“Eating’s a part of being after all”

(UN)GENDERING FOODWAYS IN THE WORK OF SALLIE TISDALE, RUTH OZEKI, AND HIROMI GOTO

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how gender operates in food theory, and reads across three contemporary North American writers to understand how they take up or divert gendered culinary configurations.

Food is deeply embedded in cultural practices, and is therefore inflected by gender and gendered roles of a particular culture. In North America, for example, meat is commonly understood as symbolic of masculinity and eaten by men, and vegetables are symbolic of femininity and eaten by women. Sallie Tisdale’s *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted* (2000), Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* (1998), and Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2004), can be read as investigations into how a gendered subjectivity can be established or destabilised through food. By offering a close reading of moments of food consumption in these texts, I argue that Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto offer a complicated and implicated gendering of food that moves beyond the binary model.

The thesis is divided into three chapters that discuss how each writer approaches food and gender, and reformulates eating practices as a complex conversation rather than as a direct result of gender. The first chapter offers an introduction to how gender operates in food theory, an in-depth analysis of contemporary gendered food practices and commercials, and gives an outline for how Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto write oppositionally from within a gendered culinary structure. Chapter two investigates how the implementation of gender roles through food practices, and cultural figures such as Betty Crocker inform how women cook and eat in Tisdale and Ozeki’s texts. Chapter three is devoted to how Hiromi Goto challenges received notions of gender and food by not gendering her protagonists and refusing to make her female characters readily consumable by the reader.
In my conclusion I theorise how seeing food practices as an extension of a character's subjectivity can root theories of food in the materiality of the food itself. I conclude that, rather than abiding by gendered stereotypes, Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto promote awareness, creativity and joy as more sustainable ways of knowing and eating our food.
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My love of food would be meaningless without my love for my friends and family.

‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert
“Love III”
Dedication

To my parents.
Chapter One: An Introduction to Food and Gender

“What can be more basic than food itself?”

--- *Chorus of Mushrooms*

Food theorists such as Margaret Visser, Sidney Mintz, Pierre Bourdieu, Carole Adams, and Carole Counihan have theorised the masculine and feminine qualities of different foods. Contemporary writers such as Sallie Tisdale, Ruth Ozeki, and Hiromi Goto, however, loosen the metaphorical bind between food and gender by questioning the assumptions behind such qualities: in *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted* (2000) Sallie Tisdale asks how femininity and domesticity have been historicised; in *My Year of Meats* (1998) Ruth Ozeki destabilises meat as a masculine food; and in *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2001) Hiromi Goto undoes the gendered socialisation of bodies and food. A less prescriptive, more complex, and symbiotic relationship therefore emerges between food and gender, and is at work in these texts.

In a western tradition, strength and passivity, power and weakness have been dualistically ascribed to meat and vegetables; this in turn has been translated into a gendered dynamic where meat is associated with men and vegetables with women. In her detailed discussion of the history and mythology of a meal Margaret Visser characterises corn, chicken, rice, lettuce, olive oil and ice cream as feminine because they are light in colour and consistency, easily digestible, fragile, and delicate (19); in his study of food preferences in the French working classes Pierre Bourdieu states that “meat, the nourishing food *par excellence*, strong and strong making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for the men” (192); and
Deborah Lupton notes that “there is a symbiotic metaphorical relationship between femininity and vegetables: the eating of vegetables denotes femininity, while femininity denotes a preference for vegetables” (107). Heavy, starchy, barbequed or roasted foods embody the idealised qualities for the masculine, whereas sweet, light, pale or easily digested food are more feminine. Women and men may not be literally what they eat, but their social roles are formulated by association with the food they eat.

This framework is valuable since it is based on sound anthropological research and historical patterns of behaviour, and provides a structural point of reference for how food is generally gendered in cultures with a Western European heritage (Lupton 111). Nevertheless, these conclusions are simplistic in their unquestioning acceptance of the relationship between gender and food. Women are traditionally seen as being susceptible to sweet foods, for example, just as they are susceptible to emotions. Sweet foods and emotions are indulgent and associated with children, which leads sweets and women to be infantilised by association. Mintz notes that whiteness is traditionally associated with purity (87), and he theorises that sugar, as well as delicate white rice or chicken, are light, pale and therefore feminine foods. There is very little room for movement beyond a rigid conception of what it means to be and eat as a man or woman, as if the proclivities of one’s sex are inevitably tied to the taste buds.

Although these patterns have become received knowledge in western food practises and are coherent within their own framework, they are based on the assumptions of a patriarchal order. Deborah Lupton rightly points out that “these figures (which indicate that men eat more meat than women) should not be taken as indicating that women and men necessarily have ‘naturally’ different predispositions or needs for food” but rather that “dominant cultural assumptions around ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ foods, reproduced from infancy in the family and other sites, serve to construct individuals’ food habits and
preferences" (111). I would argue that Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto work to bring the significance
of the individual’s food preferences back into balance with dominant cultural assumptions to
revitalise our understanding of how men and women can eat.

Tisdale and Ozeki’s texts begin with the received assumption that meat is symbolic of
masculinity and eaten by men, and vegetables are symbolic of femininity and are eaten by
women. Yet the texts unravel to demonstrate the limits of enforcing gendered tropes through
food. Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto can be read through a poststructuralist lens, where “bodies are
understood as dynamic, not static” and are “subject to conscious moulding” (Lupton 15) in
spite of, not because of, how food has been gendered.

The Best Thing I Ever Tasted, My Year of Meats, Chorus of Mushrooms and The
Kappa Child question how gendered subjectivity is established and destabilised. The texts
expose the reader’s limits of knowing; Tisdale and Ozeki posit that we can never know
enough and Goto that perhaps we can never know at all. Tisdale and Ozeki can be read as
 querying how gender roles exist through foodways,¹ and Goto can be read as exploring how
the gendered body is constructed through eating. Each text revolves around and returns to
moments of food cooked, eaten, and shared: as a memory and point of reflection for Tisdale,
as the central debate in Ozeki, or as a recurring motif that illustrates the characters’ trajectory
of development in Goto. “Food shapes us and expresses us…definitively” (Visser 12), yet I
read food in these texts as reformulating and undermining the characters’ subjectivity as much
as it confirms it.

I offer a close reading of my primary texts, using food theory to elucidate how
gendered subjectivity can be reconsidered through food. I read recipes as a site of resistance in
My Year of Meats, for example, and bring theories of disgust in foodways to bear on Hiromi

¹ Foodways is an anthropological term that refers to the how, why, what, when, where of food; the ‘way’ of food
and eating.
Goto’s writing. I will use the anthropological term foodways to refer to culturally specific customs or habits concerning food and eating, and I acknowledge that I will have neglected some readings of foodways because of my own cultural perspective. My theorization of how meat and vegetables are gendered, for example, comes from a markedly Western food practice. This thesis is just the first explorative step into how Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto expand current understanding of how food is gendered and gestures towards where food theory can move in the future.

Reading across an autobiography, docufiction, and fantasy fiction presents certain openings and difficulties, since each genre has contrasting form, content, and context. Yet by reading the texts against each other, one text reveals the depths and short comings in the ways of knowing of the other text. The autobiographical details of Tisdale’s mother’s life, for example, echoed the experience of some of the housewives in My Year of Meats, and Goto’s ambiguous characters illustrated the limits of Ozeki’s more two dimensional characterizations. I selected these three texts because although they use different writing conventions, they can each be read as examining subjectivity and challenging the reader’s ways of knowing through food.

Sallie Tisdale’s The Best Thing I Ever Tasted is a semi-autobiographical text which studies advertising and consumerism in the United States from the 1950s onwards. Tisdale takes a historical approach, using her mother’s life and her own as touchstones to trace trends in consumption. Ruefully she critiques “our postnuclear world of individual plates” and “private satisfactions” (Tisdale 247) that are never satisfied amongst the contradicting concerns for time-saving, healthy, global, local, mass-produced or organic food. Dissatisfaction and desire for the impossible are recurring motifs in Tisdale’s prose, since
women are instructed with “demanding images of a home life and family sphere not quite possible but beckoning, expectant—and somehow entirely a woman’s responsibility” (109).

Tisdale privileges food as a way of knowing by historicising social movements through changing food practises. Tisdale examines how post-war modernization manifested in the home, for example, through increased use of technology, spotlessly white electrical appliances in the kitchen, the standardised height of the kitchen surface, and “firmness in (moulded gelatine) salads on our tables as well as firm body lines under tormenting garments” (Tisdale 113). According to Tisdale, food, the kitchen, and women’s bodies were drawn to be one and the same under the strictures of conformity and mass production that dominated post-war North America. Tisdale critiques the contradiction of women’s time being worth nothing as capital, but still worth saving when advertising microwaves and other appliances since “women...were responsible for what the family bought and therefore their husbands’ success, their children’s social status, reflected in everything from laxatives to suits to breakfast cereals and drapes” (92).

Tisdale reviews the history of meat consumption, the development of nouvelle cuisine in the 1980s and fusion cooking in the 1990s, and the effects of food movements such as slow foods, organic foods, and wholesale markets on contemporary food choices. Tisdale is primarily concerned with the increased disassociation of humanity from its food production as a result of globalization, and Ruth Ozeki offers the meat industry as a prime example of this unease.

My Year of Meats is narrated through a series of diary entries, faxes, emails and first-person narrative by Jane Takagi-Little, who is based in New York, and Akiko Ueno, who lives in Hakone, near Tokyo. The two protagonists are linked through a pathetic male figure as Jane works for Akiko’s husband, Joichi ‘John’ Ueno, producing the TV show, ‘My American
Women’s experience of food and eating is central to the novel, and the construction of women through food is made literal when Jane tours the United States to find American Wives who fit (or rather do not fit) John’s guidelines of what an American Wife should be. Jane’s trans-national search uncovers the disturbing fact that much American meat does not meet health guidelines either, and is contaminated with the synthetic oestrogen growth hormone diethylstilbestrol (DES), which leads to cancer, infertility, and male hormonal imbalances. Women and meat are mutually implicated through this chemical, which was used to fatten cattle for slaughter at the same time as being mis-prescribed to women to prevent bleeding, miscarriages, and premature birth from 1938 to 1971.

The book is divided into twelve sections, one for each month of the year, and is interspersed with extracts from The Pillow Book, the private musings of Sei Shōnagon during her time as court lady to Empress Sadako in tenth century Japan. Ozeki suggests that women have been constructed through text and other media for centuries; through the novel, Shōnagon, Jane, and Akiko cross time and national borders to take part in a conversation that questions how women are constructed through food and texts.

Whereas Ozeki’s protagonist becomes obsessed with meat, Goto’s characters move in a world of “vegetable politics” (Goto, “Chorus” 91). Meat is eaten and shared at significant moments when the sisters are reunited for dinner in The Kappa Child or when the family reconvenes over pork tonkatsu in Chorus of Mushrooms, but vegetables are the primary foodstuff that is consumed and contemplated (cucumbers, mushrooms, seaweed, eggplants, bananas, daikon, persimmons, tofu). Vegetables might symbolize passivity for Visser and Bourdieu, but Goto’s characters are a mushroom-loving, feisty, rodeo-riding Grandmother and a cucumber-munching, pyjama-wearing, shopping cart collector who are anything but passive.
Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* is set on a mushroom farm in Alberta, and examines Japanese Canadian immigration through the lives of three generations of women. Naoe, the Grandmother, lives with her daughter Keiko, her son-in-law and their daughter, Muriel. Naoe will not “convert from rice and *daikon* to wiener and beans” (Goto, “Chorus” 13), she will only speak Japanese—although she is fluent in English—and calls Muriel by her Japanese name, Murasaki. Naoe takes refuge in food and the Japanese language to save herself from being unquestioningly assimilated into white Canadian culture, and Naoe teaches Murasaki to use food and language as tools to shape her own Canadian future. Naoe runs away from home to hitchhike across Canada, whilst still maintaining telepathic communication with Murasaki, especially through food. Murasaki and Naoe share the first person narrative of the text, yet the whole story is related by an overarching, unnamed narrator (presumably Murasaki), who is in bed with her lover. Words flow telepathically from Grandmother to granddaughter in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and mushrooms communicate with Naoe “beyond the painful register of human sound” (86). This lack of boundaries for communication between people and organisms indicates the disregard for categorization and biological gendered boundaries in the novel. Goto’s novels are fantasy, fiction, and myth that demonstrate how food and bodies do not need to be gendered or categorised to be understood.

Hiromi Goto continues to refuse a conciliatory mode of writing in *The Kappa Child*, and withholds fixed meaning for food or a fixed gender for her protagonist. *The Kappa Child* is narrated by an unnamed and amorphously gendered narrator who becomes pregnant by a mythical Japanese creature, the Kappa. The narrator is not genderless, since it\(^2\) demonstrates gendered traits of pregnancy, menstruation, and a burgeoning lesbian subjectivity. Goto leaves the narrative loose enough that gender is a freedom rather than a constraint. The pregnancy is

\(^2\) In concordance with the intricacies of Hiromi Goto’s ambiguously gendered narrator, I will use the gender neutral ‘it’ to refer to the narrator of *The Kappa Child* (see page 51 for further details).
similarly transgressive as it flouts biological logic at the moment of conception and occupies the narrator’s whole body, rather than just the womb. The narrator is not initially equipped to deal with how the Kappa child needs recognition, feeding, and attending to—“A baby! Of all things! In me?... Dealing with my own expectations is hard enough” (Goto 66). Yet the pregnancy becomes a metaphor for the pyjama-wearing narrator’s alienation from its family and society, and is only resolved when the narrator allows itself to need and be needed.

The narrator has three sisters—Slither, PG and Mice—and it has a difficult relationship with their mother, Okasan and their violent father. The family moved to Alberta to farm rice, and their experience as Japanese Canadians is juxtaposed with Laura Ingalls’ experience of starting a new life on the American prairies in *Little House on the Prairie*. Food is a particularly stark point of comparison for the narrator; the narrator does not eat Pa’s freshly caught rabbit or Ma Ingalls’ molasses sandwich, but eats Japanese cucumbers, *meshi*, rancid fried chicken and pizza with raisins. The narrator negotiates feelings of alienation from its family and friends because it identifies with Laura Ingalls’ story, although the realities of the narrator’s life are quite different. Through the course of the narrative, we meet the narrator’s only friends, Midori and Genevieve, who become lovers, and the narrator’s future love interest, Bernie. Ultimately it is food that brings Bernie and the narrator together, as they meet at Bernie’s grocery store after the narrator develops ravenous, pregnancy-induced cravings for cucumbers.

