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Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread-and-Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies (American Folklore Society Presidential Address, October 2005)

Research on food abounds, from the history of differing types of fare to the relationship between provisioning and culture, gender roles, and eating disorders. In disciplines concerned with health and nutrition, few studies focus on the metaphorical aspects of alimentation; while many ethnographic works do deal with the symbolic nature of gastronomy, they tend to emphasize eating as commensality and food as an expression of identity in ethnic, regional, and religious groups. Symbolic discourse involving cuisine is pervasive and complex, however, manifesting itself in a wide variety of contexts and exhibiting multiple meanings that may be ambiguous, conflicting, or pernicious. Understanding how messages are conveyed through culinary behavior requires an examination not only of victuals but also of the preparation, service, and consumption of food—for all are grist for the mill of symbolization. Here, I bring together a number of ideas about the iconic nature of cooking and eating: what is fodder for symbol creation, how and why meanings are generated, and what some of the effects of food-related representations are. I also problematize identity as it relates to food. My goal is to suggest directions for future research on foodways as well as applications in fields concerned with nutrition education, counseling, and dietary change.

One could not stand and watch [the slaughtering] very long without becoming philosophical, without beginning to deal in symbols and similes, and to hear the hog-squeal of the universe.

—Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

My points are simply stated. First, not only particular foodstuffs but also the procuring, preparing, and consuming of provisions figure largely in symbolic discourse regarding identity, values, and attitudes. Second, people have multiple identities—ethnic, regional, gendered, or classed, which have dominated inquiry, but also many others that rarely have been examined—and these identities are dynamic, subject to

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challenge and change through the life course. Third, eating practices reproduce as well as construct identity; in addition, both identity and alimentary symbolism, not just taste or availability or cost, significantly affect food choice. Finally, nutrition educators and counselors would benefit from drawing upon ethnographic investigations of the meanings of food in their efforts to design dietary programs, while folklorists should consider adding practical applications of foodways research to their plate.

When I began teaching a course on foodways in 1974, I was intrigued with not only the social dimension of gastronomy—the group customs and traditions associated with food—but also the importance of sensory experiences in determining individuals' eating habits (Jones, Giuliano, and Krell 1981); this includes disgust (Jones 2000b) as well as the effects of sensory deprivation, such as my mother's loss of her sense of smell from head injuries suffered in an auto accident (Jones 1987). Particularly appetizing, because of its richness and complexity, was the symbolic realm of foodways: why are cooking and eating imbued with special meanings, how are they related to individuals' multiple identities, and how do these idioms and ideologies affect food choice? I wondered, too, how folklore studies of the social, sensory, and symbolic might contribute to nutrition programs and counseling.

Existing methods provide limited guidance for understanding some of these matters. The typical nutrition research is experimental or quantitative; little involves qualitative, ethnographic techniques.¹ Investigations of food likes and dislikes, for example, tend to follow a set recipe of questions concerning an experimenter-generated list of food items (meat, pasta, carrots, etc.) from which respondents select those they prefer or dislike and choose from a list of possible reasons. As Letarte, Dubé, and Troche have acknowledged (1997:116), rarely do researchers take into account the way that food is prepared, the context of eating, or the associations attributed to food, people, and events (Choo 2004). Consider President George H. W. Bush's disgust at broccoli because his mother always overcooked it, one person's aversion to spinach for "it looks like hair in a shower drain," or the young woman who abhors onions because their smell hung on the breath of her stepfather who molested her as a child.

Conceptions of social actors and situations are frequently narrow. Only a few years ago did researchers think of domestic arrangements as sites of consumption involving other than nuclear families (Valentine 1999), finally acknowledging widowed, single-parent, gay or lesbian, and reconstituted households (after divorce and remarriage; see Burgoyne and Clarke 1983). Few works concern childhood traditions (Dyson-Hudson and Van Dusen 1972; Huneven 1984; Widdowson 1975, 1981), the symbolic expression of values in socializing children through food (Bossard 1943; Ochs, Pontecorvo, and Fasulo 1996), or children's agency as an important ingredient in food preparation and consumption in the home (Bisogni et al. 2002). Rarely does research take into account the extent to which "[t]he timing, seating arrangements, and dispensing protocol of a meal reflect ideas regarding role allocations, gender orientation, social order, status, and control" (Whitehead 1984:104). Who prepares the food, serves it, and cleans up; where people take their meals; the shape of a table; and who sits where and talks about what—all these convey roles, values, and ideas about gender, hierarchy, and power.

Medical and nutritional literature often pathologizes behavior, labeling other people's food habits "odd dietary practices" (Edwards, McSwain, and Haire 1954) or "abnormal" (Callahan 2003) and a serious "problem" (Federman, Kirsner, and Federman 1997:209). Geophagy (literally, the eating of earth) is often translated as the unappetizing "dirt eating" (Dickens and Ford 1972; Gardner and Tevetoğlu 1957; Reid 1992). Long-standing but seldom questioned explanations of the "disease" range from insanity to depression, iron deficiency, and hookworm (Callahan 2003; Twyman 1971). Geophagy is more properly referred to as eating clay (particularly kaolin), for that is what people typically consume (Grigsby et al. 1999). Some Native Americans used clay to detoxify foodstuffs, people worldwide and through time have seasoned dishes with it, Siberian tribesmen ate it like modern Americans eat candy, and ceramicists frequently taste clay to determine its texture (Callahan 2003; Johns 1986; Solien 1954). Americans take kaolin in Kaopectate to treat diarrhea and consume calcium carbonate when they chew on Roloids or swallow Maalox to relieve indigestion, thus practicing "a form of geophagy every time they take an antacid or an anti-diarrhea medication" (Henry and Kwong 2003:367). Some clay has appealing sensory qualities. One person told me: "I ate clay because I had seen my mother and cousins doing it. The taste was pleasing and I enjoyed it. I used to eat clay back home. I love it. I wish I had some now. It tastes sort of sour. It's good: clay from the sides of the river. I'd just get a spoon and eat a couple of spoonfuls. It was sort of soft, like peanut butter, and it tasted good." Slaves ingested clay as a statement of protest, and some people in the South consider it a "woman's dish" and a symbol of womanhood (Twyman 1971). It has a desirable texture and taste, chewing it provides oral gratification, it produces saliva and stimulates the appetite, and although some dirt can pose a health threat, the consumption of clay might well have beneficial consequences for the immune system (Callahan 2003).

Another bone of contention is that only a few identities have been researched in either nutritional or ethnographic literature. Most investigations concern ethnic, regional, and religious identification; folkloristic studies have been more cognizant than most fields of the complexity of culture, the creative uses of ethnicity (Camp 1989; Kalčík 1984; Rikoon 1982; Stern 1977, 1991), and the symbolic display of group identity through food and festive events (see essays in Brown and Mussell 1984 and Humphrey and Humphrey 1988). But too many works ignore intracultural variation in values and eating behavior as well as food consumption among those who affiliate with multiple groups or who embody multiethnic identities, such as "Cuban Jewish Women in Miami" (Wartenberg 1994) or the man whose father was from Jamaica and mother was an African American, who grew up in a Latino community in New York, and who married a Dominican (Devine et al. 1999:89). In fact, individuals draw upon many sources of self-image that influence their "personal food system" (Smart and Bisogni 2001), such as gender, age, family, occupation, class, body types, personality traits, recreational activities, and state of health—any or all of which may take precedence over ethnic or regional associations (Bisogni et al. 2002). In addition, while some identities (along with meanings given to food) persist, others change over one's "life course" (Devine et al. 1999:88).

Except for inquiries into the relationship of food to culture (usually national or

ethnic), symbolism is relegated to the back burner. When paid attention to, the symbolic is typically restricted to foodstuffs or ceremonial and celebratory occasions involving consumption as commensality. But symbolic discourse utilizing food is more pervasive and complex, and it involves more processes in a wider variety of circumstances and with more diverse meanings than is generally discussed.

Human beings feed on metaphors as ways of talking about something else: we hunger for, cannibalize, spice it up, sugar coat, hash things out, sink our teeth into, and find something difficult to swallow or hard to digest so we cough it up and then have a bone to pick with someone, which is their just desserts (see also Mason 1982; Morton 2005). Terms of endearment partake of the gastronomic: sugar, honey, pumpkin, cupcake, sweetie pie, or “my little kumquat,” in the words of W. C. Fields. Foodstuffs inform descriptions of people: a ham, nut, or tomato with peaches-and-cream complexion, cauliflower ears, and potato-masher nose who pigs out when not hot dogging like a pea-brained turkey. There’s a bountiful array of proverbs and proverbial expressions, such as you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, you reap what you sow, cast your bread upon the waters and it will return to you a thousandfold, you can’t have your cake and eat it too, half a loaf is better than none, man does not live by bread alone, variety is the spice of life, too many cooks spoil the broth, a watched pot never boils, out of the frying pan and into the fire, there’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip, watch your Ps and Qs (pints and quarts), you are what you eat, one man’s meat is another man’s poison, and an apple a day keeps the doctor away.² In other words, as Lévi-Strauss said, “Food is not only good to eat, but also good to think with” (quoted in MacClancy 1992:2).

“I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden: On Life in the Woods*, explaining his quest for nutriment beyond the physical ([1854] 1971:91; quoted in Adams and Adams 1990:244). More pointedly, Rosalind Russell proclaimed in *Auntie Mame* (da Costa 1958), “Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death. So live, live, live!” The omnipresent role of food in communication and interaction as metaphor or other symbolic form should come as no surprise, given the fact that we experience food on a daily basis from birth to death (Caspar 1988). We eat several times a day, and we often do so in social settings, which therefore generates associations between food and people (Humphrey 1988; MacClancy 1992; van Gelder 1982). Few activities involve so many senses: we hear stomach rumblings and suffer hunger pangs; see the food, smell it, and salivate in anticipation of eating it; sense its weight and density as we lift it on a utensil; and feel its heat or coldness as it enters the mouth. We detect an item’s sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy, or bland qualities on the tongue. We enjoy the feeling of satiety after consuming food while also perceiving renewed physical and mental energy. As Oscar Wilde remarked, “After a good dinner, one can forgive anybody, even one’s relatives” (quoted in Chalmers 1994:147). Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote in *The Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* that “The pleasures of the table are for every man, of every land, and no matter of what place in history or society; they can be a part of all his other pleasures, and they last the longest, to console him when he has outlived the rest” ([1825] 1926:3). Or as Gar-

rierson Keillor put it, “Sex is good, but not as good as fresh sweet corn” (quoted in Chalmers 1994:117).

In this essay I focus on the symbolic nature of gastronomy, for as Margaret Visser writes, “Food is never just something to eat” (1986:12). I am concerned with what is fodder for symbol creation, some of the ways in which people express a wide variety of identities through food in different settings, and how studies of food symbolism can be applied to such endeavors as nutrition education, the planning of special diets, and the treatment or prevention of certain diseases. In this case, “food” consists of not just items but also the preparation, service, and consumption of foodstuffs (part of the larger concept of “foodways”; see Anderson 1971; Camp 1989; Cussler and De Givé 1952:49–50; Long 1998; Yoder 1972)—for all lend themselves to the process of symbolization.³ Meanings may change from one situation to another, through time, and over one’s life, further complicating matters. The first section of this essay dwells on food symbolism, the second considers identity in relation to food, and the third discusses applications of research in regard to nutritional concerns.

Mulling Over the Language of Food

Like an additional flavor, meanings are carried with food.

—David Mas Masumoto, “*Gochisoo* and Brown Rice *Sushi*”

Dictionaries define symbol as a visible sign of something invisible, as an idea, a quality: one thing stands for, represents, or re-presents another. In 1944 Ernst Cassirer wrote that “instead of defining man as an animal *rationale*, we should define him as an animal *symbolicum*” (26). As Raymond Firth noted three decades later, human beings do not live by symbols alone, but they certainly order and interpret their reality, and even reconstruct it, through symbols (1973:20).

“Symbols are created and recreated whenever human beings vest elements of their world with a pattern of meaning and significance which extends beyond its intrinsic content,” write Morgan, Frost, and Pondy. “*Any object, action, event, utterance, concept or image offers itself as raw material for symbol creation, at any place, and at any time*” (1983:4–5; emphasis added). This is particularly so in regard to food and eating. Items of food may be imbued with special significance, be it Maine lobster (Lewis 1989, 1990) or Indian frybread (Welsch 1971), along with cuisines such as “soul food” (Joyner 1971; Poe 1999) and “Cajun cooking” (Gutierrez 1992). Even the physical characteristics of a foodstuff can be emblematic. For example, in 1972–73 the American Food for Peace Program sent yellow corn from the United States to Botswana for distribution in schools as drought relief. Shamed and humiliated by the tons of yellow grain given them as food, secondary school students in Serowe rioted, burning the headmaster’s car and destroying stockpiles of it. Only white maize is fit for human consumption; yellow is fed to animals (Grivetti et al. 1987:269). In another instance (Dresser 1999), the absence of a dish on the menu caused consternation. The food manager-dietitian at a Maryland correctional facility with a large African American population planned a Thanksgiving meal consisting of turkey, yams, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and corn bread. Inmates angrily confronted the servers behind

bulletproof glass, demanding, “Where’s the sauerkraut?” Years earlier, institution workers who commuted from Pennsylvania had introduced the pickled cabbage as a side dish. A regional food was incorporated into an ethnic cuisine and became associated with a national holiday. Its absence at mealtime left people feeling deprived and bereft. Even utensils may be iconic for some eaters. In the newsletter *American Food & Wine*, John Thorne interprets the fork as a “claw” with “long sharp nails” and hence “an unconscious emblem of the hunt. . . . [A]s coda, consider the fork in relation to the chopstick. . . . Of the two, the fork is the arrogant one, for it imperiously seizes where the other only plucks. But chopsticks are by far the more sensual instrument, delicately sexual in the gentle but urgent tugging of morsel after morsel out of the savory mess. . . . [W]here the skewering fork ensures yet again each morsel’s death, chopsticks tenderly grasp and deposit it, still pulsating with metaphoric life, into the waiting mouth” (1987:1–2).

