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Food and Boundaries in Jessica Hagedorn's The Gangster of Love

Yuxin Zheng

In her article “Deciphering a Meal,” anthropologist Mary Douglas proposes that food can be viewed as a series of codes like language and encodes social messages that indicate “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries” (61). Featuring food as a theme, Jessica Hagedorn’s *The Gangster of Love* (1996), a novel that weaves together the immigration story of the Rivera family and the coming-of-age story of the daughter Rocky Rivera, exemplifies Douglas’ theory. Throughout the novel, food is associated with geographical, ethnic, cultural, and even spiritual boundaries, symbolizing complex identities and social positions of Hagedorn’s characters, their inclusion in and exclusion from social groups, and their interconnections with each other. Examining the construction and deconstruction of boundaries through food in *The Gangster of Love* not only helps elucidate the connection between food and Hagedorn’s characterization, but also sheds light on how participants of transnational movements struggle to establish their identities, to find a sense of belonging, and to cope with geographic displacement.

With their distinctive cultural backgrounds, ethnic foods are used by various characters in Hagedorn's novel to construct boundaries, distinguish between different identities, and negotiate with their own identity positions. As a first-generation Filipino immigrant, Milagros Rivera single-handedly brings up two children in the United States and supports her household with her Filipino food business, Lumpia Express. Since her Filipino identity can be easily confused into other Asian ethnicities in America, Milagros establishes herself as unequivocally Filipino by specifically emphasizing the difference between "Filipino" and "Chinese" and constructing a clear boundary between Lumpia, an iconic Filipino food, and eggrolls, its Chinese counterpart. When her friend Rick Foss confuses eggrolls with lumpia, Milagros is offended and responds, "Excuse me, Rick Foss. Egg rolls are Chinese. Lumpias are Filipino" (Hagedorn 19). Highlighting the Filipino identity of lumpia in her response, Milagros implies that "lumpia" is not just a name for "anything wrapped in flour wrappers or wrappers made from egg," but encodes important messages of culture and ethnicity (Chan-Yap 300). For Milagros, lumpia has a unique identity of its own and is exclusively Filipino, regardless of its resemblance of Chinese egg rolls or its actual Chinese origin. While lumpia originated from the Hokkien region in Southern China, Milagros disregards such historical background and claims lumpia as only Filipino (Chan-Yap 300). As Frederik Barth argues, ethnic groups maintain their identities through "a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural difference"; in order for an ethnic group to be perceived as a distinct entity, it requires "the maintenance of boundaries between groups" (qtd. in Kalcik 45). In Milagros' case, despite that lumpia originated from Chinese cooking and is not essentially different from an eggroll in its shape and taste, the constructed boundary between Filipino lumpia and Chinese egg roll is crucial for Milagros to assert her own Filipino identity. When she explicitly points out the difference between lumpias and egg rolls, Milagros is effectively stating her difference from Chinese people, thus reinforcing and protecting her ethnic identity within the Filipino side of the boundary that she constructs between the two ethnicities through food.

In contrast, Rocky Rivera, Milagros' daughter, steps out of the boundary that defines her as Filipino and steps into American culture; her cultural identity is also suggested through her relationship with Filipino food and American food. Early on in the novel, Rocky shows that she is unable to make Filipino food and participate in the production of lumpia in her mother's

Filipino kitchen. Describing how her mother and brother are able to roll up the delicate lumpias with sophisticated skills, Rocky portrays herself as “slow and clumsy” with her hands (Hagedorn 20). Because of her inability to make lumpias, her mother sends her to shop for ingredients in Chinatown and to deliver lumpias around by taxi (20). With lumpia being a typical Filipino food symbolic of Filipino culture, Rocky’s clumsiness and failure in making lumpias symbolize her inability to learn and maintain her Filipino heritage. As a result of her failure to inherit the lumpia culture, Rocky is driven out of Milagros’ kitchen, a space that sustains Filipino culture through lumpia production. Therefore, as Rocky ventures to Chinatown and delivers lumpias around, she symbolically leaves a Filipino cultural space and enters into different multicultural spaces in the broader American society. Crossing the physical boundary between an exclusive kitchen and a welcoming outside world, Rocky demonstrates that she is more capable of participating in a multicultural American society than in a well-defined Filipino culture.

