lee has never stopped feeling like an outsider and examining America with a clear eye. His poem “The City in Which I Love You” presents a picture of the American street to be as chaotic and dangerous as any of Jakarta, from where his family escaped.

Past the guarded schoolyards, the boarded-up churches, swastikaed synagogues, defended houses of worship, past newspapered windows of tenements, among the violated, the prosecuted citizenry, throughout this storied, buttressed, scavenged, policed city I call home, in which I am a guest. (City 51)

Compact in this sharp imagery are stories of crime, racism, poverty, and inhumanity that are commonplace in urban America.

Lee incarnates Said’s model of the intellectual in exile whose trove is “dislocation and disconnectedness,” which Lee considers to be his “spiritual reality” (Moyers 268). Poignant in his imaginary identification with “the winged seed” is the poet’s self-assignment as an intellectual in exile—“a seed that had no place to rest, a seed which, born flying, flew” (Seed 91). In his exilic displacement, therefore, he does not lament the loss of home (which never existed) but rather celebrates the potentiality of life and renewal made doubly precious and sweet by the poignant connotation of death in both the metaphor of seed and the omnipresent reference to his father’s passing.

If there is any sense of origin in Lee’s poetic sensibility, it is the “scarce handful of seeds” of memory about China passed on to him through his parents’
stories and cooking. For the Chinese diaspora, the origin of ethnic identity, after more than a century and a half of emigration and immigration, displacement, and dismemberment, is a place to which one can never return. The “original” China is no longer there; it too has been transformed. China, to the Chinese diaspora, belongs to what Said calls an “imaginative geography and history” that helps “the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away. […] It has acquired an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel” (*Orientalism* 55). To this real/unreal China, which is a necessary part of the Chinese American imaginary, we cannot literally go home again. In turn, “home becomes meaningful,” as Jianguo Chen suggests, “only when exile begins and exile constitutes an essential component of homing, forever searching for a new sense of home—a home in the making” (79). When one lives at home, home is rarely the object of desire. On the contrary, home is often claustrophobic for the young, the restless, and the female. As Carol Boyce Davis points out, “[m]igration creates the desire for home […]. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (113). The desire for home generates its re-vision and idealization, motivating an endless search for and invention of the origin.

The re-vision of home for the Chinese diaspora (or for any other ethnic group) relies heavily on the discursive pleasure of storytelling and the nondiscursive pleasure of food. This truth is amply evident in Asian American literature and film. With the removal from geographical sites such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the overseas Chinese vest their homesickness in the maintenance of rituals and festivals, both of which depend on storytelling and food rituals. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan portrays such a community, epitomized by the mahjong table, whose occupants are engaged in forging a home through stories and food, through secret rivalry in culinary skills, and through food-dominated celebrations of festivals, birthdays, weddings, and friendship. In some cases such as Lee’s, however, those in exile don’t have access to a community; the closest is the extended or nuclear family. Foodways nevertheless continue to be the bloodline that keeps alive ethnic identity and the bittersweet longing for home. Yet the foodways also set the exile apart as an “alien,” an abject and threatening presence in the midst of “natives.”

After three years of wandering in Asia and the United States, the Lees settled in East Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, in 1964, when Lee’s father became the minister of its all-white Presbyterian congregation. The town’s inhospitality is best encapsulated by the oxymoronic name it gave him, “their heathen minister,” and the Lees’ feeling of alienation was deepened by the beginning of another war against Asians (*Seed* 82). Lee’s memoir reveals his experience of painful displacement that often centers on food. In the provincial eyes of the
town, the Chinese foodways set the Lees apart as heathen, uncivilized, and abhorrent. The town's abjection of what is foreign turns on food. Lee recalls a childhood made lonely by things other children said about his family's culinary habits. "They say you keep snakes and grasshoppers in a bushel on your back porch and eat them. They say you don't have manners, you lift your plates to your mouths and push the food in with sticks" (Seed 86). Food is the matter that most frustrates the culturally conditioned human impulse to separate the inside from the outside, because food is the most frequent medium in the necessary but potentially dangerous traffic between them. Humans as omnivores always oscillate between "the two poles of neophobia (prudence, fear of the unknown, resistance to change) and neophilia (the tendency to explore, the need for change, novelty, variety)"; the tension between the familiar and the foreign often causes "fundamental anxiety in man's relationship to his foods, resulting not only from the need to distrust new or unknown foods, but also and more importantly from the tensions between the two contradictory and equally constraining imperatives of the omnivore's double bind" (Fischler 278). The people of East Vandergrift revealed their fascination with and fear of the seemingly strange foodways of the Chinese in verbalizing and sensationalizing them. Never mind that the Lees didn't eat the things of which they were accused; the fantasy that they did disgusted and thrilled the townspeople. As they denigrated the Chinese foodways, they probably shuddered and perspired in imagining what it would be like to eat snakes and grasshoppers and to eat them with sticks.

Julia Kristeva believes that "[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Powers 2). Although she speaks of food loathing in the context of the primordial impulse (of a child) to establish self in separation from other (mother), her objective in theorizing abjection is to implicate the social. In our attempt to establish ourselves in differentiation from others, we often abide by a system of purity and pollution in evaluating foodways. Our food not only tastes better but is also healthier and cleaner than others'. When we have unwittingly taken in what we consider to be filthy food, we purify ourselves by vomiting, by abjecting ourselves. Mary Douglas argues that dirt is not absolute and dirt is nothing but disorder. "Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (35). Our system of ordering food matter socializes our taste buds and metabolisms, which, in turn, stand in the front line of demarcating the border between us and them, between Self and Other. Such demarcation is never simply a line drawn between good and bad cuisine or even clean and filthy food. It always informs the construction of a moral judgment of a particular culture. Those who eat filthy food are believed to indulge in filthy ways. The questions Lee had to face about the disgust-
ing things his family supposedly ate were humiliating precisely because of the association of diet with morality, an association even a child makes without understanding.

Lee and his family are no exceptions in their encounter with the foodways of East Vandergrift. He remembers that as a child he felt strange in “a world which found my family strange, with our accented speech and permanent bewilderment at meatloaf” (Seed 69). The Lees' bewilderment at meatloaf encapsulates their feelings of displacement and alienation. While othering via culinary differences seems to be a very human act, we must take into account the power relations in a given situation. The Lees, being the single family of “foreigners” in town, did not possess the power to humiliate or abject. Their visceral and moral sense of difference via food practices thus couldn’t result in actions that affected others. Through their disgust with the Lees' eating habits, the people of East Vandergrift succeeded in subjecting the extreme minority to public humiliation. Although Lee does not explicitly reveal the pain caused by the questions put to him regarding his family’s eating habits, we can sense the trauma in his repeated line, “I’d heard worse” (Seed 86). Such accusatory questions had the power to damage the young and vulnerable psyches of Li-Young and his siblings.

In contrast to their humiliation by the townspeople over Chinese food, Lee depicts the warmth and love expressed through familiar food in his family, defiantly singling out foods that might frighten most white Americans. In one lyrical moment, Lee writes about his trading with his mother.