In Tisdale, Ozeki and Goto’s texts, women are especially responsible for managing what the family eats and, to some extent, for the family’s position in social hierarchies. “Eating’s a part of being after all” (Goto, “Chorus” 138) and subjectivity is shaped through how, where, what, when, why or with whom we eat. Eating is a part of an individual’s being, but it also dictates how a group can be compartmentalised and encodes power dynamics.
according to ethnicity, gender, sexuality or class. Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto call for a more personal reading of food informed by the emphasis they give to class and race in the formation of subjectivity. Sallie Tisdale writes from a class-conscious perspective on how advertising and the fetish of commoditisation have historically bound women to a domestic role and have influenced her experience of food as a woman. Her analysis is slightly Marxist inflected, and is contextualised by her white, American, middle class background, as she narrates her journey to align the idealism and political activism of her youth in the seventies with the realities of bringing up a family in the fast food society of the nineties.

Ozeki and Goto’s bicultural heritage informs the form, content, themes, and philosophy of their writing. Ozeki’s characters physically negotiate the implications of being bicultural, because the novel takes place in America and Japan and culminates in Akiko leaving Japan for a new life in America. Jane Takagi-Little is the protagonist of My Year of Meats and a self-named “mulatto” (152) who directs a bicultural TV programme about American beef to be aired in Japan. Jane both enjoys and is frustrated by what her racial identity allows as she exploits Asian stereotypes to get what she wants (“it’s that inscrutable Asian thing” (340)), but she is still forced to name her national origins by a white racist (“I... am... a... fucking... AMERICAN!” (11)). Ozeki’s writing slices a cross-section through beef consumption in Japan and North America. Such an incision necessarily destabilises beef’s position as “the food most closely associated with male Anglo-American hegemony” (Belasco xiii), since the characters move between two cultures in such a way that calls the gastronomic, cultural and political relationship between the United States and Japan into question. Ozeki’s prose asks the following questions: What are the implications of increased meat consumption in countries which have not historically given meat such prestige? And what does it mean for Anglo-American hegemony when its prime cultural indicator in food leads to hormone
imbalance and fertility problems? Ozeki exposes the problematic cultural implications of male meat consumption by exploring the physical and health implications of eating meat which has been altered by artificial chemicals. Women are also given agency in the production and consumption of meat in the novel; although men eat more meat than women in the texts, women control how much and what quality of meat the men eat.

If Goto’s writing adhered to a philosophy of food, it would be a Slow Food movement; the text makes the reader pause over how race and gender operate and grates against a “fast-food” reading that has no time to savour the flavour and complexities of subjectivity. Hiromi Goto implicates each reader in their reading practise by mixing Japanese and English language to narrate her characters’ exploration of how their Japanese and Canadian-ness is constituted and what their tongue is able to swallow and say. Marc Libin (1999) argues that confronting a “longing to translate” (123) forces the non-native Japanese reader to make a conscious decision to translate or skip over what is ostensibly unreadable. Goto defers a readerly desire “to know a text, a story, a culture, completely” (Libin 123) through the language of her characters, but also through their bodies. The protagonist of The Kappa Child, for example, is not named or gendered and Murasaki’s lover in Chorus of Mushrooms is not gendered until page eighty nine. Midori and Genevieve’s ethnicities are only made explicit at the end of The Kappa Child with a throwaway comment by the narrator who accuses Midori of being embarrassed, “because (she’s) never been attracted to a white woman before” (Goto 156).

Goto uses difference to articulate the ethnicities of the narrator’s friends, Genevieve and Midori, and Genevieve is marked by what she is not to call attention to what the reader

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3 The relationship between masculinity, food, and the virility of the nation bears further research in Ruth Ozeki and Hiromi Goto’s work. ‘My American Wife!’ is an insistently American show focused on beef, yet by pushing “all-American values” (Ozeki, 13) onto a foodstuff that turns out to be a contaminant, both what it means to be an American and/or eat beef are implicated. Hiromi Goto’s texts can equally be read as an investigation into how Canadian citizenship is produced through eating, as Goto asks what it means to eat baked ham and wiener as opposed to daikon and rice—and what does it mean if you eat both?
presumed she was. If an unmarked position has traditionally been white, heterosexual and male, Goto’s refusal to mark her characters with race or gender points instead to the reader’s deep cultural and gendered assumptions as they are forced to fill in the blanks with answers other than white, heterosexual, and male.

Goto uses ambiguity in her narrative to work beside concepts of masculinity and femininity, and she refuses to satisfy the reader’s need for the comfort of categorization. Goto’s characters essentially ‘fail’ at being male, female, Japanese, Canadian, old, healthy, and any number of normative qualifiers—and this failure makes them lively and provocative characters. I am interested in how these unknowable bodies eat in Goto’s fiction, and if food is a code for “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries” (Douglas, “Deciphering” 36), then how does the reader decode the fictional body and the food it eats if we don’t know what the boundaries are?

Goto’s refusal to define her characters according to social boundaries of race and gender is picked up in Mixed (ed. Prasad 2006), which also features a short story by Ozeki. Rebecca Walker’s introduction to the anthology of fiction by multiracial writers offers a way into thinking about Goto’s writing when Walker meditates on her favourite line from Zora Neale Hurston: “put me down easy, Janie, I’m a cracked plate” (17). When Walker’s friend replies with Shakespeare’s aphorism, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,” Walker realises that she has unwittingly reified her own brokenness. It is suddenly clear that

Not one of us has ever been a cracked plate. We have only held the fractured projections of others, innocently imbibing harmful judgements that were not our own. (17)

Goto’s refusal to racialize and gender her characters clearly is a refusal to swallow the harmful perception of one’s self as cracked. Walker’s refusal to swallow is made literal in Ozeki and
Goto’s writing because food is such a focal point for characters’ mediation of their Japanese, American, and Canadian cultural discourses. Each moment of consumption in the novels is a conspicuous gesture towards how the characters constitute themselves—as cracked, mixed, whole, or otherwise—at that particular moment.

The richness in Ozeki and Goto’s writing comes from an awareness of how race and food are mutually constituted, and neither Japanese, North American, nor Canadian foods are semiotically stable in their writing. Sallie Tisdale asks “what is American food in a multicultural America?” and in so doing theorises that “the belief that mixed foods were harder to digest was a peculiarly apt metaphor for the dangers of miscegenation” (Tisdale 37). Ozeki and Goto’s characters mix food with greater and lesser success, but sausages with cherry pie filling, pizza with raisins, beef with Coca-Cola, potatoes with herrings, kudzu fried chicken, or cucumbers with everything are consumed by characters as a challenge to the dangers of miscegenation. Ozeki and Goto unravel the idea that “American togetherness has always been about carefully separated strands” (Tisdale 37), and instead create a new pattern of consumption that reflects each character’s individual needs. We see Akiko, the producer’s wife, making conscious decisions about what she will and will not eat in My Year of Meats, for example, enjoying Southern American chicken, rejecting beef, steaming chrysanthemum leaves, and marinating cod to her taste. Goto draws attention to her character’s culinary heritage at an Easter meal made up of turkey, sekihan, potato salad, and sushi, with equal significance given to the spread and variety rather than specific cultural dishes. Rather than privileging one mode of eating above an other, Ozeki and Goto play with and reinvent the limitations and possibilities of what it means to eat as a Japanese American or Japanese Canadian woman.
The racialised compartmentalisation of bodies is clearly marked in *Chorus of Mushrooms* when the protagonist, Murasaki, is offered the lead in Alice in Wonderland, but only if she wears a blonde wig. Keiko, Murasaki’s mother, is so keen to have her daughter accepted, that she even offers to bleach Murasaki’s hair so she can “live and be Alice before opening night” (Goto 177). This is the first time that Murasaki realises that, “the shape of (her) face, (her) eyes, the colour of (her) hair affected how people treated (her)” (175). Keiko’s attempt to physically alter her daughter is ceremoniously marked by Keiko baking a ham and pineapple, to celebrate her daughter’s acceptance into the school community and “the great Canadian melting pot” (175). Yet Murasaki is disgusted with what her mother “ladles” her from the pot (175) and Keiko is as unsuccessful at redesigning her daughter as she is at baking the ham. Later in life, the taste of burnt pineapple is an acrid reminder of Keiko forcing an imagined Canadian culture down her family’s throat, and prioritising cultural assimilation over Murasaki’s individuality.

Food, the meal, and the customs surrounding eating, can be read as profoundly culturally specific texts, and Keiko’s choice of ham and pineapple as the celebratory meal points to the cultural moment she wishes to create. Margaret Visser states that, “civilization entails shaping, regulating, constraining, and dramatizing ourselves; we echo the preferences and the principles of our culture in the way we treat our food” (12). Ham and pineapple echo the preferences and principles of a white Canadian culture that Murasaki’s mother feels she is not part of, and she is willing to regulate and constrain her daughter’s body according to somebody else’s values in order to participate.

Ham and pineapple is a ‘Dick and Jane’ family food that reiterates gender and race in the family, and meat and vegetables are perhaps the most widely theorised foods in terms of gender. Broadly speaking, in Western Europe and North America, meat and vegetables have
been ascribed dualistic qualities within the hierarchy of food. According to Western anthropology (see Adams 46, Bourdieu 192, Counihan, “Anthropology” 10, Lévi-Strauss 31, Visser 19), meat is a symbol of status, aggressiveness, virility, power, strength, lustfulness, energy, and health. This is perpetuated by idioms that metaphorically associate meat with authority, as phrases such as “getting to the meat of the argument” or “a beefy question” demonstrate. Vegetables, however, symbolise “purity, passiveness, cleanliness, femininity, weakness and idealism” (Lupton 28). Vegetables have more negative metaphorical connotations; one is a lazy “couch potato” or someone with severe brain damage is derisively called a “vegetable” (Adams 46). Although this is a brief summary, such a simplified hierarchy of meat before vegetables is re-enacted in the food chain that dominates much popular culture in North America and Europe.

In her analysis of what she defines as a typical meal, Margaret Visser extends these tropes with the conclusion that “the Meat and Staple are definitely the centre attraction, the whole point of the meal, the married couple, as it were” and the vegetables “resemble bridesmaids; theirs is a decorative but wholly subordinate and supporting role” (18). Visser’s normative metaphor indicates her assumptions of how a normal meal would function within a normal family, and is part of a larger ideological structure where food functions as tropes of imagined masculinity and femininity for heteronormative, white, mainstream North American and European culture.

Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto, however, operate oppositionally within this structure. If Tisdale were to adopt Visser’s marriage metaphor for her childhood meal, I imagine it would have been a TV dinner as the bride and groom, and Jell-O as the bridesmaids. Ozeki would have the staple jilt the meat at the altar, and run off with the organic, local vegetables down the aisle, and Goto would probably have the bridesmaids ordaining the service, and it would be
difficult to tell who was the bride and who was the groom. Food is a gatekeeper of order in
society, as it holds and reinforces the cultural ideology of the group. In Mary Douglas’
analysis of purity and danger (1991), food ‘out of place’ is dirty and suspect, yet
Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto demonstrate that food out of place or in unexpected places is not
suspect, but nourishing. Food and characters ‘out of place’ in Ozeki and Goto especially, call
attention to the restrictive and shallow conception of food as a mechanism of control and offer
a space for food to bring a more real and accurate messiness to life.

This thesis was born out of the discord I felt between my resistance to gendering food
as a trope for masculinity and femininity, and an awareness of how these ideas remain active
in advertising, contemporary discourse, and food choices around me. I wanted to understand
how contemporary authors approached food and gender, and ask how or if they drew gendered
lines through food.

Deborah Lupton’s research gave voice to this discord. In her analysis of gendered taste
in the US and Europe, many interviewees stated that they “personally did not subscribe to
(gendered) coding” in food (106) or “did not believe that (gendered culinary) stereotypes were
necessarily evident in ‘real life’” (111). Nevertheless, each respondent could categorise foods
as masculine or feminine, with red meat being the archetypal male food: “Women tend to like
the lighter foods like salads” one respondent says, whereas “a man would say, “Give me a
piece of rump steak.’” (107). Food choices are performative and always already in reference
to a gendered code that can be resisted but not avoided; meat can be consumed as an

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4 A new Vancouver restaurant has entered into the food and gender debate with a steakhouse aimed at women. Whilst attempting to undermine the atmosphere of traditional steakhouses, Pinky’s is essentialist in different ways with pink wallpaper, black and white romantic movies in the background, and a “female-friendly seven ounce sirloin” as well as plenty of “non-steak” options (Gill).
announcement of masculinity in concordance with a ideological framework, but it is not a direct result of any inherently masculine qualities in the meat itself.

The gendered distinctions I have outlined are arbitrary, culturally specific, and persistent. Dominant cultural assumptions around masculine and feminine foods are reproduced from infancy in the family and community, and serve to construct an individuals' food habits, preferences, and citizenship for a nation in the same way as nutritional discourses of good and bad taste are learnt (Lupton 111). Gendered tastes are gross simplifications, yet one only has to imagine working in a restaurant to see how these ideas can be perpetuated. If you served a man and woman with a large beer and sparkling white wine, or a rare steak and fries and a green salad, whom you assume has ordered which dish reveals your gendered cultural assumptions at play.5

I reserve my right to order a large steak and a beer, and several of my male friends are vegetarian or like to drink sparkling wine—yet despite small acts of resistance, stereotyped cultural understanding of ‘man’s food’ or a lady’s ‘sweet tooth’ have marinated Western culture. Recent examples of how men and women are aligned with certain foods include the Snickers’ advertisement during the 2007 Super Bowl. Snickers is the top selling chocolate bar of all time and has an officially endorsed “male-dominated image” (McCarthy), which was confirmed by a commercial where two car mechanics ripped out their own chest hair after they accidentally kissed over a Snickers. Gendered food is not always so blatant, but slimming cereals such as Kellogg’s ‘Special K’ are aimed specifically at women, there is no ‘Queen size’ chocolate bar, and the ‘Papa Burger’ at the A&W fast food chain is twice the size of its female counterpart, the ‘Mama’.

5 Again, racialization and the construction of a national identity are relevant here, and a larger project would be able to cover how food is gendered in Japan. This would provide an illuminating counterpoint to the American and Canadian gendered stereotypes that Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto are in conversation with.
Tired gender roles are also re-enacted in a recent Dairy Queen commercial. A coquettish eight-year-old girl stands at the counter of her local Dairy Queen outlet, bats her eyelashes, and coyly waves at a young boy in the adjacent booth. When her mother orders two ice-creams the young lady informs her mother that she should only buy one. As they sit down a server presents the girl with a towering Fudge Brownie Temptation, “compliments of the gentleman in the donkey shirt.” When her mother looks surprised at her daughter’s early development of female wiles, the young girl retorts with a grin, “It’s like shooting fish in a barrel.”

