“Are We What We Eat?” Negotiating Identities Through Cuisine and Consumption: A Thing Theory Approach to Alison Wong’s *As The Earth Turns Silver*
Abstract

Culinary narratives are frequently employed to portray migrant identities and societies in Asian diaspora literature. This thesis examines cuisine and consumption in Alison Wong’s *As The Earth Turns Silver* by highlighting the socio-political linkages between material culture and ethnic identity formation of Chinese migrants in New Zealand. Using Brown’s thing theory, food is reframed as site of meaningful discourse to interrogate the role of cuisine and consumption in mediating the migrant experience. It demonstrates the material and cultural importance of food in facilitating ethnic and political identification, transcultural exchange, and independence for frequently oppressed migrant individuals in diaspora literature. Conversely, food functions as vectors of aggression in racialising the ethnic other by communicating artificial notions of morality, national identity, and purity to reinforce the hegemony. Additionally, culinary objects facilitate how characters articulate their dislocation and fragmentation as hybrid individuals. Finally, I undertake a craft analysis of Wong’s novel by drawing connections between Wong’s hybridity and her narrative design. I use thing theory to demonstrate how characters use culinary objects to negotiate hybridity while the application of transference technique reveals the way material objects are embedded with abstract emotions to communicate writer and character ethnic subjectivity. Findings from the critical analysis are applied to my short story collection *Raw*. Thing theory provides the theoretical framework for the practical application of transference in my creative thesis, demonstrating its efficacy in improving craft. The creative thesis demonstrates the applicability of theory in creative practice. Finally, it offers an analytical framework for contextualising food as a site of discourse for hybridized identity politics in diaspora literary criticism.

**Key Terms:**

Thing Theory; Materiality; Food; Objects; Cuisine; Consumption; Culinary Narrative; Diaspora; Transcultural; Hybridity; Intersectionality; Transference; Craft; Creative Writing
Food in literature is a stage upon … and through which human dramas act out, and literary human dramas always aim at imparting lessons.

Wenying Xu

Introduction

Diaspora literature provides a site to examine the role of material culture in the formation of hybridised migrant identities. I will examine how material objects of cuisine and consumption in Alison Wong’s *As The Earth Turns Silver* influence hybrid identities and selfhood. Due to political and historical factors, food is often associated with diaspora communities. Indeed, cuisine mediates ethnic subjectivity, national and cultural citizenship, and transcultural interactions in Wong’s text, demonstrating how consumption becomes an act of grievance against nostalgia, loss and displacement. Food is a site of meaningful discourse because the relationship between ethnic subjects and food transcends physical nourishment. Cuisine and consumption will be critically examined as areas of cultural and political identification for the hybrid individual. Claims that food centric literary criticism is “scholarship lite” is undeserved given the multiple connections between hybrid identity formation and culinary culture (Ruark qtd. in Xu 162). Wenying Xu argues, “while abstract ideas such as race, class, gender, and sexuality have become axiomatic in reading literature, food, in its materiality and dailiness, persists in being associated with the mundane and feminine, and thus is often regarded as undeserving of scholarly attention” (162). This thesis reframes food as a sub-genre of thing theory,
incorporating it into the larger framework of literary criticism and contributes to building an analytical framework for contextualising food as significant in the diaspora literary canon.

I chose Wong’s text because it provides historical context to diaspora identities and transcultural race relations in New Zealand. Set in the 19th century, it examines the interracial romance between Katherine, a Pakeha (European-New Zealander) housewife, and Yung, a Chinese shopkeeper. Second, the numerous culinary references in Wong’s text attests to the importance of food as a multivalent symbol in ethnic communities, providing ample material for my study. Third, as the first novel published by a Chinese-New Zealander, her work is an important addition to the scholarship of hybridity in contemporary diaspora and literary studies. Finally, Wong’s discussion on how hybridity influences craft allows me to contextualise my personal creative challenges as a member of the diaspora.

This thesis has four sections. First, I analyse how material objects influence ethnic identity formation from a social, political and historical context. I demonstrate how objects help characters express culture, build relationships and navigate society in transcultural interactions. Second, I explore how culinary objects emancipate and oppress diaspora identities where food is used to racialise ethnic difference. I show how cuisine mediates notions of citizenship, morality, national identity, purity and contamination. Third, I examine how the conflict of dislocation and cultural hybridity is articulated via culinary objects. I use LaPlante’s transference technique to demonstrate how Wong’s hybridity as a fourth-generation Chinese-New Zealander affects her craft. Fourth, I discuss how analysing Wong’s text has influenced my creative process and demonstrate how I articulate the diaspora experience in my short story collection, *Raw*. I discuss how this food-centric study acts as a lens to show how craft technique can be expanded and applied to other material objects for communicating cultural hybridity in my work.

Lychees, Pork Pies and Mooncakes: Identity, Relationships and Trauma

Development of identity and conception of selfhood is intimately linked to the way individuals interact and communicate with the tangible world. According to Arjun
Appadurai, things have meanings “inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions” (5). Material culture is “linked to the emergence and development of identity within diaspora groups” where objects hold “the potential to grant freedom and independence to the marginalized or oppressed migrant figure in literature” (D’Arcy 12). For marginalised Asians in diaspora, food “identifies and symbolizes” selfhood by constituting “a system of communication” (Oyangen 325). Bill Brown’s thing theory suggests that material objects become “things” when they acquire a separate significance that is mutually exclusive of its inherent function. Using this framework, I will examine how objects in Wong’s novel are encoded with significance, becoming tools that help characters navigate relationships, commemorate ritual, and mediate oppression, trauma, or death. I focus specifically on how culinary objects articulate marginality and oppression, becoming a medium of communication when language is not present.

**Materiality & Identity Formation**

In her book *Being Chinese: Voices From the Diaspora*, Wei Djao suggests that Chinese labourers historically migrated, or were sold and smuggled to colonies where they laboured in goldfields, silver mines, sugar plantations and construction. Yung demonstrates this lineage where his “father was a shipbuilder, and his father before him” (Wong 1239). In New Zealand, he observes the “[d]usty clay and rock where men had hacked a footing” signalling a bodily awareness of hardship and labour (161). When a Chinese man is murdered in “[t]he news spread from one shop to another, from laundry to greengrocery to market garden,” emphasising that migrants were wholly involved in occupations of material labour rather than Pakeha dominated intellectual and commercial sectors (446). Diaspora identities are created, performed and perpetuated when receiving cultures exert dominance via political, economic or societal policies created to exclude migrants. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong in her book *Reading Asian American Literature* suggests that prohibitive legislation barred the Chinese from “masculine” industries, forcing them into dirty “women’s work” of food and laundry services, culinary industries became central for securing diaspora livelihoods (56). By providing economic stability, social mobility and cultural exchange, food and food industries consolidated and legitimised migrants’ rights to
belong, giving them a measure of agency in a restrictive society. “The acts and objects associated with food reveal a … cultural economy that links identity politics to the production of labour and the exchange of commodities for social values that the body performs” (Fung ii), where migrants are continually “racialized, gendered, and classed through their involvement with food” (Xu 13). Culinary industries have become symbolically representative of diaspora communities within and without the group. The associations with food are often internalised by migrants who perform and perpetuate these identities despite negative stereotypes. Knut Oyangen suggests, “Food and food habits [help] people understand themselves, identify with others, and communicate their desires, beliefs, and claims to status” (325). Food objects thus have latent potential as signifiers of ethnicity, culture and class, becoming a medium to communicate selfhood, identity and citizenship.

