

FOOD/BODY AS TEXT:  
EXPLORING THE CULTURAL/CORPOREAL POLITICS OF POWER

FOOD/BODY AS TEXT:  
EXPLORING THE CULTURAL/CORPOREAL POLITICS OF POWER

By  
TARA LEE NOGLER, B.A.

A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

McMaster University

© Copyright by Tara L. Nogler, September 2000

MASTER OF ARTS (2000)  
(English)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Food/Body as Text: Exploring the Cultural/Corporeal Politics of Power

AUTHOR: Tara Lee Nogler, B.A. (University of Prince Edward Island)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Susie O'Brien

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 78

### *Abstract*

This thesis will discuss three semi-autobiographical novels: Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats (1998), Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1987), and Sara Suleri's Meatless Days (1991). Drawing upon feminist and postcolonial theories (Bhabha 1988; Friedman 1998; Irigaray 1985; 1993), I will examine the ways these female novelists, both American and postcolonial, represent food and the female body as sites of cultural, racial, and gender inscription and contestation. While each text invokes food as metonym for the patriarchal and colonial violence against women (the body), at the same time, each text supplements these violent discourses with a subversive and empowering matriarchal symbolism which challenges these power structures. Ultimately, I will argue that, while this matriarchal symbolism challenges gender power structures, these texts also acknowledge the ways in which women's experience is inflected through other power dynamics, specifically those of race and culture.

As I will demonstrate, in each text, food and the body expose the multifarious means by which power discourses are internalized, rejected, or renegotiated by the female subject. By examining the strategies these characters employ in their resistance to cultural imperialist power structures, I will show how a textual metaphors of food and the female body are involved in a complex process of production, at once cultural, social, and political.



### *Acknowledgments*

There are so many people to thank that I hardly know where to begin. Foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Susie O'Brien, for whose invaluable feedback, flexibility, and enthusiastic direction I am extremely indebted.

I would also like to thank Dr. Donald Goellnicht, whose course in "American Minority Writing" provided the seeds from which this project grew. Thanks also to Dr. Daniel Coleman for agreeing to be on my committee and for his feedback and flexibility.

I extend a great debt of gratitude and thanks to my honours thesis advisor, Dr. Irene Gammel, who inspired me to continue my studies and prepared me along the way.

I need also thank my wonderful family—Ruth, Paul, Jay, and 'Gabby' Nogler and Dolina and Rollie Lemay—whose support (emotionally, intellectually, and financially) and contribution to all aspects of my life has left me feeling enriched and blessed in so many ways. I'd also like to thank my friend, Rhonda, who re-inspired me when I thought I had lost my way. Thanks also to Kim who always promises to deliver a "good dose of apathy" just to keep me grounded.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Melida McCallum, a born and bred Islander, whose songs are the first I remember hearing and whose life and death has affected me in profound ways. She taught me the ways of "cinnamon-scented, almond-scented love" and her songs continues to sing to me to this day. Thanks Gram.

## *Table of Contents*

### Introduction

Food/Body as Text: Exploring the Cultural/Corporeal Politics of Power.....	1
--	---

### Chapter One

Cultural/Corporeal Bodies: (Re)Negotiating Motherhood in Ruth Ozeki's <u>My Year of Meats</u> .....	13
---	----

### Chapter Two

Food as Text/Text as Food: Gendering Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's <u>Nervous Conditions</u> .....	32
--	----

### Chapter Three

De-Essentializing Woman: Fluid Bodies at the Contact Zones.....	50
---	----

Conclusions.....	69
------------------	----

Works Cited.....	73
------------------	----

## Introduction

Food/Body as Text: Exploring the Cultural/Corporeal Politics of Power

Nothing is more material, physical, corporeal than the exercise of power

Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge

Food can be used conservatively, as an expression of the established power structure. Or, it can be stolen and used subversively to defy power relations.

Mervyn Nicholson, "Food and Power"

the female subject is a site of differences, differences that are not only sexual or only racial, economic or (sub)cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another [...] these differences, then, cannot be again collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image.

Teresa de Lauretis, Feminist Studies/Critical Studies

Recent work in feminist and postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1994; 1995; Irigaray 1985; 1993; McClintock 1995) has focused on the body as a site where global power relations are inscribed and contested. Three semi-autobiographical texts that take up this subject are Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats (1998), Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1987), and Sara Suleri's Meatless Days (1991). These three female writers, who represent both postcolonial and American experience, critique patriarchal and imperialist power structures by visiting food and the female body as site of cultural, racial, and gender inscription and contestation. Through metaphors of eating and food, each writer explores the patriarchal effects of colonization through the female body. At the same time, each

text reclaims the female body and renegotiates women's relationship to those power discourses in part through images of motherhood; thus, in conversation with these violent patriarchal discourses is a matriarchal symbolism, a "disruptive excess" (Whitford 126) which signals nourishment, empowerment, and life-sustenance. Between and beyond these forces of symbolization is a paradoxical terrain that I wish to explore in this thesis.

In all three texts, the cultural currency of food is complex, food acting as cultural product and social and class signifier, and symbolically, revealing a tangled web of power relationships between characters and across cultures. More specifically, food functions both metaphorically as a vehicle for patriarchal and/or colonial values and power structures and as a symbol of those values and structures. In addition, food as maternal discourse can be invoked subversively to undercut those power discourses as a method of resistance and reclamation. In discussing the "maternal" and motherhood throughout this thesis, I draw upon the body of feminist criticism which explores the real and imaginary maternal. This body of criticism is especially informed by the work of Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup> who argues that the patriarchal attempt to repress and deny the maternal origin signals a desire to alienate and exile women from "the 'house of language' which has been created by men as another 'home,' a substitute for the mother's body" (Haigh 65). Irigaray links women's

---

1

While Irigaray fails to acknowledge racial and cultural difference, her theories of mother/daughter relations and the body are useful in assessing the material and symbolic formulation of maternity in these texts.

oppression with the repression of the mother's discourse, "primary maternal territory" (Gauthier 44). In order to reclaim the mother's body and discourse, the female subject must challenge those discourses which seek to reduce women to objects of exchange by becoming "subjects" of exchange, connecting with the "female imaginary" (Ziarek 61) through "the negotiation of differences and the formation of alliances among women" (73). Thus, we see in the female characters of these texts, through their relationships to food and the body, an attempt to "re-symbolize" motherhood and the "female imaginary" as discursive formations.

This leads to my second issue, the female body as site of violence and resistance. In all three texts, women's bodies become the symbolic terrain upon which discourses surrounding food are played out. Thus, I see within these texts a provisional triple move: a) disembodiment as disidentification with oppressive cultural powers which seek to contain, physically and psychically, the female body; b) re-embodiment or a reclamation of the body beyond stable, fixed, essentialized cultural identifications, a re-embodiment that signals re-connection or realization of the fluid and changeable properties of material, psychic, and geographical spaces; c) moving out from essentialized ideas of gender to encompass culture and race and confront the ambiguity of cultural power structures. The final stage in this process involves negotiating the ambiguous structures by which identities, both individual and communal, are defined and constrained. Let it be said that I am oversimplifying in suggesting that the process is simply a movement from  $a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c$ ;

each text negotiates and engages these processes in different ways with different outcomes, some arguably more successfully than others. Therefore, I have structured the chapters so that they represent what I see to be their relative place on this continuum, each text extending these negotiations a little further.

In critiquing these texts and tracing the complex symbolism of food and the body, I bring to my examination my own personal and theoretical concerns with how food and the body are often ascribed cultural currency, their representation existing within a complex matrix of power relations. Not only is food a cultural product whose use and consumption are determined partially by cultural tastes and its use-value within the cultural imaginary, but it retains many symbolic meanings in our collective consciousness. For example, in performing the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, bread and wine (symbols of Christ's body) are consumed, creating an act of purification, the cleansing of body and mind of sins. Food can signal affiliation with one's family and community; how, where, and with whom we choose to eat tells a lot about us. Food can also exist as a signifier of class and economic privilege, engaged in a complex process of exchange amid and between cultures. Furthermore, food as "authentic" cultural product is multiply commodified and fetishized; for example, depending upon our cultural heritage, "cuisine" can take on a variety of iconic roles. Food can also take on a symbolic function, revealing hidden or overt power structures. For example, traditionally, food and its preparation were designated "women's work," the materialization of their historical relegation to the

domestic sphere. In this way, food takes on a gendered resonance, its place within cultural ideology long-cemented over centuries of Western and non-Western patriarchy. In another way, food and eating can symbolize nurturance and love, a primary feeling of connection with the mother whose body becomes food in our infancy, its absence signalling the loss and desire for the mother.

For this study, I will be examining the different ways food is represented within structures of power, whether they be colonial, patriarchal, matriarchal, national, or global. My primary focus will be on how food affects gender relations in all three texts, as a paradoxical symbol which can be both nourishing and violent, nurturing and destructive, transformative and disempowering. Food becomes a symbol of power, with the women in each text involved in a complex process of negotiation between symbolic spaces of identification and difference.

In My Year of Meats, Nervous Conditions, and Meatless Days, these issues are played out in imaginary terrains within and between Western and non-Western cultures. While my critical stance is weighted towards feminism and postcolonial theory, I also see that the issues addressed in these texts, while implicating both, can extend beyond both critical frameworks. Considering the interconnectedness of cultural oppressions, both men and women are complicit in and interpellated by patriarchal and colonial ideologies. While much post-colonial criticism focuses on revealing the oppressive hierarchy between colonizer/colonized, white traditional Western feminist criticism displaces issues of race

and culture in favor of gender. While I will be drawing upon criticism which focuses on the work of feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, I understand the limits of her theories in addressing the complex intersections between and across the categories of race, culture, and gender. As an extension of these critical strategies lies a “locational” or “transnational”<sup>2</sup> feminism which, I believe, is perhaps most faithful to the complex interplays of power throughout these various spheres. This approach delves beyond binaries to address parallel and interchanging forms of power structures across and between cultural spaces.

My theoretical foundation for this thesis is strongly informed by Susan Stanford Friedman’s Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter (1998), a text which explores new directions in feminist materialist thought, specifically outlining a politics of encounter as it relates to the liminal spaces or “contact zones” between cultures. Friedman argues that we must take into account “how gender interacts with other systems of stratification” (Friedman 34), namely race, culture, class, and nation. It is impossible to parse out these various categories of identification which “all function relationally as sites of privilege and exclusion” (Friedman 23). It is perhaps through a “relational discourse of positionality” which “stresses the constantly shifting nature of

---

2

My use of this term comes from Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan who use it ‘by default’ as a term which displaces the (often arbitrary) binary between “First World” and “Third World” to delineate the shifting and fluid boundaries of global cultural exchange (Scattered Hegemonies 8-9).



identity as it is constituted through different points of reference and material conditions of history” (Friedman 23) that we may find a point of entry into these fluid textual “contact zones,” the microcosmic points of disjuncture, connection, and paradox which inform the negotiation of cultural and gender identity.

We may think of these fluid and changeable properties of identity in terms of *hybridity*, a term which designates spatial/geographical/psychic negotiations. My use of it comes from Friedman who states:

As a discourse of identity, hybridity often depends materially, as well as figuratively, on movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting. Alternatively, hybridity sometimes configures identity as the superposition of different cultures in a single space often imagined as a borderland, as a site of blending and clashing...identity is not ‘pure,’ ‘authentic,’ but always already a heterogeneous mixture produced in the borderlands or interstices between difference. Such grafting often takes the form of painful splitting, divided loyalties, or disorienting displacements (24).

While the term *hybridity* retains traces of its original derogatory usage as synonymous with racial or biological half-castedness, a negative manifestation of cultural imperialism, it contains within it the seeds of emancipatory potential to undermine and displace authority and binary thought. Positively figured, hybridity embodies Gloria Anzaldua’s concept of the “contact zone,”<sup>3</sup> which suggests the necessary movement of the subject between

---

3

See Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

difference and beyond<sup>4</sup>, to the spaces in-between cultures and spaces, real or imagined. Furthermore, Friedman considers that this concept serves a central function in “the new geography of identity [which] emphasizes the fluid interaction of race, class, sexuality, and national origin along with gender” (29). Even in their radically different cultural, historical, and political realities, in all three texts, many of the female characters are cultural *hybrids*, caught at the crossroads between cultures and discourses, whether spatially, geographically, or psychically. This ambivalence is inscribed at the very site of identity, ambiguously shifting from a sense of dislocation and ruptured subjectivity to an empowering placelessness, an opening up of the spaces of (trans)cultural identification. In these texts, while dislocation or exile symbolizes the patriarchal attempt to suppress women’s voices and/or women’s repression of the maternal, an empowering placelessness or “homelessness” often signals women’s subversive renegotiation of patriarchal discourses. This renegotiation takes place through the turn to the maternal, as material and discursive relationship, which renders women homeless, their discourse no longer (fully) containable within a logic of patriarchal exchange.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meats, a

---

4

“The ‘beyond’” states Homi K. Bhabha, “is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...[There is] a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-dela*—here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth. (1994: 244)

postmodern Japanese American novel and commentary on cross-cultural gender ideologies and capitalist exploitation. Ozeki, a documentary filmmaker, turns her figurative lens upon meat and the female body as commodities, implicated in a system of global exchange. The protagonist and narrator, Jane Tagaki Little, as hybrid (Japanese American and racially mixed) subject, works as producer of a Japanese produced and US sponsored television show which uses “American Wives” to sell American beef to Japanese consumers. Indeed, the metaphors of meat plays a central ideological and political role in the text, not only to critique capitalism and the media, but more importantly, to foreground a representation of power structures which multiply impose upon women’s bodies and voices. Through the symbolic discourses of food, eating, and maternity, Ozeki parallels and contrasts her two central female characters, Jane Tagaki Little and Akiko Ueno, revealing the complex ways that power is represented in the body/mind of the female subject.