Rocky’s alienation from her Filipino background and her affinity to American culture are further illustrated later in the novel through Rocky’s rejection of Filipino food and affinity towards American food. Rejecting her mother’s and Aunt Fely’s cooking several times, Rocky marks her position as an outsider of Filipino culture and sometimes Asian culture as a whole. After Rocky gives birth, Milagros visits her in New York. Given their different lifestyles, Rocky does not quite welcome her mother and dreads the next fortnight of “butting heads with [Milagros]” (194). Living under the same roof, they have different ideas of food. Milagros insists on buying ingredients from Chinatown to cook “virgin chicken, Chinese-style” for her, whereas Rocky rejects her mother’s proposal nonchalantly, “It’s not necessary. The grocery store has everything” (194). In this conversation, a boundary comes in place between Chinatown, which symbolizes Asian and Filipino culture, and the grocery store, which stands for American culture. Rocky rejects Chinatown and her mother’s Asian cooking either as her personal food preference, or as a way to rebel against her mother and the traditional Asian culture that she insists on. Either way, her rejection of Milagros’ cooking, indifference towards Chinatown, and suggestion for Milagros to shop at the grocery store indicate her limited connection with Filipino and Asian culture and her identification with American culture.

After childbirth and the initial months of child-rearing, Rocky is clearly tired after her baby has finally quieted down. As the narrator portrays

Rocky's inner thoughts, "two weeks of butting heads with Milagros lie ahead of Rocky. She leans back and shuts her eyes, listening to her restless mother rummaging through the kitchen cupboard" (194). Rocky and Milagros have a warring relationship when it comes to food and cooking. Rocky is tired of her mother constantly taking care of her and insisting on doing so with Chinese food. In response, Rocky repels Chinese food either as her own personal food preference, or as a way to rebel against her mother and the traditional Asian culture that she stands for. Rocky still rejects Filipino food after Milagros passes away. When Aunt Fely brings her sinigang and rice to comfort her, Rocky does not eat the food (261). She gives another indifferent response to Aunt Fely, who proposes that they should go grocery shopping in Chinatown, saying that "I'd rather eat out" (261). Here, Sinigang again symbolizes Filipino culture because it is a quintessential representation of Filipino home-cooking and culinary history as a soup usually made with "souring ingredients from the Philippine landscape" and a "native cuisine" that "amazingly, hardly changed in nature or spirit, after colonization and other foreign influences" (Fernandez, "Culture Ingested" 228). While Aunt Fely heats and reheats the food for Rocky, Rocky's reluctance to eat suggests that she does not take comfort in Filipino cooking because it represents a culture that she does not identify with. Preferring to eat out, Rocky once again establishes her position as an outsider of Filipino culture and finds her place in the American culture outside of the boundary of her Filipino household. Ultimately, her choice to eat out rather than eat home food symbolizes her identification with American culture and her American identity.

While Milagros and Rocky assert their cultural and personal identities through food, Marlon Rivera uses food to examine another person's identity and to test if an outsider can be potentially included in Filipino culture or has to be strictly excluded. When Rocky and her then boyfriend Elvis Chang visit him in Los Angeles, Marlon chooses to cook for them his signature dish, adobo. After announcing his cooking plan, Marlon specifically turns to Elvis and asks him if he has tried adobo yet (Hagedorn 84). Asking if Elvis has tried the iconic Filipino dish, Marlon is in fact testing if "his niece's lover, boyfriend, whatever" is familiar with Filipino cooking and if he has participated in Filipino culture through food (85). Marlon's question suggests a boundary between an outsider status and an insider status in relation to Filipino culture; he has to judge which side Elvis is positioned to determine if he is fit to be Rocky's partner. When Elvis says, "Rocky's