Examining the significance attached to culinary objects and unpacking how characters use or interact with them reveal how New Zealand-Chinese diaspora identities are created, performed and read. Yung spends much of his time in the novel cleaning, sorting and selling produce and his personhood becomes wholly inseparable from his labour to the extent that he remains nameless, known only as the Chinaman greengrocer because “no one knew the names of the Chinese … They were all called John … even if anyone bothered to find out, who could remember?” (Wong 1613). Migrants too perpetuate this behaviour of coding minorities by their material livelihood, Yung says, “the man selling rabbits door to door turned out to be Assyrian. And the man selling vegetables was Hindoo” (168). Yung’s grocery store becomes a site for examining a transcultural relationship where produce exchange facilitates his interactions with Pakeha that are otherwise limited due to societal segregation. Though denied participation in the larger hierarchy of society, Yung maintains a measure of power over his Pakeha customers. While Yung’s agency is artificial, granted within the confines of Pakeha legislation that dictates the agency of Chinese migrants, he is able to influence Pakeha consumption by selling them produce. For a society preoccupied with “social harmony, moral excellence and racial purity” (Belich 124), Yung’s ability to exert power over the intimate act of ingestion is a symbolically potent hierarchy reversal in New Zealand’s transcultural dynamic of control and subjugation. This artificial agency is expressed when Yung is harassed by an intoxicated Pakeha and he is certain the police will give him justice because of the relationship he has built with Constable Walters where “Yung would offer him a
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banana or a ripe pear, taking comfort from knowing the police were around” (Wong 132). However, culinary objects often mediate experiences of violence and trauma for migrants. Yung is targeted by Pakeha who destroy his vegetable displays, “young hooligans had come to the shop and started throwing cabbages around” (239). Despite Yung’s imagined acceptance by Pakeha, his demise is ultimately tied to the material world where he is eventually murdered in his shop after he offers Katherine’s son Robbie, a slice of pineapple. The rapport he perceives to exist between himself and the police proves to be non-existent. Constable Walters fails to solve the murder of a migrant who was considered unworthy of justice. After his murder, Yung’s sister-in-law Mei-Ling sees Yung’s ghost haunting the shop “looking at a stack of fruit, reaching out as if to take an apple in his hand … what would happen after they left. Would he still reach out as if to take fruit in his hand” (2817). Despite death, Yung cannot escape his migrant labourer status and continues to be defined by his occupation. Yung’s identification and interactions with society through culinary objects is representative of the larger material discourse in diaspora studies that marks food and food production as a complex site in the formation of Chinese-New Zealand identities.

In the text, foods transcend their function as edible objects and become things where they “[communicate] social values and attitudes” by acquiring cultural significance (Ho 12). Much of Yung’s life is detailed through meals prepared or eaten; congee and roast goose of his days off, produce he gifts Pakeha characters, and lychees reminding him of childhood. The prevalence of food memories demonstrates how Yung often uses food to mediate identities and relationships. Lychees perform two roles in the novel. First, they function narratively where the fruit’s taste and texture transports Yung to childhood. Second, they provide a bridge between his Chinese and New Zealand identities by signalling his physical and psychological distance from his family. Memories of lychees force Yung to admit that despite providing money that “educated [his] son and repaid [his] debt,” his labour in New Zealand alienates him from China (Wong 2203). Similarly, due to his physical distance, when he discovers his wife’s death “she has [already] been buried three weeks” (2203). Lychees signal the beginning and end of his reflections, communicating the disparity between nostalgia for his Chinese identity, regret over his relationships and the alienation he experiences as a New Zealand migrant. Lychees transcend their material function as fruit, becoming things embedded with personal
and historical significance. They instigate his reflections as a migrant who is no longer completely Chinese, but like “the sojourners whose blood is sweet and foreign” (2187). Impossible to cultivate in New Zealand, lychees come to represent a home and identity Yung cannot return to. Lychees transcend their nutritive function, becoming a thing transposed with nostalgia, loss and alienation to articulate the complex expression of diaspora identities.

Relationships
In *As The Earth Turns Silver*, food provides a lens to interrogate how material objects acquire thingness. They also mediate transcultural interactions between Chinese migrants and Pakeha locals where a shared common language is unavailable because “eating and speaking share the same motivational structure; language is nothing more than the praxis of eating transposed to the semiosis of speaking: both are fundamentally communicative acts by which man appropriates and incorporates the world” (J. Brown 13). Prior to the First World War, New Zealand society regarded transcultural interactions as “dangerous … unnatural [and] morally debased” (Fresno-Calleja 45); inter-race exchanges were therefore prohibited outside of controlled public exchanges. Yung’s store represents a microcosm to examine how characters navigate and challenge prescribed social hierarchies. The majority of Yung’s interactions are marked by the exchange of culinary objects where food becomes a tool for characters to communicate in defiance of social taboos. After a customer remarks that Katherine has “got two children and obviously not enough to feed them,” Yung begins to secretly give her produce (Wong 732). Despite the political climate that coerced minorities into food services, Yung is able to challenge his low status through material exchange with Katherine, who occupies a higher social stratum as a Pakeha woman.

Yung’s gifts become a deliberate act that removes him from a commodity system characterised by “a drive mediated by money and not by sociality” (Appadurai 12). Instead, “gifts link things to persons and embed the flow of things in the flow of social relations” (12). The first time Katherine visits the store, Yung gives her free apples. This gift communicates his empathy for Katherine’s poverty, and his desire for her despite a limited shared language. Yung polishes the apples “till the skin gleamed red with promise,” the apples transcend their material function as fruit and
become things that are embedded with meaning (710). Apples come to embody Yung’s desire and empathy, and gifting them to Katherine communicates those feelings. However, Katherine hesitates to take the fruit because as Xu suggests, eating can be considered an intimate act that “entails consuming, internalizing, incorporating [and] becoming” (166). Accepting his gift opens Katherine to vulnerability and reverses normative power dynamics. Yung transgresses accepted rules of interracial exchange by expressing his desire through the apples. Ultimately, Katherine eats them, signalling her acceptance of Yung as a man and not a migrant alien. Brown suggests that objects can “organise our private and public affection” (7). Yung’s empathy and desire communicated through food eventually influences Katherine to abandon her private stereotypes of Chinese as “sallow-faced, squinty-eyed foreigner[s]. The dregs of society” (1168) and “calls [him] by name. Mr Wong,” as if Yung is “a man and not [just] a Chinaman” (1179). Yung’s rejection of the socially accepted behaviour expected of him subverts stereotypes of Chinese men as emasculated asexuals who are simultaneously deviant predators preying on Pakeha women (Ooi 221). His gifts becomes a deliberate act of rebellion against oppression; by removing himself from a system that prohibits interracial interactions, Yung erases the economic hierarchy between customer and service provider. Food helps characters overcome prejudices by challenging societal norms regarding interracial relationships.

Yung frequently associates Katherine through foods such as “pork pies. It was she who had introduced him to them, understanding now the Chinese love of pork. ‘They’re very English’” (Wong 2296). Pork pies perform a similar role to Yung’s produce, where culinary objects convey complex emotions. By choosing pork pies instead of other Pakeha foodstuffs, Katherine shares her culture with sensitivity to Yung’s ethnic preferences by providing a familiar yet foreign experience. Culinary objects influence transcultural interactions and “shape human behaviours and relationships” (Fresno-Calleja 6). However, pork pies communicate a different connotation for Yung, becoming a catalyst for his reflections on the diaspora experience:

He loved the plump pink filling ringed with gelatine, the rich short pastry as full as a moon. They were as close as he got to moon cakes all year round … when family came together to eat and gaze at its brightness … Suddenly he did not know where might be home. (Wong 2296)
Like lychees, pork pies remind Yung of his alienation, triggering complex emotions of loss, regret and nostalgia. Yung must acknowledge his hybridity where he is no longer completely Chinese, but a hybrid New Zealander in a transcultural relationship. Characters in the novel communicate fear and desire through material objects, demonstrating how things facilitate relationships that overcome racial boundaries. However, material exchanges exacerbate cultural differences when meanings are misinterpreted or denied. While “multiculturalist eating” helps to “overcome racial and ethnic differences” (Mannur, “Culinary Fictions” 48), refusing food indicates an unwillingness to accept foreign cultures. When Katherine refuses to attend Yung’s celebratory feast, she hesitates to completely immerse into his culture, fearing that “she would have been the only white face [in] a sea of Chinese faces speaking an indecipherable tongue” (Wong 2731). Katherine must reckon with her reluctance while cognisant of Yung’s openness towards her culture in his desire to experience “Devonshire teas” (178). Despite threats to his safety, Yung wishes to participate in European food culture while publically displaying their relationship at the teahouse. Ultimately, societal taboos regarding interracial relationships are confirmed when Katherine’s son Robbie murders Yung. Culinary objects facilitate transcultural exchange while simultaneously exacerbating cultural difference. Food transcends its material function to become things that communicate contradictory meanings. They facilitate relationships, influence identity and challenge cultural assumptions yet simultaneously reinforce social norms.

