States of Exception
Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity
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Keya Ganguly
about, on the one hand, the “allegorical” (read “ethnographic”) status of Third World literature and, on the other, continuing affirmations of the nontransparency of literary representation. But one cannot have one’s representational cake and eat it too—at least, not without some heavy-duty contortions about symbols and semantics. If we take seriously the idea that postcolonial identity is articulated in multiple modalities of representation, then it is time to scrutinize quotidian understandings and common sense for their symptomatic value. They capture, albeit in flashes, what other forms of expressivity barely apprehend. This discussion has attempted to come to terms with the importance of a particular site of everyday understanding, that of personal memory, and the ways that it authorizes versions of immigrant selfhood.

CHAPTER FOUR
Food and the Habitus

Surely the Indian American Dream is a very potent one, and one rooted in reality. What it boils down to is choices, as the homes we’ve lived in, the values we’ve been exposed to, the lives we’ve led, wrestle for our very soul. And like an industrious tailor, the immigrant painstakingly aligns the Banarasi silk, the mul-mul and Jaipur tie-dye of memory with the hundred percent machine-made smooth polyester of American life, stitching a brave new world from cherished remnants of the old and shiny strips of the new.

—LAVINA MEHWANI, "Morning in America"

The sense one often gets in an Indian home is of having been there before. Not that all homes are identical but that, to the practised eye, all homes are familiar. Cues marking the arrangements of space and the placement of objects in the household are easily read by those for whom they are intended because they belong to a uniform code of propriety, obligation, and self-understanding—aspects that are central to the habitus of a social group. The idea of habitus is a formative one for thinking about everyday, taken-for-granted sites of discourse. Habitus, in Norbert Elias’s pioneering description, refers to “second nature” or the forms of “embodied social learning” underwriting all attempts at subjective self-consciousness.¹ In this chapter, I will be concerned with the hold that food has in discharging such a self-consciousness in its relation to real and imagined ideals of Indian culture and heritage inside the community.

To begin with a generality: If bourgeois living describes attachments to propriety or obligation on the one hand and conspicuous consump-
tion on the other, then there is something to be made of the interplay between the two. How is propriety informed or even determined by consumption? Equally, how does consumption relate to particular social obligations? As obvious as some of the answers to such questions might appear, there are certain elusive and potent myths that accompany particular taste preferences, as Pierre Bourdieu has explicated with great facility in regard to the French. The real question remains as to what is made conspicuous by patterns of consumption: money or the magic of mythic associations? The magic has to do with what is masked and revealed in consumption practices, as well as what is hidden and sought through the displacements of spending money. If, as I have argued throughout, the consolidation of identity is a domesticated affair, it receives its greatest charge from the elaborate staging of ideas and ideals in and through household habits. For the immigrant Indian community, forms of expenditure that center on rituals of household consumption are where the stolidity of what it means to be bourgeois in the New World is, as it were, given a “structural adjustment,” which reattaches the sacred with the profane aspects of immigrant existence. By this very token, however, these forms allow for the reconfiguration of commodified lives on terms that disavow that commodification.

By way of picking up the discussion of “adjustments” that serve both as secrets and openings of everyday practice, let me reach for a source that might seem somewhat out of place in the context of my overall analysis: Erving Goffman’s study of symbolic interaction, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* In this locus classicus of qualitative U.S. sociology, Goffman proposes the category of the “staging cue” to talk about forms of byplay that occur in situations where distinctions have to be made between insider-outsider and insider-insider:

> [S]ince it is not necessary to retain social distance or be on guard before those who are one’s colleagues in occupation, ideology, ethnicity, class, etc., it is common for colleagues to develop secret signs which seem innocuous to non-colleagues while at the same time they convey to the initiate that he is among his own and can relax the pose he maintains toward the public.

The focus here is on the quotidian maneuvers whereby one’s lived environment is negotiated, not only by those involved in undercover operations or clandestine behaviors but just as much by people whose daily operations are conducted entirely out in the open, within mainstream surroundings and in the thick of ordinary experience. Goffman emphasizes the tacit assumptions and unspoken clues placed and picked up by every person in order to make sense of his or her own situation within the social order. Such trademarks of particularity and propriety reinforce horizons of inclusion or exclusion for all subjects in their dealings with intimates. The account is sociological, designed to provide an insight into general social psychology and the remarkable yet unrehearsed strategies that subjects undertake to maintain rule-governed behavior. But whereas the unexceptional lesson is about daily social intercourse, the peculiarity lies in the way Goffman goes about establishing it. For in the very same passage, immediately after his statement quoted above, he makes the following assertion about a very far-from-general scenario:

> Thus the murderous Thugs of nineteenth-century India, who hid their annual depredations behind a nine-month show of civic-minded actions, possessed a code for recognizing one another.