In his foundational anthropology of *Sweetness and Power* (1986), Sidney Mintz observes that “one (male) observer after another displays the curious expectation that women will like sweet things more than men... Sweet things, are in both literal and figurative senses, more the domain of women than of men” (150). Mintz does not give a reason for the symbiotic relationship between sweet foods and femininity, but the young girl in the Dairy Queen commercial has certainly mastered the power associated with being sweet and fulfills Mintz’s observation that “women... will employ sweet foods to achieve otherwise unobtainable objectives” (150). Perhaps what is most shocking in this example is that the girl eats of the ice cream of knowledge at such a young age. Ultimately, both the young girl and the ice-cream are a ‘temptation’ too great to resist for the gentleman in the donkey shirt. The commercial could be read as a young woman getting what she wants, but the ice-cream parlour is no longer a site of innocence, and food as a gift descends into a disturbing, prepubescent re-enactment of gender roles.

Although the girl enjoys her ice-cream and her ability to dupe the boy, she is made synonymous with the food consumed through the lingering shots of sensuous “moist brownie pieces” melting over “gooey peaks of ice-cream” at the end of the commercial. “From time
immemorial the female has been identified with edible commodities” (Patnaik 59), and this modern example suggests that little has changed. Essentially the girl is rewarded for her performance, since she adopts the role of a sweet, white ‘girly’ girl and receives a sweet, white ‘girly’ food. If she had wanted a double cheese burger with extra pickles and large fries out of her young man, one wonders if she would have behaved the same way.

If stereotypes of how women desire and consume food are disseminated by commercials such as those for Dairy Queen, then the gender bias in professional food production is an inversion of what one might expect. Research by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations shows that women are “nearly universally responsible” for food preparation for their families around the world (Gender Food Security), and as a result their lives are more intertwined with food choices than men’s. Yet this level of responsibility is not reflected in the professional kitchens, where the Chef de Cuisine is a notably male profession assisted by a line of station chefs, whilst the figure of the cook is usually female and has to do the washing up.

Britain’s Jamie Oliver (the ‘Naked Chef’) has a Cockney ‘laddish’ persona in the kitchen and has increased the appeal of cooking amongst young men in the UK. Oliver recalls on his website that although “a lot of the boys at school thought that cooking was a girly thing. I didn’t really care” (Jamie Oliver). It seems that a large number of other men “didn’t really care” either; of the 102 chefs on the BBC chef blog page (of which Oliver is one), only twenty are women. This gender discrepancy is institutionalized in prestigious awards such as the Michelin guide; of the twenty-one chefs who have received the highest honour of three Michelin stars, only five are female (one of whom shares it with her husband). Although such statistics are limited to Michelin and the BBC, these institutions and the commercials
discussed set a standard in food practices and give an indication of how gender operates in the professional kitchen and advertising.

"The ritual of women cooking for men is deeply embedded" (Tisdale 131) and I would argue that professional male chefs are hyper-masculinised for television to compensate for the effeminate perception of cooking. Machete wielding Iron Chefs battle it out on the Food Network in a gladiator style arena with elaborate and impressive dishes to showcase their skill using one star ingredient such as giant lobster, lamb, or liver. The contenders are almost always male, and the emphasis is on rapid and unusual techniques as well as culinary bravado. Emeril, who goes only by his first name on the Food Network, does not use a machete but gives an aggressive “BAM!” with each shake of his icing sugar dispenser and dash of grated lemon rind. He also controversially claimed on one show to have “taught Julia Child how to suck head (pause) and fish tail,” getting a laugh out of the audience for his risqué joke at the expense of a chef who revolutionized cuisine in the United States (Shapiro 39).

I was invigorated by the work of Sallie Tisdale, Ruth Ozeki, and Hiromi Goto, since they disagree with the Iron Chef or Dairy Queen world view and tackle assumptions about how gender can operate in foodways. With astute political commentary and subtle good humour, each writer engages with the limits of how current food theory enables gender roles and gender to operate in food.

In food practices, gender roles and gender operate in distinct ways. For the purposes of this paper, I will use ‘gender roles’ to refer to how one acts and investigate how the movement or social role of food (its production, preparation and distribution) is affected by adopting a particular gender role. The girl in the Dairy Queen commercial, for example, adopts the role of a feminine girl to get her ice-cream; her behaviour, the ‘who does what’, is significant in her relationship with food. ‘Gender’ relates directly to the body and the moment of consumption,
since how food is gendered is experienced and expressed through the body. The narrator’s ambiguous gender in *The Kappa Child*, for example, is accentuated by eating an excess of cucumbers. Goto ignores the phallic form of the cucumber, and focuses on how the narrator is affected by the material qualities of cucumbers instead. The narrator begins to “smell like water” (91), a neutral substance, and the narrator feels the pregnancy in her ear, kidney, buttocks and chest as well as the uterus. The narrator implores the “unexpected one” (80) to “just stay in the uterus please” after being kicked from inside the left buttock. Just as the cucumber is both a fruit and vegetable, watery, and neutralising, so are the narrator’s body and gender amorphous and unexpected.

I chose to research *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted*, *My Year of Meats*, and *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *The Kappa Child* because each covers a distinct area of either gender roles or gendering through food practices. Tisdale looks purely at gender roles; Ozeki addresses the gender roles ascribed to women around meat, but also how consuming meat affects the male and female gendered body; and Goto focuses primarily on the gendered body and food. Although men are limited by a gendered dynamics of foodways as much as women, Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto write predominantly about women and this thesis will maintain a similar focus.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at how Sallie Tisdale and Ruth Ozeki challenge the construction of women as consumers and producers of food in the domestic sphere. Betty Crocker and TV shows such as ‘My American Wife!’ fuel fantasies for how women should behave in the kitchen, and a kitchen drawer stuffed full of uncooked recipes becomes a paradigm for what women feel they should cook, as opposed to what they do. The model American housewife and Betty Crocker are fantasy figures that are constructed to be
unachievable; once a fantasy is fulfilled it passes into reality and no longer exists as a fantasy. Recipes provide a site of resistance against the fantasy of the flawless, domestic women, and altering a recipe enables some of the women in these texts to reimagine their agency in food production. Whereas Tisdale’s mother felt tormented by the recipes she could not cook, they become a springboard to liberation for Akiko in My Year of Meats, as she begins to talk back to the cooking instructions the American wives give her. Akiko not only changes ingredients in her cooking, but changes the direction of her life when she moves to the United States as a contented single mother.

I investigate how Tisdale and Ozeki address meat as a feminist issue, and to what extent they agree with feminist, vegetarian critic Carole Adams. Meat is gendered as a masculine domain by the language surrounding its consumption and production; that a “woman butcher” is almost unthinkable as a cultural category” (Pringle and Collings qtd. in Lupton 108) is a good indication of this. Although Tisdale and Ozeki are aware of the negative implications of consuming meat, they do not offer vegetarianism as the only alternative. Instead they focus on how the body reacts to eating artificially enhanced meat, and ask the consumer/reader to make an informed choice about what they eat. Ozeki does not position vegetarianism and meat-eating against each other as good or bad habits, but shows the limits and possibilities of what it means to eat meat and be a vegetarian. Ozeki looks at the gruesome, unsavoury truths of meat production, for example, yet when Jane claims that she’s “not eating meat these days” (Ozeki 329), she still chooses to eat vegetarian beef at a restaurant. Rather than drive the binaries apart, Ozeki holds up the contradictions of each position to create a dynamic interrelationship where one binary forms part of the other—much like the Ying Yang sign in Chinese philosophy. Chapter one looks at the oppositions that Ozeki sets up in My Year of Meats (natural/artificial, vegetarianism/meat-eating, woman/man)
and investigates how Ozeki avoids simplistic oppositions as an answer to the difficult questions she raises.

My reading of Chorus of Mushrooms and The Kappa Child in Chapter Two suggests that rather than subverting gendered stereotypes by operating from within the fe/male dichotomy as Tisdale and Ozeki do, Hiromi Goto works beside it. Goto uses ambiguity as a tool with which to deconstruct how food is gendered, and she makes it difficult to ascribe a racialized or gendered meaning to food or the body.

In my conclusion I theorise how seeing food practices as an extension of a character’s subjectivity can prevent the study of food from becoming separated from the cook’s hands or the materiality of the food itself. At key moments in Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto’s writing we see the protagonists expressing how they feel through the food they cook, effectively proliferating and creating an extension of themselves in and through food. I offer my own experience of seeing someone proliferate themselves through the food they prepare, and illustrate this point with further examples from the text. Okasan’s Easter dinner in The Kappa Child or the housewife’s roast beef in Coca-Cola are both unsuccessful meals, and how other characters label them as a failure is a reflection of the unhappiness in the women’s personal lives. The women in Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto’s writing tend to cook meals that are always just slightly askew from what their children, the TV Company or public opinion deem as successful. Yet each ostensible failure is actually a resistance to racialisation and the gendering of food by privileging what the women want or are able to cook.

Margaret Visser reminds us that “food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication; a meal is a physical event” (qtd. in Probyn 63). Focusing on the physical aspects of food enables a reading that goes beyond traditional gendering and racialisation of food. Although food feeds us symbolically, eating is above all a nourishing, enjoyable, and
intensely corporeal experience; if we take a forkful of food it contains a multitude of flavours. Tisdale, Ozeki, and Goto's representations of food are faithful to the various flavours of what it means to be a person, and their writing makes it clear that these flavours cannot be contained in singular gendered tropes such as meat or vegetables. Sallie Tisdale, Ruth Ozeki, and Hiromi Goto resist the contradictions implicit in gendering and racialising food and people, and 'play with their food' instead of perpetuating idealised metaphors of what food and the body should mean.
Chapter Two

‘The Meal not Cooked’: Impossibility, Desire, and the Negotiation of Women’s Culinary Identity in Sallie Tisdale’s The Best Thing I Ever Tasted and Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meats.

What women cook, how, and the cultural, sociological and thematic implications of these processes has been the focus of much critical analysis in representations of food in literature. But what about the food that women want to cook, and do not; the meal not cooked? This chapter turns to how women cook in the shadow of figures such as Betty Crocker, and looks at how Sallie Tisdale and Ruth Ozeki are unable to resolve the contradictions that exist in women’s food choices.

Two meals are present in the kitchen: the meal that ‘should’ be cooked, and the meal that is. The meal promoted by cooking shows, health concerns, loved ones, and magazines is compared to what actually comes out of the oven (or microwave). “What we choose to eat, even what we want to eat, is dictated by forces far beyond our reach,” says Sallie Tisdale (3-4) and these forces are more keenly felt by women since they prepare most of the food in the home in Tisdale and Ozeki’s texts. Men do very little cooking in Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meats, although Vern once cooks for his wife it is acknowledged as a “special treat” (66). This image ruins the televised vision of domesticity and makes the TV show’s producer furious because “husbands aren’t supposed to cook!” (78). In these texts not only what is cooked, but who cooks is dictated by outside forces.

Cooking is a negotiation between the cook, time, ingredients, kitchen implements, and the people who will eat the food; it is as much an expression of the moment as of the cook. I
am interested in how contemporary North American writing challenges the expectations set up for women in the spectre of food that women fail to cook, and how current critical theory in food studies constructs gender through the meal left uncooked in the imagination. Sallie Tisdale demonstrates how women are affected by culinary expectations in *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted*. Her “personal criticism,” as Nancy Miller defines it (25), intertwines academia and anecdote to critique the development of women’s role in the kitchen. The personal is also, perhaps, industrial in Tisdale’s case, as she surveys how historical changes to food production, distribution, and trends in consumption have affected the performance of gender in the kitchen.

If Tisdale traces the historically gendered construction of cooking, studying the external forces of capitalism, marketing, social expectations and culture in the private space of the kitchen, Ozeki offers a reading of how these external forces work in fiction. *My Year of Meats* follows Jane Takagi-Little’s journey through a year of making a Japanese documentary, ‘My American Wife’. Her overpowering boss Joichi ‘John’ Ueno attempts to control the documentary from Japan, whilst also forcing his wife Akiko to rate each show for authenticity and “deliciousness of meat” (Ozeki 21). As Jane increasingly veers away from the heteronormative, white, American housewives Ueno wants Japanese women to look up to, she discovers the darker side to meat production in the US. “Meat is the message” (119), but women and cattle become synonymous flesh for consumption as the reader learns more about how both meat and housewives are mass produced. There is tension between what ‘real’ women cook and Ueno’s ‘American’ ideal that is attractive, wholesome, and “delicious” (12). Real women on the show make lamb chops, vegetarian pasta, chitterlings, and Texas beef burritos, and demonstrate their own creativity as well as a diverse American culture. Yet Ueno is more concerned with his exaggerated attempts to bolster his machismo as a producer and
husband by promoting beef, and ignores the fact that beef fudge or Coca-Cola rump steak are neither attractive nor wholesome—least of all delicious.

Ozeki is a Japanese American writer, who now resides in BC. *My Year of Meats* was her first novel and was widely publicised when it was selected as Vancouver Public Library’s ‘One Book for Vancouver’ in April 2007. Like *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted*, *My Year of Meats* advocates for critical consumption of both information and food to ensure that consumption does not become contamination. *My Year of Meats* is a work of fiction, but the Beef-Ex campaign in the novel bears striking resemblance to the “Desire Beef” Campaign launched in March 2002 by the U.S. Meat Export Federation. *My Year of Meats* was published four years previously, and Ozeki can be seen as tapping into a prevalent culture within the beef industry of promoting and rectifying public opinion around beef consumption. Following the BSE crisis in American beef imports (which were attributed to a farm in Alberta), the Meat Export Federation promoted beef with “messages of safety, taste and nutrition directly to the Japanese consumers” (Herlihy). The campaign used three American wives and mothers as spokeswomen featured in women’s magazines, on television and in a colour cookbook, “American Beef Cooking: Yu Hayami’s Party Recipes and Daily Menu.” Japan is the most profitable export market for American beef, and this cookbook aimed to promote consumer confidence and education about beef by association with real women.

Alberta Beef launched the ‘If it Ain’t Alberta it Ain’t Beef’ campaign (2001-2007) which featured three ranchHERs on the following highly popular billboard:
The image is at odds with the preconception of cattle ranching as a predominantly male, dirty, agribusiness where “stepping into the slaughterhouse was like walking through an invisible wall into hell” (Ozeki 281). Instead, we see three healthy, attractive women who are fourth and fifth generation ranchers (Alberta Beef) enjoying a clean, pastoral landscape reminiscent of the Marlboro commercial. Özeki’s interrogation of beef takes place within the former environment, but such a modern re-branding of beef still speaks to her concern of women becoming attractive cuts of meat for consumption in the meat industry, and the wide open spaces we see in this advert are mirrored only by the wide open aisles of Wal-Mart in Ozeki’s fiction.