What else have you to trade? I answered, This fish head. Good, she answers, I'll give it back to you the way you like it, with ginger, miso, green onion, the eyes steamed to succulent jelly. Plus the rich brain, she said, You may eat the rich brain. I thank her. For you, I say, I will fry the tail. (Seed 96)

Lee makes no compromise with the reading public's discomfort with such food, subverting the tourist attitude toward ethnic, culinary markers. He shows proudly that packed in the small, delicate parts of the fish are a mother's love and good wishes, for many Chinese share the belief that parts of animals nourish and strengthen the analogical parts of their eaters. Relish for such foods is culturally specific, as Lee points out: “It’s clear I got my appetite from my father, my taste for brains and eyes” (Seed 96). In writing about Lee’s long poem “The Cleaving,” Jeffrey Partridge regards Lee’s eating of fish heads as a subversive act. “This ravishing enjoyment is an act of defiance in Bakhtin’s sense of the carnivalesque—an overturning of hegemonic and hierarchical order, a response to the age-old argument that Chinese eating habits mark them as barbaric and inhumane” (112).
For the exile, his or her culture's foodways must function as a cushion from displacement and homelessness, as comfort food that momentarily transports the exile to the ever-elusive home. It is often through the palate and nose that the exile awakens the memories of his or her home and loved ones. Lee evokes the pathos of the exiled with the single sharp image of “the black cooking pot” that his family “carried through seven countries” during their wanderings (Seed 88). This image recalls the seed trope (e.g., a seedpod like a chestnut or watermelon seed). This image, also suggesting a snail, which carries its home on its back, vividly captures the state of being of the exile: home is on the road, as protean as imaginary. In turn, home cooking carries heavy value for those it feeds—the value of belonging and togetherness.

In an alien environment, the aroma of home cooking arouses a deeply entangled feeling of nostalgia and belonging. In his imagination Lee takes flights of stairs in search of memory and finds food for thought. “On the fifth I smell fried salted fish [...] I jump to the sixth, where my grandmother is stirring a soup of ginger, young hen, lemon grass, and tom yum, standing over a fire-blackened pot and crying, Memory is salt. Don't forget me” (Seed 136). This lemony, spicy soup unique to Southeast Asian cuisine not only reminds him of the comfort of home but conveys the injunction of memory for those in exile. The multiple meanings of salt unite the themes of food and home, food and love, food and the survival of the exile. “Memory is salt,” Lee’s grandmother instructs. Without it elements of food don’t come together to make a savory dish. Without it family or community cannot stay whole under the stress of transplantation. Exiles are haunted by the urge to look back, as Rushdie puts it, “even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (10).

Salt, with its connotations of sorrow and flavor, is a long-standing mythological trope expressive of the intertwining pangs of homelessness and the relish of remembrance. The biblical tale of Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt for looking back, besides showing the consequence of failing to obey God, may also suggest the arrested state of the exile when one turns one’s gaze only upon the past—looking at it as a factual past, as though that past were unmediated by memory, narrative, fantasy, and myth filtered and constructed by the present. Speaking of the Indian writers in exile, Rushdie writes, “[O]ur physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will [...] create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10). In theorizing identity as an endless production, Stuart Hall resonates with Rushdie and believes that “our relationship to it [the past], like the child's relationship to the mother, is always already ‘after the break’” (“Cultural Identity” 395). We can never return to our past as if we had never left.
The cultural identity of an exile is a constellation of narrative acts enunciating the past as well as the present.

If salt is memory, as Lee has his grandmother say, then his prizing of salt can be interpreted as his valorization of memory in the invention of home and community. To him neither is stable or fixed. One must imagine it, create it, and sustain it with memory. As salt makes cuisine possible, so does memory make possible a past cathected with love and longing. Thus his emphasis on memory indicates his belief that the past is never directly accessible to us; rather, our narratives conjure up the memory about our past. To demonstrate this point, he singles out cooks as individuals who understand best the function of salt/memory. He writes, “Only the baker knows that bread is a form of our deepest human wish, a shape of love […]. […] Love is a massive compass and several gravity, numen manifest in what can be eaten. Know how bread is knit by salt. For tears alone are active seed, leavening perishing forms, apparent at an imperishable wheel of hunger” (137). If bread is love and salt memory, it is memory that creates and sustains love. Lee’s notion of love clearly exceeds romantic love. He explains in an interview, “Romantic love interests me only slightly. More than anything, a kind of universal love—divine love […] are what interest me” (James Lee 274). Bread, a universal food with variations in shapes, textures, and tastes, symbolizes the love that transcends the individual or family. “We are bread,” he proclaims (Seed 138); therefore, we are love; we are the bread that Christ broke among his disciples as an offering of divine love. Aside from the religious connotation, he also offers the wisdom of an experienced chef. As bread is knit by salt to bring out its sweetness, sugar and salt or love and sorrow are agents for mutual fulfillment. In other words, sugar cannot bring forth gratifying sweetness without the complement of salt. This trope of bread making enacts the aesthetics of the exile: the sweetness of home is made possible through feelings of sorrow and displacement, and the plenitude of home is made imaginable through feelings of lack and loss.

The pathos in this entangled cluster of imageries—salt, bread, tears, memory, and love—is not only among the most palpable aesthetics of the exile but also his or her ethics. Tears over the traumatic dispersal from home intensify the victims’ capacity to love. As though having been dispossessed, the exile gains a greater capacity to give and a deeper understanding of human vulnerability. Lee recalls an incident that exhibits his family’s reaction to those who suffer a similar predicament. Shortly after their arrival in the United States, they met a young woman with a naked baby wrapped in newspaper on the train from Seattle to Chicago. “The child's sallow, puny body was smeared with newspaper ink. The mother, dirty, gaunt, looked wild” (Seed 15). Lee’s family “had been living on butter cookies” and “had two tins of them” to share among the
parents and four children. “Butter cookies and the sixty dollars in my mother’s purse were to see us through the next few days until my father found work” (Seed 15). Despite the threat of her family’s starvation, Mrs. Lee offered the mother and baby “the unopened tin” of cookies along with her sweater. When the young woman didn’t know what to do with the cookies, Mrs. Lee went over and began to “chew up a biscuit and, all the while humming to the child, and lightly rocking, pass the spit-brightened, masticated paste of her mouth into his” (Seed 16). This temporary relief from hunger put both mother and baby to sleep. Similarly, Lee uses food to portray his father’s compassion for those ignored by East Vandergrift—“‘the shut-ins,’ […] mainly old, infirm, crazy, or dying” (Seed 67). To them he and his father would deliver hot dinners once a week. With these stories, Lee shows that dispossession and exile have given his family sensitivity to others’ pain, and alacrity to offer assistance.