This piece of evidence is meant to support Goffman’s macrosocial analysis, and it continues with an excerpt from an early treatise by a Col. I. L. Sleeman: “When Thugs meet, though strangers, there is something in their manner which soon discloses itself to each other, and to assure the surmise thus excited, one excels ‘Alee Khan!’ which, on being repeated by the other party, a recognition of each other’s habit takes place.”

The anecdote’s complete implausibility notwithstanding—given that, for the so-called Thugs, exclaiming “Alee Khan” by way of a greeting would be on the order of using “John Doe” as a code name—it draws our attention to the fact that secret behaviors or masks of appearance are common features of intragroup symbolic exchange. Despite, or perhaps because of, his fascination with orientalist tidbits and status-obsessed anecdotes culled from courtly and diplomatic commentaries, Goffman is able to slip in an unexceptional point about exceptional behaviors; namely, that they serve as the ruses, as “secret signs” whereby “one’s colleagues in occupation, ideology, ethnicity, class, etc.” maintain a certain recognition of the obvious and the not so obvious. In other words, the dynamic is not specific to “exotics,” although exotic subjects may well help to underscore it.
It is in the light of the epistemological entanglement of norms and exceptions—as if to say Thuggee practices of social hailing or growing up in Samoa were the value equivalents of, respectively, the secret handshake of fraternity brothers on a Midwestern college campus or adolescence in Levittown—that a dialectical consideration of taste and consumption practices must be conducted. This is because value inheres, or more precisely, is remaindered in, the distance between the two: norm and exception. This distance is not recognizable, let alone commensurable, within the logic of equivalence set up by a Goffmanesque disregard for the relations of force that determine norm and exception in terms of each other. It hardly needs noting that Goffman’s interest in Thugs and how they actually communicate with one another is at best minimal. They are mentioned only to spice up otherwise unexciting observations about the ritual behavior of ordinary people in the mainstream. The other exists, predictably enough, within a logic of substitution: brought in from the margins to make a point of general interest or to adorn a sociological datum, ushered out immediately thereafter. Many critics before me have commented that margins maintain the viability and force of the center; what has been less developed is the precise dynamic of such a relation. In this case, we can see that the problem is not even that there can be no equivalence between the social interactions of Thugs and Midwestern Americans. Rather, it is that schemas of knowledge (not to mention power) are drawn up with the weight of American values in mind, thus making of equivalence a non-equivalence. In keeping with Walter Benjamin, we might once more say that the state of exception is the rule.

The exception that is the rule gives us the coordinates for examining the chiasmatic structure of what Bourdieu calls the “reality of representation and the representation of reality.” As he puts it in his magisterial analysis of French social life, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*:

[Systematicity] is found in all the properties—and property—with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainments, only because it is in the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying generative principle of all practices. Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic subspaces, clothing, language or body hexis. Each dimension of life-style “symbolizes with” the others, in Leibniz’s phrase, and symbolizes them.6

This passage permits us to read Bourdieu as following Elias into the claim that the habitus is not just a closed circuit of class-demarcated behaviors but also less determined and deterministic than the idea of class demarcation might suggest. In the current climate of privileging discursive ambiguity, semiotic slippage, and so on, it is not unusual to find the charge of reductivism leveled against Bourdieu (and his variety of socioanthropological analysis). To my mind the charge is unjustified, the result of a speed reading which “always already” presumes the vulgarity of class analysis. On the contrary, Bourdieu explains that the material and symbolic appropriation of objects and practices expresses a certain potentiality and an already established logic, a deference and a referral, an (incomplete) preference and a (tried-and-true) formula—that is to say, the gap between the given and the desired. In his words, “Taste is the mutual adjustment of all the features associated with a person.”7

What connects the notion of the staging cue and secret sign of ritualized social interaction with a system of taste preferences and the habitus is that each designates elements of social belonging. What separates the habitus of the French working class from that of middle-class Indian immigrants has to do with the radically different ways in which the experience of class is felt in the domain of everyday life.