mom made it once,” Marlon can rest assured that Elvis does not completely belong to the outsider side because he has had previous experience with Filipino food, but he keeps up with his test and says, “Well, I’m sure it was good, but I’m the better cook. You haven’t had the real thing until you’ve tried my adobo” (84). Differentiating “good” adobo from “the real thing,” Marlon further delineates the boundary between an insider and outsider. He indicates that Elvis is still largely a stranger of adobo culture and has not had a real experience with Filipino cooking, implying that he cannot be viewed as an insider yet.

Although Marlon views Elvis mostly as an outsider who has limited Filipino cultural experience, he treats him as a potential insider. Opening up the boundary, Marlon tries to induct Elvis into Filipino culture by sharing with him the adobo recipe, even including the key ingredient, “Plain white vinegar, nothing fancy, that’s the key. Use lots of it . . . and garlic—the more, the better” (Hagedorn 85). With adobo, another quintessential Filipino dish, symbolizing Filipino culture, Marlon’s gesture of sharing recipe suggests that he is willing to help Elvis become an insider. Despite his welcoming gesture, Marlon is still bound by the boundary and not fully able to treat Elvis as an intimate insider. In their subsequent short dialogue, the tension over the boundary is even more manifest when Marlon asks Elvis, “You got anything against pork?” (Hagedorn 85). Marlon has to specifically ask Elvis if he can eat pork and does not assume that Elvis does. Marlon’s question shows that he is a considerate host, but it also implies that Elvis is an unfamiliar guest and potentially a total outsider who does not eat pork. Presenting another boundary over pork-eating, Marlon’s question exemplifies Susan Kalcik’s observation that “the use or avoidance of certain foods becomes identified with a group and symbolic of it. Such symbolic foodways may strengthen the group’s internal ties or indicate out-group status” (47). Using pork to distinguish if Elvis can be accepted in the Filipino group or has to remain out-group, Marlon again demonstrates how food can construct boundaries that decide “inclusion within or exclusion from a group” (Douglas qtd. in Kalcik 48). Such an understanding of food not only illuminates the motive behind Marlon’s question, but also shows how food is used by an immigrant to establish the cultural identity of his ethnic group.

Filled with tension over the boundaries, the episode continues. In response to Marlon, Elvis says, “Nah, . . . I’m Chinese” (Hagedorn 85). Although his response seems short and casual, it encodes several layers of

messages. While “Nah” indicates that he can eat pork and participate in Marlon’s adobo meal, the “I’m Chinese” that immediately follows reiterates his otherness: with his distinct ethnicity, he would occupy an outsider position in relation to Filipino culture. Even though he is able to surpass the boundary constructed over pork consumption, Elvis can never go across the wider gap between different ethnicities and fully enter the Filipino group. At this point, Marlon responds to Elvis ambiguously with a smile and says, “Ahh . . . Of course. How could I forget?” (85). Marlon’s smile and words are filled with ambiguity and tension. With his incomplete question, Marlon could mean “How could I forget that you eat pork?” or “How could I forget that you are Chinese?” or both at the same time. Different interpretations of this short rhetorical question can lead to contradicting meanings. Marlon could be welcoming Elvis, who eats pork, into the Filipino culture, or excluding him because of his Chinese ethnicity, or embracing and rejecting him at the same time. Hagedorn provides no resolution to such ambiguity. She does not clearly indicate what Marlon actually means or where Elvis is exactly positioned in relation to Marlon’s boundary.

