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Craving Rojak & Snacking On Indomie: Reflections On A Transnational Experience Through Food Studies And Personal Essays

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CRAVING ROJAK & SNACKING ON INDOMIE:
REFLECTIONS ON A TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH FOOD STUDIES
AND PERSONAL ESSAYS

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HONR 499: Senior Honors Project

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Introduction

Throughout my experience as an international student at Messiah College, I have had the opportunity of encountering and experiencing great diversity in multiple areas of life: from personality and ideology, to language and food. These forces that weave the fabric of everyday life have slowly but surely transformed me. The exposure to the myriad of influences has undoubtedly been enriching. The process of navigating through the discovery and determination of who I am, who I could be and whom I aspire to be- my identity- has been confounding and distressing at times, as well as affirming and empowering at times. This project was inspired by many encounters and interactions with and around food that I experienced. These led to musings that led to questions about the influence of food and how it relates to identity and the central puzzle of a person's place in this world.

Food is a powerful, and often imperceptible force that engages everyone. It fulfills our basic needs for survival but is much more than that. It is an artifact of culture- an expression of human ideas, values and feelings- and is a part of the unique cultural identity that an international student brings to the United States (U.S.). It influences and has been influenced by the economy, culture, religion, traditions and the environment of all civilizations. On a smaller scale, food impacts on our physical condition, feelings and decisions. Gillian Crowther writes in *Eating Culture*,

This is an intimate relationship we have with an artifact, like no other; food is the only consumed cultural artifact that quite literally becomes us. Our relationship with it begins in the womb and extends throughout our lives as it shapes our daily habits and influences our health, defines our personal and group identity, and engages our minds and hands in the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of it. (2018, xx)

Humans are intertwined with food so that both mutually influence each other's identities. Food nourishes us and reflects our identity. In turn, cultural environments and human decisions determine the way food is produced, handled, perceived and valued.

In this paper, the "international student" refers to a student on a F-1 visa and/or has spent a significant part of their developmental years outside of the U.S. While missionary kids (MKs) or third-cultural kids (TCKs) can fall into the criteria of the latter description, this paper does not use the term "international student" with reference to them. I began this project intending to survey the international students on their experiences and thoughts on food back in their home country and cultures that they were surrounded by prior to attending Messiah College in America. A literature review and preliminary planning for the project was conducted and a questionnaire to send out to international students were created (Appendix 1 & 2). However, the Covid-19 pandemic led to unexpected challenges that prevented data collection to be carried out as planned. Thus, substantial modification for the direction of the project was made.

The project is still about unfolding journey of one's identity explored through the lens of food, but it has gained more personal touch including some reflections written in a memoir style form. The remainder of the paper is structured as short chapters that probes different facets of food studies and reflects on how it relates to the international student experience with personal stories forming the interludes. These seemingly disjointed sections are unified in a journey of gastronomy and self-discovery.

Setting the Table: Establishing an Imaginative Framework

Polyphonic Assemblage

Polyphonic assemblage is a concept presented by Anna Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) to describe the coming together of different rhythms of being.

Polyphony is a musical term and is present when two or more melodic lines are occurring at the same time forming a layered dimensioned musical texture. Assemblage can be understood as “An open-ended entanglement of ways of being” (83). In a polyphonic assemblage, there is an awareness of the separate parts while simultaneously being attentive to what they become as whole. They are “potential histories in the making” as the uncertainties and unfamiliarity-indeterminacy- in these encounters allow the development of unintentional coordination (23). It is important to be aware that multiple rhythms can overlap and each can occur at different times and for different durations.

This framework helps us to understand the existence and value of contaminated diversity. Tsing views contamination as collaboration through encounters and interactions which transform entities at an individual and system level, whether tangible or intangible, realized or not. It forms the part of the polyphonic assemblage and has a two-pronged approach. It allows connections to unblur realizing the potential for deeper and more meaningful ties as well as countering the pervasive influence of self-containment and expansion-and-conquest (27) The framework also acknowledges the lives and agency of both human and non-human entities, highlighting the various world-making projects or ways of being, occurring around us.

This paper presents a perspective of food and the international student experience through this polyphonic assemblage framework. It explores how food ties together history, physiology,

ecology and sociology in a way that shows us how noticing assemblages can allow diversity to be respected and appreciated.

Rojak and Indomie

The title of this paper hopes to capture, in some part, the blended and layered nature of being, college life, the international experience and the globalized world that we live in. Rojak is a popular snack that is eaten in Malaysia, my home country, as well as in other Southeast Asian countries. The dish in its most basic form constituted of fruits, vegetables and fried dough fritters, covered in a sticky sauce made of fermented shrimp paste, sugar, lime and chili, and garnished with ground peanuts. The combination is odd and unlikely, and results in something so wonderfully different from the individual ingredients. My favorite rojak has cuttlefish in it adding yet another texture and flavor to the mix. The word 'rojak' is also used to refer to something being an eclectic mish- mash.