Of the myriad adjustments that in Bourdieu’s terms provide “distinction” to class-configured identities, let us take a closer look at the one most central to and paradigmatic of middle-class Indian circumstances in the diaspora: the definitive relationship between food and identity. It is not my intention to suggest that the metaphorical valence attached to food or any other habitual practice of everyday life is exclusive to immigrant Indians or postcolonial subjects. Such a suggestion would be merely particularistic, not to mention unsustainable, since all communities have attachments to food as well as other icons of belongingness. At the risk of belaboring prevailing commitments, my purpose throughout is to interrogate the dialectic of universal and particular,
norm and exception; to say something about the “secret signs” of post-colonial self-understanding very much in and through the commonplaces and generalities of everyday life.

Though bourgeois societies in the West have traditionally been characterized by the disjunction between realms of public and private or work and leisure, life under late capitalism betrays even those demarcations so that the public is ever more privatized and leisure is insidiously subsumed under work (as captured by the paradox of the “working holiday”). This collapse puts pressure on all possibilities for personal or social authenticity: to borrow a phrase from Theodor Adorno’s reflections in Minima Moralia, “[t]he whole of life must look like a job.” We might then think of immigrant tastes—one’s taste in food no less than one’s attachment to Indian jewelry—as representing both the cracks and the glue in the edifice of “damaged life” whereby “[s]ecurity is glimpsed in adaptation to the utmost insecurity.” The atrophy of personal security is thus accompanied by the hypertrophy of investments in lifestyle. That commodities have a peculiar hold on our lives is, of course, exactly the reason to engage in a critique of commodification—not by a thoroughgoing condemnation of its seductions but through attempts to prise the husk of appearance away from the core of need. As what does the madeleine or this or that object, event, or item serve? Is it not less a function than a symbolic assurance? My account of culinary practices proceeds in the light of these entwinements of constraint and conviction, economy and extravagance.

Dietetics/Dialectics

Meals have an altogether special place within immigrant Indian life. This is not just true of my ethnographic community, nor is it exclusively bounded by religious or class distinctions. Even less is it the case that only immigrants exalt the status of food and eating. Well-being, both personal and social, has always been defined in India by referring it to the capacity to eat and to entertain others with food. In everyday Hindu iconography, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is depicted surrounded by her bounty of coin as well as grain and her bhndar (storehouse or treasury) is filled with everything precious, including food items. The Sanskrit aphorism “Aitih devo bhava” exhorts the “proper” subject to regard “one’s guest as god,” to grant him or her the last morsel in the household. But even apart from such dominant (albeit secularized) Hindu imagery of divinity residing in food, examples can be cited from Mughal and Persian sources as well as in the celebrations marking Christian and Muslim festivals—all emphasizing the signal importance of food as a social fact. So, for instance, the Muslim holiday of Id is celebrated with the ceremonial distribution of elaborate sweets to neighbors (including non-Muslim ones), just as Christian calendrical events are marked much more abundantly and communally than the familial emphases of their turkey-and-pie counterparts in the West might lead us to expect. What is noticeable about so-called national holidays in the United States (such as Thanksgiving or Christmas) is that they are driven by the ideology of the family; one has only to be a guest at a “regular” American Thanksgiving meal to recognize how thoroughly out of place a non-family member is amid the glorification of family ties. Community, it seems, is the unthought and unthinkable; at best it represents the family unit writ large.

In contrast, within immigrant Indian circles, the social fact of food is elevated to the status of a properly communal fetish, attaching itself to the collective meaning of being Indian (or, in its hyphenated description, “Indian-American”). Whatever the specificities are of living in an alien present, of “America,” of discourses of ethnic hyphenation within the overall matrix of expatriate Indian self-understanding, their emergence is simply incomprehensible without its alimentary component: the portable investment in Indian cuisine. It is what joins the haut-bourgeois personalities Zubin Mehta or Ismail Merchant (two readily recognizable Indian names in the culture at large) to myself or my ethnographic interlocutors.

Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of immigrant Indian existence in the United States without at the same time thinking of Indian food. In saying this, I do not mean to refer to the growing popularity of Indian restaurants both in such major cities as New York or Chicago and in smaller towns like Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, where I attended graduate school and where, solely on account of my identity, I found myself having to vet restaurants and menus for friends and colleagues as if I were some resident gastronomic expert on the cuisines of South Asia. (The same friends did not expect to be called upon to authorize the veal scallopini or the roasted Rock Cornish hen when we ate at non-Indian venues.) Nor am I speaking of the gustatory cachet that these days is associated with possessing an Indian “spice larder” or cooking
from Indian recipe books, as if to suggest that mainstream American palates and cooks had always relied on spices like cumin seed and garam masala or dishes such as matar paneer or vindaloo. The latest cookbook is eager to tell the reader/cook that Indian cuisine evokes a "universal" love of food, now given free rein via preparations ranging from Mughal to Malabar. Such multicultural universality aside, my point is about the ways that meals, food, and the culinary in general signify for Indian communities themselves as emblems of a shared knowledge (about the cooking no less than the consuming) and, thereby, a communal identity.

In the rest of this chapter, my interest will be to distinguish a subjective sense of dietary complexity for expatriate Indians from the form of valorization that food matters receive in the West. To do so, I should first like to turn to one of the many insouciant and lasting insights into postwar life in Roland Barthes's early book of essays, *Mythologies*. I am drawn to the essay entitled "Steak and Chips," which is a send-up of French gastronomic pretensions. In this piece, Barthes satirically invokes the particular "nature and morality" associated with eating steak or its complementary side dish, chips. Commenting on the function of the two in the Frenchman's gastric economy, he says, "[T]here is no alimentary constraint which does not make the Frenchman dream of steak. Hardly abroad, he feels nostalgia for it. Steak is here adorned with a supplementary virtue of elegance, for among the apparent complexity of exotic cooking, it is a food which unites, one feels, succulence and simplicity. Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values." Barthes then alludes to *Match*, the magazine in which it was reported that "after the armistice in Indo-China 'General de Castries, for his first meal, asked for chips.'"

The mythic import of this otherwise banal bit of information Barthes conveys in a couple of sentences laced with irony: "What we were meant to understand is that the General's request was certainly not a vulgar materialistic reflex, but an episode in the ritual of appropriating the regained French community. The General understood well our national symbolism; he knew that *la frite*, chips, are the alimentary sign of Frenchness." Geographically speaking, Barthes's referent is, to be sure, very far from my interest in immigrant Indian life in the United States. In fact, even on its own terms—that is, in terms of a consideration of French cuisine—Barthes's focus on much-proclaimed simplicity runs contrary to the commonsense idea that French cooking requires com-

plicated exchanges between gourmet and gourmand in the making and eating of *cordon bleu* foods. But such foods (involving sauces like béchamel or hollandaise) are too fussy, even effeminate, and cannot serve the purpose of representing simplicity when it is most needed: as a mandate for the colonial cleanup of the world's disorders, digestive and otherwise. *La frite*, then, is at the heart—or, more literally, the intestines—of the ideology of colonialism. Not only does Barthes's parodic take on alimentary investments expose the patriotic zeal about food matters to be ideological in the same way as are political pamphlets or advertisements; more pointedly, he highlights something singularly "mythological" with respect to the French for which we can find no equivalent within Indian culture, diasporic or otherwise.

Let me clarify: Indians, particularly those who (as with my ethnographic interlocutors) are Hindu, would at least not overtly celebrate the value of steak; some of the more observant may even be revolted at the idea of eating cattle, however prized the cut of meat. So it is not the particular status of steak and chips that is at issue in my comparison. The relevant point is that there is no single preparation or dish or kind of food on which Indians, collectively, could pin their alimentary hopes and desires. If, as Barthes would have it, gastronomic and communal ideals of simplicity accompany steak, and by the same token, chips conjure up the essentiality of the French nation reconstituted after the war in Indochina, nothing—and everything—Indian is able to function as the "alimentary sign" of Indianness. As symbols, steak and chips function synecdochically with respect to ideals of Frenchness; they are specific conjurings of the myth of the French nation along the lines of the national flag or the Eiffel Tower. If they are parts of an imagined whole—the paradigm of France—fries and steak—simplicity—citizenship—nation—their place in the "index of patriotic values," as Barthes puts it, is singular; their value cannot be exchanged with that of any other food.