In the second chapter, I consider Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions. Set in colonial Rhodesia, this first-person semi-autobiographical account traces the struggles of its two female protagonists, Tambu and Nyasha, who must negotiate identity in light of multiple oppressions. While Nyasha expresses her sense of cultural ambivalence by turning her resistance upon the body, developing a ‘nervous condition,’ anorexia and bulimia nervosa, Tambu finds a way to negotiate between the imaginary terrains of food as primal nourishment and foreign substance, material and symbolic sustenance. In Nervous

Conditions, food assumes various forms of social and political currency, acting, on the one hand, as powerful symbol of women's collectivity and private discourse and, on the other hand, as symbol of colonization, as the product of interconnected spheres of exploitation: racial, familial, economic, and educational.

Chapter Three consists of an analysis of Sara Suleri's Meatless Days, her sophisticated meta-fictional autobiography of her life as transnational intellectual, growing up in Pakistan and migrating to the United States. Suleri performs a textual subject who, in an attempt to negotiate her own spatial, psychic, and geographical position as diasporic female subject, crosses cultural and temporal boundaries by imagining the community of women and mothers she left behind; her process of cultural negotiation involves reclaiming, re-writing, and deconstructing the "text" (and food) she was fed throughout her life. Through her evocative and multi-layered text, Suleri performs textual acts of reclamation, attempting to renegotiate power discourses surrounding women's bodies and lives. Through her symbolic "disembodiment," she disperses the bodily and psychic category of "woman." She performs these acts of re-membrance through her disembodied politics of "meatlessness"; by representing women as negativity, loss, homeless, she recuperates their discourse of spirit, which moves beyond corporeality. Figured positively, this emancipatory rootlessness and placelessness symbolizes not only a fluid and diasporic identity, but a different way of being in one's body within and across cultural spaces. By opening up the spaces of linguistic and imaginary signification to fluidity and

transformation, I believe that Suleri convincingly opens up the contact zones between and across cultures through her re-symbolization of the maternal, a private female discourse of nourishment and empowerment.

As should be clear from the texts that I've chosen, we, as readers, are implicated in the decolonizing project of each text; and, perhaps, more importantly, we, as scholars, are called to acknowledge our own positionalities vis-à-vis gender, race, culture, economics, academic status. As a white Euro-Canadian female academic, I recognize my own privileged cultural position which allows me to use these texts in the service of my own theoretical concerns. One of the reasons we value literature is that it may speak to our social, personal, cultural reality or experience and unearth some truths or falsities which we seek to understand. Having lived and worked in Japan for a significant period of time, I have personally experienced life as a cultural outsider or, to appropriate Sara Suleri's phrase in Meatless Days, as an "otherness machine." However, in time, after learning the language and adapting to the food, I came to identify with the culture; it felt almost like home to me. I was a migratory or borderland subject. Through this experience, I came to see that identity is not fixed, the "me" that arrived in Japan certainly not the same "me" that left, in body or mind. This merely reaffirmed something I already suspected, that essentialized notions of identity are ridiculous. It also suggested to me that the properties of the human mind can be quite malleable, adaptable as they are to changing social, cultural, and geographical locations. Ultimately, it is because of this experience, coupled

with my extensive travels as a youth, that I am writing this thesis. It is also the reason that I assume the position that I do, which, I think, Susan Stanford Friedman sums up nicely: “the identification of differences among women needs to be complemented by a search for common ground, however differently that commonality is materially manifested” (1998: 46). For me, this balancing of a recognition of difference coupled with a “search for common ground” speaks to the fluidity of cultures and identities and the necessity to undo such dualisms as self/other, colonizer/ colonized, inside/outside in the service of ethically inhabiting the “contact zones,” that area where connections may be formed. In today’s transglobal culture, I do not think that we can afford to continue thinking our separateness. Such gestures merely serve to reify notions of cultural and racial purity and essence, which while important in recognizing various forms of cultural oppressions, are damaging if that means assuming an “us” versus “them” mentality.<sup>5</sup> I chose the three texts for this study because they offer no easy answers, complicating as they do any totalizing gestures. Each text performs, in a unique way, the various “contact zones” or intersections between cultural, political, and national spaces.

---

5

Or, as Gloria Anzaldua claims, “it is not enough to stand on the opposite bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance [...] is a step toward liberation from cultural domination. But it’s not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once” (qtd in Friedman 1998: 47).

## Chapter 1

### Cultural/Corporeal Bodies: (Re)negotiating Motherhood in Ruth Ozeki's My Year Of Meats

I see our lives as being part of an enormous web of interconnected spheres, where the workings of the larger social, political, and corporate machinery impact something as private and intimate as the descent of an egg through a woman's fallopian tube. This is the resonance I want to conjure in my books.

Ruth Ozeki– Interview on My Year of Meats

In My Year of Meats (1998), Ruth Ozeki represents the female body as an especially fraught site of cultural, racial, and gender inscription and contestation, addressing the multifarious means by which regulatory cultural and political discourses materialize in the psychic and physical life of the female subject. Food and the body become symbols of these power discourses which are represented, not singly upon the body, mind, or within geographical spaces, but through various sites, at once physical, intellectual, and psychological. In My Year of Meats, cultural power structures operate, not only macrocosmically in terms of global capital (Beef-Ex), but microcosmically through the rhetoric of exclusion, domination, penetration, colonization, and sexualization of the bodies of the novel's Japanese and Japanese American female protagonists. In this chapter I argue that Ozeki, to some degree, succeeds in representing the complex processes involved in negotiating destructive and violent patriarchal and national discourses through her focus on motherhood, women's private and collective agency and

empowerment; however, the force of this reclamatory project is problematized by the cultural and political imperative of the text, to celebrate American “multiculturalism.”<sup>6</sup>

A large part of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of Ozeki’s representation of the commodification, sexualization, and fetishization of the female body through a cross-cultural narrative on the lives and reproductive woes of Jane Tagaki Little, the bi-racial producer of the television show “My American Wife,” the “American Wives” she features weekly, and Akiko Ueno, the submissive Japanese housewife whose husband created the show. Just as the metaphors of food, meat, and the body serves to reveal the complex deployment of power in this text, the parallel journeys of both Jane and Akiko might be seen as similarly complicated bodily and psychic movements from inside out, and outside in. For Jane, that progression begins with individualism, self-importance, ego, and career; her identification with and role in recycling and feeding into capitalistic and patriarchal power structures comes at the price of her rejection of her body, gender and racial identity; in a different way, Akiko is also caught in a cycle of victimization. Trapped in a traditional Japanese female role, she develops an eating disorder as a form of resistance to her expected cultural role as mother. The next step for Jane is the development of a consciousness of her audience, both American and Japanese mothers. This leads her to recognize her ethical and personal responsibility to challenge cultural

---

6

The use of this term has been highly contested within critical discourse. I use it here to denote a negative capacity to homogenize cultural groups, eliding cultural difference under the all-encompassing and idealizing rubric of American nationhood.



stereotypes of motherhood. Meanwhile, Akiko, through watching “My American Wife” forms a psychic connection with “American” mothers. Finally, as Jane uses her expanding connections with these mothers to look within, cut through her negative, culturally-determined psychic internalizations in an attempt to negotiate her gender and racial identity, so also Akiko’s discovery of selfhood and the evolution of her psychic and physical empowerment is connected with her identification with “American” mothers. For both of these women, motherhood figures as ambiguous symbol of both oppression and resistance, the need to renegotiate their relationship with the body, language, and dominant patriarchal discourses. As we’ll see, Ozeki weaves a web of women whose lives intersect in crucial and illuminating ways. However, whether she offers these women the discursive space from which to “resymbolize” (in Irigaray’s terms) their position from “objects exchanged” to “subjects that exchange” (Haigh 63) is perhaps contestable.

Near the beginning of My Year of Meats, Jane Tagaki Little, the first-person narrator, outlines the mission statement of the television show, “My American Wife,” commencing our journey into the destructive practices of the American meat industry:

Meat is the message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It’s the meat (not the Mrs.) who’s the star of our show! Of course, the “Wife of the Week” is important too. She must be attractive, appealing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America. (8)

In Western culture, the control of women's bodies/lives was historically based on their inherent "animality," the old woman=nature, man=culture hierarchy, assigning women's primary function as reproductive receptacles. By aligning woman with animal, men could control women by absorbing them in a signifying hierarchy of social paradigms. In Ozeki's text, this symbol serves an ambivalent ideological purpose: by linking the oppression, violation, and subjection of the female body with that of the abusive treatment of domestic farm animals, Ozeki highlights and critiques a patriarchal, capitalist society which effects control over women's bodies, fetishizing, commodifying, and objectifying them (as animal flesh).

Ozeki claims that an added imperative for her text was to examine how meat impacts the physical bodies of her characters, literally investigating the pop cultural slogan, "you are what you eat" (7). As irreducible element of human identity, the body becomes a site for the incorporation of cultural discourses. Clearly, Ozeki's metaphorical word-play is used to critique gender representations and the violent Othering, naturalizing, and essentializing of the female body. However, the meat metaphor takes on very real consequences for both Jane Tagaki Little and Akiko Ueno, intimately related to motherhood.

Jane Tagaki Little is complicit with patriarchal cultural ideologies and stereotypes through her (capitalist) involvement in selling to a Japanese audience, both beef, through the bodies of "American wives" and ideals, a limited one-dimensional view of American

ethnicity. Stating her intentions for this metaphorical play, Ruth Ozeki states,

meat took on a variety of metaphorical resonance: I was thinking of women as cows; wives as chattel (a word related to cattle); and the body as meat, fleshy, sexual, the irreducible element of human identity. I was thinking, too, of television as a meat market, and Jane as a cultural pimp, pandering the physical image of American housewives to satisfy the appetites of the Japanese TV consumers" (6).

Significantly, Ozeki highlights the female body as fleshy commodity, unit of patriarchal exchange which becomes consumed by and implicated in the patriarchal global system of exchange. On the one hand, in their attempts to fetishize meat, linked with the bodies of "American wives," the American beef exporters target the Japanese female consumer, the collective, depersonalized Other, who becomes the object of the "specular" Western gaze (both a consumer and body to be consumed by normative Western ideologies). On the other hand, the twist lies in the double power dynamic which exacts a double violence: not only do the Japanese wives become the absent referent in the cog of capitalist (re)production, but the paper cut-out "authentic" "American Wives" demanded by the Japanese television producers become "the meat made manifest," objects used to fuel the patriarchal, capitalist impulse and to sell both an ideal of Western "femininity" and domesticity to Japanese housewives. This double violence reiterates the fact that boundaries between cultural and discursive spaces are fluid, both sides implicated in reinforcing negative stereotypes and cultural illusions through capital exchange and the media. Meat, in this case, becomes a multitiered symbol for a) women's oppression, the commodification, repackaging and consumption of their bodies; b) the capitalist impulse to

consume and dissect bodies, in the service of the modern-day God, money, at the cost of cultural miscommunication and ignorance. Ultimately, what I believe is significant in light of this textual power structure is the fact that Ozeki implicates both sides in perpetuating patriarchal ideologies.

The destructive nature of cross-cultural patriarchal ideologies is most poignantly displayed through the character of Akiko Ueno, the Japanese wife of Joichi Ueno, the producer of "My American Wife." Akiko represents the target "consumer" of the expanding global economy for the sale of American beef. Because of her lack of self-esteem and her husbands' attempts to "fatten her up," to prime her like the "meat" he markets, for reproduction, Akiko develops an eating disorder, bulimia. Significantly, her purging episodes are always associated with meat consumption, meat taking on a life of its own:

she'd start to feel the meat. It began in her stomach, like an animal alive, and would climb its way back up her gullet, until it burst from the back of her throat. She could not contain it. She could not keep any life down inside her. But she knew always to flush while she was vomiting, so 'John' wouldn't hear. She also knew that she felt a small flutter in her stomach, which she identified as success, every night when it was over. (37-8)

Following Carol Adams' claim that "the message of male dominance is conveyed through meat eating—both in its symbolism and reality" (189), we may view Akiko's bulimia as symbolic of her resistance to traditional Japanese gender roles and her resistance to the patriarchal logic meat-eating connotes. For Akiko, by inscribing her pain upon the body, she subverts/resists traditional Japanese gender roles; furthermore, her bulimia gives her

power and control over her fertility (her bulimia ceases her menstruation), allowing her to deny her husband a prized possession, a child. Akiko's bulimia enacts an ambivalent resistance; as both incorporation of cultural/gender discourses and violent resistance, her bulimia truly engenders her sense of powerlessness, her cultural and gender alienation.