**Trauma and Ritual**

Pivotal moments in life are commemorated by eating because human society connects food to rituals, symbols and belief systems (Mintz and Du Bois 107). Cuisine and consumption help characters navigate upheaval by minimising the trauma of loss. Before his death, Yung wished to publically acknowledge his relationship with Katherine by taking Devonshire tea together in a public place. After his death, Katherine orders tea for two, “[w]eak, black, unsweetened for him; white with one sugar for herself [and she] gazed at the empty chair” (Wong 2795). Tea acquires thingness and allows her to communicate loss. By publicising their relationship—albeit only to Katherine—she ritualises Devonshire tea by actualising Yung’s wishes
and commemorating his death. Only after performing this ritual is she able to visit Yung’s grave. Mannur suggests that food must be “understood in the context of the labour that is displaced to produce it [and] the concomitant forces of globalization and racialization acting upon consumption” (“Edible” 394). The “bone china” used to serve Devonshire tea conveys a multivalent commentary on ethnic difference and politics (Wong 2780). Tea and bone china were major Chinese commodities imported to the British Empire, their use and eventual hybridisation—the inclusion of milk and sugar with British-style porcelain cups—evolved into a symbol of Englishness underscored by a history of subjugation and coercion. To artificially balance trade to favour the Empire, the English smuggled opium into China, forcing the Chinese to export tea. Tea is symbolically potent, representing China’s loss of political power when the secret of tea cultivation was stolen and transplanted to British colonies. Tea served different ways communicates her understanding of Yung but also demonstrates the historical political influence of consumption habits. Katherine’s European milk and sugar versus Yung’s Chinese black tea transcends ritual and contextualising transcultural interactions by interrogating broader issues of global politics and power dynamics.

Cuisine facilitates transcultural exchanges by providing shared material experiences. After Yung’s death, his sister-in-law Mei-Ling visits Katherine and gives her mooncakes. While Katherine and Yung’s romance is hidden, his brother and sister-in-law are aware of the relationship. Mei-Ling accepts Katherine as family despite the lack of official recognition via marriage. Katherine understands that mooncakes signify acceptance because Yung says, the “Chinese gave [mooncakes] to family” (2838). As a Chinese woman, Mei-Ling has limited freedom in Pakeha society. She exerts a measure of agency by reaching out to Katherine, using mooncakes communicate her recognition of Katherine’s loss as equally legitimate as Yung’s family. Wong’s novel intertwines “the discussion of ethnic identity with gender and class variables to illustrate the outcomes of migration for … Chinese men and women [and] a range of moral and social discourses determining the lives of Pakeha women” (Fresno-Calleja 43). Cuisine solidifies female solidarity across ethnic divisions, despite her inability to publicly mourn in either the Chinese or Pakeha communities, Mei-Ling’s visit legitimises Katherine’s sorrow, allowing her to commemorate their shared trauma.
After Mei-Ling’s visit, Katherine walks through the city retracing her and Yung’s ritual of secret night meetings. At the edge of the water, “[s]he placed the remaining three pieces of [moon]cake inside the O of the middle word in the stones” (2853). Katherine internalises the Chinese symbolism of mooncakes by commemorating Yung in his ethnic tradition. As Ho suggests, “food [can mediate] both mourning and ethnic identity” (80), Katherine creates a hybrid mourning ritual that is neither Chinese nor Pakeha by combining a night walk with mooncakes that represents Yung’s diaspora identity and their transcultural relationship. Culinary objects in *As The Earth Turns Silver* acquire thingness and help characters communicate when language is absent by facilitating transcultural relationships, commemorating ritual and loss, and articulating marginality.

**Fighting Words At The Dinner Table: Edible Ideologies**

In *As The Earth Turns Silver*, cuisine and culinary objects facilitate the coding of cultural difference between Chinese and Pakeha characters. Racial and social boundaries are reinforced when Chinese food and consumptive habits are considered unpalatable and dirty compared to Pakeha norms. Chinese bodies are interpreted as a contaminant to white bodies and therefore incapable of integration into New Zealand. Applying Mannur’s notion that “food reframes our understanding of longstanding issues about nation, citizenship, globalization, immigration, and slavery” (“Edible” 394), I examine how cuisine reinforces Pakeha codes of morality and national identity, and how culinary objects become vectors with which New Zealand society transposes racial prejudice and violence upon Chinese bodies.

**Contamination and Morality**

Food is a highly visible marker of ethnic difference and often inscribed with negative moral values to denigrate minorities who consume said culinary objects. As Mintz and Du Bois suggest, “like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart” (109). Assigning subjective moral codes to food exacerbates fears of racial dilution and contamination. Individuals who consume
morally corrupt foreign foods—Chinese and Pakeha alike—become morally corrupt individuals, representing a threat to racial purity desired by the hegemony. When English official Lionel Terry kills Joe, an unarmed Chinese migrant, he exemplifies New Zealand’s pre-war national consciousness that sought “social harmony, moral excellence and racial purity” through sinophobia and racist legislation (Belich 124). Terry justifies his killing as a politically defensive act against foreign invaders. He visits Katherine and her husband Donald—a tabloid editor—for dinner to gather support for his murder trial and spread racist ideas through Donald’s magazine. He interrogates Katherine: “Where may I ask do you buy your vegetables? From an honest Briton? Or do you buy them from the heathen?” (Wong 399). When she admits to buying from Yung, Terry suggests that Katherine is unpatriotic, arguing that Chinese labour is a “criminal injustice to the British workman … and chief cause of poverty, crime, degeneracy and disease throughout the Empire” (420). Terry scapegoats the Chinese as a threat to New Zealand’s nationhood, demonstrating that the “maintenance of such boundaries is often accomplished through negative definition of the other” (Oyangen 329). During dinner, Terry accepts only a single glass of milk because “[he] did not eat foreign foods … contaminated by Chinamen … He did not even drink tea” (Wong 441). Mannur suggests, “The symbolic danger of consuming certain kinds of food produces deeply ideological notions about the sanctity of pure white bodies. As the mouth remains the privileged site of encounter, what enters it becomes highly contested” (“Edible” 396). By refusing food raised by Chinese farmers, purchased at Chinese stores or associated with China (tea), food acquires thingness by transcending its material function as an object of nourishment and becomes a medium of contamination and undesirable transcultural exchange. Terry’s fears reflect the prevailing societal unease of racial mixing that was perceived as threatening to the Pakeha hegemony, which is reinforced in his poem:

See, advancing, grim, relentless, as a scourge sent forth from hell,
Comes the blighting cures of Mammon, in the white man’s land to dwell;
Mongol, Ethiop, nameless horror, human brute from many a clime,
Vomited from earth’s dark pest holes; bred of plague, diseases and crime,
Swathed in rags and noisome odours. (Wong 404)
Terry constructs ideological boundaries between his pure white body and the dirty ethnic other by rejecting food “contaminated” by the Chinese. This idea of racial contamination arises from historical connections drawn between race and dirt where fictional medical “facts” pathologised Chinese bodies as sites of disease to promote the narrative of biologically impure Chinese migrants (Chiu 3). This normalised the notion that Chinese were incapable of assimilating into Pakeha society, therefore threatening New Zealand’s national identity. As a result “Chinese men are represented as contaminating to narratives of national construction and … hegemonic notions of masculinity” (Fresno-Calleja 46). Alienating the ethnic body by othering their foodstuffs became essential in the rhetoric of nation building. It relies on the symbolic potential of eating because “[i]ncorporation, the act of allowing food into the body, potentially involves an anxious encounter between self and world, or the known and the unknown” (Oyangen 323). Cuisine and consumption are policed to prohibit the alien other from contaminating Pakeha bodies as ingesting foreign matter threatens the sanctity of white bodies. Mannur suggests:

To maintain purity and social morality, one must adhere to strict dietary rules … eating becomes an overdetermined act … indelibly connected to normative articulations of white women’s morality. The drawing of clear national lines around foods is thus freighted with the ideological anxiety … of producing normative whiteness. (“Edible” 396)

Katherine’s willingness to prepare and ingest Chinese culinary foodstuffs signals to Terry that she has allowed Chinese influences to contaminate her body where her morality and status as a Pakeha woman is jeopardised. Terry refuses the mutton Katherine serves despite the dish’s British origins and connotations as representative of New Zealand national identity. He says: “Our carnivorous tendencies are an unhealthy obsession and wreak havoc with our constitutions” (Wong 391). Mannur argues that “[t]o eat aberrantly, or excessively, to indulge in what is considered foreign or different, is to absent oneself from the nation” (“Edible” 396). For Terry, foods purchased from Chinese producers are automatically contaminated and threatening. Food marks Katherine as a sympathiser of Chinese aliens, marking her reluctance in participating in New Zealand patriotism.
If food introduces the unknowable outside world into Pakeha bodies, then intercultural relationships with its connotations of diluted bloodlines represent a further threat to New Zealand’s racially pure aspirations. Terry considers Pakeha “race adulterers” as equally reprehensible for willingly assimilating with the Chinese (Wong 436). Like foreign foodstuffs, dirty white bodies must be quarantined “to the outlying islands” to prevent contamination of society (436). This suggests that Katherine’s relationship with Yung is an inevitable outcome of a morally corrupt individual who willingly jeopardises her moral purity. In pre-war New Zealand “engaged in a crusade against immorality, miscegenation and interracial sex,” their interracial relationship is morally reprehensible, betraying nationalist ideals that must ultimately be redressed by violence (Fresno-Calleja 45). With its implied associations as a vector of contamination, dirt, and disease, food becomes a medium through which racist ideologies are disseminated, eventually, transposing the same messages on the bodies it seeks to police and control.

National Identities, Masculinity and Violence
Culinary objects are recruited as ideological weapons by characters in As The Earth Turns Silver. Rey Chow suggests, “ingestion is habitually portrayed as cognate with aggression and conquest … Eating, in other words, is regarded unabashedly as a form of violence” (136). When Terry says, “I do not eat meat” (Wong 391), he codes ingestion into an act of aggression by waging an ideological war on migrants. Based on the assumption that Chinese are materially and ideologically linked to culinary production, Terry hopes to disrupt Chinese livelihoods by refusing to contribute to their business. He believes prohibiting food equates to prohibiting Chinese bodies, an act that can eventually force them to leave New Zealand because migrants were banned from other industries. During his murder trial, Terry implores the government

[t]o ship its aliens to other shores, so that it would be a country fit for white settlement … Upwards of 100,000 people were dependent upon the Asiatic alien for staple food … The enemy was tampering with the food supplies, polluting the source from which the country derived its strength. (524)
Terry’s speech codes Chinese material influence as a threat to New Zealand’s emerging national identity. He suggests that boundaries are necessary between the imagined Chinese “enemy” and the passive white bodies who become subjects of violence through ingesting contaminated food. Douglas argues, “If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (61). Terry deliberately codes food by claiming that Chinese manipulate produce to enact violence on Pakeha bodies. Foods shed their neutrality by passing through the Chinese food system, transforming from a nutritive object into a thing that communicates contamination. According to Terry, the Chinese are not only enacting violence through food, they actively seek to displace white settlers by “[s]warming o’er thy nation’s bulwarks; pillaging thy nation’s wealth” (Wong 407). Katherine’s employer Mrs Newman expresses similar fears:

> What does your fellow Briton see, the one who struggles to put bread and dripping on the table? The Chinamen undercut us with prices that would put a decent working man in the poorhouse. They take work away from impoverished laundrywomen. They suck the country dry and then return to the Flowery Land with everything that is rightfully ours. (1883)

Together, Terry and Mrs Newman’s rhetoric communicate a fragile sense of national identity that appears under constant threat. New Zealand’s national identity was constructed under a framework that sought to ally New Zealand with the British Empire. The ideal citizen strove to become “Better Britons” by embodying a form of patriotic martial imperialism, the anxiety of being over thrown by oppressed Chinese was a natural effect of colonial expansion (Belich 116). Terry’s fears of pollution are a means to disseminate sinophobia as food represents “the most significant medium of traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, [it] organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways” (Xu 2). After hospitalisation, Terry sends letters to Robbie, influencing his emerging sinophobia: “Many fools have many moods, And follies great and small, But the fools who swallow foreign foods, are the biggest fools of all! … The patriot is governed by his brain, the traitor by his stomach” (Wong 1227). Food “render[s] us
acquiescent to divisions along the lines of culture, region, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, and sexuality - a hegemony that is exercised via appetite and desire” (Xu 4). Indeed, Terry associates Chinese culinary objects and consumption with impaired intellect and anti-imperialism, relying on the belief that food practices can stratify individuals and influence behaviour. Terry continues: “Asiatics in this country jeopardises the rights of our fellow Britons. We have to take drastic measures before it’s too late” (Wong 425). “Drastic” implies that violence is the natural redress for the social ill Terry perceives. This begins with “political acts prohibiting the legal and civil actions and national migrations” of the ethnic other, and culminates with violence enacted upon Chinese bodies such as the shooting in Naseby, the murder in Tapanui, Terry’s murder of Joe, and Robbie’s murder of Yung (Chiu 5). Once food objects are divorced from their original nutritive function, they become things that are repackaged by characters as communicatory devices to encapsulate the multiple fears plaguing the Pakeha hegemony. Chinese food transcends its materiality and helps disseminate the idea that Chinese migrants are responsible for economic depression, sexual deviancy and racial pollution.

Constructing New Zealand’s national identity relies on a concept of normalised Pakeha masculinity, necessitating the emasculation of Chinese male bodies. Fresno-Calleja suggests, “the anxieties of national definition and the forging of New Zealand as a white man’s country are partly solved by reinforcing the exclusion and alienation of the male ethnic ‘other’” (46). By policing the lives of Chinese labourers, Pakeha society sought to create an inhospitable environment contributing to the expulsion of the Chinese. Legislation discouraging Chinese settlement and interracial relationships involved preventing Chinese women from entering New Zealand, and penalties for Pakeha women who married Chinese men, “you lose your British citizenship … you lose the right to vote, you won’t get the old-age pension” (Wong 1908). Contradictory representations of Chinese men as homosexual who simultaneously preyed on Pakeha women were disseminated to further emasculate the Chinese male. Instead, Yung refutes stereotypes of Chinamen who “seemed so thin and small. So polite and unassuming” (1781). He says, “‘you think I like boys saying Ching Chong Chinaman, push over apples all bruised? Beat Fong-man?’ Now he was angry. ‘Brother says, no trouble, don’t get trouble. Your bible says, turn cheek. How many cheek I got? You give cheek, more cheek, no face left’” (2245). Although Chinese men are emasculated by their occupation in
feminised culinary labour, it is also through practicing ethnic foodways that they exert agency in a hostile environment. Yung holds a celebratory feast to mark the Chinese Revolution. When Yung makes a traditional pork dish called kau yuk, his cooking is described as an “act of love” (Wong 2501). The scene appears to fulfil stereotypes of emasculated migrants engaged in culinary labour where “gender performance is inextricably linked to culinary consumption” (Mannur “Edible” 395). However, the scene closes with the sentence, “[t]onight he would eat and drink and celebrate because Yuan Shih-k’ai, the dictator, the murderer, was dead” (Wong 2511). Food preparation and consumption transforms from material labour into an act of political agency; making and eating kau yuk is Yung’s way to participate in the Revolution despite being in New Zealand. Yung replaces his guilt and inability to return to China with an almost furious act of culinary preparation that imbues the dish with intense patriotism. Kau yuk transcends its material function and communicates Yung’s desire to reinforce his Chinese identity, loyalty and masculinity. Mintz and Du Bois suggest that “[g]ender does not differ from these other devices of social allocation: its relationship to food and eating is at least as real as food’s relationship to the construction of nationhood, ethnicity, and race” (109). By consuming kau yuk and celebrating the death of the warlord, Yung literally eats his way to liberation. As Xu suggests, “[e]ating entails consuming, internalizing … strengthening, corroding, overcoming, and externalizing (excreting)” (166). Indeed, consumption becomes an exertion of power in a country where Yung has limited agency. By cooking a traditional Chinese dish, he asserts his ethnic identity while simultaneously challenging Pakeha notions of emasculated Chinese men.