People define events through food. “Some habits never change: a hot dog on a stick at the beach, hot chocolate at the ice skating rink, and popcorn at the movies,” one of my students once said. Although fraught with meaningfulness, such food choices may have unpleasant consequences. A friend of mine always eats Dodger Dogs at baseball games in Los Angeles. He does not like them, he eats too many, and he feels sick later, but he insists that it’s not a Dodger game without the hot dogs. Events marked by food—such as family reunions, special Sunday dinners, or holiday meals—are often problematic for people with diabetes or hypertension, whose dietary needs make them feel excluded (Broom and Whittaker 2004; James 2004).

For some, food identifies place, from region to city to small town or neighborhood: for instance, pasties in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (Lockwood and Lockwood 1991), Cincinnati chili in Ohio (Lloyd 1981), and a giant hamburger in the little berg of Harrison, Nebraska (population 360), where Delores Wasserburger of Sioux Sundries serves up twenty-eight-ounce cheeseburgers with a bag of potato chips. She began eighteen years earlier when a rancher, Bill Coffee, brought in a few ranch hands and asked for a large hamburger. That was when Wasserburger whipped up her first Coffee Burger. Since then, the diner has been featured on the Food Network and has been visited by tourists from around the world (see “Giant Hamburger” 1989). Food may also “make” place, as it did for Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II who reterritorialized their surroundings by using mess halls, gardens, hot plates in living quarters, tofu-producing facilities, and memories of food as “spaces” in which to expand political activity and create collective identities (Dusselier 2002).

Often food is invested with emotion (Babcock 1948; Choo 2004; Dusselier 2002). “I have a sense of well-being when I eat any kind of meal on a special occasion,” one person told me. “The well-being is generated by enjoyment of the people I am with. I have a sense of well-being when I eat oatmeal. I am sure this feeling is associated with TV commercials about Quaker’s oats in which oatmeal is synonymous with motherhood.” Not surprisingly, therefore, food consoles, as it did actor Ed Asner, who carried candy bars in his pocket during his childhood because he had to go to Hebrew school instead of playing baseball with other boys, or as it does for all those actresses on television shows who dig into a quart of ice cream when they are de-

pressed. "Food is a friend, a consolation, a hobby, a companion," remarked a female college student (quoted in Counihan 1999:120). People use food as a reward and withhold it as a punishment (Fuchs 1989). They give food as an expression of sympathy and support when a friend is ill or suffers a death in the family (Knutson 1965:134). In *Up a Country Lane Cookbook*, for instance, Evelyn Birkby includes a recipe for Mabel Lewis's Jell-O dish (pineapple and grapes in red gelatin with whipped topping): "This was truly a comfort salad, for Mabel always took this to a family at the time of serious problems" (Huneven 1994:H11; for the symbolic significance of Jell-O, see Newton 1992). Birkby also comments that "We learned, during those long, painful days that the quiet offer of food provided sustenance for our bodies and comfort for our aching hearts, as our family weathered the terrible storm of our daughter's death" (quoted in Huneven 1994:H11). Sometimes people transfer to food their emotions regarding others: "I always have an upset stomach when we eat at my mother-in-law's; there's something about the way she cooks—it doesn't matter what it is—that just doesn't agree with me" (quoted in Moore 1957:79).

Individuals may define themselves by the food they prepare, serve, and consume. "I use the word 'rich' to describe the effect I strive for in company meals," said one of my students. "Rich' to me means abundant, varied, interesting, and aesthetically pleasing. I describe the people whom I want to have as my guests as rich in personality. When I have company, I try to make the meal, the surroundings, and the conversation rich in order to give my guests the impression that I too am a richly interesting person. When I am a guest in another person's house I evaluate the experience on the basis of its richness: good company, good conversation and abundant food, and aesthetically pleasing surroundings." Evident in the speaker's concluding remark is the fact that people may evaluate others on the basis of food.

In social interaction involving food, individuals often make decisions about who they want to appear to be, who they do not want to appear to be, and what the best way to behave is in order to be perceived as they wish. Several studies indicate that people who eat with friends consume more food (especially dessert) than when dining with strangers and that men ingest more than women (Clendenen, Herman, and Polivy 1994; Klesges et al. 1984). Research on female college students demonstrates that being thin and eating lightly function as social indicators of femininity because of their importance in achieving status, popularity, and sexual partners (Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner 1987; see also Bordo 1990, 1998; Brumberg 1988; Counihan 1999; Kreuger 1999). Such impression management is illustrated in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Scarlett O'Hara's servant forces her to choke down pancakes dripping with syrup, yams drenched in butter, and ham swimming in gravy before leaving for the Wilkes barbeque. "Ashley Wilkes told me he liked to see a girl with a healthy appetite," protests Scarlett. "What gent'mens says an' what they thinks," Mammy replies, "is two differ'nt things." Writing in the 1950s, one researcher notes: "A young woman once remarked that she used to eat a steak at 5 o'clock when she had a dinner date so that she could eat daintily and demurely when she went out. She had a good healthy appetite, but was afraid it would give her boy friends the wrong impression" (Pumpian-Mindlin 1954:579).

While food or its consumption may be intended to signify identity, status, or social

relationship, at times people take pains to convey that the meals they serve should not be taken as an expression of feelings toward others. For instance, one individual told me in an interview (in May 1976) that, after having had a trying day she prepared a simple, light repast for guests rather than cooking something elaborate. But then she worried that “they would think that I did not care about them and that they would translate the meal to mean ‘annoyance’ or ‘obligation.’ I apologized frequently for not providing a more interesting dinner, for I feared being judged negatively.”

Many food-derived assessments of people are indeed negative, such as French President Jacques Chirac’s remark about Britain to leaders of Russia and Germany on the eve of the G8 summit in the summer of 2005: “You cannot trust people who have such bad cuisine. It is the country with the worst food after Finland.” In reaction, *The Sun* declared that Chirac should not “talk crepe” (Symons 2005). Chirac also said unkind things about the Scots’ haggis (composed of cows’ lungs, intestine, pancreas, liver, and heart mixed with onions, suet, and oatmeal stuffed into a sheep’s stomach) as well as the American hamburger. Two years earlier, in this international food fight, cafeterias in the U.S. House of Representatives changed “French fries” to “freedom fries” and “French toast” to “freedom toast” as part of a Republican protest against Chirac’s opposition to the war on Iraq. Renaming items on the menu was “a small but symbolic effort to show the strong displeasure of many on Capitol Hill with the actions of our so-called ally, France,” said Representative Bob Ney (R-Ohio), whose committee was in charge of the eateries (BBC News 2003).⁴

Food-based slurs not only denigrate others but also dehumanize the Other (Limón 1986), as in such ethnophaulisms (Roback [1944] 1979) for Germans, French, English, and Indochinese as *krauts*, *frogs*, *limeys*, and *fish heads*, or, along the Texas border (Montaño 1997), *greaser*, *chili*, *pepper belly*, *taco choker*, and *beaner* aimed at those of Mexican descent. Visceral metaphors that marginalize populations have been employed to promote adverse social policies like the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, which severely restricted the number of people from Southern and Eastern Europe. Foreigners in the United States were described as “indigestible food”—for example, the remark that “the stomach of the body politic” is “filled to bursting with peoples swallowed whole whom our digestive juices do not digest” (O’Brien 2003:36–7). Voicing a common attitude at the time, President General Sarah Mitchell Guernsey of the Daughters of the American Revolution contended that “You can never grow an American soul so long as you use a hyphen. . . . What kind of American consciousness can grow in the atmosphere of sauerkraut and Limburger cheese? Or, what can you expect of the Americanism of the man whose breath always reeks of garlic?” (quoted in Negra 2002:18).

Unsavory though some of these metaphors are, their use suggests an important point for research and application: symbols evoke emotions, act upon opinions, and influence actions. Some years ago Joanne Martin conducted an experiment with students at Stanford University to determine the effectiveness of advertisements for a (nonexistent) California winery (Martin and Powers 1983). Three groups of subjects were presented with information about the company’s winemaking procedures (types of grapes, nature of barrels, source of the grapes in France, the vintner’s name and lineage): one in the form of a story, another as a table of facts and statistics such as

that found on the back of a bottle, and the third with a shorter narrative combined with statistics. On retesting several weeks later, those who had heard the story had a markedly greater propensity than the other subjects to *remember* the product, to *believe* that the winery used these procedures, and to be *attached* to this wine—that is, willing to purchase it. Ironically, at the time that they heard the list of statistics, subjects rated that ad as much more persuasive than did those who heard the story; but it was narrating that in fact proved to be much more compelling in shaping belief and behavior.

This is the meat of my argument about symbols, that they are powerful persuaders but are often overlooked or underestimated, particularly in nutrition research. Evoking emotions, they affect perceptions and construct reality. For example, Larry Hirschhorn, a consultant trained in psychodynamics, was asked to facilitate a retreat for senior scientists in a research organization. In a brief conversation the delegate told him that the controller and president were “nickel and diming” the labs to death. Hirschhorn asked about provisions for food. Everyone was to bring a brown bag lunch. He urged the delegate to tell the president that it would be better to provide lunch for the retreat as a symbol of support, but the delegate hesitated, apparently suspecting that the president might not agree. “Puzzled and irritated,” remarks Hirschhorn, “I realized that I was experiencing the same feelings that bothered the scientists of the company.” Retreat participants would be less able to work well if the president did not meet such simple dependency needs as food, and Hirschhorn as a consultant would feel less effective. “So the president, even before I met him and before I even had a contract, was nickel and diming me to death as well!” (Hirschhorn 1988:247–8; see also C. Jones 1988:239).

As noted above, not only a food’s physical traits but also an item’s absence at table, the utensils employed to eat it, the cuisine of which it is a part, and who provides the dish and in what form may be grist for the mill of symbolization. In addition, the preparation and service of foodstuffs can send signals—for instance, burning dinner as seeming incompetence in order to escape a social role (see Radner and Lanser 1993, especially Marge Percy’s poem “What’s That Smell in the Kitchen?”). Ostensibly occasions to celebrate family unity, holiday meals can become arenas where diners pass hostility rather than bread around the table (a theme in Gurinder Chadha’s movie *What’s Cooking?*, which is described as “Thanksgiving. A celebration of food, tradition, and relative insanity”). Moreover, the very act of eating conveys meanings. That is, the rules regarding consumption (table manners) comprise “an inventory of symbolic responses that may be manipulated, finessed, and encoded to communicate messages about oneself”; hence, “you are *how* you eat” (Cooper 1986:184; see also Bronner 1983, 1986:44–55; Siporin 1994; Visser 1991).

As if it were not enough that food defines people, events, and places and serves as a basis for assessing self and others, or that symbols affect opinions, beliefs, perceptions, and actions, food also projects anxieties (see Baer 1982). The sexual dysfunction of men in military boot camp or in other institutional settings is blamed on adulteration of the food with saltpeter (Rich and Jacobs 1973). The Kentucky Fried Rat legend about a couple taking home chicken only to discover that they have been munching on a rodent expresses alarm over the loss of community control by large,

impersonal corporations displacing local vendors (Fine 1980). And the rumor that Church's Fried Chicken is owned by the Ku Klux Klan and contaminates its food with a chemical to sterilize black males projects racial fears (Turner 1987). In recent years bioengineering has spawned symbolic expression (Nerlich and Clarke 2000). The sweet visage of Dolly the cloned sheep was quickly replaced by the face of Frankenstein's monster, genetically modified produce has been dubbed "frankenfood," and a rumor spread that the government required Kentucky Fried Chicken to change its name to KFC because a study at the University of New Hampshire had discovered that genetically manipulated organisms rather than real chickens are being used—creatures lacking beaks, feathers, and feet (and in some accounts possessing two breasts and three legs) that are kept alive by the insertion of tubes to pump blood and nutrients into their bodies.

Be they objects, acts, or linguistic formations, symbols "stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings" (Cohen 1976:23). Context, therefore, often determines content; that is, circumstances affect whether or not meaning emerges (Theophano 1991:46) and which messages are conveyed or inferred. Eating everything on one's plate may appear to be gluttony, or it might mean that one follows the dictum "waste not, want not," or it might signal that there is an actual scarcity of food or money. Hirschhorn interpreted having a brown bag lunch at the retreat he was to lead as a sign of organizational stinginess, but in other situations it might speak to a desirable informality among participants. Because of the ambiguity or multiple meanings of symbols, an act may be misunderstood. For instance, a youth from Taiwan moved in with an American family to learn English. On Sunday, the hostess prepared a special family meal, setting a beautifully roasted chicken on the table, the neck cavity facing him. He picked at his food and finally said, "It was delicious, and I will leave here just as soon as I find another place to live." The tradition familiar to him was that when a person is not welcome, the host places a chicken with its head facing the unwanted party (Dresser 1994). Ignorance or transgression of cherished traditions and their meanings can cause large-scale disruption and dissention. After the Marriott Corporation took over food service at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, spending \$10 million to renovate the concession stands, it steamed many of the three million fans by no longer grilling Dodger Dogs, then by downsizing the double bag of peanuts to a single, next by telling Roger the Peanut Man that he could not hurl peanut bags to customers because of company policy against throwing food, and finally by trying to force employees (including Roger) to continue working during the singing of the "Star-Spangled Banner" (Harris 1991a, 1991b).