Indomie is a well-loved brand of instant noodles by many Malaysians. Prior to coming to the U.S., I assumed that Indomie was just available in Southeast Asia. However, I found out that the company is from Indonesia and has gain international footing so that Indomie can be found in the U.S. as well. It was surprising for me to find out that friends from Kenya and Nigeria also had Indomie as a popular snack back in their home country. Instant noodles are commonplace in many a college students' diets and Indomie specifically, provides an easy, quick way to have comfort food and reconnect to home.

Wafting Aromas: Crossing Borders

As of Fall 2019, the international student population at Messiah College are made up of 112 students from 31 different countries (Messiah College, 2019). International students come from diverse cultures and backgrounds, and represent different practices and perspectives around food, which form unique food identities. Not only do differences exist in the types of food eaten but also how the foods are consumed. Some variations of this sort include the cutlery used, if cutlery is used, what holds the food, how the table is set, as well as the eating etiquette. These practices are particular to cuisines and people groups and form part of one's understanding of self and their place in the world.

While ethnic and cultural heritage plays a significant role in the food identity a student represents, other factors of the individual's identity also shape it. Identification with certain religious beliefs (Muslims and Jains), ethical beliefs (vegans and seasonal eaters), health conditions (allergies and sensitivities), exposure (familiarity with different cuisines) and roles (athletes and backpackers) will affect how one relates to food. Although the identification with a group/s can give an understanding of the type of diet it entails, people within a group will have different diets and relationships with food. The complexity and multi-faceted nature of one's food identity reflects that of their personal identity.

Spice Trade

In *Curried Cultures* (2012), Krishnendu Ray states, "...traversing national boundaries is the contingent operational definition of globalization" (3). The propulsion of living things and non-living things, tangible and intangible across borders are a part of this process. Ray also elaborates on the implications of globalization of it becoming more visible after national boundaries are

defined and it fostering greater awareness of connections between various locales as well as between the local and supralocal. (2012, 3). Yet, in human history, national boundaries have fluidity and tell the story of the power dynamics at play. As the boundaries of these lines are rearranged, crossed and blurred, the awareness that distinguishes the local, supralocal and global allows for the understanding and practice of culture, is broadened to consider the interconnections and interdependence of community at all stages.

Food has a long history of global exchange as ingredients, food gathering and cooking methods, flavors, consumption practices and recipes have been learned, obtained and dispersed. It has played a significant role in shaping socioeconomic processes and geopolitical organization, motivating expeditions and sparking conflict. Crowther writes “The acquisition of salt has loomed large in history as people sought, fought, traded and hoarded the salt they needed...” (2018, 64). Spices, now common in most households were markers of social status as they could only be afforded by the elite (2018,64). Sugar, has become a crop that is inextricably tied with the slave trade of the Americas (Tadman, 2000). Over the years, the world’s food systems have become exceedingly globalized. The Columbian Exchange only accelerated the movement of food plants across land and sea. The cultivation of non-native crop and the inclusion of foreign foods in a country’s diet has become a norm in the current day and age (Khoury et al. 2016).

In *Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey*, Gary Paul Nabhan traces the historical route of the spices and asserts that the ancient trade is the root of globalization (2014). He discovers the disproportionately significant influence of Semitic peoples in the development of the global spice trade, dating back over 3000 years prior to 1492 when the Columbian Exchange began (Nabhan, 2014). Nabhan illustrates the antiquity of globalization through the work of a Hui Muslim doctor, Hu Szu Hui, who became the imperial physician to Tutemur, the

emperor of the country from Xi'an northward into Mongolia from 1328-1332 CE. (2014,6) Hu Szu Hui's recipe manuscript has been preserved and was found to contain a recipe for lamb and garbanzo bean stew. Apart from one missing ingredient, this same recipe was also found in a 1939 booklet, *Potajes Sabrosos*, of foods prepared by the Hispanic community in New Mexico. It is not just ingredients but culinary knowledge that have been exchanged through the crossing of borders.

The interconnectedness between humans and nature as well as between various people groups go far back into history and has only become evident in the food consumption practices of the modern day. The movement of and around food form an ongoing polyphonic assemblage filled with intentional and unintentional coordination. This only highlights the necessity of collaboration for survival.

Identity of Fusion

In *Questions of Identity* published in 1996, Stuart Hall posits 'identity' as an ever changing "process of becoming" (4). It is constructed across various discourse, practices, and positions while rooted in history, language and culture. It includes the processes and representations that relate to the past, present and future of an individual. As identity is produced through the specificity of one's context and agency, it is characterized through having distinction from another.

Hall describes 'identification' as related to but separate from identity. Identification is constructed through the recognition of representation and commonality. It is an on-going process of articulation as individuals "identify with the positions to which they are summoned, how they fashion, stylize, produce and perform these positions, not completely, some never do, or in process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative

rules with which they confront and regulate themselves” (14). In other words, while the identification with many roles have expectations attached to them, one has agency, to a certain extent, in deciding the way in which those roles are fulfilled.

While identification with an identity- a person, group or ideal –can create a sense of unity, it does so through the principle of exclusion. The unity of a group is possible because it distinguishes a member from a non-member. Moreover, one’s identity is not defined by one’s identification. “Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more” (5). Identity is thus conceptualized by Hall to be a “meeting point” of what differentiates and what interrelates one to another (5).