Not only do the "American" mothers and, in a different way, the Japanese consumers become the "meat made manifest," but Jane Tagaki Little turns the lens upon herself, extending the metaphors of meat to her body and her reproductive capacity as hybrid subject. Characterizing herself as "polysexual, polyracial, perverse" (9), it is clear that Jane's internalization of patriarchal discourses extends to her racial make-up, as she uses animal metaphors to explain her apparent infertility. Reflecting on her experience living in Japan with her ex-husband, Emil, Jane states, "I have thought of myself as mulatto (half horse, half donkey—ie., a 'young mule'), but my mulishness went further than just stubbornness or racial metaphor. Like many hybrids, it seemed, I was destined to be nonreproductive" (152). Connecting her racial hybridity with biological infertility, Jane internalizes both sexist and racist discourses which seek to align racial hybridity with impurity, biological contamination. Thus, her earlier celebrations of her hybridity, "being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic...I feel brand-new—like a prototype" (15) and "the way I figured it, I had the chance to make a baby who could one day be King of the World. An embodied United Nations" (149) become grotesquely distorted through the objectification of her own body.

For Jane, the metaphorical paralleling of women's bodies with cattle becomes literalized when she discovers that the reason for her reproductive difficulties are the result of her mother's taking DES drug while pregnant with her. In an interview, Ozeki describes her learning about the history of DES as a "climax":

Of course, the climax occurred when I came across the information that the synthetic hormone DES had a history of misuse, not only as a pregnancy drug for women, but as a growth stimulant for cattle. Suddenly the metaphor was no longer simply a literary conceit. It was frighteningly real; women weren't just like cows; women and cattle were being given the identical drugs with equal disregard for safety. (7)

The DES subplot operates on many symbolic levels, serving to expand Ozeki's symbolic use of food in this text, as symbol for the incorporation of violent patriarchal discourses.<sup>7</sup>

In a very literal way, this drug serves to damage women's bodies and reproductive capacity. Symbolically, it signals a patriarchal rhetoric of violence, women's bodies becoming the "landscape" upon which experimental drugs are tested. Their bodies, having incorporated this violence, reproduce it upon their fetuses, destroying, contaminating, and disfiguring their babies. What women once thought was nourishing and nurturing for fetuses, turns out to be a masked form of violence and destruction. The contaminating factor, the DES drug, inscribes its negative effects both materially through infertility, and psychically through a realization of one's powerlessness before insidious cultural

---

7

We may also see this sub-plot as a counterplot to Akiko's bulimic episodes which also deals (albeit in a different way) with a bodily violence and the materialization of patriarchal powers within the body.

discourses. The violent physical and psychological effects of this drug as symbol of patriarchal violence are revealed in Jane's dream of her reproductive contamination:

As I stood there with my legs spread, it started to emerge, limb by limb, released, unfolding, until gravity took the mass of it and it fell to the ground with a *thump*, gangly and stillborn, from my stomach. It was wet, a misshapen tangle, but I could see a delicate hoof, a twisted tail, the oversize skull, still fetal blue, with a dead milky eye staring up at me, alive with maggots (277).

The grotesque image of the DES aborted calf fetus conjured at the Dunn & Son feedlot combined with Jane's being infected with DES merge in her imagination to reveal her internalization of cultural discourses surrounding race and the body.<sup>8</sup> In Jane's mind, it seems that her racially hybrid body is abject, her biological impurity manifesting itself in her bodily "contamination." Her guilt and complicity over selling meat through "My American Wife" and possibly infecting others with the DES drug which caused her own reproductive difficulties, weighs upon her heavily. Jane is both subject and object of the power discourses surrounding this violent form of "food." Her role in marketing the bodies (meat) carries this violence to other women, revealing her complicity in selling violent cultural discourses.

Jane's ambivalent relationship to various power discourses and subject positions

---

8

Significantly, Jane's bodily "contamination" occurred when she was in her mother's womb: "the bludgeoning my uterus received occurred when I was still only a little shrimp, floating in the warm embryonic fluid of Ma" (156). Thus, we may see Jane's abjection of her gendered and racialized body as symptomatic of her sense of betrayal by the mother, this pre-natal breach rupturing their relationship and Jane's ability to identify with motherhood as nurturing and nourishing.

demands a re-negotiation of her relationship to her own material and imagined “body” and position as Japanese American and bi-racial woman. Trapped between gender discourses of food as nourishing and food as violent imposition, Jane expresses her ambivalence through the discourse of food as she conflates the consumption of meat with infertility.

During her pregnancy, she admits that

the creature inside craves meat [...] a massive rift has occurred between the seat of my so-called intelligence and my dumb, stunned body. With my mind, I am studying meat. I am immersed in accounts of pharmaceutical abuse [...] I am reading chilling descriptions of the slaughterhouse, the caked filth, blood coursing down the cement kill floor, the death screams of a slaughtered lamb (exactly like the cry of a human baby)...And yet my body still craves the taste and texture of animal between my teeth. I read, I shudder, I gnaw on a spare rib. How is this possible? I’ve had a long course in psychic numbing, but if this is the outcome of my documentary career, then I’m doubled to a psychotic extreme. (207)

Rather than thinking in terms of meat’s nourishing properties, Jane has internalized the function of meat in patriarchy. Her sense of ambivalence is created by her positioning between supposedly incompatible discourses, patriarchy and capitalism, on the one hand, and motherhood and maternity, on the other. Having disavowed her relationship to her mother, Jane cannot embrace the mother within her, to transform that broken link into a nourishing bodily and psychic connection.<sup>9</sup> Her body, having been the target of violence, blinds her to the transformative possibilities of her position, of her using her voice to nourish, nurture, and transform cultural perceptions about women by sharing her own

---

9

As Samantha Haigh states, “In order to find herself, she must first find her mother [...] woman’s exile from her female identity has everything to do with the way in which she is exiled from the mother-daughter relationship as a ‘relation of communication’” (65).



story. Rather, her identification with the place of food comes to symbolize her boundedness to a position of powerless victim.

The symbolic use of food to reveal Jane's sense of cultural and gender ambivalence and powerlessness translates into her career and her self-perception. Jane, having "become a documentarian partly in order to correct cultural misunderstandings" (88-9) believes that her racial hybridity imbues her with authoritative insight into cultural identity. Speaking to her lover, Sloan, she states, "No. The BEEF-EX people are very strict. They don't want their meat to have a synergistic association with deformities. Like race. Or poverty. Or clubfeet. But at the same time, the Network is always complaining that the shows aren't 'authentic' enough. Well, I've been saying if only they'd let me direct, I'd show them some *real Americans*" (57; my italics). While Jane is originally complicit with perpetuating destructive notions of gender and racial purity, truth, and authenticity, she transforms her place within power discourses by embracing their ambiguities. She admits,

I wanted to make programs with documentary integrity, and at first I believed in a truth that existed—singular, empirical, absolute. But slowly, as my skills improved and I learned about editing and camera angles and the effect that music can have on meaning, I realized that truth was like race and could be measured only in ever-diminishing approximations. (176)

Jane's journey involves a re-negotiation of her relationship to the "food" she has consumed, the violent cultural discourses which have severed her psychic relationship with motherhood and her maternal capacity. This process can only begin when she becomes accountable for her complicit role in perpetuating cultural myths and realizes that "truth

lies in layers, each of them thin and barely opaque, like skin, resisting the tug to be told” (175). While her physical and psychic resistance to this ambiguity was strong, revealed in her deception and manipulation, and in the use of her racial/gender ambivalence (otherness) as an excuse for her complicity with hegemonic cultural discourses, her journey culminates in her recognition of ethical purpose: to revise and reconfigure, within the sphere of her own personal influence, cultural notions of “authenticity” through her critique of the one-dimensional prototype of “My American Wife” and her subversive attempts to present and reclaim diverse representations of the “American” family.<sup>10</sup> This project involves Jane re-assessing and repositioning herself within and between cultural discourses, between patriarchal violence and maternal nourishment, individuality and collective empowerment.

Akiko’s resistance and empowerment similarly comes through her observations of the mothers represented on “My American Wife,” her “enlightenment” and reclamation coming about, ironically, through her consumption of meat. Given that Ozeki constructs Akiko’s bulimia, her inability to physically “consume” meat, as symbolic of her psychic resistance/rejection of the logic of patriarchal domination, capital (re)production, and consumption, what does it mean that Akiko’s resistance is figured through consuming that

---

10

Moreover, this subversion extends to food itself; as Jane becomes increasingly concerned with the mothers and messages behind the show, she no longer tailors her choice of mothers to fit into her “beef” agenda. She respects the diverse tastes of these women, featuring meals of their choosing, such as lamb, chicken, and vegetarian meals.

food which has signified her oppression? My reading of this narrative twist is that Ozeki constructs agency and resistance as possible only through women's (re)negotiation of her relationship to various cultural discourses, whether violent, nourishing, or otherwise. Certainly, the argument can be made that this empowering consumption of meat suggests that Akiko has embraced, incorporated Western values and discourses.<sup>11</sup> However, we may also see this as an instance of self-love, her eating of meat an acknowledgment that there is no safe space outside the power structures in which food and eating are implicated.

Through Ozeki's subversive representation of food and the body, it is clear that, at the heart of the various cultural/political issues which linger on the surface of her text, lies a feminist revisionism. Ozeki, by positing some common "sites of resistance" for women, challenges the notion of "authentic" cultural representation and dominant cultural power discourses, allowing for a degree of cultural exchange. Thus, she seems to use both the DES and Akiko sub-texts to highlight the politics of gender and racial difference and to explore women's reproduction as a cultural form of capital, production, consumption, mediated by patriarchal control of women's bodies and implicitly engaged in a process of exchange. In subverting this structure, women are called to dis-identify with patriarchal

---

11

If we consider that food is symbolically connected with maternal nourishment, Akiko's eating may also be positively figured as an outgrowth of her "connection" with American mothers. In this case, we might ask, what does it mean that Ozeki has Akiko look outside of Japan for a positive and nurturing maternal models?

and cultural power discourses which view them as objects of exchange, stable and containable bodies. In turn, the reclamation of the body involves embracing the maternal (as imaginary terrain) as symbolic of the necessity to recover women's bodies from the destructive patriarchal and racist power discourses which seek to contain them. Of course, motherhood and women's collectivity figure as subversive and empowering gestures in this novel, both Akiko and Jane's sense of gender oppression and displacement or homelessness, negotiated through their connection with a cross-section of American mothers. This gesture may be read, in Irigaray's terms, as an attempt to return to the mother, to recover a "maternal genealogy" as the text's "forgotten origin" (Haigh 63).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Ozeki conveys the idea that, it is in the "ever diminishing approximations" (176), the private spaces of women's lives, that the potential for a spiritual and intellectual reconsideration of one's relationship to culture and the body is (re)formulated.

Ozeki uses the tropology of meat and the body to explore issues of power, gender, the "texts" we are fed through popular culture. In a limited capacity, we, the readers, are given the opportunity to travel across geographies, spaces of cultural and gender difference. However, our view of Japan is extremely limited by the central imperative of the novel, to critique American and, indirectly, global capitalism. While I would argue that Ozeki complicates issues of race, gender, and identity and the representation of the

---

<sup>12</sup>

While Ozeki complicates Irigaray's theory by introducing the element of race, she then goes on to commit the error of conflating Japanese and Japanese American women.

Asian female subject by paralleling the lives of her Japanese American and Japanese female subjects and dialectically engaging in a global ‘dialogue’ of sorts (albeit largely mediated through television), I agree with Laura Hyun Yi Kang who argues for recognition of the “shifting separations and crossings between the geopolitical locations of Asia and the United States and between the social and discursive categories of ‘Asian women’ and ‘Asian American women’” (405). Does this (re)configuration of cultural spaces ignore the material conditions of culturally constructed ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality; does this signal an attempt to erase difference under the romanticized matrix of a “transglobal” community or does Oseki offer, through paralleling her female characters, the possibility of “transglobal” agency and/or resistance, what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third space” of cultural exchange? For Bhabha, this “Third Space”

makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code [...] In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation [...] It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew. (1994: 243)

Thus, Bhabha’s “Third Space” argues the provisionality and unfixedness of cultural boundaries and representations, the deconstruction of reified notions of identity, gender, and race. It signifies an ambivalence which opens the possibility for the traversal of cultural, economic, social borders. To “speak” of cultural borders and culturally and

geographically-located identities connotes subscription to a metaphysics of presence, an attempt to locate, make tangible in space and time, that which escapes representation. It seems to me that Ozeki is attempting to construct an exclusively American “female” space of agency outside of patriarchal and cultural discourses. In so doing, we are left suspiciously wondering as to the absence of the Japanese perspective and how that cultural dynamic might have complicated her text.