In fact, Hagedorn does not even clearly position Rocky when she concludes the adobo episode. At the end, Marlon “winked at his niece, got up from where he was sitting, and sauntered off into the kitchen,” whereas Elvis and Rocky “watched [Marlon] cook” (Hagedorn 85). Both spectating Marlon cooking, neither Elvis nor Rocky seems to be a total insider or a complete outsider of Marlon’s Filipino kitchen that symbolizes Filipino culture like Milagros’ lumpia kitchen. While Elvis is an insider of the pork-eating practice, his Chinese ethnicity casts him as an outsider of Filipino culture. Since Rocky exhibits herself as more American than Filipino, she becomes simultaneously an insider and outsider of Filipino culture in her uncle’s eyes. Throughout this episode, whereas the boundary is clearly in existence and distinguishes insiders from outsiders, each individual’s position in relation to the boundary is highly ambiguous, which symbolizes the fluidity and ambiguity of individual identities in a multicultural American society with constant transnational movements. Through this symbolic meaning of food, Hagedorn hints at how transnational movement affects the ways in which immigrants identify themselves and other people around them.

When characters construct and cross boundaries through food, food items also traverse boundaries and obtain new meanings across geographical, cultural, and even spiritual borders across life and death in

Hagedorn's novel. The foods that Aunt Fely eats during the Imelda Marcos trial, "Spam sandwiches and cans of Diet Coke," are examples (Hagedorn 219). Both two food items are globalized across geographical borders and popular in both the Philippines and America, but encode different social messages in each country. Their meanings become complicated in the hands of Aunt Fely, a Filipino immigrant in the United States presently watching a Filipino public figure on trial. Originating in America in 1937 as moderately-priced preserved meat, Spam went across the Pacific with the US military and became popular in the Philippines during World War II and the Cold War (Matejowsky 26). Perceived as "a poor person's food" and stereotyped as "the culinary domain of America's children and less affluent" in the United States, Spam is a symbol of American wealth and modernity in the Philippines (Matejowsky 28). Transcending social classes, Spam is popular among the wealthy, the middle class, and the working class in the Philippines; nevertheless, it is more often viewed as a staple food for the affluent and moderately affluent people rather than the poor (Matejowsky 28). With its contrasting connotations across the border, Spam gives different meanings to Aunt Fely in the Philippines and in America.

In the Philippines, Aunt Fely would be more likely perceived as an affluent woman if she were to eat Spam; across the ocean, she becomes more easily associated with poverty. Interestingly, the shifting connotations of Spam coincide with her immigration and symbolize the shift in her social status after she immigrates to the United States. In the Philippines, she comes from a decent family, has good family connections, and works as a professional nurse. However, in the United States, she becomes primarily viewed as a foreigner, an immigrant, and an ethnic minority. In this sense, Spam becomes a symbol of her downgraded social status. To complicate the situation even more, Hagedorn makes Aunt Fely eat a Spam sandwich at the trial of Imelda Marcos and witness a powerful figure in the Philippines being brought down from power on the other side of the ocean. Although Aunt Fely's and Imelda's stories are completely different, their paralleling loss of social status in America is symbolized through Spam, a food that faces a similar situation across the borders. Through their stories, Hagedorn again demonstrates the complexity of food and its close connection with transnational movements.

Along with her Spam sandwich, Aunt Fely also has cans of Diet Coke. In the novel, Diet Coke is consumed not only by Aunt Fely, but also by Elvis's

mother and brother at a dinner where Elvis records, “Mom and Dwayne were nursing Diet Cokes” (Hagedorn 112). Invented as a headache remedy by John Pemberton in 1886, Coke has traveled across the globe and become an American symbol (McBride 80). At first glance, Hagedorn seems to use Coke to symbolize the Americanization of Aunt Fely, Ruby Chang, and Dwayne Chang. Uniformly consuming Diet Coke, the three characters seem to have adopted American foodways and adapted themselves to American culture. While this interpretation of Coke is plausible, the Coke symbolism is much more complex. For one, Coke is also a symbol for immigrants across geographical and cultural boundaries. With globalization, Coke has been altered in many different ways to adapt to other food cultures across the globe. As Coke usually features characteristics of the local culture that it is exported into, people may even forget its American origin. According to Anne McBride, in rural Argentina, some people “believe that the word ‘Coca-Cola’ is Spanish and that Coke is an Argentine product” (80). After its transnational movement, Coke absorbs traits from new cultures and obtains a blurred identity. As such, it can be a loose parallel for immigrants and people who have transnational backgrounds in the United States, such as Aunt Fely, Ruby Chang, and Dwyane Chang who hold American citizenships while still being Filipino and Chinese. They demonstrate characteristics from both American and Asian cultures and may sometimes be recognized as non-Americans despite their American nationality. As a global food across geographical borders, Coke can symbolize immigrants and demonstrate how boundaries of their nationalities and ethnicities become blurred with their transnational movements.