People assign meanings to eating what, where, how, when, and with whom (Counihan 1999:114; Tuchman and Levine 1993–1994:385). In the words of Roland Barthes, "Food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation" (1979:171). Virtually all aspects of foodways are subject to symbolization, from the phenomenon of food itself to production and procurement (Dubisch 1989; Egri 1997; O'Brien 2003); preservation (Martin 1979); planning and structuring meals (Douglas 1972; Douglas and Nicod 1974; Nicod 1979); preparing items (Brown 1981; Cicala 1995; Goldman 1981); patterns of service and presentation (Allison 1997; Graham 1981; Shuman

1981); placement of diners and the nature of their interaction (Bossard 1943; Humphrey 1988; Whitehead 1984); performance of consumption or manners and eating styles (E. Adler 1981; Cooper 1986; Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner 1987); participants in food events (Georges 1984) and their philosophy or beliefs (Devine et al. 1999; Prosterman 1981) as well as their personal food systems (Smart and Bisogni 2001); and even the proscription against food intake as, for example, fasting used for political purposes (Gold and Newton 1998; Levine 1993) and in instances of anorexia. If food-related symbolism is complicated, then the relationship between food and identity is no less problematic.

For Whom the Dinner Bell Tolls

I'm Frank Thompson, all the way from "down east." I've been through the mill, ground, and bolted, and come out a regular-built down-east johnny-cake, when it's hot, damned good; but when it's cold, damned sour and indigestible—and you'll find me so.

—Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*

The first point about food in relation to identity is that, according to widespread provisioning mythology, many foodstuffs bear the mark of gender, which in turn greatly influences the behavior of people (Adams 1990; Deutsch 2005; Heisley 1990; Moore 1957; Sobal 2005; Twigg 1983; Wilk and Hintlian 2005). For many people in Western society, milk and eggs have feminine associations, as do vegetables that contain seeds (the ovaries of plants) and that are round, smooth, small, soft, sweet, and juicy. Tubers are linked to the masculine; their traits consist of the long, thin, rough, tough, heavy, filling, and strongly flavored. Vivid, bright, warm colors in produce represent the feminine (emotional, expressive) while cool greens and blues betoken the masculine (calm, controlled, i.e., "cool as a cucumber"). In explaining how such associations develop, Marshall Sahlins (1976) suggests that societies seize natural facts, apply them socially, and then reapply them naturally. The metaphor of sweetness, for instance, is employed in socializing women to be supportive and kind; sweet objects subsequently are viewed as feminine (Heisley 1990:23). Although "real men don't eat quiche," many in fact do consume milk and eggs as nutrient-rich, strength-building foods and perhaps as symbolic domination over women and their reproductive capacity (Heisley 1990:9). Finally, red meat is masculine—as in "he-man food," "hero" sandwiches, and bowls of Campbell's hearty beef stew referred to as "the manhandlers"—while the more delicate chicken and fish tend toward the feminine.

For centuries red meat has been associated with strength, power, aggression, and sexuality (Adams 1990; Twigg 1983). It is not surprising, then, that Lawry's Restaurant in Los Angeles sponsors an annual Beef Bowl, coinciding with the Rose Bowl, in which the competing football teams are treated on alternate nights to massive amounts of steak and prime rib, or that there are always several players who vie with one another to consume the most meat. In the 2003 gubernatorial race in California, which brought forth 137 candidates led by upstart Arnold Schwarzenegger against incumbent Gray Davis, Taco Bell announced a poll in which voters would choose their fa-

favorite candidate by the type of taco they bought; for example, all-beef crunchy tacos for muscular Schwarzenegger notorious for his macho films or chicken soft tacos for the less-colorful Davis, who lost (Rivenburg 2003). Blood carries aspects of violence, arousal of the passions, and bestiality itself. Ballad publisher Joseph Ritson writes in his *Moral Essay upon Abstinence* that the “use of animal food disposes man to cruel and ferocious actions,” evident in the fact that the ancient Scythians, “from drinking the blood of their cattle, proceeded to drink that of their enemies,” whereas Hindus, abstaining from meat, are of “gentle disposition” (1802 [2000]:207). Blood appears metaphorically in everyday language: there is noble blood, tainted blood, and a union in blood as well as the thin-bloodedness of the elderly.⁵ “Spilled blood” refers to a deed of violence, “cold blooded” connotes a merciless act, and “hot blooded” signifies anger and impulsiveness (Twigg 1983).

Omnivores are often thought of as aggressive in contrast to the more passive herbivores (Nemeroff and Rozin 1989). Vegetarians all, Voltaire was horrified at the cruel inhumanity of consuming flesh (Spencer 1993:228); Emanuel Swedenborg saw meat eating as a symbol of our fall from grace (Spencer 1993:253); Percy Shelley viewed it as the root of evil and source of disease (Morton 1995); Sylvester Graham, who bequeathed to us whole wheat bread and Graham crackers, railed in the mid-nineteenth century against meat eating as weakening health and promoting lust (Carson 1969); George Bernard Shaw worried that “If I were to eat meat, my evacuations would stink” because an animal’s stench of terror at being slaughtered is conveyed to its flesh and hence to the eater; and John Harvey Kellogg, who invented eighty meatless dishes including corn flakes, lectured in the 1870s on the theory of “auto-intoxication,” that meat literally rots in the stomach and clogs the system, causing poisons to flood the body (Carson 1957).⁶

The notion of contagion (Frazer [1911–1915] 1965; Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986) informs some of these pronouncements: one literally *becomes* what one eats. (Many aphrodisiacs involve the principle of homeopathy rather than contagion; see examples in Hendrickson 1974; Walton 1958.) On the other hand, one likely eats what one *already is*: according to HungryMonster.com, statistics compiled by Domino’s Pizza about sales and deliveries indicate that men wearing muscle shirts when answering the door order pepperoni three times more often than they order any other topping, and people with pierced noses, lips, or eyebrows ask for a vegetarian toppings 23 percent more often than they ask for meat toppings. One recent study suggests that flesh eating figures prominently in the diets of those who emphasize social power, hierarchical domination, and conservatism, while people who place greater value on equality, peace, and social justice gravitate toward vegetarianism (Allen et al. 2000). Accordingly, many nineteenth-century vegetarians promoted radical causes including temperance, anti-vivisection, and women’s suffrage (Lene-man 1997; Spencer 1993), their identity and that of contemporary vegetarians symbolizing a lifestyle and set of values rather than being simply a matter of taste regarding what to ingest.⁷

I began this section of my article on the symbolism of meat and vegetables because of how fundamental they are to diet and identity: we either eat one or the other or both, and in the process we generate or convey a sense of self. In addition, sex and

gender are our most basic identities biologically and through social construction. The symbolism of meat and vegetables in relation to identity has greatly affected, and continues to determine, people's behavior in a multitude of ways, which in turn has implications for contemporary nutritional programs. Sometimes men who assume the role of cooking—for instance, firefighters—masculinize their assumption of “women's” work by using profanity profusely during food preparation (Deutsch 2005:105). Although masculine identities may be multiple—such as “strong,” “healthy,” “wealthy,” “sensitive,” “traditional,” “smart,” or “pure” men (Sobal 2005:146–7)—the fact remains that there has long been a “hegemonic masculinity” serving as a prototype or ideal that associates men with meat rather than with “sissy” or “wimpy” foods (Sobal 2005:138).

Probably as a result of long-standing notions about meat, produce, and “stimulants,” health manuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recommended a diet low in meat for adolescent boys as a means of combating masturbation, along with reduced consumption of hot, spicy foods that inflame the passions. They also advocated a lower intake of red meat in pregnant and lactating women, promoting instead the ingestion of “delicate,” “light” female foods like fruit, soups, milk, vegetables, chicken, and fish, which both reflect a woman's own delicate feminine condition and avoid stimulating red-bloodedness inappropriate to those fulfilling a nurturing role (Twigg 1983). By contrast, a man required a diet heavy in flesh because of his expenditure of energy in hard work and creative thinking, which also used up blood that must be replenished (Frese 1992:209).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many Victorian girls rejected meat, associating a carnivorous diet with sexual precocity, abundant menstrual flow, and even nymphomania and insanity (Showalter 1985:129). Spices and condiments also excited the sensual nature rather than moral character of a young woman. “Indulgence in foods that were considered stimulating or inflammatory served not only as an emblem of unchecked sensuality but sometimes as a sign of social aggression,” writes Joan Jacobs Brumberg. “Women who ate meat could be regarded as acting out of place; they were assuming a male prerogative” (1988:180). In addition, eating could quickly lead to gluttony and physical ugliness; slimness signified spirituality, beauty, and gentility. “In this milieu food was obviously more than a source of nutrition or a means of curbing hunger; it was an integral part of individual identity. For women in particular, how one ate spoke to issues of basic character,” Brumberg continues (1988:178). Then and now, denial of appetite “expressed an ideal of female perfection and moral superiority” (Brumberg 1988:188).

Evidence suggests that provisioning mythology affects which foods men and women of different classes select in their diet. Working-class and professional women appear to prefer a more feminine array of foodstuffs than do working-class men (Heisley 1990; Roos and Wandel 2005). Although many professional males give lip service to a penchant for the same items as their female counterparts, they tend to consume a more masculine set of items, particularly when away from home and in the company of their fellows. Countless working-class women prepare and eat a more masculine diet than they would like because they accommodate themselves to their spouses' preferences (Kerr and Charles 1986). “Well I *know* my husband's taste in

food so I stick to just plain things,” said one woman. “We live on beef, pork or lamb . . . so I tend to stick to the same thing most weeks—I rarely buy anything for myself” (120). Men typically eat more meat than do women, because they expect it as males and because many females think they need it. Remarked one woman: “A man that’s been at work all day doesn’t want to come home to fish fingers. He wants something a bit more substantial” (122). Another said, “When we’re having a meal I always give him more than me and I can’t bear the thought of him having less than me” (132). Yet another stated, “I tend to think men need more food inside them and I always give him a slightly bigger portion than myself nearly every time. . . . I put more meat on his plate generally” (137; regarding men’s emphasis on quantity, see also Roos and Wandel 2005).

For many of us, the construction of a meal follows traditional rules, which Mary Douglas discovered when her family strenuously objected to a supper of soup. As the cook, “I needed to know what defines the category of a meal in our home” (Douglas 1972:63). She came to realize that a “proper meal” (Kerr and Charles 1986; Sobal 2005; Walker-Birckhead 1985) is “A (when A is the stressed main course) plus 2B (when B is an unstressed course)” (Douglas 1972:68). In many British, Australian, and American homes, a proper meal from a male’s point of view consists of a centerpiece from the slaughterhouse “supplemented by two overcooked vegetables” (Singer 1990:187). In households where the man brings home the bacon, the woman’s role is in the kitchen preparing dinner timed for his arrival, thus symbolizing her obligation as home maker and his as breadwinner (Ellis 1983; Murcott 1982; for the man’s role in cooking, see T. Adler 1981). Seemingly insignificant, a woman’s failure to provide a proper meal or to not do so on time may in fact cause her partner to boil over, committing an act of violence. As one woman battered by her husband reported, “It would start off with him being angry over trivial little things, a trivial little thing like cheese instead of meat on a sandwich” (Dobash and Dobash 1979:101). Another woman stated, “A month ago he threw scalding water over me, leaving a scar on my right arm, all because I gave him a pie with potatoes and vegetables for his dinner, instead of fresh meat” (Pizzey 1977:35).

Having examined the identities of male and female in relation to food symbolism, I want to consider other ways in which people indicate who they are through alimentary activities: first, self in relation to how and what one eats; second, food choice and identity related to values, gratification, and other personal characteristics; and third, self in relation to social categories. Of these, only the third—self and food choice in relation to, for example, ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation—has been researched to any great extent in folkloristics. To take up the first matter of self in relation to food consumption, some self-images derive from the *range of fare*—that is, foods viewed as acceptable to the individual (Bisogni et al. 2002).⁸ One individual admits to being a picky or fussy eater and unwilling to try new foods, another is a food snob, someone else boasts a willingness to eat anything, and yet others identify themselves as omnivores or as one of the six kinds of vegetarians (from occasional meat eater to ovo-lacto vegetarian to vegan; see Beardsworth and Keil 1992). Regarding the actual *types of food preferred and consumed* (as distinct from what is within acceptable limits), there is the self-proclaimed junk food junkie (immortalized in Jim Croce’s song

by this title), fast-food freak, meat-and-potatoes man, salad lover, sushi addict, chcoholic, adventurous eater (or culinary tourist; see Long 1998), or pasta person (as the buxom Sophia Loren said, "All you see, I owe to spaghetti"). The relationship between identity and types of food eaten is illustrated in *The Breakfast Club* (1985), directed by John Hughes, in which the lunches of the five main characters correlate with their personalities (for stereotypical profiles in eating, see Sadalla and Burroughs 1981).⁹ "The way you cut your meat reflects the way you live," observed Confucius. Indeed, *how an individual eats* speaks to identity, whether one be fastidious, messy, a formal diner, or someone who does not stand on formality. Tolstoy's joy in expressing intensely felt physical sensations in some of his writings bears a direct relationship to his eating with his hands, absorbing sensory qualities as directly as possible (Pearson 1984). The method of eating includes ritualistic behavior, such as a person's consuming all of one food on the plate before moving on to the next; the manner in which the character portrayed by Barbra Streisand in the movie *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996) always cuts her salad into small bits, which endears her to Jeff Bridges; the way a young man invariably tears open and flattens a fast food bag to use as a place mat for the items inside, driving his (now ex-) girlfriend to distraction; or, according to Elizabeth Adler (1981), the systematic techniques that people employ to eat wedges of cake, fried eggs on toast, corn on the cob, and Oreos. The last was satirized in the late 1990s in an e-mail claiming to report the results of a study of personality based on how one eats these cookies.¹⁰ Sometimes *meal patterns* correlate with identity, as in the three-meals-a-day person, the individual who professes to not being a breakfast eater ("I don't do mornings"), the frequent snacker, or the person who often eats on the run because of a hectic schedule. The *quantity consumed* relates to self when one admits to being a hearty eater, a light eater, a nibbler, or a person who eats like a bird or, conversely, like a horse (as one man said, "I just want a lot and eat it fast so that I can go out and do something else"; quoted in Roos and Wandel 2005:172). Finally, *consistency of alimentary practices* bears a relationship to identity, as in the regular eater, a stable eater, or someone who "grabs lunch when I can."