Ultimately, I question whether Ozeki’s text achieves this balanced representation of the complexities between cultural identifications and negotiations. While she uses images of food and eating to symbolize the need to renegotiate women’s relationship to dominant discourses, to find an empowering position between consumption/ restraint, violence and nourishment, in the end, her narrative on women’s (trans)national collectivity is undercut by, what seems to be her continued investment in those cultural and patriarchal discourses. Certainly, I felt an ambivalence towards the culmination of Akiko’s journey in her train ride across the deep South where the passengers, these “coloured folk” offer her up some southern hospitality. Akiko

clapped her hands in time and looked around her at the long coach filled with singing people. This would never happen on the train in Hokkaido! For the second time since she left Japan, she shivered with excitement. She’d felt it at the dinner table at thanksgiving [which she has celebrated—this traditional American feast—with Grace and Vern], and now again, even stronger—as if somehow she’d been absorbed into a massive body that had taken over the functions of her own, and now it was infusing her small heart with the superabundance of feeling, teaching her taut belly to swell, stretching her rib cage, and pumping spurts of happy life into her fetus. This is America! She thought. She clapped her hands and then hugged herself with delight. (339)

The symbolic implications of this passage demand interrogation. First of all, while Akiko's (and Jane's) bodily and psychic agency and resistance is figured through her connection with the discourses of women's private lives, in this passage Akiko's transplantation is expressed through the rhetoric of nation with her essential maternal fleshiness being penetrated, impregnated, and absorbed by America's "superabundance of feeling," that southern hospitality which pumps "spurts of happy life into her fetus." Ozeki's focus on mothering reappears here as a trope for national identity, Akiko as the lost mother being reclaimed by "Mother Superior," America Herself. Thus, Ozeki seems to set up an ironically reversed opposition between America/motherland (community of mothers/ nurturers) and Japan/fatherland, Akiko's move to America suggesting an escape from the patriarchal oppression of Japan. Considering the complex deployment of patriarchal cultural powers in this text, this opposition presents a real problem; through much of the narrative it is not so much Japan, but America which is represented as the violent, contaminating, and penetrating force which attempts to silence and contain women's bodies. In this context this final image seems oddly to gesture towards a colonizing or claiming of Japan, the assumption being that Akiko's diasporic move merely reifies cultural power relations/hierarchies rather than challenging them. Does this metaphorical infolding, incorporation of Akiko's body connote another type of incorporation, the erasure of cultural difference/ identity under the rubric of diasporic, globalised identity whereby Akiko's body (literally, figuratively) is being infused, imbued

with Western culture?

While it seems that Ozeki's globalizing move suggests the possibility of alternative identities, offering a "Third Space" (to use Bhabha's terms) for agency which surpasses geographical positionality, the troubling implications of this passage cannot be ignored. One could argue that Akiko's move is a manifestation of her identification with a global maternal collective unconscious, her subsequent empowerment a striking moment of boundarylessness, whereby the physical boundaries between cultures are dissolved by a central ethical imperative, a spaceless and transformative psychic connection between women. If this were the case, we may see a central thread which runs throughout My Year of Meats: the re-negotiation of the ambiguities surrounding cultural discourses of food and the body which inform women's subject positions across cultural/ corporeal spaces. If, as Caren Kaplan claims, the permeability of cultural borders suggests a psychic empowerment through "reterritorialization,"<sup>13</sup> Ozeki's text may be seen as performing a rallying call, inviting us to critique hegemonic discourses and expand our awareness of the dynamic capacities of the female subject, beyond the limiting realities of cultural and geographical spaces. Ultimately, while I find myself resisting Ozeki's ending, as representative of her continued investment in American values, it seems to me that her text

---

13

This term is derived from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "deterritorialization," which Susan Koshy describes "as the move by which the exclusions and repressions on which the security of our homes are deconstructed so as to enable re-territorialization, or, the remaking of those homes to accomodate marginality and difference" (1997: 49).



offers the seeds from which to explore the multifarious means by which cultural power discourses work within and upon the female subject. Perhaps her ending, which subsumes women's private discourses within the rhetoric of nation, is meant as a satirical political statement, calling us, the readers, to intervene in this moment of violent containment. This ambiguous metaphors/politics of "placelessness" and "homelessness," as statement of the need to reclaim and (re)symbolize motherhood and women's relationship to oppressive cultural discourses between and across cultural and imaginary spaces, will be refigured and re symbolized in powerful ways in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Sara Suleri's Meatless Days.

## Chapter 2

### Food as Text/Text as Food: Gendering Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

[One] cannot develop a stable identity out of unstable conditions.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, Berlin

In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up.

Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

As we saw in My Year of Meats, the material and metaphorical role of food is engaged in a complex cultural process of negotiation and exchange serving to reveal the internalization of patriarchal discourses surrounding the female body and reproductivity. Whereas Ozeki uses discourses of food largely to symbolize women's oppression within a global media market, eliding cultural and gender difference by figuring women's collectivity through the totalizing rhetoric of nation, Dangarembga complicates the categories of culture, gender, and race by showing how both men and women are oppressed by and complicit in patriarchal and colonial structures. What I find especially revealing in this text is the way that food is implicated not only in structures of patriarchal and colonial power which seek to contain and silence the female Shona subject, but also in strategies of female resistance to those structures. Considering the complex deployment of food as interpretive figure in this text, it is impossible to examine the full spectrum of its

implications. Therefore, I locate three primary ways food operates in this text: 1) as figure for women's domesticity, the kitchen becoming a space for female collectivity but also, negatively a space for women's oppression and containment; 2) metonymically, as part of the patriarchal power structure as it affects the African female body; 3) metaphorically, symbolizing both the consumption of the English language (text) and the loss of the African mother and "mother-tongue" (203).

Taking as her primary focus women's experiences in pre-independence Rhodesia, Dangarembga addresses the complex matrix of power relations which serve to (de)construct women's bodies and lives. By tracing the textual representation of food and the body as it affects the central female and male characters, I argue that we may see Dangarembga's central imperative, her decolonizing project which seeks to reveal the historical (and present) constraints placed upon Zimbabwean women by patriarchal and colonial<sup>14</sup> power discourses.

The idea of colonialism as a material process inscribed on the body is not new to

---

14

Throughout my analysis, I will use the terms, "colonialism" and "patriarchy," conscious that they fail to do justice to the novel's complexity, seemingly creating an opposition between victimizer/ victim, colonizer/colonized, male/female. However, considering Dangarembga's representation of a complex hierarchy and power structures, it is clear that, for the female characters in this text living in pre-independence Shona culture, the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy creates an especially destructive and restrictive atmosphere with traditional codes of feminine decorum perpetuated as containment strategy. Women's position, at the interface between colonialism and traditional Shona patriarchy, is complicated by interconnecting power relations which materialize at the site of the body.

postcolonial studies. An often cited theorist who has written extensively in this area is Frantz Fanon. Indeed, much of the recent body of criticism on Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions begins with citing the epigraph to the novel, drawn from Jean Paul Sartre's Preface to Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth: "The condition of *native* is a nervous condition." In Fanon's text, these 'nervous conditions,' symptomatic of the relationship between colonizer/colonized, master/slave, "represent internalised strategies of hegemonic rule and colonial or patriarchal strategies of containment" (Harting 238). Significantly, Fanon describes the colonial process as a corporeal, bodily materialization of power. Biman Basu notes that, for Fanon, "colonialism primarily constitutes a material intervention" and that "discursive formulations proliferate around the body, [...] the density of 'a thousand details, anecdotes, stories' impinge on the 'bodily schema'" (8-9). As Basu claims, what is missing in Fanon's formulation of 'nervous conditions' as the materialization of colonial power is a gender perspective.<sup>15</sup> It is at this point that Dangarembga intervenes with her insistence that 'nervous conditions,' as symbolic of this colonial power dynamic, must also be considered in gendered terms.

We are first introduced to food as gendered issue on the rural homestead of Tambu and her family. Tambu discovers a sense of self and empowerment in the kitchen, cooking in the company of women. She revels in her ability "to prepare [...] a fine stew,"

---

<sup>15</sup>

See Carl Plasa's "Reading 'The Geography of Hunger' in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: From Frantz Fanon to Charlotte Bronte," Journal of Commonwealth Literature 33.1 (1998): 35-45.

which makes her feel “superior, so wholesome and earthy” (39). Because of her abilities, Tambu is valued and included within this intimate group of women: “there in the camaraderie of the cooking, it was comfortable to occupy the corner that [this] natural process had carved out for [her]” (40). Through her cooking, Tambu finds a safe and “solid” place within the family community, a place from which to construct her identity. She sees herself as a piece in the larger whole “carved out for [her].”

While the communal domestic space of the kitchen offers Tambu a sense of identity, her ambitions cannot be contained within that space. However, it is precisely women’s domestic role which becomes a weapon in Tambu’s oppression when she decides that, like her brother, she desires an English education. When she voices this desire to her father, he attempts to “curb [her] unnatural inclinations” (33), thinking “that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living” (34). Jeremiah attempts to contain Tambu’s educational aspirations and to reassert his patriarchal power by reminding her of her obligations as a Shona female: ““can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables”” (15). In this scene, food becomes a symbol of gender roles and the relegation of Tambu to the private space of the kitchen becomes a containment strategy used by Jeremiah to reposition himself as patriarchal authority and, for the time, deflect her focus from personal ambition to her responsibility to the community and her future husband.

Not only does the kitchen become a complex space of empowerment and containment, but at the mission, familial power relations are revealed at the dinner table, that space where the internal gender hierarchy is played out. First of all, the ritual serving of the meal reveals a gender power structure, demanding women's humility, service, and selflessness. For example, earlier in the novel there is a celebration on the homestead for Babamukuru's homecoming to which the whole extended family is invited. The women, after spending the day cooking and preparing dinner, must "dish out" the meal for the men, offering the food according to patriarchal status in the family. After the men have received their "great hunks of meat wallowing in gravy," the women return to the kitchen, "dish[ing] out what was left in the pots for ourselves and the children [...] We, who rarely tasted meat, found no reason to complain" (40-41). Literally and metaphorically, food (particularly meat) is linked with power, with women fulfilling the role of nurturers who offer up the "sustenance" which nourishes men, only to be thrust back into the private space of the kitchen.

While Tambu is nourished at the homestead by her connection with women, the mission provides a different form of nourishment, a material abundance which immediately translates into food, in bodily terms:

That table, its shape and size, had a lot to say about the amount, the calorie content, the complement of vitamins and minerals, the relative proportion of fat, carbohydrate and protein of the food that would be consumed at it. No one who ate from such a table could fail to grow fat and healthy. (69)

Unlike the homestead, where the family struggled to maintain modest vegetable crops for

their daily survival, in Babamukuru's home, a physical atmosphere of largesse connotes a corporeal abundance. While Tambu's family rarely saw meat, Tambu finds herself "impressed by these relatives of mine who ate meat, and not only meat but meat and eggs for breakfast" (91).

The deployment of food, as symbol for cultural and social status extends to the metaphorical use of food to denote the colonial educational process. While Jeremiah is concerned with the illusory trappings of colonial education for his daughter, he full-heartedly supports Babamukuru's education which helps to support the family on the homestead:

Our father and our benefactor has returned appeased, having devoured English letters with a ferocious appetite! Did you think degrees were indigestible? If so, look at my brother. He has digested them! If you want to see an educated man, look at my brother. (36)

Colonial education becomes a material process, letters and books consumable products. This metaphorical conflation of food and education signals a complex acculturation or assimilation process with reading aligned with eating. Ironically, by systematically consuming the English language and appropriating English religious and political beliefs, Babamukuru is simultaneously consumed by the English "text," to the point of erasure of selfhood. His consumption of colonial education has secured Babamukuru a place in the Shona power hierarchy, his decision to pursue colonial education ironically earning him a right to the title, "a good African" (107).

While Babamukuru's digestion of the English "text" effectively renders him "full of

knowledge" (36), providing him a form of (elusive) cultural currency, Nyasha's consumption of the English "text" produces the opposite effect. Even while providing her with some sense of cultural status, this "food" fails to nourish her, her consumption of the English "text" negatively materializing at a linguistic and bodily level. Initially, when Nyasha returns from England, Tambu feels alienated from her cousin ("I missed the bold, ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there" (51)). Not only has her appearance changed, but she appears to have lost the Shona mother-tongue, the suggestion being that the colonization process involves severing ties to the mother (in this case, Africa) in exchange for a place within the symbolic realm of the father's language (England). Significantly, as Nyasha increasingly immerses herself in English education, her physical appearance becomes transformed, showing the signs of malnutrition: "Everyone agreed that she was overdoing it. She was looking drawn and had lost so much of her appetite that it showed all over her body in the way the bones crept to the surface, but she did not seem to notice" (107). Quoting Elizabeth Grosz, Sue Thomas explains Nyasha's condition through Luce Irigaray's description of the "suffocating mother":

With no access to social value in her own right, she [the suffocating mother] becomes the mother who has only food (that is, love) to give the child. Unable to give the child language, law and exchange—the phallus—she has only nurturance, and its most tangible manifestations—eating, defecating— through which she may gain social recognition. (36)

Her diet of English food and education, what Sue Thomas terms "the phallus of white



Rhodesia" (32), is not sufficient to feed Nyasha's starving spirit. When Tambu confronts her with her unhealthy overworking, "Nyasha confessed that she was nervous. 'As if there's everything to learn and I'll never know it all. So I have to keep reading and memorising, reading and memorising all the time. To make sure I get it all in'" (108). Having internalized colonial "hysteria"<sup>16</sup> precipitated by the loss of her parents who have severed their connection with the mother-tongue, Nyasha channels her obsessive energy into her steadily increasing 'consumption' of English texts as a means of compensating for that loss by retreating "into some private world that [her parents] could not reach" (118). However, the more English Nyasha consumes, the more her physical body starves, words seemingly devouring her from within.