These ranchers are still remarkably feminine with long hair and cocked hips, which suggest a confidence as well as sexuality in “one of the most successful marketing campaigns ever” according to the Alberta Beef website (Alberta Beef). Ozeki qualifies the first page of her novel with the note that any resemblance “to real-life counterparts is entirely coincidental” (i), but I would argue that it is also entirely unavoidable and all the more poignant that the parts of the book which are most surprising—such as the details in the slaughterhouse—are those which are closest to the truth.

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6 The ‘If It Ain’t Alberta’ campaign was in fact created by Leo Burnett Company, the same advertising house who pioneered the Marlboro Man, The Jolly Green Giant and Pillsbury doughboy.
Ruth Ozeki’s investigation of Alberta Beef-style gendered stereotypes in *My Year of Meats* is at times problematic for her own narrative rhetoric, as too many characters lack complexity. Bunny—one of the most buxom American Wives—is aware of how much she embodies a gendered stereotype: “you think I don’t realize I look like a goddam cartoon character with these inflated boobies and this big old butt?” (255). But other characters appear to simply serve as narrative devices, such as Akiko’s first friend, Tomoko, written with the Chinese characters for “friend” (289). Christina Bukowski lives in Quarry, a small town in Indiana that has been crippled by large organizations like Wal-Mart. Christina is later literally knocked down by a Wal-Mart truck and left catatonic. Each town member comes to care for her and the town soon begins to mine and market compassion by opening more care homes for disabled children after Christina is cured and the town is renamed, Hope. Although it is a positive story, the symbolism is a little thick. Ozeki is concerned with the synthetic production of women, sex and beef, yet the narrative feels equally artificial when Jane talks at length about DES and attributes her diatribe on meat to “Documentary Interludes” (250). Her co-worker Dave provides numerous informative monologues on desertification, modern farming practices and pollution, and Ozeki adds a list of resources and DES contact information at the back of the book which locates the text in a timely ecological conversation, yet this political drive can be at the expense of the narrative flow.

This level of political intervention led some critics to criticise Ozeki for “allowing her fiction to be overshadowed by her message” (Funderburg). Other critics argued that her writing was “overwhelmed by the issues it tries to contain” (Borghino) and that the “catalysts of [Jane’s] discovery are preposterously contrived” (Page). The negative views were in the minority, however, and *My Year of Meats* was also applauded for its strong political angle mixed with irony and sharp humour (Thackray and Shapiro). Ozeki defends her book by
asking whether “fiction (has) to exist in some suspended, apolitical landscape in order to be literary?” (Ozeki, Appendix 8). Characters stripped of politics and commerce, Ozeki says, are “simply not my reflection of the world” (8).

2.1 Akiko Crocker and Betty Ueno: How to Make the Woman in the Kitchen

Both men and women are beckoned by enticing but impossible images of family meals; they are aware of what they could be eating and cooking according to televised cooking shows, family, friends, fads and trends or personal philosophy—and they measure themselves against it. In The Best Thing I Ever Tasted, Sallie Tisdale laments that “the family I want is the one none of us had but so many of us believe we were taken from” (158).

Tisdale recalls that her mother compulsively collected recipes which she did not have the time or social structures to cook: “…like impulsively chosen lovers, a lot of recipes look less appetising in the cold light of day” (86). Tisdale’s mother collected recipes for the family she never had:

Why did she keep a recipe for eggplant stuffed with lunch meat, something our entire family (and perhaps the whole human race) would have loathed? Why did she save how-to plans for time-consuming, multilayered tortes when she never baked? Why menus for party foods and coffee klatches written in the careful hand of a woman who rarely went to parties and never entertained?

(85)

Like her mother Tisdale cultivates a folder stuffed full of untried recipes, and she reflects that, “I’m still caught…between what I’ve imagined and what I’ve known, what’s been given and what I’ve been able to take” (86). Tisdale feels the impossibility of desires planted in her mother by the recipes, because not being a good cook “somehow meant she wasn’t entirely a
good woman” (87). Yet do these culinary desires need to be satisfied, or is their existence all that is required of them? Untouched recipes become the meals not cooked, and they occupy a fictional space in the Tisdale kitchen that is as tangible as the real food that ends up on the plate.

In her analysis of recipes in women’s autobiography, Traci Marie Kelly (2001) asserts that “recipes can’t be fiction” (265) since recipes are authorised like a “kind of contract with the reader” (265). The instructions are presumed to be factually accurate to make an edible dish. If we take fiction to be a representation of reality, I would argue that a recipe is a curious blend of fact and fiction. A recipe is functional because it gives you truthful instructions to bring the dish into reality, yet simply reading a recipe and not getting the pots and pans out constrains the recipe to fiction. The recipe is only a representation, a narration of a possible dish, and its potential is never realised. Tisdale’s mother hoards recipes as a necessary fiction to secure an impossible subjectivity for herself in the guise of complex tortes and Cod Mackerel Basquaise that are never cooked. Tisdale’s mother is intimidated by the voracious circulation of recipes and ways of living that are beyond her reach, and keeping a pile of potential lifestyles in her kitchen drawer is one way to locate herself between what she has been given and what she has been able to take.

The ‘best thing ever tasted’ is not so much an idealised past, but navigates to where characters envision themselves in the future. John in Ozeki’s novel, for example, eats food to be the kind of cosmopolitan person he wants to become. He believes that by reproducing his stereotype of an American wife and eating US meat rather than Japanese food, he will be able to live the American dream in Japan. Akiko’s gesture of eating simply when she is free from her husband’s misogynistic control of the kitchen is likewise cooking for the future, or cooking forward, on her path to corporeal autonomy.
John fashions Akiko in the likeness of the model American housewife who was created to increase beef sales in Japan, and binds her in the same materialist mode of production as Betty Crocker, a figure developed by General Mills in 1936 to promote their baking products. Betty Crocker has since become the most popular face of domesticity in the US with “a permanent place in the nation’s culinary consciousness” (Shapiro 31). One may wonder where Betty would ‘cook forward’ to if she ‘divorced’ General Mills—but for the moment she is inextricably linked with classic recipes for frosted layer cake, “stir-n-roll” pastry, and Dutch Pantry Pie. Both Betty Crocker and Akiko are given strict instructions on how to behave in the kitchen by the controlling economic forces in their lives; Betty Crocker was created to sell a product and John tries to recreate Akiko in response to sales of a product. Women thus become another product, along with beef and baked goods, which is produced out of the intersection between domesticity and globalisation in the kitchen.

Betty Crocker never actually existed and, more importantly, “none of her followers has ever wanted to challenge her reality” (Tisdale 291). She is never referred to as a Miss, Mrs or even Ms. Crocker; doing so would force an imagined past, present, or future for Betty Crocker, and she is supposed to be timeless and presumably family-less too. Instead she is betrothed to the nation, and represents generations of budding cooks. In order to do so, she has gone through eight face changes since 1936, always with short hair, light make up, “pleasant and confident, never intimate, and never coy” (Shapiro 33). The most recent ‘face lift’ in 1996 aimed to be more ‘modern’ by using a multiracial, multiethnic fusion of seventy-five women. Such a process of amalgamation gives physical confirmation to Betty Crocker’s role as Every Woman, and therefore no woman in particular. Betty Crocker “is like us but not like us, as (she) was always supposed to be” (Tisdale 290), and her face has the startling quality of looking like someone you recognise, but do not know.
The current Betty Crocker website has no image of a Betty Crocker or any Bettys from her past, and does not account for this absence with a history of her development. When I wrote to the Betty Crocker empire enquiring more about her history and absent picture, they replied only that “the name and picture of ‘Betty Crocker’ have represented the fine quality of General Mills products for more than 75 years. Not only are they symbolic of product quality, but also of the services provided by the Betty Crocker Kitchens.” They thanked me for my commitment to Betty Crocker products, and gave no more information on who the woman existing between the inverted commas was.

Betty Crocker now offers recipes for barbequed chicken tortilla pizza—blending at least three culinary cultures—as well as the traditional sponge cakes, meals for entertaining, for kids and for weight loss, and all are “unbelievably easy” (Betty Crocker website). The website has gone beyond Betty Crocker’s original purpose of “guiding homemakers through a time of tension and change in the kitchen” (Shapiro 31) to now sell kitchen gadgets, storage, barware and patio furniture. Gone is an understanding female face, or the voice of “Time for Betty Crocker” radio show; instead if one offers to share a recipe with Betty Crocker on her website, we are reassured that “without limitation (General Mills) shall exclusively own all now known or hereafter existing rights to the suggestions of every kind and nature throughout the Universe” (Betty Crocker website). The intimacy of sharing a family recipe is interrupted by the rigidity of globalization and copyright throughout the Universe. Homemaking becomes an international (and intergalactic) affair, and where a recipe may previously have been scribbled in the wiry script of a long-dead aunt, it now belongs to a multinational corporation.

Betty Crocker is the conclusion of the idealised female face of consumerism and a social fantasy for a capable yet non-threatening woman; she is invisible, non-existent and ever-present. *My Year of Meats* deconstructs the process of constructing non-existent women.
through such TV lifestyle programs as 'My American Wife!', and ridicules the Japanese TV producer’s idea of who a Japanese and an American housewife are. Kato, the chief producer for the series, may think he is making a documentary, but he is working with a Japanese stereotype of an American stereotype to "(sell) off the vast illusion of America" (Ozeki 9) to an imagined Japanese audience. Kato writes a ‘recipe’ for the perfect American Wife which must include:

1. Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality
2. Delicious meat recipe...
3. Attractive, docile husband
4. Attractive, obedient children
5. Attractive, wholesome lifestyle
6. Attractive, clean house
7. Attractive friends and neighbours
8. Exciting hobbies

*** MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN. (12)

The reader is made aware of how the televised women—"my wives" as Jane refers to them—(173)—are produced by the TV show’s producers. The kind of women that Jane meets, however, are authentic American Wives, but not how Kato had prescribed.

Authenticity is pivotal for how we read the women in *My Year of Meats*. Many of the characters seem to be searching for an ‘authentic’ experience; John searches for the authentic (although stereotypical) American wife; Jane must rediscover what an authentic American Wife is when she is faithful to her sense of truthfulness as a documentarian rather than the Beef-Ex Corporation; Akiko is overjoyed when she meets the Beaudroux family ("They were
authentic, exactly what Akiko had seen on TV” (Ozeki 336)); and Suzie Flowers is delighted when she sees video footage of her husband confessing to an extra-marital affair on a game show because, “its so authentic… that boinggg! I mean, that’s exactly what it felt like to me” (359). If a real family are authentic because they are like a TV show, or a sound effect is an authentic expression of Suzie’s feelings, Ozeki seems to be raising questions about what can be ‘authentic’. Whilst it’s clear that the kind of American Wife Kato is looking for is not authentic, what is authentic is left open to debate.

Betty Crocker and ‘My American Wife!’ rely on the impossibility of authenticity, as they must be too perfect in order to stay active as cultural icons. Betty Crocker and the American Wives are a domestic fantasy, yet a fantasy cannot exist by its very nature because once a fantasy is fulfilled, another takes its place; it is alluring precisely because it is not real. Women like Akiko are caught up in the bind of trying to live up to a fantasy that can necessarily never be achieved since fantasy necessitates an element of the impossible for it to remain effective.

Food pornography provides a useful way in to think about how domestic fantasies operate. ‘Food pornography’ is used by food magazines and radio shows to refer to how the presentation, consumption and discussion of food is likened to sex (On The Media), but there has been little investigation into how this plays out directly in women’s lives. Although Sallie Tisdale attributes the term food pornography to Rosalind Cowardin Female Desire (1984) (Tisdale 85), Frank Chin first used it in his 1974 play The Year of the Dragon. The character Fred Eng becomes exasperated at having to exoticize his Chinese heritage to make a living, so decides to write “the great Chinese American Cookbook” (Chin 83) that sells the story of a Chinatown family and their ‘traditional’ cuisine to culturally hungry tourists. Chin used the term to describe what Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong glosses as “making a living by exploiting the
“exotic” aspects of one’s ethnic foodways... to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system” (55). Yet Coward, Tisdale, Probyn and popular culture websites like foodporn.com use ‘food pornography’ for its sexual connotations rather than signifying the power dynamics of selling of one’s ethnicity through food.

To comment on gendered fantasy in the kitchens of The Best Thing I Ever Tasted and My Year of Meats, I use food pornography to refer to a hyper-realized performance of food preparation that enables viewers to watch food without tasting it. The emphasis is on watching rather than tasting, and viewers are required to imagine their own participation in a culinary performance where the outcome is always appetising and ‘so easy’. Just as sexual pornography simplifies and codifies a complex process, so does popular ‘food porn’ such as The Food Network, simplify cooking when all pies turn out perfectly bronzed and bubbling hot and the sweet presenter is a contemporary domestic goddess.

Food pornography is an extension of the fantasy created by imagined women in the kitchen like the American Wives and Betty Crocker. Tisdale and Ozeki require that we question these domestic icons while demonstrating that we are still susceptible to them as consumers and food romantics. Although My Year of Meats critiques the nameless, faceless effects of mass meat production, and Tisdale is despairing of not being able to buy local produce in the shadow of such hyper stores as Wal-Mart buying out small businesses—the authors do not offer an easy alternative.

2.2 The Meaty Question in Ozeki and Tisdale

Ruth Ozeki takes a feminist stance against the consumption of meat by interchanging the language of women and meat in My Year of Meats. Bunny, the last American housewife we meet before Jane is fired from the show, is described as being “born and bred” in Texas, for
example, and John “sires” her daughter (Ozeki 209). Jane also describes her uterus like the head of a bull with fallopian tubes “curling like noble horns” (153), and Akiko is treated like a piece of meat by her husband in the rape scene.

Carol J. Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2000) offers a radical feminist vegetarian take on the objectification of meat and women through language. Adams argues that not eating meat is an explicitly political act that threatens the very structure of patriarchal culture. Since Adams claims that a “hierarchy of meat protein reinforces a hierarchy of race, class and sex” (40), a refusal of meat is a refusal of patriarchal hierarchy. Adams petitions to remove meat from its position at the top of the table, and cites Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* as one of a recent number of artists who address the “interconnections of violence” in feminism and vegetarianism (20). Adams states that “the message of male dominance is conveyed through meat eating—both in its symbolism and its reality” (189), and this is illustrated by characters such as John Ueno and Gale who attempt to bolster their machismo through their association with the American meat industry.

Dyann and Laura are the same-sex couple of different ethnicities in *My Year of Meats* whose story gives Jane unprecedented ratings, but put her job in jeopardy. Dyann struggled with the “impossibility and desire” (Ozeki 181) of being a mother and in a relationship with a woman, but she inspires Akiko to leave John after seeing how happy Dyann and Laura are together. The three women’s vegetarianism is ideologically consistent with Adams’ argument that meat is aligned with men, as the women chose not to be involved with either.