In addition to the numerous identities related to consumption practices, there is a goodly crop corresponding to personal characteristics, which in turn manifest themselves in eating behavior. One of these traits is *orientation toward health*. A diet of organically grown, free-range, and brown, coarse, or raw foodstuffs as opposed to conventionally grown (with a helping of pesticides), factory-raised, and white, refined, and processed items testifies to health consciousness.¹¹ As a corollary, there's the patent disregard of fitness. In 1981 the punk rock band Jody Foster's Army belted out a song at a couple of hundred beats a minute consisting of "Coke and Snickers is all I eat," repeated eight times in rapid succession followed by "Health Sucks!" sung eight times in a row. Food writer Calvin Trillin, who often reviewed "rib joints," remarked, "Health food makes me sick." According to a man who was an undergraduate at UCLA in the 1970s when the counterculture health movement was strong, "Because it is so fatty and a hazard to one's health, eating Spam," which he did, "was equivalent to never going out into the sun. It was sort of like an anti-statement, the antithesis of perfection and health" (quoted in Park 1991:21). With its emphasis on personal responsibility, "healthism" today tends to create a moral discourse surrounding sick-

nesses and diseases like cancer and diabetes, blaming individuals for their problems and robbing them of self-esteem and a sense of agency (Broom and Whittaker 2004; Liburd 2003).

“The body is not the same from day to day. Not even from minute to minute,” acknowledges Emily Jenkins. “Sometimes it seems like home, sometimes more like a cheap motel near Pittsburgh” (1999:7). A second trait is *body image*. Often “fat” is implicated, particularly among females. A 1994 survey found that 90 percent of Korean high school girls who were of normal weight believed themselves to be heavy (Efron 1997). Another study showed that upwards of 63 percent of American high school girls dieted the previous year, losing an average of ten to twelve pounds (Whitaker et al. 1989). For many college-age women, growing fat betokens loss of *control*, which is another personal characteristic related to identity and hence food intake (and an issue for countless anorexics); the bodies of thin people symbolize restraint in eating that gives these individuals power over others through self-righteousness and moral rectitude. For these women students, “eating is not a simple act of fueling the body; it is moral behavior through which they construct themselves as good or bad human beings” (Counihan 1999:126).

In addition to orientation toward health and concerns over body image as well as control, other traits by means of which people may identify themselves and that relate to food choice are *salience of food*, as in “I love to eat, I love to cook” or “I eat to live, not live to eat”; *degree of satisfaction and gratification*, which is apparent in the person who gushes about being an enthusiastic eater or in the remark by George Bernard Shaw that “I am no gourmet, eating is not a pleasure to me, only a troublesome necessity, like dressing or undressing” (Spencer 1993:280); and *physiological conditions and attributes*, as in “I have a nervous stomach” or one’s being ill (with a cold or the flu), suffering from a disease (e.g., diabetes, celiac disease, acid reflux, colitis), having allergic reactions to shellfish, potato skins, citrus, tomatoes, wheat products, or monosodium glutamate (MSG), experiencing disgust and cravings while pregnant (Murcott 1988), and so on. *Lifestyle* (Hanke 1989), such as the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan, beach bum, fitness buff, or outdoors-oriented individual, is yet another personal trait giving rise to an identity that in turn expresses and determines food choice. (Residents in the Seattle-Tacoma area spoon up 60 percent more Cheerios than elsewhere in the nation, which is “consistent with their outdoorsy, wholesome life style,” said a spokesman for General Mills; see Hall 1988:17).

One final component of identity that is reproduced in or constructed by eating behavior is that of *values, philosophy, or ideology*. At a county fair, for instance, the food booths of fraternal, religious, and civic organizations sell virtually the same fare; customers may purchase their food from one rather than another vendor because of their identification with and allegiance to that organization (Prosterman 1981). For some individuals who identify with a racial or ethnic group, preparing and consuming foods associated with that identity helps keep memories and traditions alive (Beoku-Betts 1995). And as we have seen, vegetarians and health food advocates clearly state their positions through their culinary choices, asserting their identities with every bite, but there are contrarians too, such as the UCLA reference librarian who said, “I don’t do drugs currently, and I don’t drink ’cause I figured it was not good for me. So something

like Spam fills that need to not be perfect. That is, perfect people are dull and boring so something like Spam shows that you are part of the human race” (quoted in Park 1991:13).

Identities relate not only to eating practices such as the range, types, and quantities of food consumed as well as to personal characteristics like body image, sense of control, lifestyle, and values discussed above, but also to social categories and reference groups. Gender as well as class, ethnicity, family, peer groups (including occupations; see Deutsch 2005; Roos and Wandel 2005; and Wilk and Hintlian 2005) dominate the list. In *The Status Seekers*, a best-seller in the 1950s, Vance Packard describes the downs and ups of food associated with class. A man grew up in a poor family of Italian origin that subsisted on blood sausages, pizza, spaghetti, and red wine. After high school, he worked in logging camps where he learned to prefer beef, beans, and beer. Later, in an industrial plant in Detroit, he worked his way up the ladder and cultivated the favorite foods and beverages of other executives: steak, seafood, and whiskey. Ultimately gaining acceptance in the city’s upper class, he won culinary admiration by serving guests, with the aid of his servant, authentic Italian treats such as blood sausage, spaghetti, and red wine. As suggested by this example, high-status foods are those that are expensive because of rarity, cost of ingredients, labor-intensive preparation, the prominence of animal protein, and their nonnutritional meanings and associations (Berger 1981). A staple item, if prepared in elaborate ways and served infrequently, can attain or preserve prestige value (“prestige,” from Latin *praestigium*, meaning “illusion” or “delusion”).

For centuries, meat, white rice, and white bread have commanded admiration (Flynn 1944; Masumoto 1987; Spencer 1993:257).¹² According to Kerr and Charles (1986:140–3), meat is so crucial to a “proper meal” in England that it continues to appear on the table during inflationary periods or when family income wanes, albeit of lesser quality. In the status ranking of meat, steaks and chops are the highest; stews, casseroles, liver, and bacon occupy the intermediate category; and burgers and sausages rank lowest. (Offal, which is cheap, is recognized as nutritious, but it is disliked and served as a form of penance.) The specific foods considered high-status and “luxury” items vary through time and among groups and subcultures. A general rule seems to be that luxury foods “offer a refinement in texture, taste, fat content or other quality (such as stimulant or inebriant) and . . . offer distinction because of either their quantity (especially of meat and alcohol) or quality (the latter including expense, exotic origin, complexity, style, etiquette, etc.)” (van der Veen 2003:420).

As symbols, status foods may have a significant impact on people’s behavior. Charlotte Babcock (1947:391) reports an instance in which a man flew into a rage when his wife served him hamburger. He associated ground beef with the poverty and degradation he had suffered early in life, and therefore he assumed that his wife ignored or lacked respect for his achievements and pride. On a more positive note (of sorts), three nights before the Super Bowl game in 1991, line coach Fred Hoaglin treated the eight-man New York Giants offensive line to eleven pounds of lobster, fifteen pounds of steak, twenty-five pounds of side dishes, and a \$400 bottle of wine: “I wanted them to experience real quality food so they would play real quality ball,” he said (“Eating to Win” 1991). The Giants edged out the Buffalo Bills 20–19 (for a

study of an organization's manipulation of food-related status symbols among its employees, see Rosen 1985).

What one individual esteems, however, another may reject. To many, a table centerpiece of Jell-O with tiny marshmallows, bits of pineapple, julienne carrots, and other fruit or vegetables exemplifies a woman's creativity and sophistication (Newton 1992); to others, it is *déclassé*. "Cold or hot, Spam hits the spot" might be true for some—and cooking contests highlight it with award-winning entries like Savory Spam Cheesecake while Hawaiian identity seems to revolve around this canned meat—but Spam is not prestigious to all. "Being an African-American, looking good was always important, showing some kind of status," said one man who quit eating it after eight years. "Being associated with Spam would take that away from that good image" (quoted in Park 1991:18; see also Lewis 2000 regarding Spam's high and low status; Kim and Livengood 1995 concerning ramen noodles; and Belcher 1980 for attitudes toward Twinkies, or "WASP Soul Food," as Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* dubbed them). The modern tradition of using convenience foods and prepared mixes, whether Betty Crocker Potato Buds, Shake 'n' Bake, or Hamburger Helper, is appreciated by some, ridiculed by others. *National Lampoon* (1974) satirized "The Cooking of Provincial New Jersey" in an article by Gerald Sussman mimicking the beautifully photographed images of haute cuisine and class-based rhetoric in *Gourmet Magazine*. Subtitled "Twenty-one Cuisines, One Great Taste," it features frozen, canned, and processed items. Ernest Mickler's *White Trash Cooking* (1986) inverts food and status correlations, privileging lower-class food (Evans 1992). It uses a language of cheap ingredients: swamp cabbage, hog lights (lungs), lard, 'gater (alligator) tail, cooter (turtle), and such commercial products as mayonnaise, Redi-whip, and Ritz crackers. His recipes are for dishes like Aunt Donnah's Roast Possum, Mock Cooter Soup prepared with oleo, Potato Chip Sandwich, and Paper-Thin Grilled Cheese made with white bread ("no other will do") and two slices of Velveeta cheese ("no other will do").

The relationship of food to ethnic identity has long been a staple of folkloristic documentation, analysis, and presentation (see overviews by Camp 1989; Kalčík 1984; and Rikoon 1982; see also essays in Brown and Mussell 1984 and Humphrey and Humphrey 1988). Eating culture is a significant element of festivals, whether home-grown or organized by folklorists (Griffith 1988; Hansen 1996; Kurin 1997; Sommers 1994). For ethnic displays at festive events, disagreements can arise as to which food should be served: an Americanized one or a more "authentic" dish (often the folklorist's preference but whose unfamiliar flavors, unfortunately, might offend the palate of many festival-goers; see Auerbach 1991). Participants in regional events highlighting ethnic identity usually consume esoteric dishes behind closed doors while publicly displaying those that have been accepted by the dominant society, even rechristening concession fare to suggest ethnic relevance (e.g., at an Italian American festival in Indiana, calling soda pop *gassoso*, lemonade *lemonatto*, and a ham and cheese sandwich *pasticetto di prosciutto*; see Magliocco 1993).

As often noted, many members of the first generation of immigrants attempt to retain their cuisine to the extent that similar ingredients are available (regarding the importance of the "flavor principle," or flavoring as a marker of cuisine, see Rozin 1983), economics and social context do not pose hurdles, and the food items con-

tinue to symbolically tie them to the source culture (Kalčík 1984; Rikoon 1982). But alas, “Old Confucius ways don’t work anymore, you know,” says Uncle Tam in Wayne Wang’s movie *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984). “Things can’t stay the same. Something happens here. Whoosh! It changes. You only keep what you can use.” Typically, the children of immigrants opt for the foods of the dominant culture; in England and the United States it is often fast, junk, frozen, or convenience items pervading the wider society that the youth feel, or wish to appear to be, a part of rather than apart from (Ashley et al. 2004:72; Devine et al. 1999:90; Valentine 1999:519). Members of the third generation, however, may hunger for emblems of ethnicity, selecting certain foods as representations of their heritage (Kugelmass 1990; Raspa 1984; see also Negra 2002 as well as Girardelli 2004 regarding the nostalgia that seemingly sustains food-centric films and/or ethnic-themed restaurants). Fears of losing ethnic or racial traditions and other symbols of identity associated with food often surface when individuals face the prospects of having to change their diet to conform to clinicians’ recommendations (James 2004:362).

Researchers usually dwell on ethnic identities that they suppose people assume for themselves, but Robert Georges contends that you often eat what others think you are, and those who prepare the food for you choose it on the basis of who they think you think they are. He draws on personal experiences, including one occasion when he visited Greek immigrant relatives for the first time; they vied with one another to prepare him a Greek meal although they rarely cook Greek dishes and he did not ask for such cuisine. After examining a number of situations in which he was host or guest, Georges sets forth a theorem regarding food choice and social identity: “We and others select and reject certain foods, prepare the selected foods in particular ways, and serve them to specific individuals because we identify them or ourselves as Southerners, natural food addicts, men or women, old or young; and our decisions may be based on assumptions, inferences, or hypotheses rather than on ‘facts’ and may be made unilaterally rather than cooperatively, regardless of the nature or the source of the identities we ascribe to others and conceive them to ascribe to us” (1984:256).