Besides the blurriness of its nationality and cultural identity, Coke itself crosses the boundaries that distinguishes between different types of drinks, further illustrating the complex identity positions of immigrants and ethnic minorities. As Pasi Falk observes, Coke “synthesizes types of drink which, from a historical perspective, are even directly opposed: from water to wine and from beer to coffee, to say nothing of milk” (49). Crossing boundaries that define and categorize drinks, Coke resembles sweetened mineral water in its carbonated nature, parallels coffee with its caffeine content and brown color, and substitutes alcohol as a companion for meals (Falk 49). Coke surpasses boundaries. It does not exclusively belong to one category, but can be everything simultaneously. Likewise, immigrants have synthesized identities. Having lived in both the Philippines and the United States, Aunt

Fely is Filipino and American at the same time. Besides her identity as an immigrant, she is a staff at the hospital, a wife, an aunt, and a woman. Similarly, as a Chinese-American young man, Dwyane Chang is fully Chinese and fully American simultaneously. Just like Coke surpasses boundaries, Hagedorn's characters cross many boundaries, hold synthesized identities, and become their unique selves, rather than being limited by boundaries that define them with a singular identity. Finally, Coke also crosses the boundary between generations because it is reminiscent of different traditional beverages and is simultaneously a symbol of modernity (Falk 53). In Hagedorn's novel, Aunt Fely, Ruby Chang, and Dwyane Chang consume Coke and represent different generations. Despite their difference in age, they share similarly synthesized identities. Although they may struggle to integrate their cultural heritage with American nationality, these characters continue to root and thrive in American society, like Coke thriving across boundaries. While Coke itself is not a perfect symbol for immigrants, the way Hagedorn juxtaposes it with immigrants serve to highlight their complex and synthesized identities and illustrate the way that they succeed in a foreign space.

Besides symbolizing synthesized identities of immigrants across generations, there is even more to this drink in Hagedorn's novel. Rather than a regular Coke, Hagedorn specifies the drink as Diet Coke; on top of the idea that Coke crosses boundaries and becomes a symbol for immigrants, she asks the readers to pay special attention to the concept of dieting across cultures and its implications. Earlier in the novel, in response to Rocky's complaints about her weight, Dr. Sandy employs the idea of dieting to differentiate what is and is not American in her long rant, showing that boundaries can even be constructed through a practice that is as personal as dieting. Dr. Sandy says,

Americans are shortsighted and puritanical. Diets don't work because they are all about denial. . . . what you need is a tapeworm. In South America and Southeast Asia, parasites are a fact of life. You must be suffering from cultural amnesia, Rocky. You're from the Philippines and should already know this. (Hagedorn 139)

In her long rant, Dr. Sandy explicitly categorizes dieting as an American idea, through which she constructs a boundary between what is and is not American: being concerned about weight and going on diets is American while "eat[ing] whatever you want" and relying on tapeworm is not American (Hagedorn 139). Under Dr. Sandy's problematic correlation between dieting