Reinforcing Pakeha masculinity is often articulated as violence against migrants because the Chinese ethnic other threatens the myth of a racially pure national identity. This begins with attacks on Yung’s store where “faeces [is] smeared in arcs over the front window” and escalates Yung’s murder because Robbie interprets his mother’s relationship with a Chinaman as betrayal of moral and national ideals (Wong 1866). Not recognising him, Yung offers Robbie fruit who refuses it: “He’d heard stories about how the Chows polished their fruit, rubbing them with spittle to make them shine” (3106). Robbie’s disgust reflects widespread beliefs about contamination. He reinforces his status by illustrating the worthlessness of Yung’s life when he “dropped the apple slice, spat, and ground it into the linoleum” yet “the Chinaman looked him directly in the eye, unflinching. People said they were easy
targets … But this one defied him” (3111). Yung’s attempt at challenging emasculation ultimately fails because Robbie murders him with Yung’s fruit knife. The apple and knife represent Yung’s material labour and their use against him reinforces how “inanimate objects constitute human subjects,” demonstrating “how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects” (Brown 7). Ultimately, Yung is unable to transcend his subaltern role, dying in the very place that bound him to the materiality of his livelihood. This scene demonstrates that food objects are a potent medium for reflecting the experience of diaspora identities, showing how expressions of identity occur under oppression and inequality.

Hybridity: Beetroots, Braids and Barbershops

Diaspora characters uneasily straddle multiple cultures, expressing the conflict and dislocation of hybridity through material objects. Hybrid identities are “fragmented and fractured” (Hall 4), because “the place of settlement and the place called home are separated from each other, where one is always looking elsewhere: to both another place and another time” (Upstone qtd. in D’Arcy 8). Yung expresses hybridity through material labour, reflecting that in China, his “hands that knew only the calligrapher’s brush” are now covered in calluses after ten years of scrubbing carrots in New Zealand (Wong 144). Yung is unable to reconcile his conflicting identities and feels hopeless when confronted with the daily monotony of endlessly dirty carrots. Yung’s hopelessness is transferred onto the carrots, suggesting that his scholarly past has no bearing in New Zealand where he remains a dirty, alien labourer. Like carrots, Yung can continually “scrub” himself, but fail to acquire Pakeha whiteness because his foreign body threatens to contaminate New Zealand’s racial purity.

Culinary objects mediate the conflict of cultural hybridity and “expresses the trauma of [characters’] displacement” and disconnection (Ho 80). Chopping the “long end of the [beet]root” foreshadows Yung’s eventual cutting of his Manchurian braid (Wong 144). The roots resemble the braids enforced under Manchu rule to subjugate Han identity. They also represent the highly visible mark of ethnicity used by Pakeha to other the Chinese. When Yung likens the vegetable roots to “wet rat’s tail[s]” (144), he draws on anti-Chinese narratives of migrants depicted “as vermin-eating
opium addicts” (Ho 15). Migrants were additionally stereotyped as vermin-like in their vast numbers and perceived invasiveness. Yung appears to internalise these connotations, articulating desires of both escaping Manchu subjugation while aligning himself as more Pakeha by the removal of his braid. This potentially disconnects him from his Chinese identity, moving him towards a Pakeha-Chinese hybridity. However the cost of cultural hybridity is high, “there were those who cut off their braids and then had to wear hats or wigs … or chance execution” (Wong 245). The red beetroot juice staining his hands suggests that a severance from his culture elicits pain from physical and psychological sacrifice. Beetroot signifies Yung’s struggles with his fractured identity, where he imagines the possibilities of severing himself from his homeland and embracing himself as citizen of New Zealand.

Wong’s novel interrogates the position of Chinese migrants who experience a perpetual sense of fragmentation as a result of dislocation from their cultural identity and exclusion from New Zealand’s national narrative. Yung’s desire to cut his braid is motivated by a need to rid himself of otherness. However, his actions towards this goal are influenced by a totemic fetishisation of Western materiality relying on the very culture that imposes otherness onto Yung. Chopping beetroots ignites a transformed perspective of identity and selfhood. Despite passing it daily, Yung notices a Western Gent’s Saloon for the first time. He admires the products for sale, expressing a desire to embody the attributes they represent:

Shaving mugs, each displayed with its own brush, the chrome hand clippers, Rolls Razors, cigar cutters, long leather razor strops, bottles of Scurf and Dandruff Lotion, and a Black Beauty Razor Hone … matches in cardboard containers shaped like miniature hatboxes, as well as copper and tin versions … wooden pipes and a brown ceramic tobacco jar … blue tins of Capstan, Marcovitch Black and White, pale lemon State Express 555. (245)

Appadurai suggests that objects are embedded with a life history that “is culturally regulated” and open to individual manipulation (17). The matches, tobacco, cigars and branded cigarettes are open to Yung’s interpretation; for him, they communicate normative masculinity based on New Zealand ideals of the perfect Englishman. Shaving mugs, clippers, razor strops and lotion—articles for maintaining cleanliness—communicates New Zealand’s nation building experiment grounded in purity. Pakeha society was preoccupied with “social, moral and racial integration”
seeking to “exorcise numerous demons, such as disorder, dirt, disease, drink and difference” (Belich 122). As Brown suggests, “objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (5). The freshly shaved, smoothly barbered Pakeha man exiting the saloon represents the heteronormative masculinity that was accepted in New Zealand. Yung’s desire for acceptance is projected onto the objects that communicate metaphysical promises of emancipation from his dirty, contaminating body. While discriminatory “hair pulling” and promised transformation influences Yung, he is also motivated by the Chinese Revolution where his countrymen cut their braids in rebellion against the Manchu (Wong 258). After cutting his braid and wearing Western clothes for the first time, Yung expresses the disorienting unease of his hybridity:

He did not recognise himself. He felt as if he were growing paler or maybe pinker - because that was the true colour of barbarians, not white but pink, something like the colour of domesticated pigs. He looked at his face, at his hair. He felt as if even his name was translating. (271)

Western clothing and his cut hair allows Yung to perform the Pakeha masculinity he seeks, yet he is simultaneously disgusted by his resemblance to the pig-like barbarians he is now aligned with. Yung hides the braid in the bottom of his drawer, reflecting his secret shame. Gaston Bachelard suggests that constructed spaces are hybrid objects that simultaneously inform and are informed by human psyches where drawers and wardrobes represent “organs of the secret psychological life” (78). By covering his braid with “his most intimate apparel” (Wong 273), Yung acknowledges the shame of the symbolic severance from his culture where he feels as if he had “amputated a limb” (18). D’Arcy suggests: “objects can be read as potent symbols, highlighting … the disparities and contradictions between Eastern and Western culture” (4). Yung’s treatment of his braid and fetishisation of Western grooming products demonstrates how objects become imbued with significance, influencing how characters interpret and act upon their selfhood. Despite his brother Shun berating him that the cut braid can now cause Yung to be executed if he returns to China, Yung says, “[t]o hell with the Dowager” (Wong 994). Shun represents certain facets of Yung’s home culture that he must abandon to make room for new Western influences. His flippancy over the possibility of death reveals his simultaneous
liberation and exhilaration over accepting his New Zealand identity. These contradictions represent the fragmented experience of diaspora identities where subjects feel loyalty and connection to two cultures yet are simultaneously rejected. Instead, subjects inhabit a liminal third space that has the power to be both marginalising and empowering for individuals negotiating multiple ways of cultural identification.