Like Nyasha, Tambu's anxiety and unconscious resistance to colonial education manifests in the act of eating, her "throat constrict[ing] more tightly with each mouthful [she] tried to swallow" (91). However, as her "mind and body relaxed and Maiguru tended [her] solicitously like a mother bird, ever ready to drop tasty morsels into [her] mouth, [she] grew quite plump" (95). Tambu attempts to find a substitute for her lost mother by consuming Maiguru's discourse, "eating the words that come out of her mouth" (140). However, Maiguru's "food" fails to provide nourishment because she, like Nyasha, has lost that connection to the motherland, the mother-tongue. These food

---

16

Elizabeth Grosz claims that hysteria is "the *symptomatic acting out* of a proposition the hysteric cannot articulate" (qtd in Thomas 43).

metaphors reflect not only the physical changes resulting from Tambu's increased nourishment at the mission, but also symbolize her process of acculturation as she "plunges into" (93) the English "text." Not only does the English "text" become a form of food, but food itself becomes "text," serving as metaphor for patriarchal attempts to control the consumption of English values and culture. Babamukuru's overpowering insistence on controlling and regulating Nyasha's "rebellious" behaviour is paralleled by his attempts to control her food intake. This passage highlights the strict patriarchal power dynamics which are played out at the dinner table:

"I expect you to do as I say. Now sit down and eat your food."

Sulkily Nyasha sat down and took a couple of mouthfuls. "Excuse me," she said. She rose from the table, her food unfinished.

"Now where are you going?" Babamukuru demanded.

"To my bedroom," replied Nyasha.

"What did you say?" cried Babamukuru, his voice cracking in disbelief. "Didn't you hear me tell you I don't want to hear you answer back? Didn't you hear me tell you that just now? Now sit down and eat that food. All of it. I want to see you eat all of it."

"I've had enough," explained Nyasha. "Really, I'm full." Her foot began to tap. Instead of sitting down she walked out of the dining room. (83-84)

Of course, Nyasha's refusal to consume this patriarchal "text" signals a refusal to swallow patriarchal and sexist ideology; it also becomes a weapon of power in her struggle with her father's dominance and his attempts to control and monitor her food consumption, symbolic of his attempt to impose Shona values of femininity. Food, as metonymic signifier of colonial and patriarchal authority and power, presents a threat to Nyasha's psychic life. Therefore, when Babamukuru connects obedience with eating, it is not

surprising that Nyasha's form of resistance and rejection of his authority would come in a refusal to eat. For her, to bury food within the body would connote an acceptance, an internalization of her father's text (a text fraught with contradictions). By refusing to do so, she regains some, albeit elusive, sense of power, control, and identity which exists outside of his sphere of authority, her body becoming a self-contained vessel for resistance.

Indeed, it is through the body that Nyasha is controlled by Babamukuru who uses her "femaleness" and budding sexuality as trump cards, signs of her abjection. He reads Nyasha on a surface and bodily level, his gaze seeing within her actions, speech, and dress, evidence of her fallen nature and moral impurity. Living under the myth (influenced by colonial myths of African female impurity; that the African woman is a temptress, prostitute, loose),<sup>17</sup> that women's bodies are a site of contamination and abjection, that sexuality should be contained and repressed at all costs, Nyasha feels helpless to express her femininity. Babamukuru makes her "a victim of her femaleness" (115), attempting to control what she wears, what she eats, how she talks, what she reads, and who she speaks to. When Nyasha counters his control by enacting her resistance through the body, wearing short skirts, smoking, dancing, and starving and purging, he "condemns [her] to

---

17

Therese Saliba claims that, "with the hybridization of culture resultant from colonialism, indigenous women's bodies have come to signify, within indigenous male ideology, sites of cultural impurity, bodies polluted or sickened by 'diseases' of Western influence" ("On the Bodies of Third World Women," 133).

whoredom" (115). Because Babamukuru's form of disciplinary power targets Nyasha's body as site of "cultural impurity," it's not surprising that Nyasha internalizes that discourse and inverts it by literally manifesting "impurity" within and upon the body through anorexia and bulimia nervosa.

We see in Nyasha's eating disorder the intricate levels of sexual, racial, and cultural domination that are inscribed on her body. Typically considered "Western" diseases of economic privilege, anorexia and bulimia are generally seen as conditions which are rooted, in part, in a fear of sexuality and an attempt to gain control over at least one aspect of one's life. These diseases can be symptomatic of a desire to conform to a "Western" ideal or stereotype of female desirability, slimness, and perfection. Thus, symbolically, Nyasha's eating disorder reveals her sense of cultural conflict, a "Western" disorder literally destroying her body and mind. In another sense, Nyasha's anorexia and bulimia are connected with her desire for the lost mother.<sup>18</sup> However, Dangarembga complicates the psychoanalytic reading of the significance of the mother by emphasizing the connection between family and culture, primal nurturing and communication. Nyasha is left to counter her loss of the mother(tongue) by consuming the English text, the only source of food her parents can provide.

---

18

As Elizabeth Grosz notes, "Anorexia and bulimia seem most interestingly interpreted in terms of a mourning or nostalgia for the lost (maternal) object, and either an attempt to devour or consume it (bulimia) or to harden oneself against its loss (anorexia)" (qtd in Thomas 36).

A crucial moment in this text comes when Nyasha's long struggle acting out her rage upon her body (to the point of starvation) is translated into words. She is finally able to purge her thoughts and thus, launch her counter-opposition against the consumption of colonial and patriarchal discourses:

"Why do they do it," she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, "to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We're grovelling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him." She began to rock, her body quivering tensely. "I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't. I'm not a good girl. I'm evil. I'm not a good girl." I touched her to comfort her and that was the trigger. "I won't grovel, I won't die," she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring. (200)

In this passage, we see Nyasha's bare insight into the complex reality of power structures in Shona culture. She doesn't blame her father or men, in general, for the situation in which she finds herself. Rather, she is making a powerful statement against colonization, which while affecting men and women differently, results in oppression for both. It is especially poignant that Nyasha articulates her oppression, her internalized cultural ambivalence and her external acting out of that "hysteria" on the body, finally translated into language. Considering that discourse is another site where violence (against the Shona culture) is enacted in this text, often symbolically aligned with eating or consumption, it is especially poignant that Nyasha launches her counter-movement against the insidious powers of colonialism and patriarchy through her mouth:

Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ("Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies."), breaking

mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. "They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped." Then as suddenly as it came, the rage passed. "I don't hate you, Daddy," she said softly. "They want me to, but I won't." [...] "Look what they've done to us," she said softly. "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you." (201)

Generally, this act of dismembering an English text in her teeth symbolizes a purging of both her father's patriarchal "text" and the "text" of colonialism which has stolen her mother-tongue. In her instance of pure recognition and revelation, Nyasha represents her sense of oppression and the disillusionment which come with realizing that various forms of cultural power are complicitous in her oppression. Sally McWilliams locates her violent acting out as a political gesture, a form of "mimicry,"<sup>19</sup> Nyasha performing the lack, the empty nourishment and violent invasiveness that colonialism engenders.<sup>20</sup>

Where Nyasha's attempts to locate a form of primal maternal nourishment are thwarted by her (and her mother's) cultural hybridity, Tambu's journey towards

---

19

This concept comes from Homi Bhabha as "that discourse in which the colonized mimics the colonizer; when this mimicry takes place what emerges is the 'almost the same, but not quite' repetition of a partial presence that threatens to displace colonial power" (McWilliams 109).

20

As Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter states of Nyasha, "her desire is to negate her identity—to destroy what has already been destroyed by the complicitous intersection of racial, cultural, economic, and sexual oppression. Nyasha is tearing away at the layers that have built up as masks of identity, hiding her from herself and her home. But all there is behind the black skin that tries to erase the white mask it wears, all there is beneath the attenuated layers, is her flesh, wounded and exposed" (238).

rediscovering the nourishing potential of her maternal culture is fraught with ambivalence. Earlier in the novel, Tambu refers to her move from the homestead to the mission as “the period of my reincarnation” (92); furthermore, she resists returning to the homestead because apparently, she is “too civilized” (120), claiming that, “the more I saw of worlds beyond the homestead the more I was convinced that the further we left the old ways behind, the closer we came to progress” (147). Even as Tambu travels a dangerous path towards “incarceration in racist assimilationist structures” (Aegerter 236) through her rejection and devaluation of that “African” and maternal space of the homestead, a process which threatens to turn her (like Babamukuru) into the colonizer, like Nyasha she takes a positive step towards her “liberation” from the constraints of patriarchal and colonialist discourses by performing a similar form of “mimicry” as resistance. After hearing of Babamukuru’s intention to conduct a Christian wedding ceremony for her parents (who have already had a traditional Shona wedding), Tambu comes to realize that her silence and conformity cannot be justified in light of the implicit suggestion, conveyed through Babamukuru’s plan, that “Christian ways were progressive ways” (147) while African traditions are primitive, backwards, and illegitimate. As she claims, a Christian wedding will have “made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world” (163).

Identifying with her African heritage and seeing the distorted colonial logic behind this plan, yet unable to voice her disapproval, Tambu’s form of resistance and commentary

manifests (much like Nyasha) in a bodily resistance. On the day of the wedding, Tambu finds she “could not get out of bed,” her muscles paralyzed by the weight of her disapproval. In a startling scene of psychic distancing, in which Tambu’s performs a mind/body split, Nyasha

tried to coax me out of bed, but I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed, watching her efforts to persuade me to get up and myself ignoring her. I observed with interest and wondered what would happen next [...] Babamukuru walked into the room, without knocking and looking dangerously annoyed. The body on the bed didn’t even twitch. Meanwhile the mobile, alert me, the one at the foot of the bed, smiled smugly, thinking that I had gone somewhere where he could not reach me, and I congratulated myself for being so clever. (166)

While Tambu mimics Babamukuru’s code of proper feminine behavior by remaining silent and complacent, her psychic “splitting into two disconnected entities” enacts a subversion of his authority. This incident becomes a pivotal moment in Tambu’s negotiation of identity, symbolizing her disidentification with colonialist ideology and her reconnection with her maternal past. Unlike Nyasha, who reacts to Babamukuru’s strict adherence to traditional Shona female values of silence and obedience by mimicking his colonialist discourse through self-destructive bodily inscription, in this situation, Tambu finds a means of internally distancing “by psychically dislocating her mind from her body [...] Although Tambu cannot be verbally disobedient, this psychic rupture allows her to disassociate the silent obedience that she has affected from her body’s performatively disobedient actions” (Hill 86). Even though she receives punishment from Babamukuru



for her disobedience (her refusal to participate in her parents' Christian wedding), to the score of "fifteen lashes" and the designation of household duties, Tambu performs these duties "with a deep and grateful masochistic delight" for this "punishment was the price of [her] newly acquired identity" (169).

Both Nyasha's and Tambu's journeys towards identity involve negotiating multiple spaces of cultural identification and difference, their respective approaches implicating the maternal influence. I agree with Sue Thomas' claims that Tambu's first impulses to escape her motherland and mother-tongue, its people, its landscape and beliefs, were "fuelled by matrophobia [...] fear of becoming like the mother" (Thomas 33). Seeing within her mother the "weight of [African] womanhood" (16), Tambu invests in her English education as a means of escaping the "heavy burden" (16) which she believes, in her youth, is the plight of the African mother.

I see a similar yet reversed position occurring with Nyasha, whose mother's cultural ambivalence is transmitted to her. However, where Nyasha is deeply invested in her mother's liberation to provide a model for escaping her own position as cultural hybrid, Tambu finds a way to negotiate her identity as separate, yet connected with her mother.<sup>21</sup> Having taught her that "essential parts of you stayed behind no matter how

---

<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, as with Ozeke's text, considering the complex cultural, racial, and gender politics at play in this text, Tambu's reconnection with the mother(tongue) cannot be seen as an all-encompassing reclamation, as a Kristevan feminist psychoanalytic model would put forth, suggesting that "the destruction of [the] larger symbolic order depends upon the reunification of mother and daughter" (Hirsch 211).

violently you tried to dislodge them in order to take them with you” (173), Tambu comes to realize that by devaluing her past, she dismisses an essential part of herself, her African heritage. While she can never regain unmediated connection to pre-colonial Shona culture any more than she can return to her mother, she finds some compensation for this loss through language even though she abandons her mother-tongue for the global language of English. Thus, the search for completion and utopian endings is replaced by politics.