The exposition of identity by Hall is relevant in the context of the international student experience because it captures the on-going nature of becoming, the influence from multiple sources at different points of time, the quality of being unique and the agency one has in the process. International students have identities that are developed by their experience in their home country. Through living in a different and/or new environment of the USA, they are exposed to a broader range of worldviews, systems, values, ideas and ways of doing life. These different influences provide new parts for building one’s ever-changing identity.

Tsing writes that “Selves are already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration” (2017, 29). The changes wrought through globalization, especially by the colonization of Asia, Africa and the Americas by the western nations, and more recently, through the internet, result in many students coming from backgrounds that reflect an intermingling of cultures even prior to arriving in the U.S. The effects of globalization circulate in all aspects of life including language, economy, education, agriculture, cuisine, religion and culture.

Post-colonial states, in which many students were born and raised, wrestle with relations of power and cultural complexes to navigate a sense of identity that contains the legacy of colonial imperialism yet also distinguishes itself with the unique sociocultural and geopolitical influences of the locals. Locals and the diaspora alike develop a sense of rootedness to their heritage, land and changes that are occurring through and around them. The international students represent routes of dispersal carrying with them the imagination of self and heritage (Abu-Jaber 2019, 2-5).

International students do not just cross over the defined borders of a country, but also cross over the tenuous borders of nations and culture. It is not just the mainstream American culture, especially prominent characteristics of the region the college is located, that students must navigate. Often, the students familiarize themselves with American subcultures formed by the immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, who look like them and have many similar practices. Moreover, international students are a community representing various countries, cultures and ethnic heritage with diverse worldviews, goals and practices that can have significant impact on each other as well.

The transnational experience leads to international students existing at the intersection of different ways of being and encountering multiple temporalities. Historical and present-day world-making projects converge, forming polyphonic assemblages in the culinary and sociocultural landscapes. We are inextricably tied to the past including that which we were not a part of building, but also informs the reality we inhabit. This link to food and people beyond the borders that are familiar often run deeper than we realize.

INTERLUDE: Spring Break 2019

It was the Spring break of my junior year and Laura, David and I were on our way to New Jersey to visit Yacoub, our friend who had graduated from Messiah a year before. We left Mechanicsburg around mid-morning, and it wasn't long before we arrived at Yacoub's and were seated on his couch listening to him recount his latest endeavors.

Soon after, we set out to have a meal together soon after. I was in particularly high spirits. My joy of being in such fine company was buoyed by the assurance that we would not be eating at an American chain restaurant or diner. The location of Messiah in rural suburbia and the lack of a car or public transportation limited my dining options to food at the dining hall or food I cooked. Those were decent options, but I constantly craved flavors that I couldn't recreate, and longed for the adventure of those that were untested. Sure enough, we ate at one of Yacoub's favorites, a restaurant serving Lebanese fare. The food did not disappoint. It was a gratifying time, as effortless conversation was peppered with laughter and sprinkled with exclamations of appreciation for the delicacies.

It is intriguing to find a sense of belonging outside the context of familiarity. How did we end up in this place? Laura grew up in Brazil as well as Mozambique. David was born in Nigeria and had lived for most of his life in the Ivory Coast. Yacoub hailed from Niger and I myself am from Malaysia. We sat, sharing stories, thoughts, feelings, and a meal. A meal from a cuisine that was not from any of our cultures nor the one of the country we were in. We were an assorted medley. We, who were seated around the table; the food, the earth where it had come from and the cultures they represented, the people who prepared this food and the country we were in. We were part of a polyphonic assemblage, simultaneously inhabiting and contributing towards this space where different ways of being collided.

Digesting Change: Adaptation of the Mind-body-soul Being

Digestion, Gut Microbiome & Memory

Food is essential to sustain our lives and quite literally becomes us. What is consumed breaks down through the unified efforts of the different systems in our bodies to repair, form and fuel us. This process reveals many of the complex relationships that exist within us. In addition to the physical aspect of the self, food allows us to understand the mind-body-soul connection that is the human existence.

Digestion converts food into useful nutrients and this process begins in the mind with the cephalic phase that occurs before food even enters our mouths. The sights, smell or thought of food stimulate physiological responses in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract to prepare the body to receive and break down food. The secretion of saliva, gastric acid, pancreatic secretions as well as peptide hormones are activated by signals one is conditioned one associate with upcoming food intake (Farré and Jan 2013, 698-706). The relationship of the body and the mind is intrinsic as digestion is an autonomic process. Autonomic innervation occurs involuntarily, outside the realm of direct human control and coordinates vital physiological processes such as the heartbeat, blood pressure and digestive functions (Bankenahally 2017).

The gut is also known as the second brain as it contains around 80 million neurons. Communication between the brain and the gut occurs but the gut is also able to act autonomously and influence behavior (Harvey 2014). The communication is known as the brain-gut axis and links emotional and cognitive centers of the brain with visceral functions. These processes affect and are affected by the gut microbiome as well as neural, humoral and endocrinal activities. (Carabotti et al. 2015). The vagus nerve is the means through which the communication occurs and has an important role in digestion and appetite as well as in its anti-inflammatory and relaxation

functions (Breit et al. 2018). The scope of activity performed by the gut reaches beyond its physical location to connect the mind, body and soul.