As discussed, cooking pork kau yuk affirms Yung’s Chinese identity. Displacement from China and increasing Western traits motivate Yung to cook a traditional Chinese dish to bolster his ethnic identity where “cooking and eating [become] a complicated process of claiming status and identity” (Oyangen 329). Food signifies “cultural continuity, difference, hybridity, and/or assimilation” and beetroot becomes a medium for Yung to explore his hybridity where its cultural connotation influences him to cut his braid (329). When Yung makes kau yuk and combines Chinese “belly pork … ginger, garlic, star anise, sugar and soy” with European beetroot, he expresses an increasing cultural hybridity. By arranging “first a slice of pork, then a piece of beetroot and … now another slice of pork” the dish communicate the overlapping of his two cultural identities. Beetroot, previously an object indicative of his material labour in Pakeha society, transforms into a thing that communicates affection—beetroot juice is described as a “love stain on his fingers.” Yung layers the two ingredients “then he tied string over it all like a package … he would steam it over the range till the fat meat glistened and … the gravy flowed” (Wong 2502); Yung physically links his cultural identities when he ties the pork and beetroot together. This scene illuminates how hybrid identities navigate dislocation through cuisine because “food signifies home” and the interaction with the edible “can be a negotiation of loss” and a “fundamental way of claiming a home” (Ho 146). Claude Levi-Strauss describes cooking as a form of “cultural transformation” (10). The steaming of kau yuk embodies the pressures of the marginalising process of hybridisation. Once cooked, the dish transcends the sum of the raw ingredients; it is no longer pork and beetroot, but kau yuk, a wholly separate dish. Similarly, when individuals experience the pressures of transcultural migration, the resulting identities transcend the sum of their Chinese and Pakeha cultures, instead, a distinctly hybrid Chinese-Pakeha identity emerges.
Craft: Experience, Transference and Details

Applying conclusions from the textual analysis, I will discuss how I transfer my diaspora experience onto fictional characters and how they articulate themselves through the manipulation of material objects in the fictional worlds of my short story collection, *Raw*. I demonstrate how food becomes a lens to understand how craft technique can be expanded and applied to other material objects to communicate cultural hybridity in my work.

Wong’s project of restoring the voice of historically silenced migrants in New Zealand is achieved through a combination of historical truth and fictional detail, exploring themes of gender, ethnicity and nationality through a fictionalised interracial love story (Fresno-Calleja 3). In her book *The Making of A Story*, Alice LaPlante argues, “you can’t attach an emotion to an abstraction or intellectual idea… Emotions need to be attached to things of this world: things as mundane as tables and chairs” (510). Many of the events Wong has chosen to portray come from detailing the communal history of subjugation and racial conflict that resonates for Chinese New Zealanders past and present. Historical facts—Lionel Terry, her ancestor’s murder in his grocery shop, anti-Chinese legislation—are combined with precise fictional details—beetroot processing, the texture of mooncakes, the preparation of kau yuk, and branded grooming products—to address abstractions like oppression, hybridity and trauma. Wong seems to understand that “in order to evoke a universal reaction or emotion you must use the tools of specificity” (Prose 116). The study of character behaviour through the objects of thing theory is related to the craft technique of transference where writers “take emotional meaning and transfer it onto people, places, or things” (LaPlante 509). For instance, thing theory examines how beetroot helps characters negotiate hybridity and ethnic identity while transference is the craft technique of embedding beetroot with abstract emotions like dislocation and nostalgia. In *Reading Like A Writer*, Francine Prose suggests that “details aren’t only the building blocks with which a story is put together, they’re also clues to something deeper, keys not merely to our subconscious but to our historical moment” (207). The specificity and concrete details in the novel—ingredients for making kau yuk, Terry’s sinophobic poetry, Katherine ordering Devonshire tea, Mei-Ling’s mooncakes—allows Wong to connect historical issues of racial inequality to oppression that remains prevalent in contemporary New Zealand (Fresno-Calleja 38). Narrative
techniques of exposition, scene, dialogue, and tone affect a transformation where emotional truth is transferred onto concrete details in the story where readers understand the emotional subtext writers hope to convey.

**Hybridity**

As a fourth generation Chinese-New Zealander, Wong channels her “hyphenated experience” into characters who face similarly fragmentary experiences of cultural dislocation (Wong “Writing” 9). She admits, “it would be as relevant for me to tick both Chinese and NZ European/Pakeha” and considers her fiction a result of “multicultural NZ” rather than a product of wholly Chinese or wholly New Zealand influences (9). The way Wong’s selfhood influences her narratives resonates with my hybrid identity. As a first-generation Cantonese-New Zealand migrant raised in Hong Kong and currently living in Sweden, studying Wong’s novel contextualises historical transcultural interactions and lends significance to my stories, allowing me to engage with silenced components of New Zealand history.

I wrote my short story collection *Raw* with the purpose of creating contemporary diaspora narratives influenced by my personal experiences of hybridity. Analysing Wong’s text helped me contextualise modern narratives of oppression against the racialised history of New Zealand. Findings regarding the marginality of hybrid identities influenced the decision to link my fiction to themes of isolation, dislocation, nostalgia and unease, common to the diaspora condition. However, the challenges of writing backwards—starting with a theme rather than character or plot—appeared counterintuitive. My experience demonstrates that theme or symbolism arises as an organic result of the creative process rather than the starting point. I was concerned with producing literary fiction that was genuine to the diasporic experience rather than forced parables espousing morality or oppression. Additionally, I was aware of the pitfalls of creating sentimental, disingenuous work by adhering too rigidly to the diaspora framework and missing complex character development. Applying my understanding of thing theory grounded my narratives in the communicatory potential of the material world. It allowed my characters to channel diaspora themes through emotional subtext rather than exposition. The result is a collection of stories that, while influenced by diaspora experiences, are primarily concerned with exploring the depths of the human condition.
My story “Gutting” explores what Koyamparambath Satchidanandan calls the “hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos” in diaspora (52). The protagonist Kim mediates the traumatic repercussions of cultural dislocation through her material world. The shape and smell of rotting whales stranded on the beach one morning jars her out of a quiet life, transporting her back to the Tiananmen Square massacre where the sight of dead students forces Kim to re-examine her patriotism for China, eventually compelling her to leave her homeland for New Zealand.