In summary then, this chapter has argued that food operates on many literal and metaphorical levels in Nervous Conditions, revealing how cultural powers are represented and insinuate themselves within the bodies and minds of their female subjects. Food as symbolic “text” reveals the complex negotiation of bodily and psychic realities, sites for the inscription and contestation of colonial and patriarchal cultural power structures. In gender terms, where the preparation of food signifies empowerment and community, cooking becoming a collective, creative act, the etiquettes around serving and eating food involved coercion, injustice, and gender inequity. Thus, the social codes associated with food determine the values placed on these roles. Furthermore, while colonial education, as a psychological process, threatens to destroy the bodies and minds of its subjects, Tambu shows that this oppression is not a foregone conclusion. Her “process of expansion” (204) culminates in the final paragraph of the text where,

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years

and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (204)

By the end of the novel, we move to the adult Tambu, the narrator, who has become author and empowered agent of her account. If her last attempt at self-representation is not a resounding success or a neat answer, it certainly suggests a positive move towards personal empowerment. Within language, she constructs an alternative place from which to rewrite the self within “the dialectic of autonomy and community [...] past and present, individual and group, men and women, children and parents, parents and ancestors, severance and continuity” (Aegerter 233). This imperative to re-negotiate women’s relationship to dominant hegemonic discourses will form the basis for the final chapter of this thesis on Sara Suleri’s Meatless Days.

### Chapter 3

#### (De)Essentializing Woman: Fluid Bodies Across the Cultural Divide

Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other

Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women.

Sara Suleri, Meatless Days

Like Jane Takagi-Little and Tambu, the narrator of Meatless Days is engaged in a quest for identity that is not contained within essentialized conceptions of gender, race or nation. As in both My Year of Meats and Nervous Conditions, images of food and eating serve to highlight the ways in which the female body is implicated, both positively and negatively, in structures of power. While Suleri, like Ozeki and Dangarembga, employs connections, both literal and symbolic, between women and food to illustrate dynamics of patriarchal and colonial oppression, she goes further to recuperate their positive value, connected with her intimate network of women, as symbols of nourishment, nurturance, and love. In discussing Suleri I will draw upon the work of French feminist Luce Irigaray, whose theories of women's "body symbolic" work to challenge women's discursive place in a patriarchal economy of representation. As Birgit Kruckels observes, Irigaray highlights "the characteristics women and liquids have in common: 'continuous, compressible,

dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusable, [...] already diffuse 'in itself,' which disconcerts any attempt at static identification'" (182). This fluidity signifies the disruptive economy of women's discourse which exceeds patriarchal containment. Suleri's representation of female identity as shifting and fluid also serves to challenge notions of cultural or national essentialism which she suggests are not just parallel but intimately tied to patriarchy. Significantly, however, she does not dispense entirely with the representation of culture or the body, without which identity and meaning would be impossible. Rather, she suggests that meaning is produced through a dialectic movement between materiality and fluidity, place and placelessness, identity and change. Food and the act of eating become crucial metaphors for this movement, highlighting the way in which identity is defined (literally) through communion with and (metaphorically) through incorporation of otherness. Finally, like Dangarembga, Suleri draws a symbolic connection between rituals of food/eating and discourse, using the property of language to signify both identity and difference in order to convey the complexity of women's experience.

In this chapter, I will negotiate three ways that food operates in this text: 1) food and the female body<sup>22</sup> are literally and figuratively connected with the masculinist discourse of nation; they become the "landscape" upon which power is inscribed; 2) Suleri

---

<sup>22</sup>

More specifically, in her semi-autobiography, the women's lives she is concerned with are those of her immediate family. However, as I will later discuss, Suleri deploys the category of "woman" and "Third World Woman" as a discursive tool, as means of critiquing Western theoretical (Orientalist) attempts to fit "Third World Women" into a neat category.

displaces that discourse by focusing on women's (maternal) fluid <sup>23</sup> and uncontainable symbolic bodies as supplying a private and nurturing discourse, providing an enabling supplement<sup>24</sup> to the dominant masculinist rhetoric of nation; 3) finally, I will examine Suleri's move towards disarticulating woman (and food) through the representation of the fluidity of cultural boundaries, the body becoming the imaginary "contact zone" which (dis)embodies women's cultural exchange and affiliation across geographies, time, and space.

Writing against a postcolonial tradition which silences the Indian woman's voice, subsuming it beneath the discourse of nation,<sup>25</sup> Suleri inverts (unravels) this structure, contrasting nation with the 'texts' of the intimate community of women, food and the body. Paradoxically, Suleri's<sup>26</sup> project involves (re)claiming and (re)mapping the private

---

<sup>23</sup>

Irigaray imagines "a fluidity that might be, not a loss, but a source—resource of new energies" (Whitford 1991: 106).

<sup>24</sup>

As Susan Koshy claims in "Mother-Country and Fatherland: Re-Membering the Nation in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, "'woman' and the diasporic subject do not mark a radical opposition to nationness [...] but operate as supplements that produce alternative discourses of community and affiliation [...] The strategy of supplementarity enables a renegotiation rather than a reversal of the hierarchy implicit in the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (46-7).

<sup>25</sup>

See *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996.

<sup>26</sup>

While *Meatless Days* is a semi-autobiographical text, throughout this chapter, I will refer to the narrator as Suleri, for the sake of convenience.

stories of her female family members by rewriting their absence; in so doing, she displaces, disembodies, and disarticulates woman as a material, bodily, and tangible presence. However, if we consider Suleri's deployment of the female body as supplement to discourse and language, women's bodies come to possess "a liberating potential [...] the source of a kind of pleasure and intimacy between women" (Kruckels 168). Where the other texts in this thesis attempt to locate women's oppression amidst power structures, Suleri enacts a discursive intervention, attempting to put women in a different discourse.<sup>27</sup>

Suleri's rhetoric of food and the body collects most powerfully around two women: her mother, Mair Jones and her sister, Ifat. By connecting and contrasting the various stories, anecdotes, and the real and imagined bodies and boundaries (spanning time and space) which Suleri employs in an attempt to dis-articulate the postcolonial woman, I argue that we may see the complexities of Suleri's ideological and political purpose, her de-essentializing project which seeks to transform women's private discourse by exposing and rewriting the gap between the real "stuff" of women's lives and the symbolic, the underlying transformative power which is made possible through women's negotiations of public and private spaces of agency and identity.

We first see the literal and metaphorical deployment of food and the body in the second and title chapter, "Meatless Days," in which food, as discourse of nation, is

---

<sup>27</sup>

As Irigaray states, "the invention of new ways of speaking about relationships between women is essential if women are to create a new identity for themselves within the symbolic order" (qtd in Whitford 26).

supplemented with food as nourishing reflection of women's lives. Suleri traces her childhood memories of foods, their cultural and imaginative significance, and the discourses which have shrouded their true properties in mystery. As Linda Warley notes, the term "meatless" carries with it many literal cultural meanings:

From a Western, capitalist perspective, 'meatless' signifies deprivation, poverty, absence of the main component of most Western-style meals. In recent years, it has come to signify an environmentally-conscious choice and a political gesture [...] In Pakistan, a country that has known 'both lean times and meaty times' (29), 'meatless' can refer to times of drought and famine as opposed to times of relative plenty. It can also refer to its Islamic context, 'meatless' representing the period of Ramzan during which no food is consumed between dawn and sunset. But 'meatless' also refers to a specific government decree which forbade the selling of meat on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in order to conserve the resources of meat in the country. (114)

In the "Meatless Days" chapter, all of these meanings are "relational rather than representational, plural rather than singular" (Warley 114) as they appear through Suleri's discussion of national, personal and familial experiences. For example, after the country's formation in 1947, "the government decided that two days out of each week would be designated as meatless days, in order to conserve the national supply of goats and cattle" (31). However, at least for the upper classes (of which Suleri was a part), this did little to limit the consumption of meat. Having refrigerators, they would stock up on Monday. Thus, "meatless days," "instead of creating an atmosphere of abstention in the city [...] rapidly came to signify the imperative behind the acquisition of all things fleshly" (32). Contrasting this discussion of national food practices, Suleri immediately turns to the private sphere, confirming the central importance of food in their family lives:



Am I wrong, then, to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmogrifications of which it is capable? Food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history, measuring everything we remembered against a chronology of cooks. (34)

Contrasting the “realistic” political rhetoric of nation with an “imaginative” domestic rhetoric of home, Suleri negotiates the significance of food in her family, connected with many private family issues and stories. In as far as food becomes a means of “living inside history,” it becomes a metaphor for the sense of instability and political uncertainty in Pakistan in Suleri’s youth: “all of us were equally watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment, for the way in which things would always be missing or out of place in Pakistan’s erratic emotional market” (28-9). Her sense of familial and nutritional security always hangs in the balance, Suleri voicing “the great sense of failure that attends a moment when what is potato to the fork is turnip to the mouth” (29). The unpredictable nature of food, as connected with nation, serves to express Suleri’s sense of “betrayal” (29), her sense of powerlessness which serves to contain her within the discourse of the colonized. However, by exploiting the ambiguity of language which can both nourish and betray, Suleri has the (partial) freedom to renegotiate her relationship to knowledge and cultural power discourses.

While food as metaphor serves to reveal national currents and the mysterious nature of language, its use as a form of punishment in the Suleri family reveals how the literal properties of food (its body) can be transformed to include its symbolic and

imaginary capacities. For example, when Suleri (as a youth) is caught eating baby cauliflower heads from the garden, the cook, Qayyum (under the guidance of her mother), issues forth a particularly cruel form of “penitence,” making her eat kidney. This form of punishment is meant to teach Suleri “endurance,” to “make me teach myself to take a kidney taste without dwelling too long on the peculiarities of kidney texture” (26). Here, Suleri suggests that the physical response to a property of food, the texture, can be transformed within the subject by exploring its imaginary possibilities.

This idea of the material being transformed through imagination extends to Suleri’s treatment of the mother and sister’s bodies, in their real and symbolic capacities. Women’s bodies evoke memories of strong sensory and emotional bonds which, while often unspoken, symbolize a sense of connectedness and intimacy among the Suleri women. By representing the maternal and feminine bodies as both sources of nourishment and scenes of loss, Suleri emphasizes that women’s victimization and their subversive and liberatory potential are often interconnected.

As Birgit Kruckels observes, throughout this text, motherhood is almost exclusively (both positively and negatively) linked with feeding and teaching. Suleri’s mother “had given suck so many times and had engaged in so many umbilical connections” that she is a “nervous cook,” her only recourse to “take refuge [...] in the university” (35) where she teaches as an English professor. However, just as her mother “feeds” her students by instructing them, ““Take disappointment, child, eat disappointment from me’

[...] Since I must make you taste, let me put gravel on your tongues, those rasping surfaces that years ago I watered!" (169), so does she feed Suleri in crucial ways. Rather than feeding her food, her mother (as an English professor) feeds her a love for language, putting "words into [her] mouth" (151). In this way, Suleri's desire to reclaim the mother suggests a desire to reclaim her mother-tongue.

For all the pleasures motherhood seems to offer in this text, as Birgit Kruckels observes, eating and feeding become "ambiguous issues that oscillate between the intense sensual pleasure and intimacy they afford on the one hand, and the burden of being responsible for the well-being of others on the other" (Kruckels 173). For example, in pregnancy, Suleri's sister Ifat becomes obsessively concerned with food and the transformations of her body: "'I've eaten too much, I've eaten too much.' 'There's too much body about the business [...] and too much of it is your own'" (35). Moreover, Ifat locates "the points of congruence between the condition of pregnancy and the circumstance of cooking, since both teeter precariously between the anxieties of being overdone and being underdone" (36). Cooking, as metaphorically connected to pregnancy, highlights the ambivalent sense of responsibility involved in motherhood, "with a special emphasis placed on the painfulness that accompanies this process of giving away something of oneself" (Kruckels 174).

Even as the literal experience of motherhood can be both painful and pleasurable, Suleri recuperates the maternal and sisterly body as symbolic nourishment which reveals

the intimate psychic and emotional connection between women in the Suleri family, their sense of intimacy expressed metaphorically in terms of a fluid physicality or bodily connection.