The love in Lee’s family for each other in the face of misunderstanding and alienation is also expressed through the references to food. In his short poem “Early in the Morning,” which recalls the love between his parents, Lee infuses the text with the aroma of Chinese breakfast cooking. “While the long grain is softening/in the water, gurgling/over a low stove flame, before/the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced/for breakfast/my mother glides an ivory comb/through her hair” (Rose 25). The olfactory images of soft rice and pickled greens set the tone and scent of the familial morning ritual that is both ethnically specific and universally recognizable as tranquility and love. Accompanying the aroma of a simple Chinese breakfast is the picture of his mother gliding “an ivory comb/through her hair” as his father looks on and “listens for/the music of comb/against hair” (25). In this ordinary but intimate setting, he paints the picture of his father relishing the simple pleasure of watching his wife comb her hair, a pleasure made precious by his experience of imprisonment and his declining health because of it. His father likes his mother to wear a bun on the back of her head. “He says it is kempt./But I know/it is because of the way/my mother's hair falls/when he pulls the pins out./Easily, like the curtains/when they untie them in the evening” (25). With the unlikely juxtaposition to breakfast cooking, Lee subtly suggests the eroticism of his parents in the brief but dramatic imagery of hair falling like curtains closing at night. In this short poem, he constructs a cycle of an ordinary day in his family, beginning with breakfast preparation “before the birds” and ending with the falling of his mother’s hair in the privacy of his parents’ bedroom (25). Her hair described as “heavy/and black as calligrapher’s ink” evokes an intertextuality with his other poems in which we see the father write and paint with brush and ink, projecting the poet’s solace in the love between his parents.

“Eating Alone” and “Eating Together” pair well for their alimentary imageries and their intensity of the poet’s longing for his deceased father. “Eating
“Alone” centers thematically on the inevitable and often lonely movement of life toward death (Moeser 118). Lee's depiction of nature's cycle focuses on the winter garden. “I've pulled the last of the year's young onions. / The garden is bare now. The ground is cold, / brown and old” (Rose 33). Remembrance of his father walking in the very garden rushes in and brings forth the image of his father holding up a windfall pear for his son to observe. “I still see him bend that way—left hand braced on knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet/spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice” (33). The complex impression—the aging father's creaky joints paired with the rotten pear drowning a hornet in its juice—builds upon the tone of loneliness and grief in the first stanza. Vivid in this picture is the poet's meditation on life's inevitable journey toward death. The speaker's longing for his deceased father is given a ghostly shape in the third stanza. “It was my father I saw this morning/waving to me from the trees. I almost/called to him, until I came close enough/to see the shovel, leaning where I had/ left it, in the flickering, deep green shade” (33). The father's ghost accompanies the speaker and refreshes every memory of him. No description of sadness is directly offered here. Rather the poem continues to the last stanza to picture a Chinese meal that switches the image of the cold, dying garden to that of a warm, aromatic kitchen. “White rice steaming, almost done. Sweet green peas/fried in onions. Shrimp braised in sesame/oil and garlic. And my own loneliness. / What more could I, a young man, want” (33). Lee's deep sorrow over his father's absence is powerfully suggested in the vividly inviting food, which now he must eat by himself. Despite the sorrow associated with his father's absence, there is a quiet feeling of comfort in the last stanza, the comfort of a delicious, home-cooked meal. Among the ingredients in the braised shrimp he adds “my own loneliness” to convert it into nourishment. The loving details of the menu and the meal's preparation also evoke a strong sense of family, a family in which the speaker has learned the art of Chinese cuisine. The last rhetorical question suggests his acceptance of his father's passing. Daniel Moeser interprets, “The lack of a question mark at the end of the poem shows that the speaker is making a statement of hopefulness and contentment” (119). It is almost as if Lee suggests that his skills in Chinese cooking can rescue him from loneliness and sorrow, or at least the food helps make loneliness bearable.

“Eating Together” celebrates the togetherness of family by means of a Chinese lunch and laments the absence of the father. “In the steamer is the trout/seasoned with slivers of ginger/two sprigs of green onion, and sesame oil./We shall eat it with rice for lunch,/brothers, sister, my mother” (Rose 49). This Chinese meal serves as a metaphor for the uniquely ethnic way of being. Tight family and leisureed eating, valued in the Chinese culture, differ from the mainstream American life in which fast foods, microwaved dinners, and
soggy sandwiches dominate many people’s diet. Partridge notes, “In the community of family, the poet is not lonely, and neither is his father” (113). Lee offers another uniquely ethnic picture—the manner in which his mother eats the fish. “[M]y mother/who will taste the sweetest meat of the head, holding it between her fingers/deftly, the way my father did weeks ago” (49). With ease he slides from the image of his mother holding the fish head between her fingers to the memory of his father. Their shared relish in the sweet meat in the fish cheeks marks the singularity of this family displaced in a culture that regards such a delicacy as nonfood. This image of eating a fish head also accentuates the absence of the father, for he did the same thing with his fish head only “weeks ago” (49). But now he is gone, “lonely for no one” (49). It is the living that are lonely for their lost loved ones, and eating together and eating home cooking are how we shore up against that loneliness.

**Metaphysics via Food**

Most critics classify Lee as an Asian American poet and choose to focus on his experience as an émigré and his double identity as a Chinese in exile and an American in citizenship. For example, Judith Kitchen in *The Georgia Review* attributes Lee’s poetry in *The City in Which I Love You* to his unique subject position as “a Chinese American trying to make sense of both his heritage and his inheritance” (160). Yibing Huang, writing for *Amerasia Journal*, assesses Lee’s book of prose poetry, *The Winged Seed*, as “a typical fable of Asian American experience, of how tradition and the parents’ generation are always, in consciousness or the unconscious, linked with pain and burden” (190). Lee expresses his strong objection to this classification in an interview with Tod Marshall.

I have no dialogue with cultural existence. Culture made that up—Asian American, African-American, whatever. I have no interest in that. I have an interest in spiritual lineage to poetry—through Eliot, Donne, Lorca, Tu Fu, Neruda, David the Psalmist. […] Somehow an artist has to discover a dialogue that is so essential to his being, to his self, that it is no longer cultural or canonical, but a dialogue with his truest self. His most naked spirit. (132)

Lee believes that poetry in dialogue with the cultural is a “lower form of art” (131). It is like poetry “built on sand; it looks solid, but it isn’t because it speaks from a self that is grounded in things” (133) and things disappear. True poetry, he claims, sheds the poet’s false (cultural) identity. In the same vein, Helen Vendler proposes that the “lyric desires for a stripping-away of the details associated
with a socially specified self in order to reach its desired all-purpose abstraction” (Soul Says 2–3). “If the normal home of selfhood is the novel,” she asserts in valorizing poetry, “then the home of ‘soul’ is the lyric, where the human being becomes a set of warring passions independent of time and space” (5). Lee would wholeheartedly agree with Vendler that the soul is home to poetry. But would Vendler, who has more power than any U.S. critic to make or break a poet, regard Lee as such a poet? Probably not. In her review of Bill Moyers’ The Language of Life, which contains Moyers’ interview with Lee, Vendler mocks it as “laughably politically correct, summoning up an anxious roll call of representatives from what academics call the ‘marginalized’ and the ‘Other.’” She remarks that Moyers’ book “is a misrepresentation of the achievement of contemporary American poetry to concentrate so tediously on ‘the Other’” (“Poetry for the People” 14–15). Although her disparaging comments are directed at Bill Moyers, it is not difficult to detect her contemptuous tone regarding the poetry by the marginal and the Other.