and identity, Rocky is criticized for being dissatisfied about her weight because it would categorize her as American when she is not supposed to be American given her Filipino heritage. According to Dr. Sandy, cultural amnesia is the only reason why Rocky would be concerned about weight because it is an illness that makes Rocky forget that she is Filipino and not American. Falsely associating dieting with ethnic and cultural identities, Dr. Sandy not only presents an absurd stereotype that South American and Southeast Asian people are primitive and rely on parasites to be healthy, but also shows a disregard for Rocky's American identity and arbitrarily defines her as only Filipino. Discrediting and ridiculing Dr. Sandy's rhetoric, Hagedorn deliberately makes multiple immigrant characters drink Diet Coke rather than regular Coke, which symbolizes their participation in American diet culture even if they are not necessarily concerned about their weight. The symbolism implies that anyone can participate in the dieting culture; thus, the boundary between being and not being American cannot be constructed over dieting. As such, Hagedorn takes down one more boundary that treats immigrants as outsiders of American society when she has them participate in the same food culture with the "Americans" defined by Dr. Sandy and deconstructs the idea that only Americans can consume diet foods.

Besides Spam and Diet Coke that traverse boundaries, the restaurants and food businesses opened and run by immigrants are demonstrations of food crossing physical and cultural boundaries with people's transnational movements into the United States. As the "proprietors of the Lucky Phoenix Noodle Palace in Oakland," Edison and Ruby Chang bring Chinese food into the boundaries of American society, as many other Chinese immigrants have done throughout history. Since the start of Chinese immigration into the United States, food has been traversing geographical and social boundaries together with the immigrants. During the Gold Rush in the mid-eighteenth century, early Chinese immigrants started to open restaurants in California and initiated the history of Chinese restaurants in America (Liu 1). Along with history, the first Chinese restaurant, Canton Restaurant, has evolved into many authentic Chinese restaurants run by immigrants nowadays as well as Panda Express, an Americanized Chinese food chain (Liu). In history and in Hagedorn's novel, the immigration of food is always synchronized with the immigration of people. Besides the Changs, Milagros Rivera is also the owner of a food business, Lumpia Express. She brings Filipino food into America as she migrates across the ocean. Characterizing Elvis' parents and

Milagros as restaurant owners serving Chinese and Filipino food across borders, Hagedorn reminds her readers of the intertwined history between immigration and Asian food businesses, uses restaurant owner as a position to symbolize her characters' identities as immigrants, and reflects the prevalence of transnational movements.

After ethnic foods have been transported across geographical boundaries and accepted into America, they continue to cross cultural boundaries within the multiethnic and multicultural American society. As immigrants cater to American consumers, the new food items that they create surpass boundaries that define food traditions and demonstrate how immigrants explore new possibilities with their cultural heritage. Taking lumpia across the border into America and supporting her household with Lumpia Express, Milagros makes new variations on the traditional food in order to expand her business in the multicultural American society. As Rocky records, Milagros "concocted" innovations such as "Mexi-Lumpia (stuffed with avocado and jalapeño chili, salsa on the side) and New Wave Lumpia (bite-size, vegetarian)" (Hagedorn 19). Fusing Lumpia, a Filipino food, with Mexican food, Milagros caters to the considerable Mexican and Hispanic population in California. In the process, lumpia crosses the traditional boundary that confines it within Filipino culture, demonstrating how immigrants create new possibilities with food and navigate in a multicultural society. Creating New Wave Lumpia, Milagros adapts to rising food trends that emphasize healthy and sustainable eating in American society, including vegetarianism and eating smaller portions.

The adaptation illustrates how lumpia crosses the boundary that defined it as a traditional cultural food and finds its place in the evolving modern food culture. Together, the fusion between Filipino and Mexican food and the modern adaptation of lumpia illustrate how Milagros crosses traditional boundaries that define how she makes food. Crossing such boundaries, she creates new possibilities with food, gives new energy to food traditions, and adapts traditional Filipino food into modern American society. The adaptation process symbolizes the flexibility of immigrants who navigate boundaries and thrive in a foreign society, preserving traditions while creating new variations with their cultures. As indicated by Hagedorn through her portrayal of her characters and their relationship with food, transnational movement brings about exciting innovations of food and possibilities of culture mixing. At the same time, she reminds readers of

the potential loss of authenticity of an ethnic food when it is blended into American culture, thereby projecting her concern for immigrants who might lose their traditionally defined identity as they cross the borders.