The whale stranding brings an influx of outsiders, disturbing the artificial balance she has cultivated for herself. She eventually flees, hiding in the backcountry until the outsiders leave. When she catches rabbits, there is a flashback to her beginnings in New Zealand where she integrates into rural society by learning to hunt. When handling the rabbits, she is transported back to the dirt floors, gutting chickens with her father, examining the fine architecture that housed all the special parts that made the chicken work. He named each organ that he pulled out … like a craftsman, only in reverse, pulling apart instead of putting together. (Yiu 52)

Kim has not thought of her father in many years and the memory leaves her disoriented. She loses her way and is separated from her hunting dog Baxter. LaPlante suggests that “writing must exist on two levels: the sensory world, and in a world that embraces a complex emotional and intellectual subtext” (507). Hunting connects Kim to her physical environment and reveals character by demonstrating how she occupies and interacts with the tangible world. It allows Kim to perform her New Zealand identity where the material ritual of hunting is suffused with notions of patriotism and belonging, similar to the way food is used to evoke ethnic identity in Wong’s novel. However, hunting inadvertently exposes her to an emotional past that she has buried, revealing contradictions of the diaspora experience “with its multiple possibilities of alienation and assimilation (Satchidanandan 55). After several hungry nights, Kim shoots her first deer and fulfils the ultimate act of New Zealand national identity. However, the deer’s “gelatinous, glutinous tendons” again reminds her of her father who “sliced out the lobes of the small lungs, irregular oblongs the colour of cooked walnuts, laced with a fine mesh of vessels” (Yiu 52). When Flannery O’Connor said that “[f]iction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you
scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn’t try writing fiction” (qtd. in LaPlante 108), she stresses the importance of grounding characters in material world because “without the details … our work is theoretical, abstract, empty, devoid of interest” (510). I use the visceral specificity of hunting, butchering and animal anatomy to link the past with Kim’s present. It forces her to take responsibility for her father’s death during the Cultural Revolution and connect it with her decision to leave China.

Prose argues, “a well-chosen detail can tell us more about a character … than a long explanatory passage” (198). The detail of the deer hunt and slaughter reveals Kim’s vulnerabilities, opening her to loss, despair and estrangement. Like the fetishised food objects in Wong’s novel that “mediates both mourning and ethnic identity” (Ho 80), the deer becomes imbued with transformative powers for Kim. When she finally guts the animal, strips naked and lies inside the shell of the empty carcass, the deer transcends its original function as prey and food. The deer becomes a thing that grants Kim closure by symbolically connecting her suppressed Chinese self with her performed New Zealand identity.

**Cuisine**

Culinary narratives are frequently used by hybrid authors to negotiate their multivalent cultural identities. Analysing Wong’s use of cuisine helps contextualise prevalent food narratives in my own work. Food is “a dominant site of economic, cultural, and political struggle, not as a site to produce self-exoticism or food pornography” (Xu 14). My thesis demonstrates that recurring culinary themes in migrant literature are the result of multivalent processes that influence the formation of diaspora identities. For instance, Yung’s culinary “act of love” (Wong 2501)—an entire page of sensuous culinary descriptions detailing the preparation of kau yuk—can be interpreted as a writer’s “act of love” where Wong attempts to find a “home in literature” (Perkins 23). Waxman suggests that

[n]ot only do cooking and eating ethnically enact cultural memory, but writing about these … experiences further reinforces the links to home and may defuse the often fraught situation of being in the diaspora (368) … Even when they cannot go home in a cultural sense [writers] are, nevertheless, architects of an emotional home in food. (381)
By writing about her ethnic cuisine, Wong undertakes a symbolic journey home, using the culinary to interrogate themes of nostalgia, marginality, and displacement, common to the diaspora experience. Similarly, I use cuisine in “Food and Liquor for the Dead and Dying” to, first, contextualise the protagonist’s estrangement from home, and second, to illustrate my own cultural displacement. Like the protagonist, I have similarly “strayed farthest from the centre” and experience a fragmentary relationship with my various cultural identities (Yiu 69). I attempt to perform and strengthen my Cantonese ethnicity by creating culinary narratives where the act of writing grants me an artificial closeness to home. Mannur suggests that diaspora writers “route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to … culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste” (“Culinary Nostalgia” 13). The Cantonese ancestral worship scene was based on real personal experience “where we lay out their favourites at the foot of their tombs—moon cakes, roast pork, juicy navel oranges, shot glasses of smoky whiskey” gives me a catharsis of cultural closeness (Yiu 62). If preparing culturally meaningful foods in a foreign context becomes “as much an act of innovation, assertion, and transformation as it is an act of reproducing tradition” then writing about culturally meaningful foods achieves the same goals, allowing the diaspora writer to celebrate or highlight multifaceted cultural identities and multiple ways of seeing (Oyangen 324).

However, I am aware that fictionalising childhood experiences “distorts the idealized memory” of homeland, where displacement influences how “certain memories are remembered, while others, literally, are re-membered” (Mannur, “Nostalgia” 12). Creating fiction necessitates certain distortions of truth, particularly when taking inspiration from lived experience. The scene becomes an exaggerated version of reality necessary to further the narrative. Because food can “facilitate one’s sense of inclusion” (Mannur, “Edible” 395), the scene also provides an artificial return home for me as the writer. It also allows the protagonist to contextualise her grandfather’s death despite her cultural and geographical estrangement from home where food communicates the subtext of grief and nostalgia. Writing about childhood food memories ultimately produces “a vexed form of culinary citizenship” where certain memories are highlighted while others are excluded (395).

LaPlante suggests that fiction is a process of transferring “complex emotions onto the sensory objects and events we’ve chosen to render in our story or nonfiction piece” (510). I deliberately transfer emotional subtext onto the culinary objects of my
story, helping characters articulate nostalgia, regret and loss through cuisine and consumption. My protagonist “should be used to speaking with the dead” because she frequently visits graves in childhood where she communicates with her ancestors through traditional ritual (Yiu 62). However, when confronted with her dead grandfather she is unable to communicate despite being “used to speaking with the dead. But not with a body that is still warm” (59), he remains an unknowable, estranged figure. She struggles to grieve for a man who was unfaithful to her grandmother until a culinary memory humanises him to the protagonist. On a trip to the village, her grandfather shows her the meagre foods they ate during wartime: “purple yams [that he] cannot stomach … anymore. Not after years of swallowing the sweet flesh” and “field mice” (13). Food allows the protagonist to understand that her grandfather’s physical and psychological starvation is responsible for his later voracious “appetite for food or women” (7). Characters mediate trauma via my transference of subtext onto food where they are “not just physical objects, but truth” that becomes the “outward manifestation of the interior movement, or emotions” (LaPlante 510). Recognising the pivotal role of food in both Chinese death rituals and her grandfather’s life, the protagonist is able to grieve when she finally understands that: “Bodies too are food. Becoming fungal, they are nibbled by fishes and microbes and bacteria, returned to the earth and later eaten up by flames” (Yiu 72). Near death, her grandfather

becomes a child again, refusing vegetables, fish, fruit. He calls for sweets and junk and children’s food … sticky puddings made with brown cane sugar … fried crackers with a dusting of salt crystals … In the end, the kidneys failed and those that need to blame will blame it on his love of salt and sugar. (70)

The protagonist finally understands the importance of food objects and is able to contextualise how consumption provided her grandfather with both his greatest joy and greatest sorrow in life.

LaPlante suggests that “details are the lifeblood of a good writing … By first and foremost relying on what we see, feel, hear, touch, and taste … we are ensuring that we immerse our readers in a concrete sensory world of our own making” (107). Culinary objects transcend their function and become things that acquire symbolic meaning because I have rendered them in concrete detail. The protagonist witnesses
her grandparents transform when “with relish they feed [her] and they are young again, the way they chewed and talked and laughed, the way their bodies seemed to expand to lightness. Eyes charged with a curiosity [she] had never seen” (Yiu 68). Here, food objects communicate multiple ideas of nostalgia, loss, and dislocation precisely because they are rendered in a tangible scene that readers can believe. My work benefits from “eschewing grand ideas in favour of thinking particularly” (LaPlante 108) where I use exposition to convey emotions and trust that the material world can adequately express my narrative subtext.