Ironically, discredited by critics such as Vendler as hotcakes of multiculturalism, Lee nevertheless maintains his polemical appeal to the naked self and demonstrates his ambivalence toward his ethnicity. This ambivalence, however, has little to do with culturally enforced self-loathing. His objection to the reviewers’ classification is rooted in his desire to transcend all cultural representations. For him, cultural identities are works of the rational mind, and true poetry works against it. He remarks in an interview,

I’ve noticed that we can’t be free of stereotypes as long as we’re thinking with our rational mind. So it was important for me to take a breath and then go under […] to try to escape all stereotypical views of what an Asian is in America, what an immigrant is […]. The only way I could escape those stereotypes was to defy my own rational thinking. (James Lee 275)

Rejection of his Asian American identity, for Lee, does not purport a willing surrender to the ideology of assimilation. Rather than becoming an American, he desires the “state of nobodyhood.” His response to his ontological condition as an exile taking the form of cultural transcendence aims to counter the stereotypes of Asians in U.S. popular culture. He explains in the same interview,

The culture we live in offers or imposes versions of “somebodyhoods” that are really shallow and false. […] If I can attain a state of “nobodyhood,” which is the same thing as the state of “everybodyhood,” that’s much richer and more full of potential than some false, made up, Hollywood magazine, university, or cultural version of “somebodyhood.” (J. Lee 275–276)
The seeming paradox of nobody being everybody is central to his transcendentalism, which strives to achieve the state of the naked self in relationship to God.

Diaspora, for Lee, is not a uniquely ethnic condition; rather it is a human condition, a view derived from Genesis in which human history begins in dual exile from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God. “It is arrogant of the dominant culture,” he comments, “to think it’s not part of a diaspora.” He regards himself as exilic in this sense. “The difficulty is that the earth is not my home” (J. Lee 279). Although his concept of diaspora is Christian, it is rooted in his existential condition as an exile and in his father’s theology necessitated by his experience of imprisonment and exile. The latter’s influence on his son is unfathomable, and one can say without risk of exaggeration that most of Lee’s writings are trained to the remembrance of his father. In “My Father, in Heaven, Is Reading Out Loud,” he captures brilliantly the symbiosis between them, even beyond the grave.

Because my father walked the earth with a grave
determined rhythm, my shoulders ached
from his gaze. Because my father’s shoulders
ached from the pulling of oars, my life now moves
with a powerful back-and-forth rhythm:
nostalgia, speculation. (The City in Which I Love You 39)

Lee’s metaphysics is not only an answer to his ontological condition as an exile but also functions as an umbilical cord linking him and his deceased father.

The senior Lee’s fascination with and eventual conversion to Christianity can be traced back to his initial exile from communist China and his exile again from Indonesia. Hesford documents that Lee’s father was “converted to Christianity while a prisoner in Indonesia” (40). Wandering from country to country, from continent to continent, the senior Lee found communities among Chinese Christians, exiled or not, who sublimate alienation to divine deliverance. Lee’s parents used to stand in front of other Chinese refugees and immigrants and speak “about the mysterious hand of God which had preserved us and protected us throughout our trials in Indonesia” (Seed 130). He recalls that once a year his family would meet four hundred other members of “the Ambassador Temple in a Maryland wood, where they witnessed, sang, prayed, preached, danced in the aisles, got slain in the spirit, rolled on the floor, and got generally all over holy, shouting hallelujah!” (Seed 130). Such religious orgies offer the diasporic Chinese badly needed catharsis and serve to exorcise the demon of banishment. In religion they find solace and in each other a sense of home. In the lives of the Lees, the pangs of exile and constant movement have
necessitated Christianity’s vital place. Homelessness is a human condition in the Christian theology; it is the life humans are doomed to lead on earth. As I suggest above, such religious fervor would probably not have touched Lee had his parents not been exiled from China and Indonesia successively. As a consequence, Lee’s affinity to the universalistic concept of humankind overrides his affinity to Asia.

Few of Lee’s critics take into account his transcendentalist yearnings as part of his social living. They either want to rescue him from ethnic determinism or fault him for not being sufficiently ethnic. Xiaojing Zhou argues against the tendency of some critics to interpret Lee’s poetry by emphasizing his Chinese ethnicity. By reducing his art to expressions of his ethnicity, Zhou points out, critics minimize “the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee’s work and of the creative experiment in his poetry.” On the strength of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of “horizon,” Zhou theorizes that “one’s heritage is not possessed once for all, nor is it necessarily inherited through ethnic lineage. Rather, it is changed and renewed with the changing conditions of human life and human consciousness” (“Inheritance and Invention,” 114, 115). Lee’s rich inheritance harnessing different cultures and histories leads to an expansion of his horizon, a position that, according to Bakhtin, promises creativity. In his essay on Lee’s “Persimmons,” Steven G. Yao remarks that many of Lee’s critics (including Zhou) “have relied on an overly simplistic model for cross-cultural literary production” (3). In a close reading of Lee’s most anthologized poem, Yao makes the case that “Lee achieves only a superficial integration, or ‘hybridization,’ of Chinese and American culture” and “‘grafting’ offers a more exact term than hybridity for understanding Lee’s accomplishment in “Persimmons” (19–20). To him Lee is more American than Asian American because Lee’s knowledge of China is so meager that the Chinese culture he represents offers only a “voyeuristic appeal” (6).

Both Zhou’s and Yao’s efforts to free Lee from interpretive limitations, however, only partially meet Lee’s own self-portrait as a poet on a quest for the Absolute. To be Asian, American, or Asian American occupies little space in his self-representation. His metaphysical schema aims to rid him of such labels: “My true self is universe or God. I assume that my true nature is God. I assume that I am God in my true nature” (Marshall 134). What he claims to be true of himself he attributes to all true poets. “When I read poetry, I feel I’m in the presence of universe mind; that is, a mind I would describe as a 360-degree seeing; it is manifold in consciousness” (Marshall 130).

Lee’s transcendentalism bears a strong resemblance to Emerson’s, whose famous declaration goes, “[A]ll mean egotism vanishes, I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all” (Ziff 39). Lee’s “360-degree seeing” and Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” offer a political liberal license to all “true”
poets, as Lee deems them, and true poets possess the naked self that is the uni-
verse mind or God, free from cultural and social constraints and therefore free
from the blind spots that all people have as social individuals constituted by
race, class, gender, religion, and language. In his statement “I am born into the
great, the universal mind. I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect” (Ziff 240),
Emerson anticipates Lee’s self-anointment as God in his true nature, a god
that is twin to Emerson’s “Oversoul, within which every man’s particular being
is contained and made one with all others” (Ziff 206). The concept of self
in both men’s articulations of the transcendent, therefore, is seated in essen-
tialism. Harold Bloom in his usual abstruse eloquence describes Emerson-
ism as the American Religion. “Self-reliance, in Emerson […] is the religion
that celebrates and reveres what in the self is before the Creation, a whatness
which from the perspective of religious orthodoxy can only be the primal
Abys” (146).

As an American transcendentalist, Lee is situated within the American
poetic tradition of the sublime. His appeal to that which is other to the social is
an appeal to what Vendler calls “the grand, the sublime, and the unnameable”
(Part of Nature 2). Departing from European Romanticism, the object of the
sublime in American poetry is much more than nature itself; it is nation,
technology, and power that have been elevated to sublimity. Many of the
major interpreters of American poetry, such as Bloom and Vendler, regard the
American sublime as a sensibility that defines American poetry as much as the
American spirit. Nativist in sentiment, their assessment of American poetry
would probably annoy Lee, if not affront him, for he refuses to be a grateful
guest in this country by critiquing it and by considering it “a country/wholly
unfound to himself” (Book of My Nights 6).