The gut microbiota is made up of the microbes that inhabit the gastrointestinal tract and play an integral role in the metabolism of the host. (Vangay et al. 2018) A few of the factors that influence the constitution of this community are long-term diet, environment as well as probiotics and prebiotics (Huang et al. 2019). The change in diet and consequently gut microbiome has implications on health. There is an association between the residency of immigrants in the U.S. and having an increased risk of non-communicable chronic diseases and obesity more common in the U.S. that is also linked with the duration of residence in the U.S. (Goel 2004).

A study showed that immigrants experience a loss of diversity and function in gut microbiome that can be detected within 9 months of immigrating to the U.S. Unfortunately, microbiome diversity decreased the longer the time spent in the U.S. There is a shift of *Prevotella* to *Bacteriodes* strains of bacteria in the gut which has been associated with the reduced ability to degrade plant fiber. The effect of the diminish gut microbiome has been observed to continue in second-generation immigrants. (Vangay et al. 2018) A high *Prevotella* - *Bacteriodes* ratio is also predictive of weight and fat loss in a diet rich in fiber. (Hjorth 2019, 149-157). Moreover, the gut microbiota's role goes beyond digestion as it also influences a person's mood and immune system. (Huang et al. 2019). The complex interplay of between the gut and the brain as well as with a whole ecosystem of microbes residing inside us indicates the relational nature of being human the necessity of communication and cooperation.

Scent and memory also play a significant role in understanding the human as a psychosomatic being along with the relationship humans have with food. As noted above, food

aromas can stimulate gastrointestinal secretions. Another aspect of scent as it relates to food is scent-invoked nostalgia. Familiar scents can transport the individual to the time and place in which they experienced that scent. Findings have also showed that scent evoked nostalgia has many beneficial effects being predictive of positive affect, self-esteem, self-continuity, optimism, social connectedness and meaning in life. The study also found that the memories associated with the scents had more positive emotions attached to it. Interestingly, participants who are prone to nostalgia reverie reported greater scent-induced nostalgia (Reid et al. 2014, 157-166). This research suggest that scent invoked nostalgia is positive for mental and emotional health on variables that affirm one's sense of self-efficacy and place in this world.

Memory plays a big role in international experience as the student is removed from the sights and sounds that are familiar. The tendency to reminisce could get greater as not only will food be missed but festivals, celebrations or holidays that have an intimate association with specific foods as well. The recollection could be provoked by a familiar scent that is unexpectedly caught or even as the student eats familiar/ traditional foods prepared by themselves or others. These moments become more profound as they are reminders of cherished moments that were formative in the development of one's identity.

Multiculturalism and Acculturation

As international students are immersed in cultural environments different from which they were socialized, they are participants of multicultural engagement. In doing so, they are developing their sense of multiculturalism, which consists of the multicultural mind and the multicultural self. The multicultural mind is having the know-how of multiple cultural traditions (or cultural schemas), while the multicultural self is the incorporation of multiple cultural traditions into one's identity (Hong et al. 2007). The development of multiculturalism within the international

student can be described as acculturation. It is a progress of change due to first-hand interactions in a context other than one's heritage culture occurring over an extended period (Ward and Geeraert 2016).

The understanding of acculturation used in this paper is articulated by the work of Marina M. Doucerain. "Acculturation consists of the creation and flexible use of new cultural schemas (development of multicultural mind) and of changes in people's self-positioning with respect to their different cultural traditions (development of multicultural self)" (2019, 11). The concept of cultural schema used in the body of Doucerain's work refers to a framework of cultural knowledge, structures, and practices. The existence of a cultural schema can often go unnoticed, as societal norms and standards are taken for granted until an interaction with a different culture. The acquisition and use of an individual's cultural schema/s provide the foundation for cultural fluency, the tacit knowledge of social operations and expectations (Oyserman, 2011). Acculturation is thus, an adaptive means to "re-establish cultural fluency" (2019, 11).

As acculturation involves the multicultural mind and the multicultural self, an important aspect to have in mind is that the two components are independent. One does not necessarily identify (self) with the cultural schemas they are fluent in (mind) (Hong et al. 2007). The acculturative changes occur in response to affordances, constraints, and reward structures available in the majority culture (Mesquita et al. 2017). International students have to adapt within the parameters of their resources, abilities and values to function within the new system they are a part of. This does not necessarily mean that they resonate with the standards and norms of the dominant culture.

As foreigners, international students may find that expression of their heritage culture, a large part of their identity, is inhibited. Practices, traditions and rituals that they have grown up

with may not be recognized or performed in the same manner. Instead they are replaced with a new set of institutions. The students may or may not identify with many of these new influences. It may also be that they perceive their own heritage culture in a new light and identify with various aspects of it in a different way. This transformation may come to be an amalgamation of cultural traits and forms a unique identity in each of them.