A final point about ethnicity is that sometimes it serves up chagrin, not pride or pleasure. During a televised interview, film director Luis Valdez asked to tell his taco story (*Zoot Suit* 1982). “Mother’s tacos, I mean, they’re wonderful things, especially if the tortillas are warm, they’re hot off the stove, the beans are hot,” he said. “And it is everything that symbolizes the warmth of home, mother. It’s a symbol of the solidarity of Mexican family life.” The child carries the taco to school wrapped in newspaper or waxed paper inside a paper bag. At lunchtime the other children bring out their food. “They’re eating these things called sandwiches,” said Valdez, “which are these scientific, you know, square things that are kind of even, and inside they’ve got, you know, very neatly fine cut slices of ham, lettuce, or tomato, or what have you.” They differ so much from the taco:

And you look at it and suddenly that taco, which symbolized that warmth, is no longer the same thing. . . . For one thing, it’s no longer warm, it’s cold. So the tortilla has undergone, you know, . . . a wrinkling process that makes it look like this long, ugly, dried up thing with spots on it, and the beans are cold, and all of a sudden, it

represents everything that you're ashamed of, and you don't want to pull that sucker out and eat it in public. It's disgraceful. The taco has become . . . this obscenity. And you want that . . . nice, white scientific sandwich. . . . And rather than eat your taco and proclaim yourself Chicano in front of all these young gringo kids eating their sandwiches, you go without lunch sometimes. Or you go in the bathroom to eat it, but certainly not in public. (*Zoot Suit* 1982; for other tales of luncheon woes, see Huneven 1984)

In addition to gender, class, and ethnicity, the social categories of family and peers relate to identity and food choice (on constructing family identity through homemade food, see Moisiso, Arnould, and Price 2004). According to one study (Ochs, Pontecorvo, and Fasulo 1996:23), in socializing the tastes of children American families tend to give priority to food as nutrition ("eat your vegetables, they're good for you"), food as a material good (frequent reference to cost of ingredients and labor in preparation; hence, accepting food entails a moral obligation to consume it), and food as a reward ("Dessert is used by many American parents as if it were a proof of salvation, i.e., that one is worthy of the state of grace [delivered not by God but by authority figures in the family]"). A child is likely to be treated in terms of a social category rather than as an individual with a unique personality, and its more limited tastes contrasted with the broader tastes of adults. Research on anorexia implicates childhood experiences with food in the home, particularly struggles with issues of power and the lack of autonomy and control (Adams and Adams 1990; Banks 1992; Bruch 1978; Counihan 1999). Finally, an investigation of teenage girls' foodways found that the teens distinguish between "healthful food" served at home and "junk food" (potato chips, candy, sodas, burgers, fries) that they purchase at the mall (Chapman and Maclean 1993); the former symbolizes ties to family, the latter loyalty to peers and independence from home. The tensions that arise over whether to eat junk food or healthful food signal the conflicts teens feel between maintaining familial relations and gaining autonomy as adults. A paradox results: nutritionists insist that junk food is unhealthful and inappropriate, yet for teens such "fun" food is a symbolic way to act out the independence necessary for psychosocial maturation and well-being.

People develop self-images through multiple experiences and sources of information, be it in the home, at work, in school, or from the media. In regard to the last, advertising plays a vital role in shaping eating behavior, social roles, and bodies (Bordo 1990, 1998). "To the extent that we are what we eat, and what we eat has been influenced by advertising," writes Arthur A. Berger, "advertising has helped determine what we are, physically as well as emotionally" (1970:433). Sidney W. Mintz goes further, contending that "in the modern western world, we are *made* more and more into what we eat, whenever forces we have no control over persuade us that our consumption and our identity are linked" (1985:211). Whatever the sources and their initial impact, identities are not static but dynamic (Battaglia 1995); once enacted (Bisogni et al. 2002), they are affected by self-reflection, challenges from various quarters, clarification, alterations, and reinforcement.

Illness can call into question one's consumption practices along with the identities to which they are linked, thus precipitating changes. Flesh-eating Percy Shelley had

long felt ill, so he switched to a fruit and vegetable diet (for moral as well as health reasons; see Morton 1995). In the final two sentences of *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, he avers, "It may be here remarked, that the author and his wife [Harriet] have lived on vegetables for eight months. The improvements of health and temper here stated is the result of his own experience" ([1813] 2000:285). George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, was already an herbivore when he contracted smallpox. Friends who thought his resistance had been lowered because of "those wretched vegetables" convinced him to take up meat eating; feeling worse after doing so, he reasserted his former identity and eating practices, vowing never to abandon his diet again because of illness (Holroyd 1988:1:93). By contrast, Sylvester Graham, a staunch crusader against "over-stimulating" foods including flesh, alcohol, spices, condiments, and refined flour, resorted to meat and whiskey toward the end of his short life in a desperate effort to stimulate a failing body (Carson 1957).

"Self-making" (Battaglia 1995), as symbolically expressed in or constructed through food choice, engages the processes of monitoring, evaluation, and revision (Bisogni et al. 2002), as the behavior of the nameless African American migrant in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* ([1952] 1992) illustrates. In chapter 9, he enters a diner for breakfast. The counterman assumes that he is from the South and offers him stereotypical food: pork chops, grits, eggs, biscuits, and coffee. "He leaned over the counter with a look that seemed to say, There, that ought to excite you, boy." Ashamed and rejecting this badge of regional and racial heritage, the Invisible Man orders orange juice, toast, and coffee. "A seed floated in the thick layer of pulp that formed at the top of the glass. I fished it out with a spoon and then downed the acid drink, proud to have resisted the pork chop and grits. It was an act of discipline, a sign of the change that was coming over me" (Ellison [1952] 1992:174–5).

In chapter 13, as the Invisible Man wanders through the black section of the city, he grows angry as he sees one window display after another advertising products to alter or hide an African American identity. Then he comes upon an elderly man warming his hands against a cart from which wafts the enticing aroma of baking yams, "bringing a stab of swift nostalgia. I stopped as though struck by a shot, deeply inhaling, remembering, my mind surging back, back. . . . we'd loved them candied, or baked in a cobbler, deep-fat fried in a pocket of dough, or roasted with pork and glazed with the well-browned fat; had chewed them raw—yams and years ago." The vendor offers him a yam, butter spooned over it. "I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control." Munching on the yam as he walks along, the Invisible Man is "suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom. . . . It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper." He ceased attempting to deny who he is or to be ashamed of such signs of identity as yams: "'They're my birth mark,' I said, 'I yam what I am!'" (Ellison [1952] 1992:188).

Developing, assessing, and altering or reasserting one's sense of self, and expressing it symbolically, occurs over the course of one's life (Smart and Bisogni 2001). Self-image is influenced by personal experiences, including illness, as well as by social and environmental factors, and it aggregates elements from a multiplicity of identities (see examples in Theophano 1991). A case in point is Gary Robertson, who lives alone

on a farm in Manitoba, Canada. The son of a Scottish immigrant, he was reared by his mother as an assimilated Canadian-Anglo Roman Catholic in the city of Winnipeg. He now cultivates an image composed of several identities that are directly opposite of the earlier ones: rural, Ukrainian, Orthodox lay monk (Jones 2000a). Born in 1939, he was the only child of alcoholic, promiscuous, abusive parents; in his teenage years he sought refuge with his Polish-Ukrainian grandparents, from whom he learned a smattering of household dialect, religion, and ethnic traditions. After working in a department store, then briefly as a postman, he despaired of city life, bought a farm in 1975, spent twenty years building from two abandoned log cabins a house within which he constructed an Orthodox chapel replete with icons that he painted, and now attempts to live a monastic life of prayer, chanting, and iconography.

Robertson has long suffered from colitis, rheumatism-arthritis, headaches, hernias, sinusitis, hemorrhoids, depression, and more recently an enlarged prostate. "Of course this colitis goes back to when I was a kid," he said. It developed "because of the turmoil with the break up of the family, parents fighting—I used to crawl under the bed when I was small I was so terrified. Wait till you read that stuff," he said, referring to comments in a volume of memoirs that he began writing in 1997. "When I was 26 I was on three Valium a day. I was ready for a nervous breakdown. It wasn't from the job so much, it was from family stress." In April 1995 he suffered hives and diarrhea for three weeks; soon his weight dropped from 190 to 145 pounds. He writes, "My poverty was chronic and I did without proper food. . . . The arthritis had been getting worse and every other ailment with age setting in. . . . Here I was about to turn 56 and my whole system collapsed" (Jones 2000a:129).

He began reading books on health and diet, querying a local dietitian and a doctor, reviewing what he knew about folk remedies, purchasing commercial herbal preparations, and growing herbs. Since November 1995 Robertson has kept a daily log of what he eats, at what time of day, the supplements he takes, and any illness that he suffers. Over time he developed a diet that contains little dairy and eliminates sugar, most meat including the venison that friends would give him from their hunting, and alcohol such as the berry wine he once made. He developed a regimen of eating six to eight times a day; avoiding food or drink that is either hot or cold, which he attributes to the tradition of his Eastern European grandparents; and consuming only a single item at a sitting but varied from one day to the next (which echoes the practice of William Alcott and his recommendations in his 1839 volume of thoughts on food and cookery). The last time I interviewed Robertson (in July 1998) he had been free of colds and flu for three years and his bouts of colitis had diminished. In addition, as he settled into a new diet reflecting different values, greater control, and a new orientation toward health; he built a grotto next to the river near his house where he prays and meditates, let his hair and beard grow long, and donned the black cassock of an Orthodox monk, thereby completing his ethnic-religious transformation.

Robertson's activities bring up a final matter. "Tradition" is the staff of life for folkloristics. The discipline would not survive without being able to document and analyze customs, which by definition are a social phenomenon as opposed to personal habits. However, I have dwelt on individual rather than group identity in rela-

tion to food choice and symbols. Yet it should be apparent from the discussion of the ways in which a sense of self is linked to eating practices as well as to personal characteristics and social categories, along with the process by which self-image develops and changes, that nearly all of the examples smack of traditional knowledge, practices, and verbal expressions. People derive ideas and procedures from multiple sources such as their interactional, communicative, and experiential networks (Blumenreich and Polansky 1974); the media; health manuals; and so forth. They manage to integrate some of these notions into a personal system of beliefs and practices (a process that has not been adequately studied; see Brady 2001:vii; Hufford 1998). Although the configuration is unique, most of the components are not.

“You are what you eat” may be true in a broad sense, but on closer examination the situation is more complex than this proposition suggests. We have seen that you become what you eat literally and figuratively, because consumption practices construct identity; you eat what you already are owing to the fact that alimentation reflects self-concept (as in the expression “If you are what you eat, then I’m fast, cheap, and easy”); you are how you eat in regard to comportment and class; you often eat what others think you are, which is conveyed by what they serve you; those who prepare food for you to eat may do so on the basis of who they think you think they are; and you sometimes eat what you wish you were or want others to think you are but might not be. Whoever we are, we express or symbolically construct an identity linked to eating practices related to the range and type of food consumed, personal characteristics of the eater (including values and lifestyle), and social categories and reference groups with which the individual is associated. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then it’s time to submit some of the ideas in this essay to the test by considering their relevance to practical issues in nutrition studies.

Seeds of Change

Our eating habits are dear to us and not easily altered.

— Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*

A number of health problems involve eating—or not eating. All relate in some way to identity and food symbolism, which should interest both folklorists and nutrition educators. As Kim Chernin (who suffered anorexia-bulimia for many years) writes in her autobiography, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, “What I wanted from food was companionship, comfort, reassurance, a sense of warmth and well-being that was hard for me to find in my own life, even in my own home. And now that these emotions were coming to the surface, they could no longer be easily satisfied with food. I was hungering, it was true; but food apparently was not what I was hungering for” (1981:61).

“Fat phobia” and the cycle of starving, feasting, and purging have gone global, now appearing in countries influenced by the West where affluence makes food plentiful (Lee 1996:23; Efron 1997). “In the context of abundance, voluntary starvation is a powerful symbolic act,” writes Carole M. Counihan (1985:88). People can afford to overeat or to wolf down and then throw up a week’s worth of groceries. Hilda Bruch

reports an example of a woman who regularly has a lavish breakfast at a café and then consumes ten or twelve doughnuts, a dozen eggs, an untold number of bread and mayonnaise sandwiches, a package of Fritos, some cookies, “and so on,” which she vomits within two hours lest she become fat (1988:118). Some who suffer from bulimia use the body or physical self as a metaphor for the inner self: “As I binge, I think of food being all my problems. As I devour them, they go down inside of me to the root of the problem. When I purge, I am bringing these problems out of me” (quoted in Schupak-Neuberg and Nemeroff 1992:344).

A symbolic paradox exists (Brown and Konner 1987:42). The ideal of thinness obtains in a setting of privilege where it is easy to become fat, while a preference for plumpness (if not outright obesity) occurs in societies that suffer food scarcity: a chubby baby is a healthy baby, heftiness is attractive in men and women, and bigness confers status (Cassidy 1991). “Fat people have more luck” and “gaining weight means good fortune” are common sayings in China, where “You’ve lost weight” is not a compliment but an expression of concern over a person’s well-being (Lee 1996:24). Sobo (1997) writes that for many Jamaicans the breadth of a woman’s backside is particularly important symbolically in displaying status. Thin individuals are seen as antisocial, mean, and stingy for they do not create and maintain relationships through gift-giving and exchange of food that would make them big. “Like an erect penis or breasts plumped with milk, like a fat juicy mango, the body seems more vital when full of fluid and large in size” (Sobo 1997:262). Among some African Americans in the inner city, writes Counihan (1999:90), a woman’s ample physique can represent not only beauty but also power and victory over poverty and racism, freedom from drugs, and self-respect. For many Latinas and Latinos, *gordura* or stoutness has positive connotations; some Mexican Americans in Tucson now have coined *gordura mala* or bad fatness (Ritenbaugh 1982:359), a term that acknowledges the possible health risks of corpulence.

Ingesting red meat, too much meat, or any meat at all may account for other threats. “You do not need to eat dead animals to stay healthy. Reduce your risk of getting six out of ten diseases that cripple and kill Americans” by opting for vegetarianism, recommends Carol Adams (1998:71). According to Deane W. Curtin (1992:11), one of those six killers is heart disease. She cites research indicating that American men who eat an average meat-based diet face a 50 percent chance of dying of a heart attack in contrast to male vegans, who have a 4 percent risk. Then there’s colon cancer. In a book chapter titled “Becoming a Vegetarian” (1990), Peter Singer refers to a study published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* (December 30, 1972) revealing that the “mean transit time” of food through the digestive system of flesh eaters is 76 to 83 hours but only 42 hours for vegetarians; the researchers suggest that there is a link between the length of time the stool remains in the bowels and the incidence of cancer of the colon.

Another health problem related to consumption has reached epidemic proportions. “For the first time in two centuries, the current generation of children in the United States could have shorter life expectancies than their parents,” contends Linda Rosenstock (2005), dean of UCLA’s School of Public Health. The reason? Obesity, a risk factor for not only heart disease and cancer but also type 2 diabetes, which afflicts

sixteen million Americans and has gone global in areas where there is now an abundance of calorically dense, low-fiber, high-glycemic foods and the adoption of sedentary Western lifestyles (Lieberman 2003). The World Health Organization estimates that 140 million people worldwide are afflicted (Rock 2003:139). Native Hawaiians, American Indians, African Americans, and Latinas/os are at greatest risk for obesity-linked diseases, particularly adult-onset diabetes, the prevalence rates of which are two to six times higher than among the general population in the United States (Tripp-Reimer et al. 2001).