In addition to presenting how people construct and cross boundaries through food and how foods traverse boundaries with people, Hagedorn shows how food can also bridge the gap between boundaries and bring people together across borders. Throughout the novel, while food largely serves to mark Rocky's American identity, it ultimately brings back her memories of the Philippines, her homeland. After her mother's death, Rocky goes back to Manila for the first time since her immigration to America. Despite the initial sense of being a stranger, Rocky starts to recollect her memories of the Philippines when she observes the street. Looking out of the car window, she observes, "here's what's sold on the street: mentholated cough drops, sampaguita leis, painfully sweet peanut brittle. Rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves, still steaming" (Hagedorn 293). Although she has lived in America for many years, Rocky can still pinpoint the food sold on Manila streets. Her ability to instantly recognize and accurately name the food items on the street suggests that she has retained a clear memory of food, which enables her to connect with her homeland. On the other hand, Rocky's familiarity with street food suggests that street food in Manila has remained mostly the same after many years. As Rocky has an immediate sense of familiarity upon her return in the Philippines, it suggests that her food memory and a part of Filipino food culture have both resisted the passage of time and remained unchanged. For Rocky, the unchanged memory and food culture send her a message that even though she has crossed geographic and cultural boundaries into America, she can still feel familiar with her homeland if she maintains her food memory; even if time passes by, her homeland still welcomes her with its unchanging food and culture and accepts her in the same way that it embraced her in her childhood. In this sense, food becomes a thread that sews together Rocky's American present and her Filipino past, suggesting that food can be the a medium for immigrants to connect with their homeland and bridge the gap between many different boundaries that they have crossed.

In Manila, Rocky feels strange and awkward in Luz's house; it is Manang Emy's kitchen that offers her a real sense of familiarity and home, inviting her back into the Filipino side of her identity. Set in the kitchen, the interactions between Rocky and Manang Emy is carried out through food and cooking.

Venturing into the kitchen, Rocky observes Manang Emy prepare for lunch with other servants (Hagedorn 300). At first, Rocky describes herself as “an intruder,” which again exhibits the boundary between where she belongs and does not belong (300). Rocky feels that she does not belong to the kitchen, just like how she did not fit into the Milagros’ lumpia kitchen. However, whereas Milagros rejects her from the kitchen and sends her out on errands, Manang Emy accepts her and allows her to observe the servants “cleaning rice and chopping vegetable” (300). After greeting Rocky, Manang Emy remains unbothered by Rocky’s presence and “went right back to whatever she was doing . . . Chopping meat with her cleaver, barking orders at the other servants in the kitchen” (300). Previously, Milagros’ rejection of Rocky from the lumpia kitchen symbolizes Rocky’s exclusion from Filipino culture and her position as an outsider. Now, Rocky is able to spectate Manang Emy making food, rebuild a connection with Filipino cooking, and potentially reestablish the cultural bond with her homeland. Accepting Rocky into the Kitchen, Manang Emy is symbolically welcoming Rocky back home and back into the Filipino culture by offering her a comfortable space to stay in and a sense of belonging. In this scene, the steadiness and peacefulness of home is carried by food, which shows that food can bridge the gap between the boundaries of acceptance and rejection, offering a sense of belonging to individuals after their disorienting transnational movements.