To a degree, one has agency in the process of acculturation and formation of one's identity. An individual can determine the qualities and characteristics he/she cultivates and/or incorporates into their identity, along with how they manifest. International students navigate multiple cultural environments (e.g. class, workplace, among international students, among local students, among students from the same home country etc.) within the larger setting of being in different country. This contextual variation fosters the cultivation of multiple cultural schemas to allow one to operate as one sees fit in a specific cultural environment. The use of domain-specific schema is known as cultural frame switching (Hong et al. 2000). This process requires developing the knowledge and skill to flexibly use one's explicit cultural self-positioning and implicit cultural schemas in response to situational demands whether to be culturally appropriate and/or to convey one's cultural orientation (Doucerain, 2019). Students might perform cultural frame switching by eating differently depending on the community around.

This has implications on the development of an international student's identity, as the experiences, priorities and agency particular to the student are all part of the acculturative forces in the transformation. These forces include a sense of affinity to their cultural heritage, preference, skill and privilege. Even within the complexities of identity, there is also ambiguity. Identity is comprised of components that one is unaware of and/or does not understand, as well as the 'stories' of self. These 'stories' of self are not limited to one's understanding of whom and

what one is but are also formed by one's aspirations. This area of identity that one is aware of is where one has agency in this "process of becoming" (Hall 1996, 4). International students are thus confronted with decisions of identity formation and transformation not just from exposure to higher education but also to a different cultural framework. The 'stories' of the self-undergo evaluation and change to accommodate the deluge of new influences. The 'stories' as well as the process and motivation behind their formation are all significant in shaping the identity.

As international students reside in the U.S., there lack of representation in rituals, customs and appearance that affirm one's personal and cultural identity. Adaptation is required and as food is usually consumed multiple times daily, the change in diet and practices surrounding commensality can become forces that affects one's self whether at a conscious level or not. Within the international student community, each unique person influences the other in the collaboration to adapt to a new country. As new understanding of different ways of being is acquired and personal relationships are established, the unlearning of misinformation, preconceived notions and prejudice is also induced.

There is indeterminacy in this process of self-discovery and building bridges, but it opens one to unforeseen alliances that could lead to a sense deeper understanding and purpose. There are overlapping and diverging objectives that students cultivate to survive in the time of readjustment and growth. The expanding and interconnecting network of polyphonic assemblages continues to become clearer as they are formed not only by the past but also by the present moment.

Expanding the Palate: Beyond Anthropocentrism

The term “Anthropocene” has been used by climate scientists to describe the geological epoch we are currently in to depict the impact of human actions on the earth and atmosphere at a global level. (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). While it can be helpful to emphasize the need for people to act in mitigating climate change, the focus on human actions can blind people from realizing and respecting the numerous world-making projects that other non-human life forms are engaged in. Yet, neither Life nor the human experience consists solely of human activities.

The non- human actants in this world: plants, animals, and microbes are active and influential, having interactions with each other as well as humans. We would be amiss to live as though humans had dominion over nature with the misconception that our species is the only history maker. Life on earth is enabled through multispecies synergistic relationships. Moving beyond anthropocentrism, we can expand the circle of moral concern and extend subjectivities beyond humans through a shift in imaginative frameworks. In this post- humanist worldview, the self-organizing powers of non-human entities is acknowledged. This is easier to conceptualize and eventually, practice through the lens of food because it links the local to the global, the tangible to the intangible and the human to the non- human.

The dualism of a human–environment is an illusion. Land is essential for life. Humans obtain food from the land. Half of the world’s habitable land is used for the purpose agriculture with 77% of this land being used to raise livestock either in the form of grazing land or crop for animal feed (Our World in Data 2019). The globalized food system has also enabled land degradation as poor land use has increasingly been driven by the consumption of distant instead of local peoples. It has been found that on a global level, “foreign crops make up 69% of country

food supplies and farm production.” (Khoury et al. 2016) This has removed consumers from the ill-effects of their consumption and has aided the disconnect from food, land and other peoples.

While land degradation prevails all over the world, a review by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) found that Asia and Africa bear the highest costs of land degradation, which is estimated to amount to USD84 billion and 65 billion per year respectively (2018). Biodiversity loss, desertification and soil erosion are a some of the adverse consequences of land degradation. The continuation of poor land use will exacerbate climate change at a global scale and create scarcity of resources that could provoke conflict from local to international levels (UNCCD n.d.). Asia and Africa are the continents from which most of the internationals originate. This contributes to power dynamics at a global and systemic level that students can experience as wealthier, western countries continue their empire building while leaving the developing nations to confront issues thrusting onto them.

Global interdependence is evident, and countries need to improve in action that considers this reality. Humanity has yet to realize and accept the autonomous nature of other non-human beings and respect the kinship that exists between humans and nature. The numerous species that are plants, animals and microbes have complex ecosystems apart from humans and yet interlock webs with the polyphonic assemblages that each person inhabits.