For the most part, a narrow range of methods characterizes research on those with diabetes. Investigations are largely quantitative, not qualitative or ethnographic. They dwell on readily discernible, researcher-designated groups, whether ethnic, rural, elderly, male and female, or a combination of these. Beyond that, little attention is paid to intracultural variation and none to the many other identities related to food discussed in the previous section. Latinas and Latinos from North, South, and Central America as well as the Caribbean are lumped together under the single rubric of Hispanic; while inferences are made about this group as a whole, most investigations in fact concern only Mexican and Mexican American populations (who themselves do not constitute a homogeneous group but differ by racial stock and ethnicity, residence, education, acculturation, and so on). Rather than exploring the social, psychological, and symbolic challenges involved in people's having to make sense of and cope with diabetes, studies are more often limited to discovering "barriers" to health care and dietary needs, which researchers typically reduce to availability, accessibility, and cost. Interventions as a rule consist not so much of generating insights into an individual's identities and his or her symbolic uses of food related to patterns of consumption, but to "knowledge transfer" (conveying information to patients about diabetes and its treatment) along with "skills acquisition" (in taking medications and reading glucose levels). Predictably, assessing the success of programs entails determining "adherence behaviors" (frequency of glucose monitoring and consistency in taking prescribed medications) and measuring such "physiologic outcomes" as levels of weight, fitness, cholesterol, and blood glucose.

Evident from the methods and metaphors, the prevailing research paradigm in nutrition research and interventions boils down to a technological model (not unlike the "technological mode of birth" analyzed by Davis-Floyd 1987), one preoccupied with intakes and outputs and with weights, levels, scores, scales, and other measurable results (Sharman et al. 1991:261). By and large, the interventions are intensive, short-term efforts aimed at achieving quantifiable objectives. Virtually all programs of nutritional education and behavioral change are claimed to be effective; within the assumptive framework employed, they probably do show improvements in technical areas of skills, knowledge, and monitoring. In addition, the "Hawthorne effect" is likely at work—that is, the activities of people who know they are being observed tends to conform to what the experimenters expect of them.¹³

A few researchers have censured the assumption that knowledge transfer is a panacea for changing behavior and maintaining alterations in lifestyle after program completion (Campbell et al. 1996; Liburd 2003; Rubin, Peyrot, and Saudek 1991). Some contend that most of the projects directed at the poor involve norms decreed

by those with power (Counihan 1999:123), are class-based and ethnocentric, and pathologize the tastes of others who lack the right cultural knowledge to eat “properly” (Ashley et al. 2004:61). Many with diabetes, particularly those identifying themselves as ethnic minorities, complain that nutritional information is not specific to their own traditions or given in a language comprehensible to them, publications are bereft of images of people like themselves, and the recipes “are for things I would never eat” (quoted in James 2004:359). The issues of living and coping with diabetes suggest the need to shift from a knowledge model to patient-centered perspectives, self-management, and empowerment (Glasgow and Osteen 1992).

These critiques are intended as constructive criticism, not simply spitting in the soup. Epidemiological research is crucial to discerning the extent of health disparities among ethnic minorities, and any kind of intervention that conveys information about prevention and treatment of diabetes is valuable. But individuals with diabetes, along with those who would help them, face many challenges, which are often in symbolic form and therefore all the more compelling. The meat and dairy industries pressured the federal government for prominence on the food chart, for four decades occupying half the wheel that depicts the basic four food groups (milk, meat, vegetable-fruit, and bread-cereal) and protesting a pyramid where these products would command far less space (Adams 1998:69–70). Televised cooking shows dwell on animal products: “It’s a pork fat thing,” exclaims Emeril Lagasse as he warms to his audience; “Oh, yeah, babe!” Fast food outlets have sprung up in airports and even hospitals (Kearns and Barnett 2000). At schools and in the workplace vending machines dispense junk food (an oxymoron). Advertisers have long been criticized for peddling snacks, sweets, and sugary cereals on television shows for kids, along with socializing children to the consumption of processed foods and meat by depicting the joys of downing a Manwich Sloppy Joe, Bugs Bunny Chicken Chunks dinner, or sandwich of Mr. Turkey while spinning to rhythms of Sergio Mendez’s “Never Gonna Let You Go” (Delahoyde and Despenich 1994). Manufacturers of food, beverages, and medicines inject products with sugar as preservative, solvent, binder, stabilizer, flavor mask, and sweetener, among two dozen uses (Mintz 1985:246). Bumper stickers, greeting cards, and refrigerator magnets declare that “Life is uncertain—eat dessert first,” “Chocolate—the Fifth Basic Food Group,” and “Tonight’s gourmet food on hold—until we can find the can opener.” Perhaps inspired by Jeff Foxworthy’s comedy routine that “You might be a redneck if. . .,” an e-mail lists “Things you would never hear a Southerner say,” such as “I’ll have grapefruit and grapes instead of biscuits and gravy,” “Give me the small bag of pork rinds,” and “I believe you cooked those green beans too long.” Often people turn jokes about themselves into a source of pride, however, “re-valuing negative portrayals as positive traits” (Henry and Bankston III 2001:1020), which in this case does not auger well for changes in diet.

But enough background. “Talk doesn’t cook rice,” observes a Chinese proverb, so it is time to consider specifics regarding research and applications. I will describe two of each. First, more documentation should be undertaken regarding plants utilized traditionally as hypoglycemic agents. Adolfo Andrade-Cetto and Michael Heinrich (2005) estimate that people in Mexico avail themselves of as many as five hundred species to treat diabetes. The few surveys that have recorded information about herb-

al remedy use by Latinas/os in the United States (principally Mexican Americans) indicate that, variously, 17 percent, 33 percent, 49 percent, 59 percent, and 64 percent of the subjects in the studies employ plant materials in treating diabetes (see, respectively, Zaldivar and Smolowitz 1994; Brown et al. 2002; Yeh et al. 2003; Pegado, Kwan, and Medeiros 2003; and Poss, Jezewski, and Gonzalez Stuart 2003). In one research project 84 percent of respondents cited herbs as possible alternative modalities whether they personally used them or not (Hunt, Arar, and Akana 2000). Among the small number of plants used to treat diabetes that have been documented thus far from Latinas and Latinos in the United States are *nopal* or prickly pear cactus (the most frequently mentioned plant in studies by Poss, Jezewski, and Gonzalez Stuart 2003; Coronado et al. 2004; and in my own research), along with *sábila* or aloe vera, corn silk, *espina de pochote* or silk cottonwood tree, *chaya*, and *maguay* or century plant.¹⁴ Many desert plants eaten as food or medicine, including nopal, aloe vera, and maguay, “contain mucilaginous polysaccharide gums that are viscous enough to slow the digestion and absorption of sugary foods” (Nabhan 1998:175; Shapiro and Gong 2002:224). Therefore, they likely reduce blood-sugar levels that stress the pancreas (which permanently damages insulin metabolism), or at least they prolong the period over which sugar is absorbed into the blood after one eats.

Health professionals tend to overlook or downplay the significance of folk medicine (Helton 1996) rather than incorporate it into a plan of care (Davidhizar, Bechtel, and Giger 1998). Several authors of works about diabetes among Latinas/os consider traditional therapies to be “negative health practices” (Brown et al. 2002:262), “non-congruent cultural beliefs” (Philis-Tsimikas et al. 2004:112), and potentially “dangerous” owing to the chance of people using them for the wrong indications and possible interactions with prescription medications (Poss, Jezewski, and Gonzalez Stuart 2003:319) or because of the toxicity of certain plants as well as the prospects of triggering a hypoglycemic crisis when herbal remedies are combined with oral therapies or insulin (Tripp-Reimer et al. 2001). A detailed review of clinical trials of herbs employed in treating diabetes, however, found that nopal and aloe vera showed positive results as hypoglycemic agents and, further, that there were no apparent side effects (Yeh et al. 2003; see also Ghannam et al. 1986; Shapiro and Gong 2002). Some contend that the use of herbs will result in people not taking their prescribed medications or monitoring their blood sugar levels (Pegado, Kwan, and Medeiros 2003). On the other hand, in a community in Mexico “better diabetes control was related to a higher level of cultural knowledge”—that is, awareness and use of traditional modalities (Daniulaitye 2004:1899); and in a group of Mexican Americans in South Texas, “those patients very actively using alternative approaches also tended to be very actively using biomedical methods; they were using all resources they encountered” (Hunt, Arar, and Akana 2000:216).

The research tasks are to document more thoroughly the plants traditionally utilized in treating diabetes, assay them in order to determine their pharmacologically active ingredients and effects, test them in clinical trials to establish their safety and efficacy, and include the effective ones in treatment plans (Croom 1983). Plant-based modalities seem to have few if any side effects, which makes them desirable. Already employed or recommended by many people, nopal, aloe vera, and other plants are

familiar; hence, they are more likely to be accepted, rather than doubted or feared by patients, if they are proposed by health professionals who are convinced of their safety and efficacy. They also may satisfy those who prefer “natural medicine.” Individuals who cultivate medicinal herbs in their yards appear to derive sensory and aesthetic pleasure from looking at the plants and breaking off a leaf, crushing it, and smelling the aroma as well as from making teas and tinctures with them. One woman in my study not only has a garden behind the apartment building where she lives but also has potted plants hanging on the balcony of her second-story apartment that are emergency supplies for use when children are sick during the night. For everyone I have interviewed, growing and utilizing medicinal plants symbolizes self-reliance. When standard interventions fail, as they do with many Latinas/os (Brown et al. 2002), including phytomedicine with proven hypoglycemic effects in the treatment plan might prove attractive and effective.

The second need in research is for folklorists and nutrition educators to collaborate on qualitative, ethnographic investigations into the day-to-day experiences of people with diabetes; such studies would benefit patients’ health. Living with this illness imposes great demands on patients who must test their blood two or three times a day, plan meals that balance food group selections, calculate calories and fat content, schedule exercise in relation to eating, and in advanced stages of the disease take medications orally or by injection daily. Most health professionals seem to emphasize the technical aspects of monitoring, dwell on the pathophysiological problems in managing symptoms and treatment, and stand by a compliance model expressed as adherence to a strict regimen of tests, diet, and exercise (Broom and Whittaker 2004:2376; Hunt, Valenzuela, and Pugh 1997:3). For many patients, however, it is not only a technical issue but also a social, emotional, and ideational one: a matter of self-reflection concerning causes, struggles with the relationship between identity and eating, and efforts at coping with meanings of illness and symbolism about food. In regard to the semiotic links between self and the food eaten or to personality traits discussed earlier, consider the difficulties encountered by those who view themselves as a meat-and-potatoes man or a chocoholic or a pasta person (type of food consumed), someone who eats on the run (meal patterns), the hearty eater (quantity consumed), the person who loves to eat (salience of food), and an individual for whom plumpness has positive rather than negative associations (body image). Relating identities to social categories symbolized by food, particularly ethnic and regional heritage, can prove problematic: “I know that some of our traditional foods are not full of nutrients but they bring back good memories of childhood and I’m not giving them up just because some researcher says they are bad” (quoted in James 2004:358).

It is important for folklorists in health fields and nutrition educators to realize that those attempting to manage the symptoms of diabetes must negotiate such iconic aspects of eating as the use of food to define events and people, to express emotions, and to find comfort. “Low fat” and “diet foods” as well as the individuals who provide them on celebratory occasions are not always welcome: “You can be banned from a family reunion for bringing a salad!” (quoted in James 2004:361). Conveying feelings toward others through offerings of food, whether it’s done by or to the person with diabetes, occurs often but not always in benefit of health (see “Big Mamma,” a dia-

betic, in the movie *Soul Food*). “We can’t express to you [in other ways] how much we love you, so let’s all sit down and take part in this dinner,” said one young man regarding older people for whom he was working and who would “feed me like five times a day, not thinking, well, this child needs a balanced [nutritious] meal so he won’t get fat” (quoted in Liburd 2003:165). As a representation of their feelings, some who prepare food heap large amounts on the plates of others; family, friends, and guests may eat to excess, because rejecting the offering can be construed as a rejection of the host (James 2004:358). It’s also common for people in need of consoling to reach for a carton of ice cream, whip up some mashed potatoes, or self-medicate with chocolate, of which diabetics must become consciously aware. Other deterrents to changing eating behaviors that have to be recognized are the concept of a “proper” meal and the provisioning mythology on which it is based, which I discussed at length earlier, and the symbolic and gustatory significance of a “complete” meal, whether this includes a course such as dessert or a particular item: “Many people feel if rice isn’t cooked [and served], they haven’t eaten,” remarked one woman. “Take my grandson, for instance. No matter what you cook, whether it’s potatoes or macaroni, you have to prepare a separate portion of rice for him. Otherwise he’ll feel like he hasn’t eaten” (quoted in Beoku-Betts 1995:543).