Detail

Objects transcend their original functionality and become inscribed with new meaning when the author is able to convey subtext through the material setting of their narrative. Transference succeeds when the author uses concrete details to successfully “render [the] emotional truth” they wish to convey (LaPlante 510). This requires the careful selection of objects and details that are specific to the narrative and its characters. It is only through an author’s precise utilisation of surface detail that readers can interpret the subtext of a narrative. Using culinary objects as a framework to examine thing theory has allowed me to extend the method beyond food and apply it to other material objects. In “Road Codes,” my characters manipulate and are in turn manipulated by objects. Yixing feels emasculated by his inability to find a job after immigrating to New Zealand. He fails to provide for his wife, Jian, and becomes frustrated that his “certificates [remained] next to suits and ties [that] sat in the closet” unused (Yiu 13). He controls what Jian wears and taunts her with a copy of the road code to emphasise her inability to drive. He keeps a snow globe keychain from a holiday to remind Jian of her apparent infidelity although he lacks proof. As in Wong’s novel, “inanimate objects constitute human subjects” with their ability to “facilitate or threaten” individuals (Brown 7). Yixing’s manipulation of Jian’s material world is ultimately not about controlling the objects. Yixing is humiliated because he is unemployed and feels emasculated because Jian has employment. This lack of agency causes him to control the only other factor in life he feels he has power over, his wife. To punish her for his humiliation, he continuously oppresses Jian by controlling her physical environment. The material objects communicate the subtext of Yixing’s emotional dissatisfaction and underlying menace. When they go for a
drive, the car becomes an extension of Yixing’s aggression. He controls the stereo, the windows and orders Jian to fix her seatbelt. When she ignores him, he drives dangerously until she complies. The car becomes representative of their troubled marriage; they are physically moving yet the relationship has stalled. Yixing escalates his control, punishing Jian for ignoring him by lying down in the middle of the highway until she complies. LaPlante notes that beginner writers often create writing that is “filled with intense emotions and insightful moments of clarity … but which lack the concrete to make it real. It is only when we marry the two that we get truly compelling fiction” (113). My previous work relied heavily on exposition where I would explain instead of showing action. I have trained myself to ground the narratives of Raw in the material world, trusting that characters who interact with their tangible surroundings can truthfully communicate the emotional subtext I wish to convey. By forcing Yixing to enact his emotions in the material world instead of verbalising it, his humiliation and aggression appears more potent and dangerous.

After a group of teenagers witness Yixing’s tantrum and come to Jian’s aid, the power dynamic reverses. Jian reveals to the audience that she can indeed drive. Suppressed under Yixing’s oppression, Jian’s agency returns after they arrive at the beach. The car stops and signals a major upheaval in their marriage. Jian sheds all of Yixing’s objects of dominance. She takes the car keys that are attached to the snow globe keychain. She swims into the ocean and strips out of the bathing suit he forced her to wear. She unclips the snow globe and drops it into the ocean. Jian swin...
In “Undertow,” loss and trauma are conveyed through specific details of people, places and things. As LaPlante suggests, imagery is at “the heart of riveting, dramatic prose. It fulfils many purposes: not just helping the reader … perceive the world of the story, but pushing the reader toward deeper understanding and judgement” (124). The climatic scene when Julia dives into the lake is drawn from personal experience swimming in a jellyfish lake. It was such a powerful setting that I decided to create an entire narrative that would culminate in that location. That choice of detail eventually influenced plot development in my narrative. Wong’s text revealed the transformative powers of objects; I applied this finding to “Undertow” by creating characters that imbued ritualistic powers to their material world. Julia searches her past for clues to solve the death of her twin brother Ben. She travels to all the countries he visited before dying to understand his psychological trajectory yet these locations force Julia to reflect on her fractured childhood. The story becomes as much a process of reacquainting her own life as understanding Ben and accepting her knowledge of the abuse he suffered from their father. Ben’s possessions become crucial communicatory tools that “carry emotional weight” (LaPlante 511). Julia uses them to construct an identity for her brother who is essentially a stranger to her. She attempts to interpret what those places and things say about Ben. In turn, the details, places and objects reflect wider themes of loss and trauma.

Ben was a champion swimmer but stopped after his abuse at the hands of his father twenty-five years ago. Ben associates water with his father so I chose the countries he visits for their remoteness to the sea. This illustrates Ben’s desire to distance himself from his father. However, Julia is confused by his final decision to work in Indonesia because it is surrounded by water. She studies his personal effects to understand his motivations but fails to uncover the triggering event that led to his death. Because imagery is used “as the impetus to creating and discovering situation, meaning [and] possibilities within [the] material” (LaPlante 125), Ben’s destinations and possessions transcend their original material functional and begin to communicate Ben’s characteristics while simultaneously revealing Julia’s psychological state. LaPlante suggests that imagery is the writer’s “way of reaching down into [their] subconscious and finding out what [they] really think about a person, place, thing, event … it centres around the senses, and [their] ability to create complex, messy images that bring a situation to life” (111). The stamps in Ben’s passport and his worn footwear suggest an adventurous nature, but reflect Julia’s fears of the unknown. Her
comment of his “SPF 15+ sunblock” as “useless against the tropical sun” reflects his laid back attitude while highlighting her uptight meticulousness (Yiu 23). Julia learns that the Bajau who “could dive down to twenty meters on one lung of breath” (32), gifted Ben a hand carved mask. He idolised the tribe because Bajau “fathers dive with their babies when they are only three days old” (34); the Bajau provide Ben with a healthy paternal relationship that he lacked. As in Wong’s novel, objects are imbued with transformative powers; Julia understands that the mask influenced Ben and can potentially explain his psyche before death. She must literally see through his perspective by using the mask to dive into Jellyfish Lake, which was his last confirmed location. Both mask and lake become imbued with transformative powers, yet when she dives in, Julia’s expectation is overcome by doubt. She realises Ben did not take the mask when he died and remains as elusive to her as in the beginning of her journey. This indicates Julia’s failure to understand Ben’s trauma because she remains emotionally attached to her father and refuses to address her own fragility. Instead of the transcendental experience she hoped for, Julia almost drowns in panic. Imagery and objects doubly support and threaten characters in their trauma and loss while allowing readers to gauge the psychological motivations of characters.

Conclusion

My thesis demonstrates that cuisine and consumption are culturally and politically important in the formation of hybrid migrant identities. The application of thing theory in literary criticism produces a framework for contextualising the thematic, symbolic and technical functions of food objects in writing. Studying thing theory through the lens of culinary objects has allowed me to extend the method beyond culinary objects and apply it to the tangible objects of my writing. The reflexive relationship between craft, thing theory, and transference reveals how author subjectivity influences narrative trajectories, in turn dictating how character interiority is projected onto the material world. Transference embeds material objects with abstractions to communicate subtext within the narrative, while thing theory contextualises the significance of those objects in the real world socio-political framework. Thing theory provides the framework for the practical employment of
transference in craft, and demonstrates the applicability of theory in creative writing practice.

I reframe food studies as a sub-genre within thing theory that requires its own dedicated area of scholarship. Culinary narratives are meaningful sites of discourse because food significantly influences ethnic subjectivity and transcultural interactions. In relation to craft, cuisine provides a physical medium for writers to communicate the subtext of fragmentation and cultural displacement common in diaspora narratives. The prevalence of culinary references in Wong’s text is representative of wider trends in migrant literature. Instead of self-exotification, food narratives contextualise the multiple societal forces acting upon and against diaspora communities. Food tangibly articulates issues facing both migrant writers and their characters, reinforcing the role of cuisine as powerful vectors of cultural, political and economic struggle. The increased movement of people and thus transcultural exchanges in the globalised world guarantees the emergence of ever more complex hybrid identities. Critically engaging with cultural products emerging from new hybrid societies requires recognition of the importance of culinary narratives. Indeed, food must be reframed as an essential topic worthy of literary criticism. My findings contribute to building an analytical framework for contextualising food in the diaspora literary canon.

I have demonstrated the efficacy of using food as a critical lens to engage with these issues because cuisine functions as both a narrative and culturally emblematic device. Since literature is a reflection of societies where consumption is understood as an act of grievance against oppression and marginalisation, food narratives can significantly influence the engagement of critical issues in the real-world societies portrayed in literature.


Wills, Jenny. “Culinary Culture in Asian/North American Coming-of-Age Literature.”