Rob Wilson, interrogating the nationalist implication in the American
sublime, puts forth his thesis that “[a]s a poetic genre, the American sublime
helped to produce the subject and site of American subjection as sublime” (3).
Or in my blunt paraphrase, the American poetic expression of the sublime is
a performance of a distinctively American subject substantiated through the
subjugation of land and its first peoples. Centering on “the material sublime”
in American poetry, Wilson points out that the will to American sublimity finds
its representation in a “landscape of immensity and wildness” that serves as
the “Americanized self’s inalienable ground” (3, 5). Although Lee does not
participate in the representation of such an American material sublime, he is
nevertheless part of this American poetic tradition in which wild immensity,
be it nature, force, or rhetoric, predictably accompanies self-deification and
hyperbolic imagination. In “Degrees of Blue,” he evokes the sublime through
the grand language of power:
How is he going to explain
the moon taken hostage, the sea
risen to fill up all the mirrors?
How is he going to explain the branches
beginning to grow from his ribs and throat,
the cries and trills starting in his own mouth?
And now that ancient sorrow between his hips,
his body's ripe listening
the planet
knowing itself at last. (Book 31)

In this vast field of vision traversing the private, the historical, and the planetary, Lee centers himself as the knower and seer. His rhetorical will to power and his self-deification place him squarely within what Wilson calls the American “collective will-to-sublimity” (6). Lee’s disavowal of all that is cultural cannot hide his American roots even when his disavowal is sublimated into a metaphysical form of mysticism.

Lee is, of course, fully aware of the self’s submergence in the diurnal mass. To him, precisely because most of us most of the time are socially anchored, we become “entangled with a phantom” (Marshall 134). Like Heraclitus and many Buddhist and Western process philosophers, Lee (whose undergraduate study was in biochemistry) tells us that material objects in fact have no materiality. “Modern physicists are proving what the ancient mystics have always known: that matter is 99.9999% space” (Marshall 133). Everything we see, touch, and hold onto is fading away. “So where is ground?” Lee asks (Marshall 133). In “Arise, Go Down,” he writes, “[s]eeing how one cancels the other. / I’ve become a scholar of cancellations. […] to see in each and / every flower the world cancelling itself” (City 37–38). This knowledge of “the world cancelling itself” renders illusory all that is worldly. His poetry, he tells us, is born out of his frustration because he cannot continuously live the life of the universe mind. It is writing poetry that keeps him living “in constant remembrance of who I am. That I am not this. I am not this stuff that is fading away” (Marshall 134).

One can read this as Lee’s opposition to the reification of existing social and cultural practices while finding his own poetic voice, which resonates with Martin Heidegger’s claim that new social and cultural worlds can come to be if we cease trying to control socially constituted objects and if instead we permit a poetic world-making process to work through us (17–87). The new emerging, of course, will still be social and historical. In much less grandiose language, Gadamer makes a comparable claim when he tells us that something new can be created if we, with our cultural prejudices, risk those prejudices by
entering into open dialogue with people and texts with other often incommensurate prejudgments (345–350). Lee’s desire to enter into dialogue with all other poets present and past is interestingly similar to Gadamer’s position, although he in his desire to possess a 360-degree consciousness may be forgetting that prejudgments and cultural worlds are often incommensurate and that the creative result of dialogue will remain socially and culturally specific.

Situated in the Christian tradition, Lee’s appeal to that which is Other to the social takes on the absolutist lexicon of God and the universe mind. His attempt to go beyond the social and the rational finds good company in Asian philosophies and religions as well as contemporary Western thinkers. In Daoism it is the transcendent Dao that is Other to the social prioritized by Confucianism, and in Buddhism it is nothingness that defies the material and the cultural. Lacan theorizes the Real that is not codifiable by the social. For Kristeva it is the Semiotic that operates in constant tension with the Symbolic. All of the above positions claim that there is something more “real” than the reality of socially constituted objects and subjects. Henry Ruf sums this up well: “There is an irremovable ‘Real’ that our entire conscious and unconscious symbolic apparatus cannot account for or control” (209). Lee’s appeal to God is his way to name the unnameable, the Lacanian Real that is Other to social rationality. When he disavows his ethnic identity, he is really attempting to resist absolutizing social and cultural identities. The flaw in his metaphysics, however, lies in his belief that the material, social world hinders his union with the universe mind. In contrast, the transcendent Dao offers the way socially constituted people are to live with creative quietude in the situations where they find themselves. Likewise, the Real for Lacan reveals the symbolic world’s inability to avoid radical instability in its effort to control enjoyment. In neither case is a transcendent, socially naked person being postulated. This is why Žižek à la Lacan argues that one cannot approach the Real without going through cultural and material specificities. The movement of the universe mind always brings one back to the cultural and material. Ethnic identification and Lee’s transcendent self are not mutually exclusive.

If we look at more of his poems, it becomes apparent that Lee speaks from a social or ethnic self to reach the transcendent, and his semantic/semiotic place from which to speak is Asian food. Fruit is the unifying imagery in “Persimmons” and becomes the locus from which he articulates an immigrant’s analysis of his own experience between two cultures and his critique of the intolerance of the mainstream culture. The adult speaker returns to his childhood memory keyed up by two words, “persimmon” and “precision.” Yao points out that “[t]he system of Chinese phonotactics does not include the complex syllable onset of the pre- at the beginning of the word precision as an allowable sequence” (7). The young Lee, speaking Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin Chi-
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nese, encounters the difficulty of reproducing the sequence of sounds that distinguishes the first syllable of “persimmon” from that of “precision.” The poem begins by picturing a classroom situation where the immigrant child is punished for making this phonetic error. “In sixth grade Mrs. Walker/slapped the back of my head/and made me stand in the corner/for not knowing the difference/between persimmon and precision” (Rose 17). Lee makes it apparent that the child knows the difference in meaning between these two words—“How to choose/persimmons. This is precision” (17). He then describes precisely how to choose, peel, and eat the perfect persimmon.

Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart. (17)

The speaker’s sophisticated knowledge in the selection and consumption of persimmons counters the common, racist assumption that broken or accented speech signifies underdeveloped intellect. As a child, Lee came to understand this prejudice with immense pain and humiliation. He recalls,

When I was six and learning to speak English, I talked with an accent […] I noticed early that all accents were not heard alike by the dominant population of American English speakers. Instead, each foreigner’s spoken English […] fell on a coloring ear, which bent the listener’s eye and, consequently, the speaker’s countenance; it was a kind of narrowing, and unconscious on the part of the listener, who listens in judgment, judging the speaker even before the meaning or its soundness were attended to. […] The result was that while in Chinese, with my family, I rattled like any good loose child […] and spoke my broken English without embarrassment […] in public school or any other place where fluent English was current, I was dumb. Perceived as feeble-minded, I was […] spoken to very loudly, as though the problem were deafness. (Seed 76–78)

His early experience of physical punishment and social isolation over his phonetic difficulty in English resulted in self-disgust. He remembers “how I used
to hold a hand very casually over my mouth when I talked, hoping to hide the alien thing. And I grew to hate its ugliness more than anyone” (Seed 78).