The Indian example is all but unique, because, depending on place and time, any number of different items or dishes—distinguished in terms of provenance and preparation—can spark that epic relationship with the motherland. Of course this has everything to do with the vastness and diversity of the subcontinent, which transports its linguistic as well as culinary diversity to its diaspora here and elsewhere. More specifically, the circumstances of middle-class immigrants are privileged
enough to allow them to indulge their palates and sensibilities in ways that they perhaps could not in India itself. What is *dosa* to the indigenous subject from Karnataka or Tamil Nadu, fish curry to the Bengali, or *gajar halwa* to the Punjabi is here transformed into soul food for everyone of Indian origin. Indian food functions etymologically in relation to immigrant identity because the whiff of belongingness, nostalgia, or hope is carried along by the taste and aromas of a wide range of dishes. We might then say that the relationship of food to identity follows a syntagmatic chain of associations of the following sort: India—belonging—longing—*bhat* (generic term for rice, anything from plain basmati to *pullao*, lemon rice, *biriyani*, and so on) and *roti* (designation for a variety of breads)—*bhaji* (general term for prepared vegetables)—*salan* (saucers)—*mithai* (desserts), and so on. The essential quality of an undoubtedly imagined Indianness resides in the profound fact of Indian cuisine, whose value can be discharged with flourish as well as simplicity, by appetizer or entrée, as vegetarian or nonvegetarian, by elementary or elaborate delights.

A final point of contrast between Barthes’s exposition of the alimentary reach of French nationalism and my conjunctural interest in post-colonial variations: As I argued in chapter 3 with regard to issues of memory and their specific charge in shoring up everyday understandings of the self, ideological attachments of dominant social groups are not reducible to their counterparts within the symbolic hierarchies of those who have been dominated historically. The two are irreducible not only because the myths that accompany marginalization are put to different uses than are myths belonging to those at the top of the social hierarchy, but also because the value of what gets labeled as “ideological” or a “special interest” and so on is formed in relation to existing structures of power. Dominant ideologies and preferences have institutional sanction; marginalized positions do not. In this connection, it bears verifying that General Castris’ elemental desire to eat chips after the armistice in Indochina is, as Barthes notes, an index of “the regained French community,” an “appropriation” signaling French imperial sovereignty. Chips are part of this imagery and affect of colonial desire—basic, muscular, efficient. Moreover, unlike effete “exotic cooking,” steak or chips connotes something of a work ethic; like their imperial counterparts elsewhere, the French know how to get down to the business of ruling over those who spend too much time being distracted by culinary matters. Whereas the commonplace about food is that one eats to live, it appears that the Frenchman eats to rule.

Separated from the Gallic instance by history and disposition, the inventory of food items in the Indian symbolic order is able to mark civilizational complexity without possessing any of the self-assurance of the imperium. Consequently, avowing a preference for Indian foods in the name of a lost or regained Indian community is to be distinguished from that subjective sense of historical smugness that Barthes satirizes. Though assuredly mythic—in Barthes’s sense of an “ex-nominated” system of meanings, of the “language-robery” whereby bourgeois ideology is naturalized as nameless or obvious—a taste for *pakora* or *roso-golla* can only betoken the magic of tautology: It tastes good because it is Indian; it is Indian because it tastes good. But what such magic cannot produce is the sort of peremptory supremacy available to the so-called winners of history: “Anyone civilized would agree… ” On the contrary, one often finds oneself having to explain to outsiders that “spicy food isn’t bad for the digestion.” Even today, when multicultural tastes are asserted with great élan, haute cuisine may call up French food; Italian food; perhaps even variants of *nouvelle* cooking with mild combinations of Thai, Chinese, or Indian spices; but hardly ever subcontinental offerings alone. The last belong in the lower echelon of “ethnic” (that is, non-Western or non-European) selections (the French or Italian having long since passed from being worshipped as ethnic within mainstream taste culture). European culture has become, to use Barthes’s term again, “ex-nominated”; that is to say, it represents the taken-for-granted norm against which cultural values are determined. The status of immigrant investment in Indian food is thus implicitly measured against such a mainstream calculus of value. Given Bourdieu’s contention that taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier, culinary preferences may be said to express a social logic, an *art de faire*, and a historical line of force whose invisibility is guaranteed by the very liberalism of the dictum *De gustibus non est disputandum*.