People with diabetes reflect on causation, fitting ideas into an existing symbolic meaning system. Although they mention biomedicine’s broad explanations regarding diet, genetics, and sedentary lifestyle, most attempt to ascertain what (including themselves) might have contributed to their specific condition, such as leading a “disordered” life or engaging in self-indulgent behaviors (“It’s not good not getting your proper sleep, not eating your proper meals, staying out, drinking and partying too much”; quoted in Hunt et al. 1997), extenuating circumstances (one woman said her diabetes is due to “just something that fails in your body”; Broom and Whittaker 2004:2375), the impact of pollution and pesticides, or the effects of stress upon the body. Researchers have documented “metaphoric bombs” (Broom and Whittaker 2004:2376) or triggers that allegedly precipitate diabetes. For some Mexican Americans, these are strongly felt emotions, such as *susto* (fright), experienced in an auto accident, altercation, or other shocking event (Hunt et al. 1998; Poss and Jezewski 2002). Other emotional causes are *coraje* (intense anger), *tristeza* (sadness or depression), *gusto* (joy), and *precoupado* (worry) (Coronado et al. 2004:580). Several of these interpretations sound like attempts symbolically to protect against being stigmatized for a disease often blamed on the patients for not taking care of themselves. A number of studies in recent years, however, strongly suggest that stress may indeed be an etiological agent, one that compromises the immune system and activates endocrine abnormalities resulting in insulin resistance (Rock 2003:152; Schoenberg et al. 2005:187; Surwit and Schneider 1993:388). Not only might stress contribute to the onset of type 2 diabetes, but it also may exacerbate an existing condition as well as serve as precursor to complications (Schoenberg et al. 2005:178–83).

Comprehending how individuals evaluate and interpret the impact of diabetes on their behavior, social relations, and meaning systems is crucial to designing educational material and treatment programs that will help them, which is the first of the two applications of folkloristic inquiry that I will address. At the very least, published

materials should be understandable to readers, free of medical jargon (or provide meanings of terms), and presented in languages other than English; of numerous booklets published by the National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse (NDIC), only four are available in Spanish “to help educators and patients improve diabetes management” (concerning what, when, and how much to eat plus information about medications), and none has been translated to other languages. Documents and ads “targeted” at or “tailored” for a particular racial or ethnic audience (Kreuter et al. 2002) should include images of people from that group; recipes must take into account not only familiar ingredients but also the flavor principle associated with different cuisines (Rozin 1983); workshops on nutrition should be held at churches, botánicas, and other community centers where people feel comfortable, rather than exclusively at clinics; and dieticians ought to provide food preparation demonstrations and lead tours to grocery stores to apply dietary recommendations (for these and several other suggestions below, see Brown et al. 2002; James 2004; Horowitz et al. 2004; Liburd 2003; and Tripp-Reimer et al. 2001).

Given the fear that many people have that healthful eating means relinquishing traditional preparations and iconic provisions, nutritionists should avoid suggesting such drastic measures. Instead, they should propose consuming symbol-laden dishes less frequently, in smaller amounts, with substitutions in ingredients, or modified in regard to the amount of sodium, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sugar (James 2004:363). For example, smoked turkey could be used as an alternative to salt pork and pork fat to season vegetables. Speaking of produce, there is a long-standing tradition of many Americans thinking it unwholesome, unclean, and even dangerous (the cholera epidemic in 1832 was blamed on the consumption of raw fruit and vegetables; see Carson 1957), which is probably why Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg developed their diets around grains. Recipe books in the nineteenth century called for several vigorous washings of vegetables before cooking them almost beyond recognition: peeled, seeded, sliced cucumbers were first soaked in salted water and then boiled for forty-five minutes, cabbage simmered for four hours, carrots required forty-five minutes to three hours on the stove, turnips needed an hour and a half, and summer squashes were boiled for forty-five minutes (Gvion 2002:148–9). Many recipes still call for cooking times that are too long, and rather than being crisp and kelly green at least one brand of frozen, precooked broccoli that I sampled a few years ago was rubbery and bleached nearly white. I recall my parents opening cans of peas, green beans, and corn that were already overcooked and letting them simmer while they fried meat to the texture of shoe leather, all of which they justified as necessary to avoid food-borne diseases. No wonder President Bush and others find their mothers’ broccoli disgusting. Such practices are a serious challenge to instituting dietary change.

Recently a family physician and I obtained a grant from the UCLA-LA Partnership to work with residents of a Latino neighborhood in Boyle Heights to create a community garden composed of organically grown healing plants, which is one model of collaboration between folklorists and health care personnel. Several people involved in the project have conducted workshops on cooking vegetables, safe uses of medicinal plants, and the preparation of herbal tinctures. A booklet that we prepared with the assistance of community members contains information about the me-

dicinal garden, sample recipes for vegetable dishes, and ways of preparing and using plant-based remedies. Effort is also under way to teach *promotoras* (community health workers) who can aid in instructing others (Philis-Tsimikas 2004). These activities are ways of applying knowledge to practical problems. So is counseling that goes beyond the technical to help patients understand their symbolic uses of food in relation to self-making, social interaction, and patterns of consumption.

The second application involves educating those in nutrition and health care fields about the significance of food customs and symbolism in everyday life, however seemingly commonplace. No one can compile an encyclopedia of food symbols, owing to their vast numbers and context-derived meanings, nor would health care personnel be able to avail themselves of such a gigantic smorgasbord of items. They need to be informed, however, of basic principles regarding the iconic significance of meat in the American diet and in a “proper meal” as well as the gender symbolism of foodstuffs, investment of emotions in meals, emblematic uses of food and its preparation, service and consumption for signifying people and events, and ways in which alimentary activities relate to forming and signaling a sense of self. They should understand how class, ethnicity, family, peer relations, and other social groups and reference categories are indexed by gastronomy, and they should be aware of the fears of many people about having to give up cherished traditions in the name of health (whether a cuisine like soul food with some dishes that can be high in fat and calories, the “Provincial Cooking of New Jersey” characterized by its abundance of processed and convenience fare, or the creative and expressive uses of Jell-O, Spam, and ramen noodles).

In the current climate of healthism, those with diabetes are often reproached for having failed to take responsibility for their health. However, “They might be more effectively supported by discourses and services that strive to restore agency without implicit or explicit judgement,” write Dorothy Broom and Andrea Whittaker, “and that dispute the common cultural currency that blames people for their health problems” (2004:2381; see also Liburd 2003). The authors note that one diabetes sufferer commented on being “treated like a leper” (2373) while other patients employed metaphors such as naughty child, foolish adult, and child needing help in feeding by an authority. Earlier I quoted Mintz (1985:211) to the effect that people are increasingly *made* into what they eat, and eat what they do, owing to external forces such as food manufacturers, advertisers, and the entertainment industry. Perpetrators, not victims, should have their feet held to the fire.

As culprits in the problem of obesity-related diseases, video games and television have long been charged with turning youth into overweight couch potatoes. A few seem to be feeling the heat. In September of this year an Australian firm will release an interactive DVD called *Escape from Obeez City*, in which the heroine fights villains like cholesterol that are making people fat; when she is captured, kids must answer educational questions in order for her to be released (MacKeen 2005). Two other video games unveiled recently are designed for children with diabetes to teach them about self-management of their condition, provide coping skills in social situations, and address problems of self-image. In the world of television, the villainous Robbie Rotten in Nickelodeon’s *LazyTown* keeps the children indoors, occupied with candy and video games; fitness-loving Sportacus and Stephanie back-flip to their rescue,

bringing them fresh air and fitness. This is one of the new wave of shows attempting to “instill a desire for fruits, vegetables and cartwheels in young viewers” (Smith 2005). Clearly beginning to address health issues, network executives nevertheless stop short of admitting guilt for Americans’ fat and lack of fitness. So does McDonald’s, long the symbol of globalization (with its burgers and fries now available in 119 countries) and happy but unhealthful meals. The company dismisses as “frivolous” a class-action lawsuit filed in 2002 by two Bronx teenagers who blame it for making them fat, and it denies that it has been affected by Morgan Spurlock’s 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*, which details the serious health problems he suffered on a thirty-day diet of McDonald’s fare. However, the restaurant chain recently began offering a new line of “premium” salads, chicken sandwiches, bottled water as an option to soft drinks, apple slices instead of fries, and a bun-less burger wrapped in lettuce. Ronald McDonald appears in some TV commercials snowboarding, skateboarding, and serving as (in the words of marketing executives) “an ambassador for a balanced, active lifestyle” and “powerful force for good” (Piccalo 2005).

If clinicians are to maximize the good that they do, they should not only understand the impact of customs and symbolism on identity and food choice as well as help remove the stigma of having diabetes, but also begin taking the compliance model with a grain of salt (see Anderson and Funnell 2000, who discuss the dysfunctional consequences, for themselves and for patients, of health care educators relying on the concepts of adherence and compliance; they also describe how they have shifted to an approach that makes patients’ lives the focus of education, which might serve as a model for other diabetes educators). A principal ingredient of the health and nutrition literature is reference to “improved adherence” as a goal and as a measure of the success of interventions. As David Hufford writes about folk medicine in the clinic (1994:125), the primary issue for many health care professionals is that of “How can we get patients to give up those health practices and beliefs that are not in accord with medicine or, failing that, how can we get them to follow medical advice regardless of those beliefs and practices?” From this perspective, food traditions and symbols are a complication or impediment in the treatment and control of diabetes. The ultimate goal should be to deliver the best medical care, however, which entails the creation of a cooperative relationship between caregiver and recipient (Hufford 1994:126; Kleinman 1980:114). Clinicians have to know patients’ symbolic uses of food, what their impact on food choice and health is, and how to talk with individuals about these matters. Health care personnel “need to learn this material within a framework that will permit them to elicit the relevant information from their patients and then discuss it reasonably and ethically with them” (Hufford 1998:300).

Clinicians might draw upon a list of general questions to obtain information from patients. Several recent works include queries that could be modified or elaborated for this purpose. G. D. Coronado et al. (2004:578–9) list such topics (for focus group discussion) as the following: What is diabetes? What puts someone at risk for getting diabetes? What are some factors that help you prevent getting diabetes? What are some things that make it difficult for people to treat their diabetes? What are some things that help people treat their diabetes? Delores C. S. James (2004:354) provides

a guide (again, for focus group interviews) asking: What comes to mind when you think of healthful eating? What factors in your life make it difficult for you to eat a healthful diet? Which foods are most difficult to limit or give up from your diet (and what special meanings are attributed to them)? Which foods would be the most difficult to add to your diet and why? What type of information do you need to help change your eating habits? And what would motivate you to improve your eating habits (and why)? Finally, Leandris C. Liburd (2003) proposes that clinicians ask patients the following: How important is eating to your social interactions and why? How do certain foods represent an event? How would relationships with family and friends change if you radically altered your diet? How often do you use food as a gift or to celebrate special occasions? And what are foods that you are unwilling to eliminate from your diet (and why)?

Devising a list of questions is not a recipe for success, however. Clinicians' perspectives need to change from strict adherence to technological and compliance models to approaches that emphasize collaboration, negotiation, and the joint development of treatment plans that the patient can live with—plans that are appropriate to the symbolic significance of food in the patient's daily life, social relations, and self-making.

To gain this orientation, health care personnel should identify assumptions in their own system of beliefs—for example, patients who do not practice healthful behaviors do not care about their well-being, biomedicine is “right,” traditional beliefs must be changed rather than built upon, people should and will follow instructions given by health practitioners, and adherence failure is the patient's fault and problem (Tripp-Reimer 2001). They can also reflect on their own symbolic uses of food socially and emotionally, which may generate greater understanding of and empathy toward patients. As Bisogni et al. write, “Learning about the identities that clients bring to and derive from eating can help practitioners to think about food through the eyes of their clients and forces practitioners to see beyond their own personal or professional meanings for food and eating” (2002:137). All of this requires another change analytically, one that anorexic-bulimic Kim Chernin (1981) finally realized after many years of struggling with food-related issues—namely, the “shift from literal to symbolic understanding” and research into the meanings of behavior.

Putting Butter in the Spinach

It requires a certain kind of mind to see beauty in a hamburger bun.

—Ray Kroc, franchiser of Mac and Dick McDonald's hamburger stand in San Bernardino, California

To bring this essay to a close, I will mention two matters, one regarding national and ethnic identity and the other concerning the application of folkloristic research to nutrition studies and health fields. In regard to discussions of ethnicity and culture, I am often reminded of the following traditional saying: “To a foreigner a Yankee is an American. To an American a Yankee is a Northerner. To a Northerner a Yankee is a New Englander. To a New Englander a Yankee is a Vermonter. To a Vermonter a Yankee is a person who eats apple pie for breakfast.” This is not to suggest that break-

ing the fast by consuming pie (or cold pizza, as some people do) is necessarily a health risk but to emphasize that, like an onion, identity is a complex, many-layered thing. Food choice and meanings are influenced by numerous factors, including culture. In addition, while ethnic identity often has a bearing on symbols and consumption patterns, it exists in conjunction with other identities, some of which predominate in one or another context (Devine et al. 1999:89). A promising research direction in folkloristics and nutrition studies, then, is that of exploring a wider range of identities in relation to food choice and symbolism.

If issues concerning diet and health are the bread and butter of nutrition studies, then in folkloristics it is questions about how and why traditions are generated, why they are perpetuated, how and why they remain stable as well as change, and what their meanings are for people in their everyday lives (Georges and Jones 1995:317). Food customs and symbolism are among these traditions. Sociologists, psychologists, and those in fields related to nutrition have conducted most of the research on diet and health, but with too little attention to the traditional and symbolic aspects of food in people's day-to-day activities. My second point, therefore, is that there is room for folklorists at the table.

Notes

1. With a few important exceptions in recent years, what Sandy Rikoon wrote in 1982 still holds: "these works present meager theoretical discussion and offer fragmented views of the relation of food systems to other aspects of culture" (12). Of more than six thousand articles about diabetes listed on the National Library of Medicine's PubMed database in the first half of 2005 (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=PubMed>)—for which diet is obviously critical—none specifically mentions ethnography, none concerns the symbolism of food in relation to this disease, and only a few investigate culture as a factor in regard to the prevention, cause, or treatment of diabetes.

2. For a history of "an apple a day" and other health proverbs, see Mieder (1993:152–72).

3. Don Yoder defines "folk cookery" as "traditional domestic cookery marked by regional variation. As everyday, domestic, family cookery based on regional tradition, it is obviously the opposite of the commercial, institutional, and scientific-nutritional versions of cookery" (1972:325). Nowadays this characterization seems unduly restrictive in its limiting traditional foodways to region and, as most of his examples indicate, ethnic groups. What renders the culinary activities "domestic" and "traditional" is that they are learned, taught, and manifested in people's interactions and communication with one another, and that they exhibit continuities and consistencies through time and space (see Georges and Jones 1995:1).