Test Kitchen: Assembling Food and the Self

Cooking and Recipes

The kitchen is a lab of sorts. It is where ingredients, utensils and equipment are stored and then used in all sorts of variations to construct snacks, dishes and meals. It is a place that where one's identity can be expressed. Food-getting and cooking strategies have been ever-shifting processes, and continues to reflect the forces that influence the individual. This would include cultural and ethnic heritage, preference, limitations, experience and expertise. Ingredients and cooking methods frequently used often reflect their widespread use in a specific region and/or culture. They also reveal the nutritional and emotional relationship one has with food.

Cooking is an activity that are opportunities for the individual to carry out practices, values and skills that are a part of their identity. Gender plays a significant role in the way one engages with food. The home-kitchen has largely been the domain of women and domestic cooking has long been expected of women. In many western cultures "men's conspicuous cooking" occurs in the realm of outdoor cooking such as barbecuing as well public cooking particularly as professional and/or celebrity chefs (Crowther 2018, 118). There is irony and injustice in the way society has formed and enforced expectations of women and afforded opportunities to men. Crowther also remarks that "...the division of labor is culturally constructed, the value assigned to the tasks reflects the status of those who perform them in society" (2018, 111).

One of the phenomena born out of the social practice of women in the kitchen is that they often become "holders and transmitters of culinary knowledge" which often take the form of recipes (126). Recipes play an important role in the cooking process. They can be oral or textual, precise or arbitrary, adaptable or fixed. Many learn these recipes through repetitious,

practical work in the kitchen. While experience is extremely useful, textual recipes have become the means through which culinary knowledge is preserved, codified and to an extent standardized in our present times. However, the importance of food and remembering has been felt and understood since the earliest recorded history. The oldest inscribed recipes date back to circa 1800 and were written in Akkadian cuneiform script on Mesopotamian clay tablets (Nabhan 2014, 273. Yale n.d.). Recipes hold memories and allow for the exploration and re-creation of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Creolization and Conservation

For international students, cooking can become a way to reconnect to their pasts allowing them to maintain a sense of personal and cultural identity. The globalization and commercialization of foods has made some traditional ingredients accessible. Yet this can be a double-edge sword as accessibility allows for greater opportunities having familiar foods but can lead to cultures and peoples being taken for granted. Food, traditions and practices are frequently “too easily digested without acknowledging the others’ presence” (Ray 2012, 9). Food is an easy point of access into another’s way of life but can also be a superficial method of engaging with others who are different. Cultural erasure is easily practiced as merely the “riches” of a culture in this case, food that is foreign are consumed without a care for the civilizations they are most intimately tied to.

For many international students, the transnational experience is a time of learning, modifying, enhancing and experimentation with food as well as with the ‘stories’ of the self. The lab of a kitchen is akin to the lab of the self. As cultures collide, creolization is inevitable and there is the tension between “the transvaluation of the old and production of the new.” (Ray 2012, 4). One is not the same after being exposed to novel experiences and diverse world-

making projects. The student then decides which pieces from the past to leave behind and which new pieces fit into the present self.

The restoration, reframing, renegotiation of the self is an ongoing process and is part of making meaning in life. There is a messiness in both cooking and in constructing an identity, especially one that functions within multiple temporalities. Tsing writes that “contaminated diversity is often complicated, often ugly and humbling.” It is not always pleasant to be out of our comfort zone and interact with jarring differences or reminders of ourselves or our past that we find repulsive. However, these encounters move us to see the self and others with greater clarity and are woven into the shifting assemblages of we are a part of.

INTERLUDE: Winter Break 2017

After living in the U.S. for a few years, I realized that preparing food from home is not a particularly enjoyable activity for me. I tell myself that I could never make the dish taste as good as it does in my memory, and besides, I don't even have all the right ingredients or equipment. So, I cook food that is Malaysianese, incorporating many key ingredients and preparing food with somewhat similar cooking methods commonly used back home.

Yet, there are occasions when I obey the compulsion to make a dish from home and to share this small part of myself with others. It always seems like a venture on a once familiar path, but the journey is filled with too many wrong turns, unanticipated improvisation, and apprehension. Not only my cooking skills are assessed, but more importantly, this dish, this meal, could be a defining impression that others would have of my country. There always seemed to be so much at stake. I know now that longing for the familiar is an acknowledgement of needing a sense of belonging as well as continuity. I can hear my body telling myself, “Go find the food

that gave you joy and fueled your growth. It will make you strong again.” I don’t think this need goes away.

I visited my sister and brother-in-law once in Sweden. They had lived there for several years by that time. To my surprise, I found that I appreciated many characteristics of the country. Sustainability was made a natural part of their lives. There was no debate about whether climate change was real or if people had to care. The public transportation was stellar, waste was to be separated and grocery stores were lined with mostly organic food (although, that’s how food was grown till recent human history). My brother-in-law said that I would probably like living here. I thought the same too.

For dinner one night, the three of us decided to make Hainanese chicken rice, my dad’s specialty. Both of them had not made it since being there and I, had only attempted it once in the U.S. The process is not too complicated, and the meal is not fancy by any standards but it is one of those dishes enjoyed by all social classes. The preparation for it was almost exhilarating. My dad was called to obtain the recipe and to get a run-down of the process. Some ingredients were already in their kitchen, and the rest were easily procured at the Asian grocery store. Shallots, garlic, lemongrass, ginger, sesame oil, rice and chicken for the main dish; bean sprouts, Chinese chives, eggs, light soy sauce, dark soy sauce and chili peppers for the accompaniments. We chopped, mixed, sautéed, boiled, steamed and soon enough, dinner was ready.