The sharp irony in “Persimmons” points to two situations. First, Mrs. Walker humiliates the immigrant child “for not knowing the difference” between two English words, “thereby marking herself as someone grossly insensitive to the very category of ‘difference,’ as a poor teacher […] who both fails to recognize and neglects to practice the import of her own lesson” (Yao 8). Second, Mrs. Walker demonstrates her ignorance by committing the errors of selecting a green persimmon, calling it a “Chinese apple,” and cutting it up with a knife. Lee’s critique of the mainstream’s ignorance and arrogance, embodied in this sixth-grade teacher, centers on this particular Asian fruit. In introducing an exotic fruit to her students, Mrs. Walker offers misinformation and humiliates the immigrant child. Even though the child declines his share of “the Chinese apple,” knowing the sour and astringent taste of an unripe persimmon, he is not spared when his classmates scrunch up their faces and turn to stare at him, silently accusing the Chinese of being foolish people who eat such terrible-tasting apples.

Centered upon the same fruit is also the contrast between the cruelty of the American society, whose microcosmos is Mrs. Walker’s classroom, and the love and comfort inside the immigrant home. The image of a persimmon round as the moon and warm as the sun, central to the aesthetics and ethics of this poem, counters the earlier scene of punishment and humiliation in the classroom. In the sixth stanza, the centerpiece, Lee de-exoticizes the fruit by giving it a private value. “My mother said every persimmon has a sun/inside, something golden, glowing, warm as my face” (18). These three lines evoke an intimate image of a mother cupping her son’s face in her hands and trying to heal his injured psyche. Persimmons capture all that is golden, warm, sweet, tender, and gratifying in such a moment. In the eighth stanza, Lee brings into the folds of the persimmon trope his relationship with his dying father.

Finally understanding he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love. (18)

These are the two persimmons the speaker has put on his bedroom windowsill to ripen, “where each morning a cardinal/sang, The sun, the sun” (18).
Lee associates persimmons with heart—“so sweet,/all of it, to the heart”—employing it as an objective correlative for his heavy heart and deep sorrow over his father’s illness. The symbol of persimmons vividly sets the contrast between a culture, ignorant of its ripe connotations, that punishes a child for mispronouncing words and the immigrant home where love cancels fear and pain. Persimmons thus figure for the rich, full warmth of his parents’ love, which he finds lacking in American culture. And love and tenderness are the spirit of Lee’s songs that bring him closer to God or the universe mind.

For Lee divine love includes profane love. Mining the riches of Song of Songs, he rescues the sensual and the erotic, and unifies the sacred with the profane. In “This Room and Everything in It,” he invokes Song of Songs to describe his love for his wife, blurring the line between the erotic and the divine. Again food is the site where such blurring takes place.

Your scent
that scent
of spice and a wound,
I’ll let stand for mystery.

Your sunken belly
is the daily cup
of milk I drank
as a boy before morning prayer. (City 49)

In “Persimmons” the loving details surrounding the fruit are highly charged with eroticism. Returning to the second stanza, in which the speaker displays his knowledge on selecting and eating this fruit, we see how erotically suggestive his vocabulary is: “sniff,” “soft,” “sweet,” “the bottoms,” “lay,” “skin,” “suck,” “swallow,” “eat,” “meat,” and “heart” (Rose 17). Yao elegantly terms this moment “an erotics of consumption” (9). Persimmons thus eroticized lead the reader into the third stanza, in which Donna appears as the speaker’s object of desire. “Donna undresses, her stomach is white” (17). With the time frame shifted away from the traumatic classroom scene, this stanza presents the speaker as an adult lover: “we lie naked,/face-up, face-down. […]/I part her legs” (17). Donna’s attraction to the speaker is made clear through the association with persimmons—“she is beautiful as the moon”—resonant to the seventh stanza in which the speaker’s mother compares a persimmon to the sun, punning for son. As the fruit emblematizes the speaker, “golden, glowing,/warm as my face” (18), so is Donna implicitly linked to the fruit by Lee’s simile of “the moon,” round and “beautiful,” gravitating and gravitated.
toward the sun/son. The fruit symbolic of the sun masculinizes the speaker, the son, while it is simultaneously symbolic of the feminine moon that assists the display of the speaker's manhood as sexual agency—“I part her legs.”

The speaker's attraction to a white woman and his romancing of her via a few words of Chinese are an issue to some critics. Yao interprets the figure of Donna as “the ultimate object and symbol of assimilationist desire” (9–10). Tim Engles asserts that Lee himself suggests that “the speaker's attraction to white America has involved a prostitution of sorts of his heritage” (191). While the assessment of this issue lies outside the domain of this chapter, it raises a related question of Lee's relationship to his ethnicity in “Persimmons.” The large, orange-colored persimmon comes from grafting a branch of the Asian specimen onto a native plant rootstock to achieve hardiness. Its duality allegorizes a new identity of Asian immigrants in the United States. Yao strongly argues against the postcolonial lexicon of hybridity in assessing the aesthetics as well as the ethnic identity of “Persimmons.”

While appreciative of Yao's erudition of Chinese and Western languages and lyricisms that establishes the fine distinction between “hybridity” and “grafting,” I think that ethnicity as mediated by persimmons is a matter of nondiscursive engagement, a gustatory jouissance and a bodily memory, rather than a matter of cultural and linguistic asymmetry. It is true that “Persimmons” begins by marking the speaker's ethnicity along the line of linguistic displacement. Yet Lee's opposition to the cultural insensitivity in the episode of Mrs. Walker's pedagogical error relies strongly on nonlinguistic acts. Following the physical punishment and humiliation occasioned by the speaker's mispronunciations, the second stanza exhibits his precise and confident knowledge on how to choose and eat persimmons. “Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat. / Chew the skin, suck it, / and swallow” (17). Lee seems to establish the speaker's ethnic authenticity via his relationship with persimmons. His know-how in enjoying this fruit testifies to his Asianness, as though it were an innate knowledge, a bodily memory. This seemingly biologist approach to ethnicity is not necessarily guilty of essentialism. Enjoyment, though a bodily activity, is culturally specific. The people in East Vandergrift enjoy meatloaf while the Lees enjoy fish heads, neither understanding the other's gustatory passion. The speaker's loving account of the fruit, erotically tactile, evokes sensations more than beliefs. This nondiscursive ethnic identification evinces how culture inscribes even our taste buds and metabolism.

In the eighth stanza of “Persimmons,” Lee shows how the speaker forges his ethnic identity by introducing the father, the paternal heritage. He gives his father the two persimmons he has been ripening on the windowsill, “swelled, heavy as sadness, /and sweet as love” (18). His love for persimmons, which comes from his parents, now transfers his love to them. The poeticism of the persimmons
relies on tactile and olfactory imagery, suggesting the association of heart and feeling with persimmons. In the last stanza, the speaker finds three of his father’s paintings in the cellar, one of which bears two persimmons, so vivid that “they want to drop from the cloth” (19). When told of the paintings, the father says,

I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind.
Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight. (19)

The father’s lines show that his connection to Chinese tradition continues despite his loss of perception. The countless repetitions have ingrained the art of representing persimmons in the body: “the feel of the wolftail on the silk, / the strength, the tense/precision in the wrist. […] the texture of persimmons,/in your palm, the ripe weight” (19). The father’s story seems to tell us that it is the somatic that continues one’s connection to one’s ancestral culture. His emotional reflection on things that one never forgets “despite any form of geographical, linguistic or even sensory displacement” offers a consolation to the son that his link to his parents and their culture leaves imprints in his body, despite his fading skill in Chinese and feelings of disconnection (Yao 18). It is significant that “Persimmons” concludes with the father’s speech, offering the resolution that the value of persimmons is measured by weight—the weight of memory, of loss of memory, and the weight of cultural inscription in one’s body.

