

Fall 2003

## Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps

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### Recommended Citation

Poey, Vivian (2003) "Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol2/iss3/5>

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# Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps

Vivian Poey

*Vivian Poey's art performance piece On Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps is accompanied by slides and a video. It features the Cuban sandwich and uses food as a metaphor for dynamics of culture, cultural transitions and acculturation. Images located at end of article along with a link to the video.*

## The Photographs

To deal with an almost inextricable cultural assimilation process I introduce a series of Photographs that present food as a metaphor for world migration. All the meals present us with hybrid foods, from the most obvious combining sweet plantains with Chinese-American food to more subtle combinations of fruits and other elements with origins in various continents. The latter may be found even in the most traditional American tables: South American potatoes, Middle Eastern sugar, European beef, etc. By documenting personal meals, enlarging them to mural size and presenting them as banners I hope to map and monumentalize an identity based on hybrid cultural traditions (in this case culinary) as opposed to one based on place and a singular cultural identity.

## The Performance - A Script

A banquet table is set across the gallery. Photographs, documents of personal meals hang from the ceiling like banners, creating boundaries and providing a context. The back side of the photographic banners is navy blue fabric with white stars. The table cloth is red white and blue and the dishes, chairs and silverware are assorted, no two are alike but some are repeated in the photographs. At the head of the table sit piles of books--all dealing with Nationalism, theory or food--which act as pedestals. On the first pile of books sits an empty blender, on the second an empty clay Costa Rican bowl and on the third a Chinese rice bowl filled with lettuce and Italian tomatoes. Behind the books are a cutting board with ham, a pork chop and Swiss cheese. Next to it are three jars containing mustard, mayonnaise and pickles, a baguette of 'French Bread' and the silverware: a sharp cooking knife and a small spoon.

The performance begins: An audio tape plays a stream of thoughts on the Cuban Sandwich, somewhere along the way "America the Beautiful" starts playing in the background. The Cuban Sandwich text ends and the music continues. When this tune ends "God Bless America" begins; a set of congas follow to its rhythm. "God Bless America" is followed by "The Star Spangled Banner" also with congas.

As the audio plays I cut the pork into small pieces and drop them in the blender. I then add, one by one, the ingredients in the Cuban Sandwich. I count the people in the table by pointing at them with the knife in my hand--ten persons-- and proceed to split in half ten tomatoes which I then gut with my little spoon. As the voice in the audio ends and "America the Beautiful" becomes loud I press a button and the blender joins in the patriotic music.

Once the sandwich is completely blended I ask the guests at the table to pass me their dishes which I decorate with a leaf of lettuce and a split tomato, half of it filled with the light yellow paste that the Cuban Sandwich has become. Once I finish and the patriotic music ends I exit. A Cuban danson takes the place of patriotic tunes and I enter the room bringing and announcing the next dish: Moros con Cristianos and later ropa vieja, traditional Cuban dishes whose names translate directly into Moors and Christians and old clothes. Ironically, my chef Alfredo who is Venezuelan, tells me that this precise combination of dishes, along with the sweet plantains I couldn't serve due to logistics, is the most traditional meal in Venezuela. Coca Cola and red Chilean wine are served with the meal. I invite everyone to eat and the performance dissolves into the opening reception. To my surprise almost everyone eats the deviled egg-looking tomato

### **Audio: The Cuban Sandwich**

The Cuban Sandwich has: Cuban bread, which is similar to French bread, French? Do we really want to be French? French bread, French toast, French fries, French kissing. . . French, well its not really French bread, its Cuban bread but it is similar to French bread. French bread may be used as a substitute when Cuban bread is not available. It also has pickles, mustard, mayonnaise, ham thinly sliced roasted pork leg and Swiss cheese, yes Swiss cheese. Swiss French? Swiss Italian? Swiss German? I guess it doesn't really matter. Its just Swiss cheese, like, what we put in our Cuban Sandwich. Could you imagine making a Cuban Sandwich before Columbus? No wheat, I think the weather is too hot for wheat in Cuba, certainly not cucumbers, no pigs. I don't think there were any pigs in Cuba before Columbus. Could you imagine making a Cuban Sandwich after Castro? I don't think it would be possible. I mean, I still think its too hot for wheat in Cuba after Castro. Its just the weather in Cuban don't know if you can grow cucumbers, I don't even know what weather cucumbers grow in, or mustard seed. , seems highly unlikely. You know? I was talking to my friend Vladimir the other day. He said that the Cuban Sandwich is really a Cuban Sandwich. Its the legendary Cuban Sandwich. He insisted as well that I was Cuban, probably as Cuban as the Cuban Sandwich. Do you know that they wanted to name Tampa the "City of the Cuban Sandwich"? Do you know what they put in their Cuban Sandwiches? The last time I ordered one in a restaurant they asked me if I wanted that A.T.W. Do you know what that means? It means 'All The Way', with lettuce and tomatoes. The Cuban