The scene between Rocky and Manang Emy closes with Manang Emy “lift[ing] one of the cauldron lids to check on the rice” and then “turning down the flame on the stove” in order not to overcook the rice (Hagedorn 305). The scene ends with rice, one of the most important food symbols for Filipino culture and identity. As Doreen Fernandez observes, rice is “a food of symbolic as well as central value to the Filipinos” (“Historias” 289). As a native staple food, rice is ubiquitous throughout Filipino history. Comparing rice to mana in the Bible, Spanish friar Juan J. Delgado of the Society of Jesus in the eighteenth century writes in his account that “although Christ said that man cannot live by bread alone, the Indios can live by rice alone” (qtd. in Fernandez “Historias” 289). For the Filipinos, rice is essential for their living and also serves to connect people on a spiritual level as a bridge between life and after-life. In Hagedorn’s novel, rice even connects Milagros and her estranged husband in the Philippines across geographical boundaries as well as the boundary between life and death. One night, Milagros dreams that her husband desperately asks for food and that she goes into the kitchen

and cooks rice for him; the next morning, she concludes, "the dream was a sign. He's going to die, very soon" (Hagedorn 209). As Milagros interprets her husband's request for food as a sign for his proximity to death, her action to cook rice means that rice would accompany and comfort the dying man during the final bit of his life journey. Connecting an estranged couple across the ocean and accompanying the old man in his transitional phase between life and death, rice transcends geographical and spiritual boundaries between people and between different phases of life. With the significance as "a physical, economic, symbolic, perhaps mythic entity" in the Philippines, rice is also able to encode Manang Emy's sincere pleasure to see Rocky back home in the Philippines and symbolize her invitation for Rocky to return to the Filipino side of her identity (Fernandez, "Histórias, Crônicas" 294).

Despite such invitation, Rocky's position in relation to the boundary between an insider and outsider of Filipino culture remains ambiguous. Throughout the scene where Manang Emy cooks in the kitchen, Rocky remains an observer who is only "mesmerized" by Manang Emy's cooking but never tries to be a direct participant in the food making process (Hagedorn 303). In the same way that she watches Marlon cooking adobo, Rocky observes Manang Emy "scraping the insides of the fish, getting ready to stuff it with onions, tomato, garlic, baby shrimp" (Hagedorn 303). Although Rocky seems to have great familiarity with the ingredients and cooking process, she is still an observer rather than a participant. As opposed to her ambiguous relationship with Filipino cooking, she directly participates in American cooking when she makes roast chicken and tossed green salad (Hagedorn 238). While she is accepted in Manang Emy's kitchen and feels familiar with the food, it is not certain if she would take an active step to be a participant and cross back into Filipino culture. Hagedorn does not give readers a clear answer. However, till the end of the novel, Rocky does seem to be more comfortable with her American identity. Her choice of and identification with an American identity offers a possible solution for other people who are also faced with multiple boundaries that try to pull them in and define their identities. As Hagedorn suggests through Rocky and her relationship with food, it is not wrong for people with transnational backgrounds to choose and stick to their American side of identity, even if their homeland may offer loving and sincere invitations to draw them back.

Throughout *The Gangster of Love*, Hagedorn portrays different characters constructing and crossing geographical, ethnic, cultural, and

even spiritual boundaries as they produce and consume food. With lumpia, Milagros constructs the boundary between Filipino and Chinese ethnicities to maintain her Filipino identity, but crosses the boundary of traditional food to thrive in a multicultural America. With adobo, Marlon creates a similar boundary that defines who is and is not Filipino, partially includes Elvis, and partially identifies him as an outsider. Constantly faced with the tension between being American and being Filipino, Rocky manifests her American identity through her preferences for American dishes and cooking. Many other food items and foodways, such as Spam, Diet Coke, and restaurants, serve to identify immigrants and suggest their social status before and after their immigration. As Roland Barthes argues, food “sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies . . . all food serves as a sign among the members of a given society” (21). Throughout the novel, food is more than a carrier of nutrition, but serves as important symbols for identity, transnational movements, and social status. Using food to construct boundaries in *The Gangster of Love*, Hagedorn not only manifests the identity traits of her characters in a concrete and vivid way, but also give meanings to their experience and social positions through food, reflecting the cultural and social significance of food. Through the relationship between characters and food, Hagedorn shows readers not only the prevalence of transnational movement and its potential cost and gains, but also the subtle strategies and anxiety of immigrants who try to establish their identities in a foreign land.

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