Liberal tastes indicate cultural capital. And a dietary liberalism is expansively, if tellingly, engaged by my ethnographic interlocutors in the southern New Jersey community. Hypostatizing the home as the fabric and fabrication of identity leads to a corollary set of investments in “the good life,” in which good eating is the most privileged practice. Of course this entails a great deal of labor and money spent on food. Not
surprisingly, the former provides a de facto justification of women’s work in the home, while the latter becomes one of the major reasons for men to work long hours and direct a certain calculated energy toward their middle-management jobs (seldom rewarded in terms of access to the upper echelons of professional-managerial existence). So the measure of one’s success is given in predictable material ways, although the valence of food expresses a specific combination of myth and rationalization.

It is not out of the ordinary to be served a fourteen- or fifteen-course meal at a weekend gathering in an immigrant household. These events are quite common despite the fact that a birthday, an anniversary, a graduation, or a religious festival is always found on the calendar to signify their exceptionality. Meals eaten at religious get-togethers are invariably vegetarian in Hindu homes because of the proscription against eating flesh during such celebrations. At other times, the household cook can satisfy the appetite of both her vegetarian and her carnivorous guests with a menu that includes two or three appetizers (samosas, dahi-vada, kebabs, chops, and pakoras represent a fairly common selection of vegetable and meat starters); chicken, lamb, and fish curry (each prepared in a mode that is distinct from the others and also from anything one might find in standard Indian restaurants); pullao or biryani, sometimes both; dal; roti; two or three different vegetable dishes (generically termed tarkari or bhaji); home-made chutney; and, finally, a range of desserts (kheer, gulab jamuns, sandesh, kulfi, and the like), made at home or bought from local Indian grocers and sweet vendors. In a humorous inversion of the commonplace adduced earlier, that one eats to live, it is often said that Indians live to eat. If, as Thorstein Veblen held, the hallmark of bourgeois life is conspicuous consumption, nothing is more conspicuously or passionately consumed than these weekend meals.

“What is your recipe for ———?” is a question often heard in people’s homes. It belongs to the class of question usually though not invariably asked of and by women. My own repertoire as a cook has been enhanced greatly by all the recipes I have collected over the years from women in the community. With respect to the exchange of recipes, a procedural difference remains between me and other women in the community: Unlike me, they do not require exact measurements of amounts and ingredients; the barest detail suffices to convey a wealth of subtlety. Between the recipe giver and the receiver, there is a universe of unspoken steps that are assumed and implemented: “A little methi

added to the garam masala will give the oil a more rounded flavor” (how much is a little?); or “once you’ve got the sheera made, you can prepare the dough for the malpua” (with no indication of how to make the sheera [syrup] for this particular type of dessert). In such situations I have always insisted on a methodical if vulgar belaboring of quantities and measurements, thereby revealing my gauche ness. For the expert cook, however, these details detract from one’s competence as a cook (and as an Indian). Part of the legibility of one’s own culinary stamp resides in interpreting the missing detail, in leaving intact the mystery of the transformation from raw to cooked.

Cookbooks are, therefore, largely inessential; they represent the refuge of the untrained, just as tandoori chicken appeals most to the taste buds of the uninitiated. Instead, women in the community are more likely to have their own stock of recipes—gathered from family and friends (both in India and in the United States), innovated from existing recipes (how to improve upon Mrs. Balbir Singh’s Cookbook, for instance), or invented wholesale using hybrid ingredients and improvised methods. So it is that I have partaken of samosas made with eggroll skins, chicken curry spiced with tomato ketchup, and alu paneer made with ricotta cheese and canned potatoes. The premium here is on the shortcut, particularly given the communal emphasis on quantity and variety, although it should be said that the labor-intensive character of Indian cooking is only moderately relieved through such measures. On the other side of things, everybody recognizes that, as the saying goes, real value can only be earned the old-fashioned way and that no substitute exists for the authentic preparation. Authenticity is about distinction and distinctiveness within Bourdieu’s conception of the habitus, as well as in the parasubjective sense of a structure of feeling. Of course, the very idea of authentically making an Indian dish in an American kitchen, using materials bought at supermarkets and ingredients that have complied with FDA regulations, may appear misguided to those who take authenticity to be an unsupportable matter of supportable origins. But were one to not discount the investment in authenticity as irredeemably archaic or bound up in a Hegdegerian quest for a thingness of things, it might become possible to think of the category of the authentic as a problem of materiality itself.