Adams argues that the sustained myth of meat’s health-giving properties in Western culture and its indispensable role in a male diet have reinforced meat in a gendered hierarchy of power which makes it more impenetrable and difficult to challenge. “The way gender politics is structured into our world, is related to how we view animals” (Adams 16) and
facilitates the moral ease with which animals are killed for meat. Adams argues that women and animals are the “absent referent” in the metaphor for each other’s suffering when women feel “like pieces of meat” and animals are “raped” (53) in the meat industry. As a result, the overlapping issues of violence against women and the inhumane treatment of animals are overlooked by consumer culture. On this point Ozeki is in agreement, as the American wives are women at the service of “beef as sovereign of meats” (Ozeki 201). Adams theorises that an “absent referent” is present in the metaphorical language used for cuts of meat or when the butcher asks, “are you a breast man or a thigh man?” (59), which masks an implied violence against women. The ideal American Wife is described as “Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest” (Ozeki 8). This sounds misogynistic, but it is Jane’s translation of Kato’s pitch for the programme; “maybe a little excessive... but I liked it” (8).

At this stage Jane is unaware of the ideological implications of women being “meat made manifest” and implicates herself in the linguistic violence that Adams critiques.

Ozeki supports yet simultaneously unsettles Adams’ argument for vegetarianism. Although My Year of Meats gives a gruesome and realistic account of being in a slaughterhouse and queries how meat operates in women’s lives, Ozeki does not advocate for a purely vegetarian diet or reject meat as solely a signifier of patriarchy. Ozeki seems to agree with Tisdale who argues that the appetite for flesh is “quintessentially human” (Tisdale 169).

Ozeki explores how other foodstuffs are implicated in violence against women. Fish, for example, are what Carole Adams would call the absent referent in insults directed at women around sexual coldness or a lack of fertility in the novel. John calls Akiko a “cold, dead fish” (Ozeki 195) when she doesn’t show interest in his sexual exploits at a strip club, and the women who aren’t pregnant at the doctor’s office scuttle about “crablike” amongst the glowing expectant mothers (79). In this case meat is privileged over fish, as meat is warm and
strength giving, whereas fish are regarded as cold and barren. So although Ozeki explores the negative connotations of how women and meat are treated, she also asks how other foods might be used as a metaphorical slur against women.

It would be an oversimplification to see Jane’s new vegetarianism as her salvation at the end of the novel, and Akiko’s body needs meat to be healthy. Akiko confesses that she “never liked meat so much” (329) but she does not stop eating meat entirely, and her periods return after relishing in “the best meat she’d ever eaten” (143). Akiko feels at home sharing Vern’s “prize winning kudzu-fried chicken” (336) and a golden, glazed Thanksgiving turkey with the Beaudroux family. “This is America!” she exclaims later without a sense of irony, as she tucks into chicken drumsticks and sings along to ‘The Chicken Bone Special’ song on the train back from New Orleans to New York (339). How are we to reconcile this with the woman who used to vomit at the feeling of meat in her stomach and chose to eat “small calcium-rich fishes, steamed vegetables, and a pickled plum to help her digest” (317) as her first meal after leaving her abusive husband?

The first meal that Akiko and Jane share at the start of Akiko’s American adventure is mock beef “drenched in a black beansauce” (330). We are assured that “it is indistinguishable from the animal itself” (330), yet it is unclear whether this is supposed to be a disturbing or positive attribute. Instead it complicates Jane’s previous comment that she is “not eating meat these days” (329), as she still eats vegetarian protein made to look like meat. Perhaps Ozeki is suggesting that a vegetarian diet operates in reference to a meat based one, yet having decided not to eat meat Jane makes a surprising choice to eat something that tastes and looks so much like it. Ozeki does not provide an answer to the contradictions in Akiko and Jane’s food choices, but by allowing the contradictions in one woman’s eating habits to sit side by side the reader has a more accurate impression of what Tisdale means when she says that “eating is
reactive” (Tisdale 169). A prescriptive analysis of gendering food does not allow us to eat in response to our surroundings and bodily needs with all their contradictions, and yet Ozeki and Tisdale privilege these contradictions.

Sallie Tisdale recognises the contradictions that went unnoticed in the vegetarianism of her youth. She felt that her “refusal to look clearly at meat, at meat eaters, at meat hunger, was a refusal to look at something essential about people themselves” (169). Tisdale traces the history of meat as a distinctive factor for class and wealth, and why that for “as long as people have kept records of what they eat, they’ve made it clear that they will eat as much meat as they can” (Tisdale 164). Tisdale does not gender meat so much as associate it with power and wealth; “Only now” she says, “do the rich eat lean and the poor eat fat” (170), even if it means eating “expensive, unnaturally skinny beef” (170). Whereas fat used to be associated with power, now a higher value has been put on leanness in both humans and the meat they consume. Having been a vegetarian, Tisdale now tries to eat meat consciously—holding the history of meat eating in the balance with her disturbing knowledge of modern meat production.

Tisdale and Ozeki suggests that it does not need to be an either/or situation, where one is either a meat eater or a vegetarian with a battle field of knives and forks between the two; rather we are encouraged to foster what Tisdale calls “the ability to eat with understanding” (299). In My Year of Meats, Jane says that she “would like to think of [her] “ignorance” less as a personal failing and more as a massive cultural trend” (Ozeki 334), because it is easier to claim ignorance of the widely available information on toxicity in food than make a change to one’s habits. Tisdale replies that this ignorance can no longer be sustained, since “one of the essential marks of a modern life is that it is mediated and we all are middlemen now” (298).
As My Year of Meats closes, Jane has grown to realise that it is her responsibility to bring people out of a collective norm where “stupidity becomes proactive, a political statement” (Ozeki 334). Dyann and Laura make their choices as vegetarians, Akiko makes hers as a woman who prefers to eat lighter foods like fish and game, and Jane makes her choices as a recent convert to vegetarianism. Ignorance is not an option, choices are. Tisdale’s response is that we need “a little of this—concern. A little of that—the sacred” (304). The point is that each mouthful is an informed choice and therefore an authentic one.

2.3 Consumption and the Ethics of Artificiality in The Best Thing I Ever Tasted and My Year of Meats
In The Anthropology of Food and the Body, Carole Counihan (1999) argues that western society privileges the impermeability of the male body, and thus enables the domination and subordination of women as a result of their biological permeability and perceived vulnerability indicated by menstruation, childbirth and breast feeding (73). Counihan’s closing statement of her chapter on ‘Food, Sex and Reproduction’ advocates for a world where “the reciprocal interpenetrability of men and women is recognised and lined with our interdependence” (“Anthropology” 75). This is a world which Ozeki has already written; male bodies evidently are permeable in My Year of Meats, and ironically man-made chemicals such as DES, Synovex-S growth hormone, and Lutalyse for artificial insemination permeate the rigid, male corporeal ego boundaries.

In My Year of Meats, masculinity is undermined when meat over-feminises those who consume it, and women are positioned as the producers and gatekeepers of masculinity when they prepare meat. Mr. Purcell, a husband to one of the American Wives, starts to sound “just like a woman” and grows “teeny little titties” (Ozeki 117) after eating chicken that has been
fed growth hormones. His wife forces him to tell the story after letting out a burst of laughter as she remembers when his “barrytone came out soundin’ serpraner!” (117). Presumably one of the reasons she finds it so funny is that Mr Purcell’s image as the head of the household relies on being an impermeable baritone who has control of his bodily boundaries. The Purcell’s consumption of contaminated meat is also socioeconomic issue, however, as it is suggested that Mr Purcell consumes the hormone injected chicken because they can only afford cheap meat from the packing house.

Men’s bodies become permeable, but female bodies are hyper-permeable as a result of artificial intervention in meat production. Rosie, the daughter of one of the last American wives, Bunny, has already started menstruating at five years old and she is a physically mature woman with breasts and pubic hair due to her exposure to Synovex-H growth hormones for artificial insemination. Jane is horrified to see Rosie suck on a Popsicle—perhaps one of the most persistent icons of childhood innocence—with her little hands covered in toxic dust (264). Jane suffers from a malformed uterus because her mother took those same chemicals whilst pregnant with her to prevent miscarriage. Jane then further jeopardises the health of her own baby at the Dunn’s feedlot when she is exposed to dinoprost tromethanmine (DES), which is “readily absorbed through the skin and can cause abortion” (262). Jane’s poor health, combined with being knocked over by a cow carcass whilst filming in the slaughterhouse, leads her to lose the child she is carrying at the time.

The loss of Rosie’s childhood and Jane’s miscarriage are directly linked with increased mechanization of meat production, and these outcomes suggest that the use of artificial hormones and intensive farming have no future. Yet even at this emotional climax of the book when Jane is in hospital after her miscarriage and Akiko is in hospital after being raped by her husband, Ozeki does not hold the meat industry entirely responsible. It transpires that Jane’s
baby had already stopped growing and would not have come to term regardless of Jane’s accident in the slaughter house. Ozeki asserts a causal link between Jane’s inability to conceive, Rosie’s advanced puberty, and the administration of DES. Jane and Rosie’s tragedies are not just a result of artificiality and mass production in the meat industry, but are embedded in Ozeki’s argument against artificiality and mass production in numerous spheres of modern life.

The tension between what is artificial and natural is never fully resolved in Ozeki’s novel. Although Ozeki criticises the “blighted postcapitalist landscape” of America in the late twentieth century (137), one of the signposts to this landscape is that the boundaries between what is natural and artificial are harder to discern. The artificial and the natural are complicated and interdependent signifiers, but for the purpose of this essay, and in relevance to My Year of Meats, I will frame technological intervention like DES as artificial, and a natural state as being unmediated.7 I read Ozeki as flagging the conflicting ethics of artificiality in human reproduction to raise these very debates, and to argue against technological intervention that is accepted unquestioningly.

Ozeki holds the complexities of technical intervention in human and animal reproduction up against each other, but does not privilege one over the other. The male human body is sidelined in every successful pregnancy in My Year of Meats, which moves human reproduction into a sphere parallel to bovine artificial insemination. Male cows do not need to be physically present to propagate, since the female can be artificially brought into heat and then inseminated. Likewise, the human sexual act is separated from the moment of reproduction when Jane’s mother and the lesbian couple, Dyann and Laura, refuse to rely on men to get pregnant. Jane’s mother sees herself as a “modern woman” (310) who reinvents the

7 How the natural or unnatural state is gendered in Ozeki’s writing would bear further research.
Japanese tradition of holding a *go-en* five-yen coin on her tongue to get pregnant by swallowing a nickel instead. Dyann and Laura have an even more autonomous conception as they have no relationship with their child’s biological father, and they disassociate themselves from him by joking about shopping around for sperm which did not come from a computer programmer (174). Although Jane’s mother, Dyann, Laura and eventually Akiko rely on men to provide the sperm, they do not rely on the man at the moment of conception or after. Jane is the only character who does not exert autonomy at the moment of conception, and her pregnancy fails.

Ozeki does not suggest that Dyann and Lara’s IVF treatment is akin to artificial insemination in cows, but she problematises attempts to label artificial intervention in the act of conception as *either* natural *or* artificial. A binary value structure proves to be limited in this situation, and instead the reader must hold the elements of artificiality which have become natural (such as IVF) up against technical intervention which is still seen as problematic (such as artificial insemination in cows). Contradictions provide the conclusion. Akiko’s ability to self-fertilise is perhaps the most ‘natural’ as it does not entail any technical intervention, and Akiko even refuses an X-ray to protect her baby. Akiko is able to facilitate the moment of her child’s conception in a gesture towards magic realism that even some of the characters find difficult to believe:

zygote into morula into hollowed blastula, still suspended,

free-floating until...

*now*...

it brushes up against the soft and spongy wall. Parasitic;

it sticks tight, begins to burrow
... And when her child-to-be was safely embedded, she let out a breath with a long sigh and fell sound asleep.

(306)

Akiko does not self-fertilise, but she does envision her child’s conception and utilises John’s violation of her body for her own means. Akiko still needs John’s sperm, like Dyann and Laura need a donor and the cows need sperm to be artificially inseminated, but the male body is absent at the moment of conception.

Self-fertilization and control of one’s own fertility is symbolised by the pearls that stud Akiko’s life. Pearls are produced by oysters, some species of which can self-fertilize. The Pacific oyster (otherwise known as the Japanese oyster), the European flat oyster and the Olympia oyster on the US Pacific coast are hermaphrodites and fertilize the eggs within their own body by retaining those eggs in their gills until a shell that bears larvae has formed. The pearl is a product of misappropriation—a flaw—created when a grain of sand works its way into the shell of an oyster during the moment of conception. The sand creates an irritation and the grain is covered by nacre, a shell like substance, which forms a pearl. If the sand is an intervention in the reproduction of an oyster, does that make it artificial? A pearl is essentially a rare deviance from the course of reproduction in an oyster and is revered by humans, yet pearls that are mass-produced by a manufactured intervention are not valued so highly. Humans place a higher value on an intervention which is not of their making, which brings into question how we position ourselves in relation to nature through the artificial/natural binary opposition.

Natural pearls become a symbol of Akiko’s reclamation of her body as authentic and individual. Akiko steals a pearl bracelet at one point, and wears a pearl necklace and pearl-studded barrette when she (unsuccessfully) tries to seduce her husband by acting out male
fantasy (193). One of Shōnagon’s Pillow Book extracts also reflects on the dangerous life of female pearl divers, “who have to plunge into (the sea’s) depths for their livelihood” (85). Real pearls are therefore associated with women taking risks to steal or dive for them as if their lives depended on it, as opposed to fake pearls, which are associated with men. Akiko notices that girls in pornographic magazines wear “polyester blouses and fake pearls” (185); the male fantasy of femininity is evidently a synthetic reproduction where the models, their clothes, facial expression, and jewellery are all false.

The novel is full of ‘pearls’ that emerge when the intention (an oyster or a flawless American recipe) is diverted and something more interesting is created in the process. Jane makes ‘My American Wife!’ to promote beef, yet she finds out about DES; Akiko tries to be the perfect housewife, and ends up leaving home; Bunny tries to be the model American Wife, yet finally exposes her step-son’s corruption that caused Rosie’s illness. In each instance, when the characters work against forces outside their control they find strength on their own terms. As Mrs Bukowsky, one of the Wives says: “you never know what it’s going to be, or what they’ll bring, but whatever it is, it’s always exactly what is needed” (139).