sandwich does not have lettuce and tomatoes. Not in Miami, but then again what the hell do I know, after all I only know what my parents tell me and they tell me that the Cuban Sandwich has roasted pork leg, ham, pickles, Swiss cheese, French bread, mustard and mayonnaise, and nothing else. But I suppose we must adapt to the times. Now that we are in the U.S. we want to be healthy so we add lettuce and tomatoes to our Cuban Sandwich so we can say that we are getting our salad, our vegetables, lettuce and tomatoes.

Well, I suppose at least tomatoes are an American crop like nothing else in the Cuban Sandwich. Lettuce, however is really Egyptian. Do you know that they used to use it as an antidote to . . . aphrodisiacs? yes, its supposed to have calming effects, lettuce. If you don't want to have sex, you have lettuce. Anyway, lettuce and tomatoes, A.T.W., the American way. Its what we now put in our Cuban Sandwich, and Swiss cheese, as well as pork, ham and pickles. What about mayonnaise? Isn't mayonnaise French? I wonder, can you have a Cuban Sandwich in Cuba after Castro? I don't know that there is that kind of variety in Cuba to have such a sandwich. So if you cant have a Cuban Sandwich in Cuba before Columbus and you cant have a Cuban Sandwich in Cuba after Castro, how many years did the Cuban Sandwich last? Is this the new Cuban Sandwich in exile, the legendary immigrant Cuban Sandwich? Immigrant cows to make Swiss cheese, immigrant cucumbers, immigrant olives for French mayonnaise. Are you what you eat? Are you French? Well Actually one of my last names is French. Who the hell cares, I can't even speak French. Are you German? no, I'm Cuban! perhaps as Cuban as the Cuban sandwich with Swiss cheese and French bread, cucumbers, Egyptian lettuce, some American tomatoes, mustard seed, ham , light pork now that we have to be healthy, ATW, All The Way , with lettuce and tomatoes: the new and improved, immigrant Cuban Sandwich in exile, the authentic, legendary Cuban Sandwich.

## **The Music**

I introduced the congas into this "All-American" tunes in an attempt to create a syncretic identity as an American. To my surprise this blend became a perfect materialization of something that I have been trying to convey (unsuccessfully) for a long time and in various ways: the difficulty in reconciling two different, perhaps incompatible frameworks and the awkward results of the mixed recipe.

Most viewers (and listeners) seem to find this hybrid music uncomfortably humorous. I find it both beautiful and painful. God Bless America does not seem so incompatible. The congas follow with ease and transform the whole flavor of the song, they season it. The Star Spangled Banner however has a more rigid structure and the congas can only follow by creating a poly-rhythm. The tempo changes radically from one note to the next and it becomes obvious that the congas can barely follow. The inadequacy of

the mixture is both painful and revealing. I purposely chose to use a fixed instrumental version of the national anthem, rather than having somebody play it, in order to emphasize the difficulty of the outsider in adapting to a framework that that is both different and indifferent to the efforts of its uninvited guest.

## **The Blender**

The "Melting Pot" and the "Salad Bowl" are common metaphors for the (U.S.)American people. In the melting pot every element is boiled to blandness, light elements get tainted by dark ones and vice-versa, their vitamins are lost and everything is homogenized. In the salad bowl everything is mixed yet every element remains separate and retains its own identity. In this work I introduce a mixed metaphor: the blender, the salad and the deviled egg.

My very special thanks to the following for their collaboration:

Akiko Hamazaki: Seamstress

Don Morton: Conga player

Alfredo Sosa: Chef

RISD Photo Department: Plenty of constructive criticism

RISD Media Resources: Recording equipment

My parents: All around support

Sallie Mae: Financial support

You can download the video here: [Video of On Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps](#)

## ***On Fictional Grounds and Culinary Maps Images***

The following images document the installation. Each photograph is printed in two panels which are then juxtaposed in the space. Each photo is approximately 3.5 x 5 feet in size.