Most pertinent to ethnicity is one of Lee’s best long poems, “The Cleaving.” Food and eating are central to its themes and aesthetics. Only after the indulgence in the carnal does he arrive at a meditation on the transcendent. Only after the montage of ethnic markers—Chinese cuisine and physical features—is he able to empty out ethnicity. “The Cleaving,” set in a Chinatown, begins with the speaker’s identification with the man working in “the Hon Kee Grocery” (City 77). “He gossips like my grandmother, this man/with my face” (77). Emanating from the first few lines is a sense of belonging: “I could stand/amused all afternoon/in the Hon Kee Grocery” (77). What amuses the speaker is not the exotic, which attracts tourists to Chinatown, but the familiar sights, smells, and tastes associated with home. The following lines present an aromatic and alimentary image of meats hung inside the grocery.

[R]oast pork cut
from a hog hung
by nose and shoulders,
her entire skin burnt
crisp, flesh I know
to be sweet,
her shining
face grinning
up at ducks
dangling single file,
each pierced by black
hooks through breast, bill,
and steaming from a hole
stitched shut at the ass. (City 77)

Lee depicts this scene with such ease that the seeming violence is muted by humor and appetite. The details about roast pork and ducks serving as markers of his ethnic subjectivity—“flesh I know/to be sweet”—seem to appeal to the sensory, the bodily. Significantly, the line break occurs at “know,” not “flesh,” to underscore that the speaker’s ethnicity is based on intellectual as well as visceral knowledge.

Such union of the mind and the body when constructing the speaker’s ethnic self enjoys a high moment in the fourth stanza, describing roast ducks.

The head, flung from the body,
opens down the middle where the butcher
cleanly halved it between
the eyes, and I
see, foetal-crouched
inside the skull, the homunculus,
gray brain grainy
to eat. [...] 
The butcher sees me eye this delicacy.
With a finger, he picks it
out of the skull-cradle
and offers it to me.
I take it gingerly between my fingers
and suck it down.
I eat my man. (79–80)

On the surface this moment describes the fellowship between two Chinese men expressed in their mutual enjoyment of duck brains. The particular association of duck brains with “man” and “foetal-crouched [...] homunculus,” however, has far-reaching significance in ethnicizing the speaker. Lee alludes to the
Chinese legend of Yue Fei, a general during the Song dynasty, who defeated foreign invaders but was unjustly punished by the emperor under the advice of a corrupt courtier. Afterward, everywhere the courtier went, people spat and threw stones at him. Hated and chased by people, he could find no better refuge than inside a chicken's skull. Since then the Chinese eat fowls' brains with glee. Lee's allusion to this legend serves to wed the mind (which is familiar with the Chinese cultural tradition) with the body (which relishes hardcore Chinese cuisine) to give an impression of the speaker's ethnic authenticity. Lee has expressed a sense of helpless regret, such as in “Persimmons,” that he has lost the Chinese language, and the reference to the legend of Yue Fei provides a measure of redemption in establishing himself as a cultural insider.

Lee's evocation of this legend through duck brains not only defines the speaker's ethnicity but also initiates the unifying trope of eating in this poem. Much like the function of persimmons, the imagery of eating weaves together several strands of otherwise disparate motifs in this poem. From duck brains, Lee moves on to eating nonfood matter such as people, their actions, their manners, and their history. The trope of eating figures for appropriation, incorporation, and assimilation, all that we take in through our senses and becomes us.

What is it in me will not let
the world be, would eat
not just this fish,
but the one who killed it,
the butcher who cleaned it.
I would eat the way he
reaches into the plastic tubs
and pulls out a fish, clubs it, takes it
to the sink, guts it, drops it on the weighing pan.
I would eat that thrash
and plunge of the watery body
in the water, that liquid violence
between the man's hands,
I would eat
the gutless twitching on the scales,
three pounds of dumb
nerve and pulse, I would eat it all
to utter it. (82–83)

The prominence of orality here connotes the poet's voracious desire to understand the world, as he appropriately explains, “my reading a kind of eating, my eating/a kind of reading” (82), for eating is a kind of assimilation that trans-
lates the foreign into the familiar or converts the threatening into the nourishing. Lee humorously resolves “the omnivore’s paradox” (the tension between neophobia and neophilia) by an infantile delight in tasting and testing everything he lays his eyes on (Fischler 278). Only through introducing the outside into the inside can one understand the concerned matter. As a poet Lee believes that he must “eat it all/to utter it.”

This understanding of one’s relationship to others and their worlds brings us back to Gadamer, whose hermeneutics promotes fusion of the horizons of understanding through genuine dialogues. I have argued elsewhere that “all interpretations of texts are done by readers who come to the text with prejudices which determine the readers’ horizons of understanding” (Xu, “Making Use of European Theory” 49). In a dialogic encounter with a text, a culture, or even an individual, one risks the stability of one’s own prejudgment by opening oneself up to a different “prejudice,” creatively appropriating what is foreign to one’s mental landscape. Such risks, Gadamer promises us, often result in creative infusions of the radically new. Lee’s eating trope certainly suggests the kind of risks involved in introducing into the Self what is Other. This act of seeming assimilation, however, does not produce homogeny by effacing differences as some of Gadamer’s critics charge.17

“The Cleaving” is by far the strongest Asian American poem in Lee’s oeuvre. Hesford goes so far as to assert that “[i]n the central ‘City’ the poet denies his Asian past and identity to cleave to his American beloved; in the concluding ‘Cleaving’ he cleaves to his Asian past and Chinese-American identity” (53). The celebratory embrace of his ethnicity takes the form of gleeful indulgence in Chinese cuisine and appetite—the appetite that establishes him to be a big eater of not only food but also his race: “I would devour this race to sing it” (83). Eating his race to sing it entails the incorporation of Asian American history, which is fraught with injustice and sacrifice. Deploying “death” as a metonymy for this history, he sings,

[...] I would eat,
[...] the standing deaths
at the counters, in the aisles,
the walking deaths in the streets,
the death-far-from-home, the death-
in-a-strange-land, these Chinatown
deaths, these American deaths. (83)

His eating and singing of this history serve as an elegy for all the Asian Americans who died after eating much bitterness. By eating their misery and deaths, he endeavors to understand and place himself within Asian American history.
The trope of eating suggests two diametrically opposed meanings. On the one hand, it stands for the poet’s eager absorption of all that is around him in order to turn daily life into poetry. On the other, it figures for the poet’s attack on his adversary, in this case racial hostility. In psychoanalytical theory, orality is associated with both pleasure and aggression. Although orality is mostly discussed vis-à-vis infants, Freud and Lacan never disassociate infant modality from adults. Indeed, when Lacan theorizes the Real that is constantly threatening the stability of the Symbolic, he makes it clear that the primordial underlies as well as frustrates the social. Lee’s imagery of orality integrates into the self what is pleasant and vanquishes what is hostile. In response to Emerson’s offensive remark about the Chinese, Lee interposes both implications of the eating trope.