4. See Kraft (1995) for governmental efforts led by President Chirac to institute courses for school children regarding French cuisine as a means of combating culinary inroads by immigrants as well as by the American fast food industry. More recently a campaign was underway urging greater consumption of the baguette in France, the eating of which is feared to be a disappearing tradition.

5. For a wide variety of beliefs among some African Americans about the nature and significance of blood, see Laguerre (1987). For numerous examples of beliefs concerning blood and health, see www.folkmed.ucla.edu.

6. See Sylvester Graham's *Lectures on the Science of Human Life*: "It [spices, seasonings, condiments] diminishes his gustatory enjoyment,—impairs his bodily elasticity and strength, and his animal vivacity,—takes away his mental tranquillity [*sic*],—subjects him to frequent depressions of mind, and painful despondency, and increases his liability to insanity.—Red pepper, mustard, ginger, and cinnamon, are somewhat less irritating than black pepper, all-spice, cloves and nutmegs; but they are all highly exciting and exhausting, and when habitually and freely used, they are all decidedly and seriously mischievous

[sic]. The stern truth is that, no purely stimulating substance of any kind, can be habitually used by man, without injury to his whole nature” (1839:2:598).

7. The seeds of such causes were planted in the preceding century during the rise of humanism, which was marked by a concern over natural law, human rights, and a more inclusive moral code embracing not only human beings but also animals (Spencer 1993). Increasingly individuals found repugnant the “barbarous custom” of “feeding on the corpse” of a “butchered victim” that had been subjected to cruel suffering merely to serve the human taste for “flesh and blood.” Although grains and vegetables were recommended in place of flesh, the word “vegetarian” did not come into use until the 1840s; rather, eschewing meat and meat products while eating only fruit and vegetables was referred to as a “natural diet,” as, for example, in the title of Shelley’s *A Vindication of Natural Diet* ([1813] 2000), or sometimes as herbivorous and/or frugivorous. The word “vegetarian” was not taken as cognate with “vegetable” but with the Latin *vegetus* meaning “lively” or “vigorous” (C. Jones 1998); many contemporary vegetarians speak of the items in their diet as “alive” and filled with “vitality” as opposed to meat, which is “dead” (Fleshman 1973). A Vegetarian Society was founded in England in 1847, an American Vegetarian Convention was formed in 1850, and a Vegetarian Society was established in Germany in 1867 (Spencer 1993). By the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the principal objections to consuming flesh expressed by vegetarians today had been articulated. They include such contentions as creophagy or flesh eating is unhealthful, animal slaughter brutalizes human character, raising animals for food inflicts suffering on our fellow creatures, and stock breeding is a waste of environmental resources and an inefficient way of feeding people in the face of large-scale hunger (Guerrini 1999; Rudrum 2003; Spencer 1993; Thomas 1983; for contemporary attitudes, see Allen et al. 2000; Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Dietz et al. 1995; Grivetti et al. 1987; Gvion 2002; and Kalof et al. 1999).

8. In this section on identities related to food and on the process by which identities develop and change, I am drawing heavily upon Bisogni et al. (2002) and to some extent upon ideas in Jones (1995).

9. The five students are punished for mischief by having to serve detention at school all day Saturday; they must write a one-thousand-word report on who they are and how they got that way, which they never do; rather, it’s through their interactions stimulated by eating together—food as “social facilitator” (see Clendenen, Herman, and Polivy 1994)—that they discover much about themselves and one another. At lunch, Claire (“the princess”), who wears diamond earrings from her mother and drives her father’s BMW, opens up a neat, gray bag from which she withdraws a Japanese wood plate, napkin, chopsticks, and black lacquered box of sushi, along with a decanter of soy sauce. Andrew (“the jock”) plops a large shopping bag on his desk containing a big bag of chips, three thick sandwiches, cookies, a banana, an apple, and a quart carton of milk; he’s carbo-loading for a wrestling match. Brian, who is a straight-A student and member of both the chess and physics clubs, has brought a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with the crusts removed, a Thermos of soup, and a container of apple juice. (“All the food groups are represented,” chides another student.) Allison opens a can of Coca-Cola that foams over; she licks off the top. She opens a sandwich, peels off a thin slice of meat, tosses it over her shoulder where it sticks to a sculpture, grabs two straws, pours sugar out of them onto each slice of bread and into her mouth, and slurps soda. From a plastic bag she grabs a handful of Cheese Doodles, dribbles them onto the bread slices, crushes them with a grinding motion of her hand, folds the two slices together into a sandwich, and takes an enormous bite. Allison’s hair is a mess, she hides her face in the hood of her jacket, and she has no friends. The fifth student, John, has no food for lunch, only a can of Coke. A rebel and outlaw, he comes from a home of domestic violence and is abusive toward others, remarking sarcastically about their food choices and personalities.

10. The email message reads as follows:

Psychiatrists have discovered that the manner in which people eat Oreo cookies provides great insight into their personalities. Choose which method best describes your favorite way of eating Oreos:

1. The whole thing all at once.
2. One bite at a time
3. Slow and methodical nibbles examining the results of each bite afterwards.
4. In little feverous nibbles.
5. Dunked in some liquid (milk, coffee . . .).

6. Twisted apart, the inside, then the cookie.
7. Twisted apart, the inside, and toss the cookie.
8. Just the cookie, not the inside.
9. I just like to lick them, not eat them.
10. I don't have a favorite way because I don't like Oreos.

Your Personality:

1. The whole thing
This means you consume life with abandon, you are fun to be with, exciting, carefree with some hint of recklessness. You are totally irresponsible. No one should trust you with their children.
2. One bite at a time.
You are lucky to be one of the 5.4 billion other people who eat their Oreos this very same way. Just like them, you lack imagination, but that's ok, not to worry, you're normal.
3. Slow and Methodical.
You follow the rules. You're very tidy and orderly. You're very meticulous in every detail with every thing you do to the point of being anal retentive and irritating to others. Stay out of the fast lane if you're only going to go the speed limit!
4. Feverous Nibbles.
Your boss likes you because you get your work done quickly. You always have a million things to do and never enough time to do them. Mental break downs and suicides run in your family. Valium . . . would do you good.
5. Dunked.
Every one likes you because you are always up beat. You like to sugar coat unpleasant experiences and rationalize bad situations into good ones. You are in total denial about the shambles you call a life. You have a propensity towards narcotic addiction.
6. Twisted apart, the inside, and then the cookie.
You have a highly curious nature. You take pleasure in breaking things apart to find out how they work, though not always able to put them back together, so you destroy all the evidence of your activities. You deny your involvement when things go wrong. You are a compulsive liar and exhibit deviant, if not criminal, behavior.
7. Twisted apart, the inside, and then toss the cookie.
You are good at business and take risks that pay off. You take what you want and throw the rest away. You are greedy, selfish, mean, and lack feelings for others. You should be ashamed of yourself. But that's ok, you don't care, you got yours.
8. Just the cookie, not the inside.
You enjoy pain.
9. I just like to lick them, not eat them.
Stay away from small furry animals and seek professional medical help—immediately.
10. I don't have a favorite way, I don't like Oreo cookies.
You probably come from a rich family, and like to wear nice things, and go to up-scale restaurants. You are particular and fussy about the things you buy, own, and wear. Things have to be just right. You like to be pampered. You are a prima donna. There's just no pleasing you!

11. Such concerns today were propagated during the 1960s by the counterculture protest against the food industry establishment (Dubisch 1989). The evils were numerous: the high sugar content of popular breakfast cereals (according to *Esquire* magazine's "Dubious Achievement Awards" in 1972, Wheaties, "the breakfast of champions," ranked thirtieth in a field of sixty, falling in nutritional value behind Apple Jacks, Clackers, Froot Loops and other sugar-laden products); heavy doses of additives and preservatives in processed foods that already had lost much of their nutritive value (a classic example of additives is "lemon cream pie" that contains neither lemon nor cream); the overuse of chemical fertilizers; the reliance on hormones and antibiotics to stimulate animal growth; and the proliferation of pesticides, which continues to be a problem ("Sure, it's going to kill a lot of people, but they may be dying of something else anyway," allegedly remarked Othal Brand, member of a Texas pesticide review

board, regarding chlordane). A system of symbols that binds beliefs and behaviors includes a Romantic ideal of returning to nature or a “golden age” signified by homemade bread, home-canned produce, and other forms of subsistence; preference for frozen yoghurt over ice cream; wheat germ sprinkled on cereal; sprouts on whole grain bread (or “Bible breads”; see Waldenberger 1995); vegetable and fruit juice in place of sodas; and raw and coarse foods rather than processed and refined ones (Dubisch 1989; Fleshman 1973). Sugar has been one of the most powerful condensed symbols for colonialism, slavery, industrial capitalism, and globalization (Aykroyd 1967; Mintz 1986). It is also drawn upon to explain youth violence through addiction and hyperactivity, and it serves as a class-based emblem of what’s wrong with welfare programs, because the poor spend their food stamps on soft drinks and sweets (Counihan 1999:123; Mechling and Mechling 1988). The Twinkie Defense became a metaphor for the evils of sweets and junk food. The attorney defending former San Francisco Supervisor Dan White, on trial for killing Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1980, mustered the defense that extended the notion of “diminished capacity” to the cycle of stress, depression, consumption of sugar-laden junk food, and ultimate loss of self-control. The jury returned a verdict of manslaughter, not murder; however, many today who have heard of the Twinkie Defense think that eating sweets caused White’s diminished capacity, which further strengthens the symbolism of the evils of junk food. “Some people say that Twinkies are the quintessential junk food, but I believe in the things,” remarked Jimmy Dewar, who named them (inspired by a sign outside St. Louis advertising Twinkle Toes Shoes). “I fed them to my four kids, and they feed them to my 15 grandchildren.” One son played college football, another professional ball. “Twinkies never hurt them” (quoted in Klein 1989:3).

12. Flynn (1944) writes that seventeenth-century Elizabethan England had five kinds of wheat bread, each of which had its class associations. Manchet, the bread of higher aristocratic tables, consisted of six-ounce loaves, “white and sweet.” Cheat was the household bread of superior families; grey or yellow, it was made of flour from which the coarsest bran was removed. Raveled cheat was found on the tables of fairly prosperous citizens; it was baked in sixteen-ounce loaves made from meal from which twenty-two pounds of bran to the bushel was removed. Brown was of first quality; it was wheat meal without any bran removed. Inferior brown consisted almost entirely of bran. Miscelin was an inferior brown mixed with rye meal. Other breads, consumed by the poor, were made of rye, barley, oats, beans, peas, corn, or mixtures, but not wheat. Ground acorn bread was for the very lowliest.

In regard to meat, visitors to America were amazed at the amount of flesh ingested. In *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Frances Trollope wrote, “They consume an extraordinary quantity of bacon. Ham and beef-steaks appear morning, noon and night” ([1832] 1949:297). Letter after letter to relatives in the Old World proclaimed, “We eat meat three times a day”; in one instance an immigrant wrote “twice a day” fearing that readers wouldn’t believe the actual frequency (Schlesinger Sr. 1944–47). Average meat consumption for the decade of 1830–39 was 178 pounds per person per year (Cummings 1940:15), contrasted with a little more than half of that (91 pounds) in 1994 (see Chalmers 1994:238). Americans ate at least twice the amount of beef as the English and three times the pork consumed in Europe. Said a Southern physician: “The United States of America might properly be called the great Hog-eating Confederacy, or the Republic of Porkdom” (Hilliard 1969:4). The nineteenth century was a dyspeptic age because of the fried foods, rich gravies, and fatty meat (Carson 1957) that were eaten with “the rapidity of a wolf” (Frederick Marryat; quoted in Coleman 1986:1). In 1976, *Esquire* magazine (vol. 86, no. 2) satirized rapid ingestion with what at first appears to be a real advertisement on the last page of the magazine; it features Evelyn Wood’s speed eating lessons (“Let me show you how to cut your eating time in half & triple your consumption in just five days!”), which is based on a speed-reading course popular in the 1960s. One nineteenth-century pundit remarked that the American motto should be “Gobble, Gulp, and Go” (Maxwell 1841:69; quoted in Schlesinger Sr. 1944–47:209). America’s fast food industry has become a potent symbol of globalization and corporate colonization (with the golden arches and the Big Mac as icons; see Kearns and Barnett 2000). In regard to the nineteenth century, writes Russel Nye, “people ate stupefyingly huge meals of fried foods, fat meats, and few and overdone vegetables, all in prodigious amounts. Cookbooks recommended a standard ‘three meat, three dessert’ menu for the average home meal. . . . Gout, dysentery, and dyspepsia were pervasive alimentary ailments” (1974:349). Today, heart disease, diabetes, and colon cancer are implicated in a similar diet.

13. The realization that behavior may be altered because individuals know they are being studied oc-

curred during a research project (1927–1932) at the Hawthorne Plant of the Western Electric Company in Cicero, Illinois, which was led by Elton Mayo of the Harvard Business School. Mayo and his team sought to discover influences of the workplace on worker productivity through various experiments such as changing the humidity, brightness of the lights, work breaks, and so on. Regardless of the nature of the manipulation (e.g., first brighter light and then dimmer light in a subsequent experiment), the production of workers improved. A reasonable conclusion is that they were pleased to receive attention from the researchers who expressed an interest in them.

14. One project, funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, concerns the use of herbal medicine by Latinos and Latinas in Los Angeles for a wide variety of ailments. The other investigation, supported by a grant from the UCLA Center on Research, Education, Training and Strategic Communications on Minority Health Disparities, is a pilot study concerning conceptions of the causes and herbal treatments of type 2 diabetes among Latinas/os.

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