The aroma that filled the air was one of comfort. We took tentative first bites of the food and soon found ourselves shoveling it in into our mouths. The satisfaction went beyond filling my stomach. It is only in hindsight that I grasped that there is something deeply profound in re-creating a memory that is visceral and affirming. It exceeded the fulfillment of feeling an affinity with the attitudes and conduct of the new environment I was in. In an out of the way place I

found myself in an unexpected encounter with my many selves: the one who was a child helping my dad to make this meal in the kitchen; the one who left home to the U.S. and spent many days craving different foods; and the one who was now reunited with family again, in another foreign land, but having a taste of home.

Epilogue: Roots and Shoots

Dianne Abu-Jaber wrote in a personal essay “Cooking is *hejira*- departure and return, if you never strike out or take chances, you may become imprisoned; if you run too far, you may get lost. There is a balance between tradition and creativity...” (2019, 4). It is just so with life and leaving home taught me that. I have cultivated a deeper gratitude for my cultural heritage as well as my family, reaching my metaphorical roots further down to honor all that came before me and to celebrate the ‘stories’ and ways of being that formed me; even as I have relished in striking out to find new adventures and allow new shoots to grow.

Having an imaginative framework of polyphonic assemblages unblurs the strands of interconnections that are not always visible but present. Humans are relational creatures and are shifting amalgamations of countless encounters. We are linked to the past that extends beyond our existence; we function through the cooperation of systems within the self and have a living microbial community living inside us; we forge ties with others to find a sense of belonging; and we are intricately tied to nature to give us life.

“Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option” (Tsing 2017, 27). There is transformation of the self and others through interactions. Survival for all species requires collaboration and collaboration lead to contamination. The alternative as Tsing writes, is

self-containment in which encounters and transformation are ignored. This self-interest leads to humans and other beings having identities merely as resources to be tapped and are consequently alienated, becoming less of their true self.

Cuisines are the fruit of collaboration and can be a medium for collaboration. However, focusing on those aspects create façade that masks the conflict that surrounds food and the culture cuisines represent. Unequitable practices of cultivating, distributing and restricting food that degrade people or the environment prevail within and without borders. Our moral concern must be enlarged to include those we do not know or see. Restoration must occur with our self, with other peoples and with the land. Interdependency is already present and must be valued and each counterpart more highly regarded.

This project has led me to realize the importance in resisting the progress narrative. This narrative, prevalent in America, has been embedded into many non-western cultures as the way forward, but has resulted in the disintegration of cultural heritage, health of the land. It is not working but one is not beholden to the narrative. Jesus embodied the antitheses of what was understood as progress in his time. Many envisioned a Messiah that would lead the Jews to defeat their Roman conquerors. Yet, his ministry focused on love and restoration especially for the marginalized. In Revelations as well, the new Babylon is portrayed as the enemy of the kingdom of God. Babylon is not referring to a specific nation in a geographical location but to empires that worship and accumulate military power and wealth. It is not too hard to find nations that practice those values.

Even as I have reflected on the past, I have also had to look ahead. I have made conclusions, and I am also left with more questions: How do we engage in relations of power and appropriate power without being imperial? How do we learn to value other kinds of knowledge,

ways of being and other indicators of health? How do we work within a flawed system and maintain selfhood while respecting others?

Appendix 1: Literature Review

In preparation to answer the research questions about food and identity, a review of published literature surrounding the experiences of international students with food was performed. This allowed me to place this study into the larger context of existing studies, and build on the findings of other researchers.

The review revealed common themes concerning food experiences among international students: The eating habits of international students change while living abroad, and the diet many acquired tended to be less healthy, with an increase in consumption of processed food as a main cause (Alakaam et al. 2015; Lee 2017; Noyongoyo 2011; Strawn 2018). Weight gain and a decline in health status as a result of the dietary changes were also commonly reported (Alakaam et al. 2015; Lee 2017; Noyongoyo 2011; Strawn 2018). Food availability and price were frequently identified as key factors that influenced food choices (Alakaam et al. 2015; Lee 2017; Noyongoyo 2011; Strawn 2018). Students also reported cooking and eating out more while living abroad. While the reasons for these trends were not thoroughly investigated, cooking more was associated with independence and the lack of familiar foods being readily available, while eating out more, with convenience and time constraints (Lee 2017; Strawn 2018). These changes in health, lifestyle and options all have implications on one's identity, vice versa.