If we understand pearls as symbolising femininity in the novel, then a kind of flawed femininity comes to be valued in My Year of Meats. Akiko and the American housewives fail to fit into the planned, artificially produced model of female domesticity circulated by ‘My American Wife!’, and yet they discover a way of life that is more suited to them. An altered recipe can be an act of resistance that enables a recirculation of femininity, as Akiko and the other American wives cook foods that resist gender stereotypes and undermine the social recipes that limit women. Akiko initially depends on the recipes she transcribes from the TV show, but by the end of the book she cooks food which appeals to her rather than her husband.
The extent to which a character sticks to the recipe is perhaps the clearest indication of their ability to interact with—or cook against—lived and culinary expectations. Akiko makes small changes to the Texas style Beefy Burritos recipe, for example, by adding spicy Korean bean paste and ground ginger root: “She found herself cheating more and more, cribbing from other cook books and adding ingredients that the original American wives had never heard of” (98). Akiko’s distinction between the ‘original’ American wives and herself demonstrates that she is aware of her implication in the reproduction of femininity. She is complicit in it at first, and even mistakes the television show for reality at an early stage when John announces his future with American wives and she responds with a crestfallen, “Who?... When?” (21). Yet she later enacts small rebellions that capitalise on John’s lack of know-how in the kitchen. Eventually Akiko’s recreation of herself is more successful than the American wives she cooks from (if John’s opinion is anything to go by). “John hadn’t liked the show very much, but he thought the Beefy Burritos were good” (98), but when John thinks he is enjoying a beefy burritos recipe from his American wives, he does not realise that Akiko’s personal touch and creative interventions have made it more delicious.

Suzie Flowers, one of the first American Wives we meet, tries to portray herself as a perfect wife, yet her attempts are thwarted by her lack of media savvy. Her recipe specifies Coca-Cola to marinate the beef “(not Pepsi, please!)” (19), but she has to prepare the meal so many times for the various takes that all she has left to continue cooking with is Pepsi. Suzie’s performance as a perfect housewife descends into a farce as Jane has to decant the Pepsi back into the Coke bottle each time to maintain the illusion, and nobody even wants to eat the meal in the end because it tastes like Pepsi. Ironically, in this example, Coke is the ‘real’ thing, and Pepsi is the ‘fake’; in what should have been a moment of domestic bliss, the rivalry between
two mass-produced, artificial, high-sugar content, fizzy drinks makes Suzie’s husband storm out.

I see the characters in these texts as moving in a crowded space, full of ghosts and spectres of commodification, consumerism, and postmodern globalization. There are expectations set from all angles, and *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted* and *My Year of Meats* are about how we negotiate those expectations using our own beliefs and experiences. Tisdale and Ozeki do not offer a solution to the difficulties posed by postmodern life, but they do give a workable method for how to conduct oneself using informed, conscious choices.
Hiromi Goto activates ambiguity in the food and bodies of *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *The Kappa Child* to expand current gendered readings of food theory. Cucumbers and mushrooms are powerful, strength-giving and lustful in Goto’s prose—qualities which are often symbolically reserved for meat (Lupton 29). Goto’s fiction demonstrates the limits of categorization into male and female specific patterns of consumption outlined in the introduction, as she creates liminal, ambiguously gendered bodies that consume food with the same characteristics. A cucumber-eating, ambiguously gendered narrator, or a mushroom absorbing grandmother challenge the received knowledge that “liminal foods are...potentially dangerous” (Lupton 154). Bodies remain elusive and unknowable in Goto’s fiction. This pushes the reader into the position of the subject as their desire to know, read, and consume is exposed by Goto’s refusal to simplify her subjectivity. As one character says, “if the positions become static, there can never be stories” (“Chorus” 172), and there could never be interesting food to eat either.

Hiromi Goto was born in Chiba-ken, Japan, and immigrated to Canada with her family in 1969, eventually settling in Alberta. She is a multi-award winning writer, and one of the most prominent Japanese Canadian fiction writers working in Canada today. In a personal correspondence over my research, Goto said that “food is dear to me, both physically, literally and symbolically.” Food plays a significant role in her three published novels: *Chorus of Mushrooms*, *The Kappa Child*, and *The Water of Possibility* (2001), and the collection of short
stories in *Hopeful Monsters* (2004) returns to food grown, eaten, shared, and rejected in a world where monsters are closer to home than we may like to think.

The characters affected by food are predominantly women or ambiguously gendered, and masculinity is not hyper present as it is in Ozeki’s writing. “Vegetable politics” (“Chorus” 91) also dominate both novels and although meat is eaten at an important family meal, vegetables are the primary foodstuff that is consumed and contemplated (cucumbers, mushrooms, seaweed, eggplants, bananas, daikon, persimmons, tofu). Food and its consumers have a reciprocal, mutually constitutive relationship in *The Kappa Child* and *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and I would argue that the ambiguities in food feed the unconventionalities in people, and vice versa: a rebellious grandmother and mushrooms eat each other, both feeding off the transgressive and asexual qualities of the other, for example, or an ambiguously gendered narrator gets pregnant by a mystical Kappa and is left holding a cucumber. Categories of gender, race, age and sexuality are consistently inverted and dismissed, and the characters who populate Goto’s fictional world rarely behave as we might expect.

The recurrence of food not only reflects Goto’s personal interest, but also indicates the racialized history of Asian Canadian agricultural labour and food production in Canada. At the end of the nineteenth century, Asian immigration to Canada was encouraged as cheap labour to build Canadian infrastructure, including the Canadian Pacific railway. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Western Canada, which was home to the majority of Asian immigrants, was going through an economic depression, and white unemployed Canadians vented their anger against Asian immigrants with violent race riots and racist immigration policies.

After Pearl Harbour, twenty-two thousand Japanese were “named...out of existence as Canadian citizens” (Miki, “Redress” 265) when their property was seized by the Government
and they were forcibly relocated to remote areas of Alberta and Manitoba to work on sugar beet farms. After the war, many Japanese Canadians chose to continue working in agriculture and stay in the interior rather than be deported (Miki 2004, Boyko 1995), and Hiromi Goto herself grew up on a mushroom farm in Alberta. The racism of internment was partially re-inscribed through food since the labour camps forced workers into food production, and many Japanese Canadian families have their history tied to farming and food production as a result. Although Goto does not make direct reference to this racialized agricultural history, the setting for both novels is a result of this history and the racism that each family faces in *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *The Kappa Child* creates a simultaneous destabilization of race and gender through food.

3.1 **“Who cares?” Gendered ambiguity in Hiromi Goto’s Writing**

The Kappa is a trickster that figure captures characteristics of the narrator and reflects the tone of the novel’s shifting narrative that slips through the net of restrictive reading practises. A Kappa is an amphibious creature of Japanese mythology, about the size of a ten-year-old child, which lives by water and is notorious for attacking naughty children, horses, and cows to suck their liver through the anus. They are playful, but dangerous, much like Goto’s narrative is playful, but also promotes a serious political point about the limits of gender and racialization. Kappas have soft, green skin but change colour like a chameleon (Akutagawa 58). Although the narrator does not change colour, the Kappa’s colour shifting is reminiscent of the narrator’s unclear gender and the foetus’ persistent displacement around the inside of the narrator’s body. A baby Kappa is also said to speak from the moment of conception (Akutagawa 62), just as the Kappa child narrates sections of Goto’s novel from within the narrator’s body. The top of the Kappa’s head is shaped like a bowl, which must remain full of
water at all costs—even whilst engaging in the sumo wrestling that forms part of love making. Bearing in mind the similarities between the narrator and the Kappa, the narrator’s brief and passionate encounter with this creature comes to signify an encounter with itself which results in a mythical pregnancy and the beginning of the narrator’s journey to self-acceptance.

Gender is immediately destabilised in The Kappa Child as Goto’s characters do not conform to normative gendered expectations. The main character of the novel is not named or clearly gendered and the narrator is never referred to in the third person. Hiromi Goto explains that she wanted to “explore the notion of gender and sexual identity and the body. How is sexuality interconnected with gender? If gender isn't apparent, how is sexuality defined?” (“Cross-Cultural Creatures” 18). Elspeth Probyn argues that the body is produced through eating (60), but what kind of body is served when Goto refuses to produce her bodies with a familiar gendered sauce?

The unmarked position has traditionally been white, heterosexual and male, and it is the ‘other’ who is marked and differentiated. Goto refuses to mark her characters with gender, however, and instead forces the reader to fill in the blanks with their own assumptions which never quite seem to fit. Although the ‘blanks’ in the narrative (such as name or gender) invite being completed, the narrative simultaneously resists it. Goto says that she wanted to “explore an identity that placed no quantitative values on physical and social cues...I wanted to explore a character who was learning to become instead of the gendered baggage we’re laden with since birth” (“Cross-Cultural Creatures” 18).

Elspeth Probyn would celebrate this becoming as rhizomatic messiness that “produces fabulous bodies with ‘multiple entryways and exits’” (76) and any analysis of The Kappa Child must reference this messy becoming in its critical prose. There is no neutral personal pronoun in English, and any attempt to describe or locate the narrator becomes clumsy without
the shorthand of s/he. Goto exposes the short-sightedness of assuming that one could ever fully describe a character, as the rigidity of English grammar cannot support the complex multiple entryways and exits of subjectivity that Goto invokes. It is tempting to refer to ‘she’ since the narrator becomes pregnant, there is reference to menstruation, the narrator’s breasts, and the narrator seems to be realising its identity as a lesbian through the course of the book. Yet Goto refuses this resolution, and we are left with ‘the narrator’ and no constraint of gender or sexuality. Although all the critical work on The Kappa Child refers to the narrator as ‘she’ (see Latimer and Pearson), I believe it is more accurate to refer to the narrator as ‘it’ rather than ‘she’ to concord with the complexities of Goto’s work on gender.

Goto continues to intercept what Steve McCullough calls the “readerly desire for constraint” (156) by not specifying who the narrator is in Chorus of Mushrooms, and the narrator’s lover is not gendered as male until page 89. Although it would be reasonable to assume the narrator is Murasaki, Goto does not provide the reader with that resolution. Characters in The Kappa Child experience a similar frustration not knowing whether the narrator is male or female. A boy of mixed First Nations and Japanese decent falls in love with the narrator and asks, “you a boy or a girl?”, to which the narrator angrily replies “you Blood or Japanese?” (Goto 168). The boy feels a deep need to know the gender of his new friend, but the narrator deflects his request and makes it as irrelevant as the boy’s racial origins. The Kappa is equally disinterested in knowing whether the narrator is male or female: “guy, girl, so what? ...Do I look like someone who cares?” (119). The body is no longer a place of singularity in Goto’s writing as her characters are rarely Japanese or Canadian, male or female, but rather enjoy multiplicity over convention.

How or what someone is called is a fundamental part of subjectivity in Goto’s novels. In Chorus of Mushrooms, names slip between Naoe and her grand daughter; Murasaki (which
means purple) is called Muriel by her mother, whilst Naoe takes on the name Purple Mask as a rodeo star. The narrator of *The Kappa Child* gives its sisters nicknames that would “disguise and protect” them (15) from the racist name-calling that ensues when people could not pronounce their Japanese names. The characters are able to change their names like the Kappa changes colour to fit into the surroundings; “What’s in a name?” the narrator asks herself, “a great deal was my conclusion” (15). Yet the narrator is the most disguised and protected of all since it remains nameless. The narrator is the last person to reject its childhood persona and it is taken aback when Slither, Mice, and PG reclaim their original names; “it was funny when we were children” says Sli-Satomi, “but we’re adults now.” (268). The narrator is also surprised when the next-door neighbour refers to Okasan, the narrator’s mother, as Emiko, “What the hell else would she call her? I think bitchily to myself, Okasan?” (210). Only when the narrator is more comfortable with its own life, work, friends and sexuality is the narrator able to accept its sisters’ and mother’s original names.

The movement of names is a form of translation that marks “learning to become.” Goto assumes that she will have an English speaking audience, and the inclusion of untranslated Japanese words calls attention to the impossibility of ever fully understanding a text or character. In “Translating the Self”, Goto says:

> Text is also a place of colonization. And I wanted to highlight that difference exists, all cannot be understood, language could and can be a barrier. This is based on my assumption that most of my readers are English-speaking and do not understand Japanese. This is the audience the book is mainly speaking to, [these are] my assumptions while translating myself. (112)

When Goto makes the narrator of *Chorus of Mushrooms* or *The Kappa Child* difficult to categorise and ‘consume’ through language or bodies, I would argue that she is
appropriating the discourse of disgust and desire in food theory. In her study of ‘Food and Revulsion’ in *Food, the Body and the Self*, Deborah Lupton (1996) observes that “foods that are of ambiguous texture or appearance evoke disgust” (115). The idea that slippery or gooey foods are disgusting is culturally specific, as there is a refined aesthetic around light jellies and foods with a range of ‘disgusting’ textures in Asia. Equally, milk was only accepted into the Japanese diet in the early 20th century, as it was previously shunned along with the taboo of slaughtering animals (Ishige 160). Goto therefore plays with the cultural specificity of ambiguity by experimenting with the limits of what can be ambiguous yet palatable in foods as well as bodies.

Goto’s ambiguous text is clearly not advocating that the female should be consumed or that the ambiguous body is disgusting (“She likes herself, she likes her body” (Goto, “Not Your” 66)). Reading is a form of consumption, as a character must be digested and understood in order to be read. But if Goto is ‘othered’ as a Japanese Canadian woman, she takes this to its (il)logical conclusion and makes her narrators so ‘other’, so unknowable, that they are unpalatable to a reader who has not absorbed that “difference exists, all cannot be understood.” A narrator logically provides stability and the narrative core to a text, yet Goto leaves an absence where a coherent narrative body that could be conveniently theorised and categorised should be, which pushes the readers into an ideological hall of mirrors to encounter themselves.

“‘Disgusting’ designates the horror of being brought into intimate contact with what is considered another category of being” (Probyn 138); disgust is thus both a moral and aesthetic category of what or who is deemed an ‘other’. When we do not know what a food (or body) is, we are reluctant to eat it. Cries of “that’s disgusting!” are a visceral reaction as well as a plea for reinforcement and “comfort in the recognition that what offends me also offends you: to
assuage doubts that...we are not disgusting or shameful” (Probyn 131; emphasis added).

Goto’s characters delightfully escape being consumed physically and ideologically when Naoe rides off into the Alberta rodeo sunset in *Chorus of Mushrooms* and the narrator in “Not Your Ethnic Body” disappears into a blip on the computer screen. By making her character’s bodies unfamiliar without a name or gender, Goto challenges the expectation that a body should be familiar and readily consumed in the first place. Any analysis of disgust is deeply embedded in a cultural practise, and I read Goto as trying to expand the possibilities of taste and disgust around reading the racialised body.