We first see Suleri's attempt to reclaim the maternal, outside of masculinist discourse, in her mournful discourse surrounding her mother, Mair Jones, a Welsh woman who married her Pakistani father, Pip. Hearing of her mother's death in Pakistan from her place in America, Suleri has a dream about her mother which (significantly) takes place in London. In this evocative dream, Suleri's father comes to pick her up with a refrigerated car:

He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin, and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin [...] like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle [...] Then, when my father's back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft—for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tillat and all of us, I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. Then I and the dream dissolved, into an extremity of tenderness. (44)

Suleri's transgressive stealing back a piece of her mother's body is a multilayered symbol for her desire to reclaim, to regain access to her mother's body and voice<sup>28</sup>; furthermore,

---

28

Luce Irigaray warns of the necessity "to move out of the role of 'guardians of the body' [...] and to put into words and symbolic representations the primitive relation with the mother's body" (Whitford 26). Suleri's rewrites that "primitive relation" by recreating the scene of mother/daughter exchange of food which occurs in infancy. This symbolic gesture could also be seen as a reverse birthing, Suleri desiring to nourish, birth, and give life anew to the mother.

the dream being set in London could suggest Suleri's desire to reclaim her mother's national heritage. By equating her mother with meat, Suleri symbolically performs an act of mourning, the desire to reclaim part of the lost mother. This symbolic incorporation "is figured as a fulfillment of daughterly duty, but also as a covert transgression of paternal jurisdiction over the maternal body" (Koshy 47).<sup>29</sup> This re-membering through incorporation, as a form of mourning "also allows the incorporation of the maternal body into [Suleri's] narrative" (Koshy 48). However, that recovery cannot be complete, the mother's body resisting total consumption, as Suleri's mother "dissolve[s]" on her tongue "into an extremity of tenderness."

Not only does Suleri configure the maternal body as source of nourishment and site of pain, but the sisterly bond is also strongly figured symbolically in bodily terms. In the chapter entitled "The Immoderation of Ifat," Suleri traces her close relationship with her older sister, Ifat, expanding her discussion of the displacement of women's bodies and discourses. Suleri, confirming their closeness, wonders if they are "twins," the biological process merely temporarily suspended as "one egg in its efficient subdivisions became forgetful for a while [...] until four years later they remembered to be born" (131). Their symbolic communion expresses itself through the mother's body, Ifat "leaving her haunting aura in all [her] secret crevices: in the most constructive period of my life she lay

---

29

In the above passage, we might also read a discourse of violence, Suleri's father implicated in "breaking" or violating the mother's body.

around me like an umbilical fluid, yellow and persistent” (131). Suleri imagines these women all inhabiting a fluid<sup>30</sup> and comforting space, each connected to the other through the maternal body. Thus, the mother’s womb represents a safe, secret, and fluid space within which Suleri and Ifat become symbolically “twinned,” Ifat’s “haunting aura” providing perpetual nourishment for Suleri. In addition, Suleri’s admiration for her sister extends to her symbolic body, Ifat becoming “the nutty bone our teeth would hit when we wished to take upon our tongue that collusion of taste and texture” (133). Suleri’s love and admiration for her sister express themselves through sensual metaphors, her sister becoming food for her imagination.

While food and the act of eating signal the ways identity is (literally) defined through motherhood, Suleri extends this materiality to include her role as metaphorical “mother”:

Then commenced the labor. I was imitating all of them, I knew, my mother’s laborious production of her five, my sisters’ of their seven (at that stage), so it was their sweat that wet my head, their pushing motion that allowed me to extract, in stifled screams, Ifat from her tales. We picked up our idea of her as though it were an infant, slippery in our hands with birthing fluids, a notion most deserving of warm water. Let us wash the murder from her limbs, we said, let us transcribe her into some more seemly idiom. And so with painful labor we placed Ifat’s body in a different discourse, words as private and precise as water when water wishes to perform both in and out of light. Let it lie hidden in my eye, I thought, her tiny

---

30

These images of water, milk, and umbilical fluid run throughout *Meatless Days*, and, as Birgit Kruckels suggests, they are significant such that they “share something with [Luce] Irigaray’s conception of woman as fluid: their rejection of solidly defined notions and ‘any attempt at static identification’” (182).

spirit, buoyant in the excessive salt of that dead sea, so that henceforth too she can direct my gaze, a strange happening, phosphorescent! (148)

The “body” of her text becomes the maternal body, that space from which to perform a surrogate birthing of these women within language.<sup>31</sup> However, even Suleri’s desire to carve a space for these women is elusive, their “bodies” escaping her discourse. For example, Suleri’s attempts to contain her mother’s discourse are continually thwarted by her fluidity and transience; “she lived increasingly outside the limits of her own body, until I felt I had no means of holding her, lost instead in the reticence of touch” (156). Moreover, while Ifat embodies “motherhood,” her identity cannot be contained within that space, her linguistic doubleness and multiplicity at once unravelling and exceeding the “text” of her body.

Where Suleri’s fluid embodiment performs a de-essentializing move, the father’s attempt to contain the maternal body is represented as a colonizing gesture, his mapping out and claiming the maternal “body” as landscape. For example, in a chapter entitled “Papa and Pakistan,” Suleri contrasts her father (Pip)’s desire to consume history, to “eat it up alive” (110), to “martial facts [...] up and down the nation” (115) with his desire to conquer the mother’s body. Employing the discourse of consumption, Suleri contrasts Pip’s obsessive incorporation of Pakistani history with his desire to consume and contain

---

31

As Irigaray states, “woman must ceaselessly [...] beget anew the maternal within her, give birth within herself to mother and daughter in a never-completed progression” (Whitford 1991: 109).

the mother:

Did she really think she could assume the burden of the empire, that if she let my father colonize her body and her name she would perform some slight reparation for the race from which she came? Could she not see that his desire for her was quickened with empire's ghosts, that his need to possess was a clear index of how he was still possessed? (163)

Her mother's body becomes the real and imaginary terrain upon which power is inscribed.

In presenting her mother's body as a territory, land, which is possessed by her father,

Suleri brings up issues of colonization. As a white Welsh diasporic woman, Mair Jones' identity position is shifting, unstable and precarious; she is in both a "position of power (as a representative of the former colonizing country) and in one of powerlessness (as a valuable good in a sexual economy between men)" (Kruckels 179). While she offers her body as a peace offering, Pip receives it as a battleground upon which to fight the "empire's ghosts." Pip's patriarchal and colonial attempts to contain Suleri's mother (through the body) is extended to his desire to inscribe, mould, and contain history into a coherent whole.

However, just as food and the body escape their linguistic "containment," their physical properties transformed by exploring their imaginary possibilities, so are women's discourses fluid and multiple, resisting containment. Suleri's mother escapes Pip's "pen," his attempts to fit her within a fixed historical/cultural space; rather, she "let history seep, so that, miraculously, she had no language in which to locate its functioning but held it [...] sheathed about her face, a scarf" (168). Suleri suggests here that, while her father is



concerned with the political aesthetic of history, her mother (even in her silence) is more political because she lives that history “sheathed about her face.” Thus, where Suleri’s father attempts to contain Mair’s discourse by making of her body a conquerable and colonizable landscape, Suleri intervenes in this colonizing impulse, countering this patriarchal claim to Mair’s body by symbolically breaking up her discursive body, dispersing it so as to render it uncontainable.

Images of fluidity serve not only to expose and complicate cultural gender representations but also, and arguably more importantly, to symbolize “cultural migrancy [...] eschewing the localization of identity amidst veils of ambiguity” (Yancovitz 1). In her attempt to (dis)articulate woman, physically and psychically, Suleri takes seriously her mother’s invocation, “daughter, unplot yourself; let be” (156). Mair, as diasporic subject, finds a productive space in absence, living “outside the limits of her body” in discourse, coming to accept her transient place, her homelessness as a Welsh white woman living in Pakistan: “she let commitment and belonging become my father’s domain, learning instead the way of walking with tact on other people’s land [...] I’m curious to locate what she knew of the niceties that living in someone else’s history must entail, of how she managed to dismantle that other history she was supposed to represent” (164). In terms of space and place, Suleri’s mother (like Suleri) is faced with negotiating her identity, her otherness in a foreign culture. Accepting her ambiguous position within Pakistani culture, between place and placelessness, home and homelessness, her mother adopts a position of

distanced perception and interest, retaining difference “between her sea and [Suleri’s] shore” (159).

Like her mother, Suleri, as diasporic woman, has to moderate her consumption of cultural identification and negotiate her relationship to various power discourses. Suleri’s desire to incorporate her mother’s discourse comes from her identification with her mother’s diasporic position. Having symbolically “eat[en] grief” (177) by consuming a part of her mother’s body, Suleri attempts to incorporate her otherness, to retain Mair’s “unique and unclassifiable discourse” (166) of migrancy which, while an inversion of Suleri’s diasporic position (such that Mair moves from colonial England to colonized Pakistan and Suleri moves from Pakistan to America), speaks to her psychic reality of dislocation.

Symbolically, by translating and transcribing her mother and sister’s disembodied discourse into her text, Suleri lets their absence speak. Their dislocation becomes a way of translating her diasporic discourse into another idiom, a metaphorical language from which to articulate her placelessness. When her friend, David, asks her for whom she is writing, Suleri’s response is,

But surely it was preferable to pick up an empty shell, a structure bleached with the promise that it once was home? I cannot help it, David, if my names sound hollow to you, residences that you must condemn: to me, they are the words most shaped like beds, and I am glad to find them empty, attendant on my rest. (173)

Through her memory and re-membrance in writing, as Kate Cook observes, Suleri

“suggests that this meatless form, like the body or an identity, can find consolation in its

former inhabited space" (2), because "the disarticulated woman must shed the desiccated shells she traditionally has had to inhabit" (Dayal 254). By adopting her mother's discourse of dislocation and cultural fluidity and her sister (Ifat's) discourse of resistance, Suleri intervenes and empowers herself to metaphorically take these women "on her tongue," transposing and translating their discourse through her own, thus inscribing community, affiliation, and love at the "contact zones" between cultural and symbolic spaces.

If, as Suleri suggests, one is rendered in space through language, home<sup>32</sup> is a perpetually shifting, contingent, and unlocatable product of discourse. Intimately linked to the interconnected and interchanging physical, geographical and psychic spaces of women's lives, meatlessness signifies an absence, a negativity which is positively transformative such that it highlights the imperative to strip bare, unravel, and release women's discourse from the patriarchal one which places women's bodies and voices under erasure, silenced beneath the rhetoric of nation.

Unlike her father, whose attempts to 'penetrate' the seeds of truth and locate some

---

32

Citing Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, Sidonie Smith poses the question: If 'being home [...] refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries,' the autobiographical subject may find the body to be the home of the stranger who is not at home in the body, who is in fact homeless. This sense of 'not being home' [...] 'is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.' This experience of homelessness inside the body derives from the relationship of specific bodies to the cultural meanings assigned bodies in the body politic. (128)

essential notion of Pakistan in history, Suleri adopts her mother's distanced position as cultural migrant, attempting to negotiate identity in-between cultural/corporeal spaces. In Suleri's dream, the taste of her mother remains on her tongue although it "dissolves into an extremity of tenderness." Indeed, just as Suleri comes to know of her mother's presence through her absence, so does she come to negotiate her personal relationship to her body through its "breakage":

Bodies break, but sometimes damage feels a necessary repair, like bones teaching fingers how to work, to knit. When my bone broke, I was perplexed: was I now to watch my own dismantling body choose to unravel with the cascading motion of a dye in water, which unfurls to declare, 'Only in my obliteration will you see the shapes of what I really can be.' (186)

Ending as she began, Suleri shifts the rhetoric of fluidity from her female intimates to her own body, recognizing that meaning is produced through a dialectic movement between materiality and fluidity, identity and change. Appropriately, the final word of the text is "disembodiment"; one might ask, in a book so much about bodies, what is Suleri's purpose in this ending? By claiming disembodiment, Suleri is making a social and political statement: within the violent and objectifying discourse of nation, women's bodies are signified as empty shells, blank pages to be written on. By dis-articulating women's bodies and re-writing symbolic maternal and fluid bodies, she enacts a symbolic subversion of the colonizing and silencing discourse of nation which attempts to locate some essential womanliness within the body and women's maternal roles.

Suleri's obvious deployment of French feminist theories of the body is problematic

because, while it offers a discursive apparatus from which to intervene in violent discourses surrounding women's bodies, it fails to account for the lived experience of Pakistani women. Furthermore, while French feminist theories certainly complement Suleri's political imperative in this text, she highlights their failure in accounting for the complicating factors of race and culture.

One statement in Suleri's text which has presented questions and complicated the reception of her text is her contention that "there are no women in the third world" (20). Considering the strong presence of women and women's stories in Suleri's memoir, how are we to read such a statement? Clearly, if it is through their presence and her connection to these women that Suleri finds strength and agency, why does she inscribe their erasure? It seems to me that this statement, like Suleri's discourse of fluidity, is performing a rhetorical and political (perhaps theoretical) injunction; Suleri is saying that there is no unified or neat category within which to insert women outside of Western culture. The "Third World" is a "discourse of convenience," rendered by the West in order to "speak" about the margins, to make tangible and unified that which, in Suleri's view, is diverse. Furthermore, in terms of gender, her statement, "there are no women in the Third world" highlights the absence of women's voices, silenced beneath the rhetoric of nation and patriarchy.