Additionally, the literature indicates that international students perceived food as a link to their heritage culture or home country. This was demonstrated through the students' efforts to obtain and/or prepare traditional foods (Alakaam et al. 2015; Lee 2017; Noyongoyo 2011; Strawn 2018). Other findings also identify and support the relationship of food and identity. One study concluded that students from sub-Saharan Africa were more likely to change their diet as compared to students from other regions. This likelihood was attributed to the lack of food

availability (Noyongoyo 2011). The finding suggests that there exists a disparity among international students of having opportunity to express and/or maintain their identity through traditional foods. It also reveals the varying levels of familiarity the host country has with different people groups and cultures. Another study found that appearance, specifically the Asian ideal body type, was a factor that influenced food choices of many East Asian international students (Lee 2017). This portrays how food relates to ideals that one identifies with, and how those ideals are indicative of one's identity.

The literature review presented evidence of dietary changes among international students and food as a major component of one's identity. It provides a better understanding of the subject matter and situates my research project. While the studies reviewed have looked at the relationship between food and identity, there are more aspects of identity that have yet to be covered. I would like to explore more in-depth the formation and maintenance of identity through the symbolism of food, exposure to multiple cuisines, and the effects of traditional/familiar foods from the perspective of the international students.

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

FOOD & IDENTITY SURVEY

There are 3 parts to this survey. Feel free to skip any question. Thank you so much for putting the time and thought into doing this! It is an essential part to my research project. If you feel the need to process your thoughts and feelings about your time at Messiah College to a greater extent, please reach out to staff at the intercultural office or the Engle center.

PART 1: Demographic

Name (optional):

Year in College:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Country of origin/ countries you have lived in prior to starting at Messiah College:

PART 2: Food and Identity (13 Questions)

‘Identity’ here refers to an ongoing process of developing. It is informed by history, language and culture and includes experience and representations that relate to an individual’s past, present and future. It is something influenced by an individual’s context as well as choice.

1. Please select the top 3 factors that influence your general food choice and eating habits?

Please explain your choices briefly

Accessibility

Finances

Preference

Religion

Time

Ethical beliefs

Sustainability concerns

Activities

Health conditions

Other:

Why:

2. Name one challenge you faced while adapting to the dietary changes and food environment here:

3. Do you think you understand and are able to navigate the food culture at Messiah College and South-Central PA?

ALWAYS/ MOSTLY/ SOMETIMES/ STILL FIGURING IT OUT

Other:

4. If you have made significant changes to your food choices, when did you do so? Briefly explain why.

First Year (Fall/Spring)

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Why:

5. What are some memorable (positive, negative, surprising, new) experiences you have had throughout your time in the US when consuming

- traditional/ familiar food
- mainstream American food
- food from culture that is neither your own nor mainstream American

6. What are some foods you rarely ate before coming to the U.S., but you frequently eat now?

Pizza

Burgers

Mac n' Cheese

Pasta

Potatoes

Fried Chicken

Desserts

Others:

7. How often do you think about familiar/ traditional foods that you don't have the opportunity to eat as often or at all at Messiah College?

Everyday/ a few times a week/ A few times a month/ Every few months/ Never

8. Describe the food and food culture/s that you grew up with: (e.g. staple ingredients, cuisines, family practices, festivals, community, tradition, gender roles)
9. Do you think that the experience with food from the culture/s you grew up in has influenced your identity (cultural and personal):

YES/NO

- 9.1. If yes to 9, describe the role of food in shaping your own cultural and/or personal identity (before coming to the U.S., how it has changed here)

10. Select the main ways you maintain your cultural heritage while at Messiah College?

Attending Multicultural meetings and/or events

Spending time with students from the same country and/or cultures

Eating at restaurants that serve familiar/ traditional foods

Cooking familiar/traditional foods

Keeping in touch with news and happenings at home

Performing practices and traditions from your cultural heritage

Example:

Other:

11. What differences have you observed when comparing the way food is perceived, prepared and eaten in the culture/s you grew up to that which you have experienced in the U.S.?

12. Have you eaten your traditional/familiar food here in the U.S.?

YES/NO

12.1. If yes to #12, did you do so on campus or in South Central PA?

CAMPUS/ SOUTH-CENTRAL PA/ BOTH

12.2. If yes to #12, please share about what it looks like (where, how often, how you obtain ingredients, with whom, why, how it makes you feel):

13. What is a comfort food for you? If you are willing, please share a story relating to a time/s when it you had it:

14. What do you appreciate about the dining availabilities on Messiah College? Do you have any suggestions for Dining Services that could enhance your eating experience on campus?

PART 3: Recipes

Share a recipe of a food that is significant to you, what is it and what is the story behind the choice? Exact units of measurement are not necessary. (e.g. food tied to your sense of cultural, national, ethnic or family identity, food you miss, food you have tried to re-create, comfort food.

For Part 1, please indicate if you will allow me to use the personal information you provided for my thesis paper and presentation:

YES/NO

- A. For Part 2 and 3, please indicate if you are willing to allow your responses to be used and shared as a story in my presentation.

YES/NO/ SOME

If some, what to exclude:

- B. If many students respond with recipes, I may be able form a recipe compilation. Would be interested in receiving an online copy of this? If so, please type your email:

Additional comments:

Thank you for the time and thought you have put into this. It is greatly appreciated. If you feel the need to process your thoughts and feelings about your time at Messiah College to a greater extent after completing the survey, please reach out to staff at the intercultural office or the Engle center.

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