I would devour this race to sing it,
this race that according to Emerson
managed to preserve to a hair
for three or four thousand years
the ugliest features in the world.
I would eat these features, eat
the last three or four thousand years, every hair.
And I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his
soporific transcendence. (83)

The racial othering by Emerson is particularly alienating. Although Lee has never acknowledged Emerson’s influence, the two men’s transcendentalisms, as I have discussed, bear a strong resemblance. Thus, it may strike one as curious that Lee belittles Emerson’s transcendentalism as “soporific” in order to cut down the virility of the master’s (father’s) influence, reducing it to an old man’s ramble—an oedipal antagonism Lee displays via aggressive orality. The poet, therefore, avenges himself and the Chinese by subjecting Emerson and his racist remark to the trope of eating, and with the same trope he simultaneously embraces his people and their four thousand years of history.

Partridge is correct in pointing out that “[w]hile eating Emerson seems overtly and violently to disassociate the speaker from Emerson and his influence, as a ‘food’ substance Emerson also becomes a nutrient for the speaker’s poetic utterance” (114). The one “who eats is at one with what is eaten” (Partridge 118). Eating (chi) in Chinese has the connotation of assaulting or overcoming, such as in chess, where one “eats” the opponent’s pieces, and it is overcoming through incorporation. In The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston tells the story of her mother, who overcomes the sitting ghost by catching it, cooking it, and eating it (78–88). She is now better off for having
eaten the ghost. Lee situates himself in the Chinese semantic tradition of eating oppositions and joins the battle against racial injustice in the American literary tradition while allowing himself to be nourished by that very tradition. Or borrowing Sau-ling Wong’s words, Lee belongs to “the company of fabulous Chinese heroes who overcome ghosts, monsters, and assorted evils by devouring them” (25). In this poem, the eating trope creates a cross-cultural site in which Lee performs his Chinese American self.

As soon as the ethnic self is constructed, Lee proceeds to empty it out by moving his motif of eating to that of death and by meditating on the nothingness of this material world in order to “witness the spirit, the invisible, the law” (Marshall 141). The poem’s metaphysical moment, therefore, is made possible only through the extravagant display of food, its killing, cutting, cleaning, cooking, and eating, much of which is culturally specific. Continuing the trope of eating, he writes,

Bodies eating bodies, heads eating heads,
we are nothing eating nothing,
and though we feast,
are filled, overfilled,
we go famished.
We gang the doors of death.
That is, our deaths are fed
that we may continue our daily dying,
Our bodies going
down, while the plates-soon-empty
are passed around, that true
direction of our true prayers, […]
As we eat we’re eaten. (85)

The references of eating, being eaten, and dying configure to voice his metaphysics that materials fade away and only the pure consciousness of the universe mind lasts. Only after he establishes the trope of eating is he able to cancel out materiality and cultural/ethnic identification in favor of transcendentalism.

In the poem’s conclusion, Lee returns to the theme of ethnicity. Only this time it becomes expanded by his metaphysical meditation to include a diverse cluster of ethnic markers that may or may not be Asian, only to be rid of them all. Urged on by his reflection on death/change, Lee loosens the rein on his utopian impulse to de-ethnicize, de-gender the butcher by exploding his ethnic identity to such an extent that its overflowing labels come to mean nothing. What remains after such an explosion of signifiers is the singularity of his face.
The terror the butcher
scripts in the unhealed
air, the sorrow of his Shang
dynasty face,
African face with slit eyes. He is
my sister, this
beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
keeper of Sabbaths, diviner
of holy texts, this dark
dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
I daily face,
this immigrant,
this man with my own face. (86–87)

The butcher, after passing through these conventional ethnic markers, in the last line simply becomes “this man with my own face,” embodying all, therefore emptied of all ethnicities. Simultaneously, Lee also purges the butcher’s gender by referring to him as “my sister.” The butcher thus becomes the transcendent self embodying all ethnicities and genders, and therefore is tied down by none.

In settling for the final identification of the butcher to be “this man with my own face,” Lee also postulates that the specificity of an individual cannot be reduced to his or her socially constituted identities. Although this ethnic specificity is other than any of the social masks people wear, still they always wear social masks. The I-Thou encounter, which Gadamer regards to be the necessary presupposition of all discourse, must transcend socially constructed categories (321–322). Emmanuel Levinas argues that interpersonal ethical relationships have priority over each individual’s social identity. We are different because of a singularity that, in such encounters, calls for a responsibility to the other that cannot be passed off to anyone else (116–125). The other to whom one is responsible always remains an embodied, socially constituted person. Xiaojing Zhou aptly employs Levinas’ ethics of alterity in explicating several of Lee’s poems and contends that “Lee’s corporeal aesthetics dismantles the binary construct of the self and its other through articulation of an alternative lyric subject” (“‘Your otherness is perfect as my death’” 305). “Face,” the last word in “The Cleaving,” captures this ethical relationship best. It is the face-to-face encounter that is central to our relationship with others, and in such an encounter uniqueness overwhelms sameness and the universality of uniqueness overwhelms difference. Correspondent to Levinas’ notion of human singularity, both English and Chinese semantic traditions are rich in
connotations of “face,” such as “saving face,” “having big face,” “losing face,” “giving face,” “facing up.” With “face” denoting respect, dignity, courage, and honor, Chinese- and English-speaking cultures certainly mark the face-to-face encounter as an ethical moment.20

Lee’s interpersonal ethics originates from his transcendentalist impulse to render cultural differentiation meaningless. Yet it is precisely his cultural difference that makes him a fascinating poet. His disavowal of ethnic identification in order to be regarded as a transcendentalist poet, a soul speaking from nowhere as Vendler insists, creates a dynamic tension in his poetry (Soul Says 5). On the one hand, Lee’s poetry works its way exactly through Asian diasporic signifiers, and on the other, his wish to be stripped of all cultural identifications and politics ironically places him squarely within American transcendentalist and sublimic tradition, a culture irrevocably tied to the U.S. history of imperialism, as Wilson explicates convincingly. His poetic journey toward the transcendent turns out to be a cornucopia of cultural particularities such as Asian food. His wonderful poetry reveals profoundly his strong affiliations with both Asian and American cultures, neither of which is free from political implications. It is his poetry that best argues against his own position and demonstrates that it is not necessary to postulate a universe mind in order not to reify the social.

The undeniable connection between food and body is the fundamental ground for studying food as the porous border of embodied subjectivity that lives, among other things, a social, cultural, economic, gendered, exilic, and sexual life. So far I have considered how food bears upon ethnicity, gender, class, and diasporic existence. The subject of the final chapter is food and sexuality, a long-standing relationship few people question since it is frequently depicted in literature and film. In reading Monique Truong’s Book of Salt together with Mei Ng’s Eating Chinese Food Naked, I explore how subversive sexualities dramatized via food portray a desiring subjectivity that is fully immersed in ethnicity, class, gender, and exile.