Goto exploits the fact that “only something that you thought might delight or satisfy can disgust” (Sedgewick 22), and binds the reader into a tension of desire and disgust using the reader’s expectation of pleasure as the rope. This tension is succinctly articulated in Goto’s critical essay “Not Your Ethnic Body” (1999), which further explores the implications of what a gendered, racialized “self, this utterable” (67) is expected to say. Ultimately “the most wonderful food of all teeters on the boundary of the edible” (French qtd.. in Probyn 135), and Goto’s narrators teeter on the boundary of gendered norms in order to call attention to the existence of arbitrary social signifiers.

“Not Your Ethnic Body” is a short creative text that critiques the relationship between the writer and the reader. The protagonist is at home, writing a piece, but is interrupted by the voice of ‘they’ who read over her shoulder and “will talk of ethnicities, not race and (it is) certainly inappropriate to talk about racism” (70). The text is interspersed with sections of the protagonist’s fiction that poke fun at the tension she negotiates as a Japanese Canadian, when Canadian usually signifies “white”.

The title of “Not Your Ethnic Body” alludes to ownership and racism, as it could be read ‘not your ethnic body’ and does not belong to you, or ‘not your ethnic body’ emphasising
that the body is not ethnic. It is not specified if the narrator is Japanese, but Japanese words (“umeboishi baba” (68)), names (Mari, Junko and George-san) and food (salted sour plums) suggest that she is. Nevertheless, the narrator simultaneously gives and takes away the “markers of ethnicity. Foreign words, chopstick, exotic food” (Goto, “Not Your” 69) that ‘you’—the assumed reader or publishing world—demand of her. By calling attention to foreign words and exotic foods as markers of ethnicity, Goto mocks the necessity for such markers in the first place.

The stereotypes and desire for constraint frequently revolve around women’s bodies in Goto’s writing. One fictional female character is described as having skin “gleaming like polished cedar” and “long silky black hair” that smells “rich and ancient like incense in a temple” (69-70; emphasis in original). Her lover, George-san, is so overcome by her that he is inspired to write a book called “I Wanked Off In Japan and Now I Wrote This Book” (70). “They are not amused” (70) by the writer mocking their taste and refuse to accept her text, excusing themselves by saying that “it’s not the kind of body they are interested in” (71). Even though ‘they’ want the writer to behave in a certain way as a female, ethnic body, the writer refuses to deliver what they expect to be on the menu.

It is an “easy leap: from the food of the other to the symbolic consumption of the body of the other” (Gunew 229). The narrator of “Not Your Ethnic Body” plays with the symbolic consumption of the other, as she lies on her futon, turning from her back to her belly to her side like meat on a rotisserie, whilst the predatory voices “wait…gasp…stare mouthing words they think will somehow save them” (Goto, “Not Your” 66-67). The text savours morsels of the narrator’s body in turn, and the reader subsequently consumes the narrator’s tongue, her
lips, and her skin as he reads each section of the text. The narrator gestures towards eating herself as she repeatedly brings her fingers to her mouth and refers to her lips as "umeboishi" even though they "didn't look like a salted sour plum" (69; emphasis in original). The narrator is "central to her own body" (Goto 71) and oscillates between offering and withdrawing her body for consumption.

These close-ups of tongues, sticky fingers, and lingering consumption are reminiscent of scenes from Ang Lee's film Eat Drink Man Woman (1994). Yau Ching critiques the culinary 'strip tease' in Lee's film because "when we Asians become the food we eat; the image of racialized food reinforces the stereotype of the Asian Body, smooth and soothing" (qtd. in Gunew 229). Smooth and soothing are more feminine traits, and Ching implies that they are disempowering, like taking one's clothes off. Uma Narayan, however, warns against only associating agency with the dominant group (qtd. in Gunew 229) and for Goto's character being naked and being food are not necessarily a weakness. I read Goto's texts as arguing that weakness pertains to the person who needs to consume another to feel satisfied. The narrator in "Not Your Ethnic Body" is self-sufficient and is able to sustain a literary/culinary strip tease (an overwhelmingly female art form) using her body as false bait.

The narrator reels 'them' in as they delight in her body—she then thwarts them in the next instant. The hopeful reader (or Hopeful Monster) is isolated further by the presence of two authors; the fictional author and Goto the writer. It is unclear whether this is autobiography, yet it also ceases to matter. Goto's creative criticism blurs the (artificial) line between fiction, autobiography, and critique until Goto's characters (and herself) are unknowable and the process of reading a text is interrogated.

8 I am reminded of bpNichol's Selected Organs: Parts of an Autobiography (1988) in the astute and humorous reading of subjectivity through selected body organs in "Not Your Ethnic Body". Although Nichol's body-text is not as aware of its gender or race as Goto's, for both writers, to tell their story is to speak their body.
It is precisely this desire to know and read a character that Goto reconfigures. At the end of “Not Your Ethnic Body” the narrator stands proud and naked, and disappears into her own computer screen whilst ‘they’ are left scrambling around punching keys and rebooting the computer trying to find her like a lost Word File. In her analysis of how purity and danger are constituted, Mary Douglas argues that “the only way... pollution ideals make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose keystones, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation to rituals of separation” (“Purity” 51). Goto’s characters disappear beyond the rituals of separation, beyond the computer screen, and the alternative is not pollution but autonomy.

Douglas uses nationalistic language when she refers to boundaries, margins, and lines that are necessary to define purity and danger, and Kristeva (who was influenced by Douglas) also uses these metaphors of geographical frontiers to describe why “food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories” (Kristeva 75). Not-your-ethnic-bodies, however, are unrestricted by discourses of ethnicity and borders, and can permeate screens to evade critics’ attempts at enforcing boundaries or marginalisation. The female narrators of Chorus of Mushrooms, The Kappa Child, and “Not Your Ethnic Body” slip through the fence and become apparently abject, but also more desirable, powerful, and difficult to contain.

The refusal of somatic categorization is reinforced by the food we see in The Kappa Child. Cucumbers are technically a fruit since they contain seeds to reproduce, yet cucumbers are commonly referred to as a vegetable. The cucumber occupies a curious position as it is a salad ingredient that embodies idealised feminine traits of lightness, paleness and digestibility, and yet it does not take a grand leap of the imagination to notice its phallic shape. Even though this would be an easy trope to feed into, the cucumber is decentred as a phallus in The Kappa
Child, and Goto makes only one direct reference to it. Instead, the narrator begins to smell like water—as if the excess of cucumbers being eaten have a neutralising effect on the body, rather than confirming a specific gendered identity.

When the narrator first feels a cucumber in its jacket pocket after its passionate wrestling match with the Kappa, the narrator blushes pulling it out thinking it is a dildo—only to then converse with the burly man on the next stool about the freshness of the Japanese cucumber (146). The sexuality of the cucumber’s shape is immediately replaced by a horticultural appreciation. Likewise the male reproductive organs are noticeably absent in the novel as the Kappa is not sexed, and yet the narrator still becomes pregnant. The cucumber’s role as not a dildo forces the reader to imagine the cucumber as more than a phallic shape and Goto reclaimed its watery, crisp and light texture as exactly what the narrator craves.

In an article titled “Translating the Self: Moving Between Cultures”, Goto describes her existence as “permanently liminal, permanently in translation” (111). I would argue that Goto encourages her readers to exist in a similar state and to abandon gender as a pivotal orientation. Instead, “you have to forge another route,” says the narrator of The Kappa Child, “draw your own map” (Goto 13).

3.2 “Where does one thing end and another begin? And can you separate the two?”

(Chorus, 213): Food After Gender in Chorus of Mushrooms and The Kappa Child

Chorus of Mushrooms examines the experience of Japanese Canadian immigrants through the lives of three generations of women in a mushroom-farming family living in a small prairie town. Language becomes synonymous with food in the novel, as Murasaki is prevented from

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9 The kappa-maki sushi roll is named after the belief that cucumbers are a Kappa’s favorite food.
consuming Japanese words and Japanese food by her mother, who desperately tries to integrate the family into what she perceives as Canadian life.

Roland Barthes said that “food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (26), but in Chorus of Mushrooms, mushrooms transform themselves into a thematic core to the novel, as well as providing a livelihood for the characters. Mushrooms have long been associated with the transformative, the occult, and ethereal. Imagine them growing, if you will, for a moment; they grow over ground, but flourish in the dark. Mushrooms grow off decaying organisms, they are a fungus—mould—a substance commonly considered inedible in Western culture. Many are deadly poisonous, others prized delicacies. Fungi can reproduce both sexually or asexually, depending on conditions in the environment, and so physically mushrooms resist becoming tropes of masculinity or femininity, since their biology is amorphous. In short, fungi are complex and Goto refuses to simplify them. The contradictions and sexual ambiguities in mushrooms reinforce the destabilisation of gender that occurs in the novel and their transformative, dark and transgressive persona give characters the opportunity to be the same. For instance, fed up with her controlling daughter, the eighty-year-old Naoe runs away from home, and finds herself in the family’s mushroom farm before heading off cross-country. The exact details remain obscured, and in the gloomy and dank light of the farm the reader cannot determine exactly what goes on. This extract is taken from the moment Naoe enters the farm:

She looked like an aged shrimp in silent contemplation. But for the first time in decades, moisture filtered into her body. Moisture rich with peat moss and fungal breath. Slowly seeping into parchment, osmosis of skin and hair. The wet blanket of humidity enclosing her tiny figure. Her sallow cheeks shone a little more roundly and the loose skin where she once had breasts began to rise like bread, like
mantō. Her skin, so dry, slowly filled, cell by cell, like a starving plant, the mushroom moisture filling her hollow body. The wet tinkling into her brittleness.

Blood stirring, restless. Like silk threads, they wound through her. Old chicken arms grew longer, filling with supple strength, her buttocks curving, swelling, with flesh and longing. She could hear her body filling, the rippling murmur of muscles and bones, squeak of hair, growing long and smooth, long enough to sweep the soft skin of her back…. She ran her palms from her collar bones over breast belly hips thighs. Laughed aloud in wonder. Stood tall and straight and stood on her toes, flung her hands skyward. (84-85)

The grandmother's transformation is demonstrated by the shift in metaphors from animal or meat imagery, to vegetables. At first, the grandmother stands like an “aged shrimp” with “old chicken arms,” yet the “fungal breath” and mushroom moisture fill out her muscles and make her body rise like bread. Goto then carefully qualifies the image of body as bread to the more culturally specific mantō, a steamed Japanese bread. I am not suggesting that Hiromi Goto is privileging vegetarianism as a more liberative practice (a meal of deep fried pork brings the family together at the end of the novel) but it is telling that mushrooms and cucumbers are the main culinary characters that flavour her writing with magic realism.

“Playful representations of food as body permeate [Chorus of Mushrooms] in blurring profusion” (Gunew 231) when the grandmother lies down amongst the mushrooms, the boundaries between food and body are blurred until the grandmother effectively becomes a mushroom and the mushrooms become the grandmother’s body. The peat is “warm as blood, the moisture seeping into hair, skin” (86), peat facilitating osmosis between the grandmother’s body and the fungus. The text structurally completes the blurring profusion, as phrases are left incomplete, one merges with the other, separated only by commas.
Embracing the anthropophagic fear of the diner becoming the dish, the mushrooms consume Naoe’s dry and brittle past to fill her flesh with youth and desire. We might have been told not to play with our food, but very rarely is our food told not to play with us; the fungi consumes Naoe as it enters through osmosis into her blood stream and moves around the body to rejuvenate her breasts, belly, and legs. By sharing an intimate space with this transgressive, asexual foodstuff Naoe grows like an ancient Alice in Wonderland after effectively saying “eat me” to the family’s fungi. Earlier on in the novel Naoe comically foreshadows her transformation: “I must be a mushroom,” she says, “everyone keeps me in the dark and feeds me horseshit” (26). “The unheard chorus of mushrooms” (86) activate the novel then, and take on a level of agency not usually associated with a fungus that grows in the dark.

Naoe lies down amongst the family’s mushrooms, and as she sinks into the peat, opening and closing her legs and arms, she hears the:

Murmur murmurmurmur forming humming earth tipping under body swelling growing
resound and the SLAM of breath knocked from lungs, beyond painful register of
human sound, the unheard chorus of mushrooms (Goto 86).

The SLAM and painful register of human sound could be a heart attack, but the image is too sensual and the “unheard chorus of mushrooms” comes like a symphonic, orgasmic release at the end of a section of building tension that culminates in the grandmother’s ancientness being consumed. But what would mushrooms sound like? Again, Goto pushes her readers to go beyond their limitations by imagining the unheard.

The delicious onomatopoeia of the chorus of mushrooms enables the reader to eat words whilst Naoe is simultaneously being consumed by the mushrooms. Angelica Michelis suggests that “similar to the way in which we chew food and savour its taste and texture,
poetic language with its rhythm and rhyme makes us aware of the materiality and morality of words and language as such” (81). The form of *Chorus of Mushrooms* embodies the materiality of food through the parallel experience of savouring the narrator’s drawn-out storytelling and a lengthy feast. This is made explicit when words and food are imperceptibly interchangeable in Naoe’s mouth during her late night snack and story time with Murasaki: “Obachan always chewed like mad, words falling out with each snap of her jaw” (Goto, “Chorus” 18). As food goes in, words come out, and nobody can tell the difference.

Naoe is treated by her daughter like a kind of fungal growth who gets in the way of sweeping and will not move from her chair, yet Naoe is one of the most dynamic characters in the book. She is stubborn, and although her family believe Naoe cannot speak English, she is more fluent and competent than they realize. Naoe refuses to be categorized as senile—even if she chooses to sit in the same chair for twenty years—and she gains her strength from monitoring everyone in the house: “I see all...no one moves in this house without meeting my eyes” (4).

Glenn Deer’s article “Asian North America in Transit” explores how “Americans of Asian descent have not been permitted to travel the literal and symbolic landscape with the same freedom as the Caucasian mainstream” (5). He pays particular attention to the “armchair voyeurism that constructs Chinatown as a place of mysterious vice” (Deer 12), and the extent to which this limits how Asian North American creative sensibility is imagined. Naoe repositions both of these issues, however. It is now she who enjoys armchair voyeurism in her own home, as she smells traces of her family’s life on their clothes and imagines Canada beyond the door as a mysterious vice she needs to explore (Goto, “Chorus” 76). Although mobility and voyeurism have been restrictive to Naoe’s literary predecessors, she doesn’t give
them a second thought (either as an octogenarian or Japanese woman) and sets off across Canada with some beer, seaweed paste, and salted squid wrapped up in a piece of cloth (80).