Contrast this statement with Suleri's earlier pronouncement, "leaving Pakistan was [...] tantamount to giving up the company of women [...]" The concept of woman was not

really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant” (1). Clearly, Suleri strategically dis-articulates the category of woman and Pakistani woman, revealing her concern with unraveling the texts of women<sup>33</sup> and what it means to re-articulate woman within her diasporic positionality. Suleri re-writes a politicized identity, her symbolic re-imaginings an attempt to find an ethical idiom for alterity which respects cultural, racial, and gender difference. While the first two texts in this thesis revealed women’s attempts to negotiate identification and difference, Suleri’s text finds a productive means with which to inscribe that alterity. Finally, her text (dis)embodies Caren Kaplan’s discussion of “re-territorialization, or, the *remaking* of those homes to accomodate marginality and difference” (Koshy 49). Perhaps the more appropriate word would be *unmaking* since Suleri’s text inscribes “disembodiment” as the discourse with which to dismantle, deconstruct, and open up real and imagined national, maternal, and cultural spaces of identification and difference.

---

33

As Samir Dayal observes, “[Suleri’s] displacement of the category ‘woman’ is echoed by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s suggestion that the point is ‘not to carve one’s space in identity theories that ignore women’ and describe some of the faces of female identity...but patiently to dismantle the very notion of core (be it static or not) and identity” (262).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, I have attempted to trace the metaphors of food and the body in three texts which employ them in their decolonizing projects. While I approached these texts from the perspective of a feminist and cultural critique, I hope that my treatment has displayed the difficulty in separating issues of gender from other issues such as race, class, nation. As I have argued, cultural discourses collect most powerfully around women's bodies as ambivalent sites for the incorporation and subversion of cultural and gender discourses.

In Chapter One, I examined Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats arguing that, while Ozeki makes a case for the metaphorical power of food to reveal cross-cultural violence against women, her attempts to counter that patriarchal violence by embracing a global community of sisterhood and subsuming cultural difference under the totalizing rhetoric of nation serves as all-too-easy universalizing gesture.

Chapter Two focused on Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions. Food serves in that novel as a multilayered symbol for colonial and patriarchal oppression and the body becomes the site of that violence. Dangarembga's text is more sensitive to the dialectic between individual and communal identity, her text performing women's agency, rupture and resistance in the midst of patriarchal and colonial discourses.

Finally, in Meatless Days, the discourse of food is connected with Suleri's recuperative project, to reclaim women's bodies beyond the all-consuming and silencing discourse of nation. Her lyrical and evocative prose shifts fluidly from the real to the imaginary, providing a complex and, at times problematic application of Irigaray's feminist theory. While Suleri deploys the metaphors of food in similar ways to Ozeki and Dangarembga, her use of it is perhaps more complex because she troubles categorizations based on race, gender, or culture through her re-symbolization of the maternal and female body. In addition, through her fluid symbolism, she reclaims a private discourse of nourishment, opening up the "contact zones" between cultural spaces, at once geographical, political, national, and familial.

Certainly, what all three texts have in common is their revaluation of motherhood and women's familial communities within and across cultures. Motherhood and the maternal body and discourse (mother-tongue) figure centrally in the reclamatory projects of all three texts, albeit in different ways. Where Ozeki's text elides the categories of race and culture, constructing an all-too-easy cross-cultural community of women, Dangarembga and Suleri's texts address some of the complexities involved in negotiating women's connections amidst patriarchal and colonial power structures. While food, as symbolic figure, can serve as vehicle for patriarchal and colonial power, in Dangarembga and Suleri's texts, it also signals a subversive excess which is made possible through women's private and communal bonds apart from images of an essential womanliness



located in the body. Considering that the maternal body becomes the target for essentialized notions of femininity, it is especially noteworthy that these texts attempt to reclaim that position as providing the foundations of love and connections between women.

All three texts problematize essential notions of race, gender, and culture, revealing the multifarious means by which cultural and transglobal power structures are materialized and/or psychically incorporated by the female subject. In addition, each text attempts to intervene in violent cultural power discourses by providing a means of women's resistance, that reclamatory project involving the negotiation of different worlds, whether geographical, ideological, or psychic. While their struggles are sometimes similar, this real and imaginary terrain is negotiated in different terms by each writer. While Luce Irigaray's theories are useful in assessing some of the possible symbolic meanings behind the texts' representation of motherhood, they merely provide one trajectory that works in conjunction with the texts' critique of cultural, gender, and racial power structures. Furthermore, while I foregrounded cultural, racial, and gender issues throughout this thesis, an investigation into class issues in these texts could provide a fruitful area of exploration.

Given the different social, political, racial, and cultural spaces (and imperatives) from which each author writes, it is impossible (and undesirable) to attempt to synthesize these three texts into a coherent or conclusive study. Rather, my goal for this thesis has

been to show that, while the conditions of any given culture necessarily determines the conditions of the subject, it is necessary to make connections, to move beyond categories of exclusion. Certainly, at least in Dangarembga and Suleri's texts, the negotiations of the complexity of women's experience is made possible by and transformed through women's intimate connections. Thus, I see within these three texts inspirational seeds, expressions and extensions of certain moments of love which exceed the critical project of academic thought. They comment on the central imperative in both our academic and personal lives, to forge unions, connections beyond geographical, cultural, and ideological boundaries, imagined borderlands.

## Works Cited and Consulted

- Aegerter, Lindsay Pentolfe. "A Dialectic of Autonomy and Community: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions." Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 15 (1996): 231-40.
- Adams, Carol. The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory. New York: Continuum, 1992.
- Adams, Carol and Josephine Donovan, eds. Animals & Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- Apter, Emily and William Pietz, eds. Fetishism as Cultural Discourse. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Ashcroft, Bill and Gareth Griffiths, et al. The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Basu, Biman. "Trapped and Troping: Allegories of the Transnational Intellectual in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'Nervous Conditions.'" Ariel: A Review of International English Literature 28.3 (July 1997): 7-24.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Cultural Difference and Cultural Diversity." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 206-9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Signs Taken for Wonders." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 29-35.
- Bose, Brinda and Bishnupriya Ghosh, eds. "Introduction: Feminist Interventions and Locational Politics." Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film. New York: Garland P, 1997. xv-xxxiii.
- Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth, ed. Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996.

- Burke, Carolyn, Naomi Schor, et al.(eds). Engaging With Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Cook, Kate. "Memory and Structure in Meatless Days."   
<<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/suleri/cook5.html>>
- Chang, Grace, Linda Rennie Forcey, et al. (eds). Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Dayal, Samir. "Style Is (Not) the Woman: Sara Suleri's Meatless Days." Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality. Eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. 250-69.
- deLauretis, Teresa. Feminist Studies, Critical Studies. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- Foucault, Michel. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. Ed, Trans. Colin Gordon. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998.
- Gaard, Greta, ed. Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.
- Gauthier, Lorraine. "Desire for Origin / Original Desire: Luce Irigaray on Maternity, Sexuality, and Language." Canadian Fiction Magazine 57 (1986): 41-46.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly and Helen Scott. "An Interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga." Novel: A Forum on Fiction 26 (1993): 309-19.
- Grewal, Inderpal. "Autobiographic Subjects and Diasporic Locations: Meatless Days and Borderlands." Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices. Eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1994. 231-54.
- Gunew, Sneja and Anna Yeatman, eds. Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1993.
- Haas, Lynda. "Of Waters and Women: The Philosophy of Luce Irigaray." Hypatia 8.4 (Fall 1993): 150-59.

- Haigh, Samantha. "Between Irigaray and Cardinal: Reinventing Maternal Genealogies." The Modern Language Review 89 (1994): 61-70.
- Harting, Heike. "The Profusion of Meanings and the Female Experience of Colonisation: Inscriptions of the Body as Site of Difference in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman." Fusion of Cultures? Eds. Peter O'Stummer and Christopher Balme. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 237-45.
- Hendricks, Christina and Kelly Oliver, eds. Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language. State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Hill, Janice. "Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History: The Nervous Conditions of Silent Girls." College Literature 22 (1995): 78-90.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Review Essay: Mothers and Daughters." Signs 7 (Autumn 1981): 200-22.
- Irigaray, Luce. This Sex Which Is Not One. Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Speculum of the Other Woman. Trans. Gillian Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Jay, Paul. Contingency Blues: The Search For Foundations in American Criticism. University of Wisconsin P, 1997.
- Kang, Laura Hyun Yi Kang. "Si(gh)ting Asian/American Women as Transnational Labour." Positions 5.2 (1997): 403-37.
- King, Richard. Postcolonial America. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Koshy, Susan. "Mother-Country and Fatherland: Re-Membering the Nation in Sara Suleri's Meatless Days." Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film. Eds. Brinda Bose and Bishnupriya Ghosh. New York: Garland P, 1997. 45-61.
- Kruckels, Birgit. "'Men Live in Homes, Women Live in Bodies': Body and Gender in Sara Suleri's Meatless Days." Hybridity and Postcolonialism: Twentieth Century Indian Literature. Ed. Monika Fludernik. Verlag: Stauffenburg, 1998. 167-86.
- Lionnet, Francoise. Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity. Ithaca:

Cornell UP, 1995.

Lovesey, Oliver. "'Postcolonial Self-Fashioning' in Sara Suleri's Meatless Days." Journal of Commonwealth Literature 32.2 (1997): 35-50.

Lowe, Lisa. "Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Asian American 'Novels' and the Questions of History." Cultural Institutions of the Novel. Eds. Deirdre Lynch and William Warner. Duke UP, 1996. 96-128.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Work, Immigration, Gender: Asian 'American' Women." Immigrant Acts. Duke UP, 1996. 154-73.

McClintock, Anne. Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context. New York: Routledge, 1995.

McWilliams, Sally. "Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions: At the Crossroads of Feminism and Post-Colonialism." World Literature Written in English 31.1 (1991): 103-112.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women's Issue.'" Discourse 8 (Fall/Winter 1986-7): 79-116.

\_\_\_\_\_. When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics. New York: Routledge, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Feminist Review 30 (1988): 65-88.

Nicholson, Mervyn. "Eat or Be Eaten: An Interdisciplinary Metaphor." Mosaic 24.3 (1991): 191-209.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others." Mosaic 20.3 (1987): 37-55.

Oed, Anja. "Aspects of Self-Representation in Sara Suleri's Meatless Days, or: what does it mean, to write a book beyond what it is about?" Hybridity and Postcolonialism: Twentieth Century Indian Literature. Ed. Monika Fludernik. Verlag: Stauffenburg,

1998. 187-98.

Ozeki, Ruth. My Year of Meats. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Plasa, Carl. "Reading 'The Geography of Hunger' in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions: From Frantz Fanon to Charlotte Brontë." Journal of Commonwealth Literature 33.1 (1998): 35-45.

Quick, James Robert. "Pronom 'She': Luce Irigaray's Fluid Dynamics." Philosophy Today –(Fall 1992): 199-209.

Rajan, Gita. "(Con)Figuring Identity: Cultural Space of the Indo-British Border Intellectual." Writing New Identities: Gender, Nation, and Immigration in Contemporary Europe. Eds. Gisela Brinker Gabler and Sidonie Smith. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997. 78-99.

Ray, Sangeeta. "Memory, Identity, Patriarchy: Projecting a Past in the Memoirs of Sara Suleri and Michael Ondaatje." Modern Fiction Studies 39.1 (1993): 37-58.

Saliba, Therese. "On the Bodies of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, and Other Nervous Conditions." College Literature 22 (1995): 131-46.

Sharpe, Jenny. "Is the United States Postcolonial? Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race." Diaspora 4.2 (1995): 163-72.

Sjorup, Lene. "Globalisation: The Arch-Enemy?"  
<<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/gender/docs/sjorup.html>>

Smith, Sidonie. Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Spretnak, Charlene. "Critical and Constructive Contributions of Ecofeminism." Worldviews and Ecology. Eds. Peter Tucker and Evelyn Grim. Philadelphia: Bucknell Press, 1993. 181-89.

Suleri, Sara. Meatless Days. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Rhetoric of English India."

\_\_\_\_\_. "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." Critical Inquiry 18

(Summer 1992): 244-56.

Thomas, Sue. "Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized House: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions." Journal of Commonwealth Literature 27.1 (1992): 26-47.

Warley, Linda. "Assembling Ingredients: Subjectivity in Meatless Days." a/b: Auto/Biography Studies 7.1 (1992): 107-23.

Whitford, Margaret. "Irigaray's Body Symbolic." Hypatia 6.3 (Fall 1991): 97-109.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed and introd. The Irigaray Reader: Luce Irigaray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.

Wong, Cynthia Sau-Ling. "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." Amerasia Journal 21 (1995): 1-27.

Yamamoto, Traise. Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.

Yancovitz, Molly. "Defying Containment, Deskinning Woman." Post Imperial and Post Colonial Literature in English.  
<<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/suleri/my1.html>>

Ziarek, Ewa Plonowska. "Toward a Radical Female Imaginary: Temporality and Embodiment in Irigaray's Ethics." Diacritics 28.1 (Spring 1998): 60-75.