In a home that has been dominated by silence with only “the wind shouting against the door frame, hurling insults at (the) house” (11), Naoe chooses to use the door as a moment of change: “it is a time of change. Ahhh, so easy to say, but another to open a door, step out and close it behind me” (76). The Canadian poet, Fred Wah, uses the door in his biotext and culinary autobiography *Diamond Grill* to represent his ability to pass and move between two worlds. It is the “the wooden slab that swings between the Occident and the Orient... I ride this silence that is a hyphen and the hyphen is the door” (Wah 16). If the door is a hyphen between cultures in Fred Wah’s text, Naoe goes both literally and figuratively beyond the hyphen (to use Ty and Goellnicht’s title for their critique of Asian North American identity) when she leaves her family home, “close[s] the door behind her” (Goto, “Chorus” 81) and steps out into her adventure across Canada. It is only after Naoe passes through the door that the mother regains consciousness for her family, the father confesses his secret habit of reading and eating Japanese culture, and Murasaki finds peace with the hyphens in her own identity.

The characters in *Chorus of Mushrooms* are what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993) would call ‘big eaters’. *Chorus of Mushrooms* riffs off Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, but unlike Kogawa’s women, this family refuses to be categorised and passively accept what goes into them, and instead “assimilate the foreign context into themselves” (Gunew 230). Probyn reflects that:

Eating and sex provide an opportunity to go beyond a model whereby the body is an inert entity that passively accepts what goes into it. I would rather think that
[eating and sex] are practices that open ourselves up into a multitude of surfaces that tingle and move (70).

Naoe’s fungal foray into self-realization is an example of how characters can tingle and move when they choose to assimilate the foreign context into themselves and open up their bodies and mouths to consume rather than be consumed.

Ultimately Murasaki and her family choose quite literally to consume themselves. Murasaki discovers that her last name, Tonkatsu, is a deep fried pork cutlet dish and she decides to cook tonkatsu for her parents after her grandmother has run away from home, her mother has stopped talking and eating, and her father has confined himself to his office. Effectively all roles have been reversed: the grandmother runs away like a rebellious teenager, the mother regresses and stops caring for herself, and the daughter begins to care for and support her parents.

Murasaki’s father gives his family the name Tonkatsu, as it is the last Japanese word he can remember. Sneja Gunew argues that “food traditionally functions to mark the memory of another kind of corporeality” (230), and it is not surprising then that the last word Murasaki’s father retains is a taste. When Murasaki’s mother and father immigrated to Canada, they decided to stop speaking Japanese. But when they could not remember how to pronounce their last name, Murasaki’s father insisted on keeping “the one word [he] could remember. Tonkatsu!” (208).

“Multiculturalism as food is often the most benign version of accommodating cultural difference” (Gunew, 227). The tonkatsu meal could be an opportunity for a seamless multicultural ending when the young woman reunites her family with a traditional dish, as in the end of Lee’s Eat Drink Man Woman. Yet Goto avoids such sentimentalism. Tonkatsu is not ‘purely’ Japanese: ‘ton’ means pork but ‘katsu’ is adopted from cutlet, which is not a
traditionally Japanese way to prepare meat (Goto, "Chorus" 209). As a character in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* says, "name is face to all the world" (9), and Murasaki’s father gives his family a name that is neither Japanese or Canadian with which to face their new world. Japanese food is therefore not privileged as the restorative culmination of the "ethnic feast" (Boelhower qtd. in Gunew 233), but just one step in the family’s journey.

If the tonkatsu meal inverts a tendency to romanticise racialized food, Murasaki does the same for gender roles in the kitchen. Steve McCollough describes the Japanese supermarket as a “nutritious female kingdom” (166) when Murasaki shops for the tonkatsu ingredients, and although Murasaki prepares and cooks the tonkatsu using a telepathic recipe from her grandmother to heal her mother, it is Murasaki’s father who knows where the Japanese supermarket is (Goto, "Chorus" 134). Murasaki could not have cooked or eaten the dish without him, as her father gives her the inspiration for the recipe and also makes the chopsticks to eat it.

Leaving aside its oxymoronic nature, McCullough’s description of the supermarket as a female kingdom overlooks the fact that the Japanese supermarket had been secretly nourishing Murasaki’s father’s hunger for Japanese food and culture for years. Although the Japanese supermarket is an oasis of sovereignty and a place for Murasaki’s father to feel whole again (Goto, "Chorus" 207), it is not an exclusively female space. Academic analysis is thwarted in its attempt to constrain food through gender in Goto’s writing, yet the characters in *Chorus of Mushrooms* are no less invested in making simplifications by gendering their food.

The unnamed narrator wanted sekihan to be a special rice dish “for women only” (182) to commemorate her first taste of sekihan with her Grandmother in celebration of her first period and transition into womanhood. Yet the narrator’s male partner, who asks her to tell him the story in the first place, is able to name the dish from her vague description, and even knows
how to make it. Both the critic and the characters’ attempt to reserve food for men or women are foiled by Goto, and there is little secure footing on which to assume that food has a predetermined gendered significance.

This refusal to naturalise women as a culinary matriarch is reiterated when Murasaki begins cooking her namesake. It takes three attempts to make something worth eating, and the family does not sit down to eat until two in the morning—and when they do, they have no chopsticks. Even after her father whittles some out of twigs from the garden, Murasaki doesn’t know how to use them. “There wasn’t a sudden wellspring of words, as if everything we never said burst forth and we forgave each other for all our shortcomings,” says Murasaki. “We sat and ate” (153). Georg Simmel argues that although eating is a communal moment of sitting and eating, it ultimately confirms our experiential isolation from each other through the idiosyncratic experience of taste (131). Food is a Simmelian experience in Goto’s writing, as it establishes difference as much as it brings people together.

3.3 “Choice is a false word, too polar. I prefer choices, a myriad of paths that spiral outward into streams, sky, soul, body” (Goto, “Kappa” 40).

Goto rarely provides a secure ideological footing in her prose. She is aware of what readerly assumptions may be for her characters and herself as an Japanese Canadian woman—and like the narrator of “Not Your Ethnic Body”, I read Chorus of Mushrooms and The Kappa Child as refusing to make gender and race easy to digest. Goto leaves a space in the text for the reader to gender and racialize her characters, but she never gives confirmation that such assumptions are accurate. Food mobilises this playful, political intervention in Goto’s writing by reacting against normative food theory; the narrator’s body is a bitter plum in “Not Your Ethnic Body” and vegetables possess the lustful, powerful, energizing qualities of meat in Chorus of
Mushrooms and The Kappa Child. Goto engages with the normative assumptions behind the gendering of meat and vegetables, and embraces the contradictions and ambiguities in food, men, and women.
Conclusion

Sallie Tisdale, Ruth Ozeki, and Hiromi Goto do not offer a resolution to the relationship between gender and food, but they do offer the reader certain tools to expand the possibilities for reading food through gender. Tisdale suggests that consumers need to be informed to make choices that do not undermine their subjectivity, Ozeki argues for political consciousness and personal experience, and Goto opts for ambiguity as a way out of the knots of gendering food in the first place.

Tisdale and Ozeki recognize how food can be gendered, but they demonstrate the power of authentic choices on our own terms, even if those choices appear to be contradictory like eating meat-shaped vegetarian food. Only by being fully informed of what we are eating—its origins, ingredients and who made it—will we be able to fully enjoy the food. Tisdale and Ozeki work from the assumption that food is gendered, yet by highlighting how other people’s culinary fantasies affect women in the kitchen and what they allow and disallow, Tisdale and Ozeki point to creativity and joy as more sustainable ways of knowing our food beyond abiding by gendered stereotypes.

Goto also offers ways out of gendering food, but she does this by taking the reader out of familiar spheres of reference and feeding them ambiguity instead. Her characters are able to move in ways that Tisdale and Ozeki’s creative non-fiction does not allow. By reading a character that is not gendered, for example, the reader is able to examine her own politics of how a gendered and racialized body eats. Without the security of a personal pronoun to refer to, we must accept the ambiguously gendered characters on their own terms and revert to the materiality of the body and foodstuff as points of navigation.
A character’s subjectivity is reiterated through their food practices; this creates a proliferation of self that enables characters to be read through how they interact with food as a lived experience. The proliferation of self in food became clear to me when I was watching a friend prepare a salad for me. It was late at night; he had eaten, I was hungry. I sat at the small, glass kitchen table that his mother was always anxious to keep clean. He worked at the kitchen counter to my right, with his back to me. To begin, he pulled small cans and half-open packets out of the cupboards and fridge, leaving them strewn across the sideboard; the tin of olives half-drained, the lettuce unwashed. Ripping up the lettuce leaves with his hands, randomly chunked tomatoes, he threw in some green olives stuffed with anchovies (even though I’m vegetarian, and prefer black olives), lots of tinned sweet corn and white asparagus, which he knew I liked, and carefully arranged slices of carrot on the side for decoration. When it came to dress the salad, he liberally sprinkled his creation and the sideboard with salt with his right hand—his left hand up in the air as if he were flambéing bananas—a generous splosh of good olive oil and then he began to chat animatedly whilst adding the balsamic vinegar.

I remained silent, getting more and more distressed at the increasing flood of acidity to my awaited salad, whilst he and his gestures got more and more involved in the story. Finally my gaze and look of horror gave me away—he laughed and tipped off some of the vinegar (and an errant olive and bit of lettuce with it) into the sink, and plopped the plate in front of me with some delicious fresh bread and no knife or fork.

I felt acutely then that how he made salad was the way he walked, it was how he made music, drove the car, how he read the newspaper, or swept the floor—with an endearing, addictive chaos and attentive lack of attention. His salads were a proliferation of his self... or perhaps he just wasn’t a very good cook! But that’s still saying something. Food is marked by the conditions of its preparation; the cook’s ability, past experience or mood, the event, if the
cook has a lot or little time, a new or old recipe, if it is traditional or experimental food, 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'—the form and content of the food will inevitably convey part of the creator's being through a system of cooking where we are constantly "regulating, constraining, and dramatizing ourselves" (Visser 12).

"Eating's a part of being" (Goto, "Chorus" 138), as discussed in the introduction, but choosing what to cook and eat is just the first step of bringing one's subjectivity into being. Throughout The Best Thing I Ever Tasted, My Year of Meats, Chorus of Mushrooms and The Kappa Child, we see characters making conscious choices about who they are through what they decide to cook. These texts focus on the processes and emotions behind preparing food as much as on the consumption of it; ascribing masculine or feminine qualities to a food can be a useful starting point, but is essentially a fallacy when the lived experience of that food is contradictory and constantly changing.

The Easter dinner in The Kappa Child for example, is a proliferation of the mother's state of mind, as well as her daughters' anxiety to fix it. Okasan, the narrator's mother, tries to bring the family together with a traditional Easter meal at the beginning of the book. Goto's choice of an Easter meal is significant because on this occasion the four sisters effectively rise from the dead when they stand up to their violent father for the first time. It is a moment of rebirth for the family, who go on their separate paths from there; Okasan runs away claiming to have been abducted by aliens, Mice goes to grad school, and the narrator accepts its friends, sisters, and a new lover into its life after the phantom pregnancy.

There is a semblance of order to the food at the Easter dinner, but cabbage rolls rip, potato salad is spat out onto the cabbage, the turkey takes too long to roast, and the family gathering is consistently tense and on the point of collapse. Goto's spread of food at the Easter meal is a mediation of the family's bicultural heritage; they eat sashimi, sekihan and the
narrator’s invented potato salad with pickled herring, as well as turkey roast, cabbage rolls, peas and carrots. But all the “sigh-laden food” (Goto, “Kappa” 27) ends up on the floor when the father looses his temper and Okasan is left holding a martini glass, struggling to hold herself together. The sisters prefer to eat dry raisin bran and cottage cheese rather than consume food which is rooted in their family’s food history, and no single culture’s food is given more meaning than the other, as it all ends up on the floor.

The Easter meal is one of the first moments in the book when we see the whole family together, and the food Goto gives her characters points to how they view themselves and each other. PG eats Raisin Bran without milk, rather than help her mother prepare the evening meal. Cereal is an established breakfast food in Canada, but also a noncommittal snack for any time of day. PG absolves herself from her “happy endings, sad endings” family (29), just as she omits herself from the process of preparing food by eating cereal. Adding milk to cereal would be too close to preparing a meal so she opts for dry food that exists in a temporal vacuum and isolates herself from her family.

The narrator is asked to make a potato salad, which she does by furiously mashing potatoes, adding mayonnaise, pickle bits, celery and tomatoes and tosses in some pickled herring “to make it more festive” (23). The mixture has an “odd” (24) flavour and both Slither and the narrator are unable to swallow it, and spit it out into the sink. The narrator’s way of making potato salad is akin to how the narrator dresses, interacts with the world and lives. The narrator unconventionally wears pyjamas every day; yet the narrator still reserves a set for evening wear, flannel for work, and certain designs for special occasions. In making a potato salad and getting dressed, the narrator vaguely follows conventional formalities but the content is quite different.
In *My Year of Meats*, how Suzie Flowers roasts meat in Coca-Cola is a proliferation of her self and her domestic situation. She takes American beef and The American Drink to create a dish which she hopes will establish her as the American Housewife. The producers are disappointed because the recipe has “so few steps” (25), but that is part of its appeal for Suzie as it is “so quick n’ easy” (25). Suzie and the producer’s ideas of what it means to be an American Housewife are two different things.

As if to make matters worse, Suzie is relegated to using Pepsi instead of Coke because she had not planned on several ‘takes’ of the same process. She forces the usurping soft drink back into the Coke bottle each time, just as she forces herself into the mould of the perfect housewife she fears she is not. Ultimately she has been usurped, as her husband is having an affair with a cocktail waitress, and Suzie becomes the Pepsi to the mistress’s Coca-Cola. As if to torment her further, Suzie has to repeat the action to get the right shot, and the meat becomes increasingly tired and grey like a repetition of her life.

By analysing how a character chooses to prepare their food—or not—we have a more accurate idea of how the characters constitute themselves through gender, race, or class. Rather than reading gender from the food to the subject, I propose that we privilege how the subject uses food and recipes to perform its subjectivity. Too often the study of food is separated from the mood of the cook’s hands or the materiality of the food itself, yet Tisdale, Ozeki and Goto bring out these qualities in their writing and the process of preparation is attended to as much as the moment of consumption.

Food is in direct conversation with the self. When we enter the kitchen we are aware of the expectations that may guide us—like the ingredients in a cultural fridge—but how we combine them is an ever-evolving process. We either make the same dish as usual, not straying from the tried and tested recipe of our repertoire, or push out to combine homemade
marmalade with beets, or roast acorn squash in chai tea because we feel like a change. Tisdale advocates for a diet guided by emotions rather than health fads and expectations, and calls for simple enjoyment of food: “to eat with ease and joy, to eat with the wholehearted belief that what one eats is good, to eat with trust—this is a good secret” (188). This sounds like a simple request, but Ozeki and Goto’s fiction demonstrate how complicated it can often be to eat with ease, joy and trust.
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