I realize that my interest in reviving the value of authenticity immediately comes up against Derridean and Foucauldian critical fashions that
almost reflexively assert that the idea of authenticity is metaphysical or naive or both: Who could possibly have any intellectual faith in something that smacks of ontology, without at the same time being hopelessly prey to a pre-poststructuralist illusion about the “real”? Begging the question of whether an antimeetaphysical stance is more radical than are the emphases of a phenomenological Marxism or, closer to home, the Frankfort school’s dialectical conceptualization of the relations between *physis* and metaphysics, contemporary “theory’s” privileging of ideals of repetition, supplementarity, and discursivity has led to a correlative undermining of any talk of reconciling consciousness with nature. It is highly, almost ecstatically, abstract.

To take just one example: In a book that garnered much acclaim in literary-critical circles, Susan Stewart regards all narratives of authenticity as *narrative* and therefore as “symptoms” of the prelapsarian desire for a reality that denies “the crisis of the sign.” Lest I be accused of paraphrasing too much, let me call on the words with which she expresses some ideas on longing for the authentic:

> The second meaning of *longing* [the first having to do with a pre-eighteenth century notion of “yearning desire”], “the fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy,” takes us closer to an imagined location of origin, be it the transcendent with its seeming proximity to the immortal or the rural/agrarian with its seeming proximity to the earth; for it is in pregnancy that we see the articulation of the threshold between nature and culture, the place of margin between the biological “reality” of splitting cells and the cultural “reality” of the beginning of the symbolic. Out of this dividing — this process of differentiation and relation — the subject is generated, both created and separated from what it is not; and that initial separation/joining has a reproductive capacity that is the reproductive capacity of all signifiers.

Heady stuff to be sure, particularly given the way Stewart trucks with “language and materialism” (to echo the title of an early book on the subject). The materiality of the maternal body and the indubitable solidity of a reference to the earth, to rural/agrarian concerns, and to cellular biology are juxtaposed to make the case that the “generative metaphor of writing” incorporates symbolization in general. From the moment beginning the subject’s famous entry into the symbolic, all narrative will retrace and repeat the initial generation and loss of the momentous event of birth seen as a literal and, therefore, semiotic event. The “reproductive capacity of all signifiers” is, as it were, primordially defined from this “initial separation/joining” of reproduction itself, and from such a determination (not to mention determinism) is born the narrative of authenticity — which is itself doomed to repeat the longing for a rejoining with the maternal body/agrarianism/unsplit cell and so on.

If my gloss sounds ungenerous, perhaps I may be forgiven because my point is to emphasize the degree to which this kind of narratological explication depends upon dissimulating a materialist interest in the world of objects and of reality (however qualified). In actuality, the argument is entirely analogical, even more than it is metaphorical. It is predicated on a presumed though not necessarily established resemblance among elements of the series posited (cell, body, enclosure, birth, separation, loss, signifier, meaning, and so on). Such a hyperbolic faith in the ability of narrative to incorporate both subjective and objective realities leads Stewart to exaggerate “the capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other.” In the process, she blurs the very line between truths and their representation. Once the defining fact of birth has been allowed, no other material fact can be entertained; all facts and all material appear as “fanciful cravings,” ideologies not of “the transcendent” (although that is how Stewart mistakenly phrases it above) but of the transcendental.

Other ways exist to represent the alleged misbegottenness of the idea of authenticity, ones that avoid the excesses of an argument based, as is Stewart’s, on Julia Kristeva’s semiotic theories. Nonetheless, if they take a poststructuralist lead, the fear of totality (read as totalization, the transcendental, the phallus) is not far behind. Authenticity can once more be written off as degraded ideology. But paths not on the poststructuralist road map are also there for the taking, and I shall follow one that allows me to reconnect, albeit circuitously, the issue of authenticity with the sociality of food, Indian-style.
In a discussion that has provided much more serious food for thought than made possible by my dietetic considerations here, Adorno uses the term "exact imagination" (exakte Phantasie) to propose the conjunction of knowledge, experience, and aesthetic form.²⁴ (I take the term’s translation as “exact imagination,” rather than “precise fantasy,” from Sherry Weber Nicholsen’s impeccable arguments in Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno’s Aesthetics.)²⁵ An “exact imagination” designates a nondiscursive form of truth; that is to say, the primacy of the object over language. I would not wish to diminish the importance of recognizing that Adorno’s proposition emerges within the context of his writings on aesthetic experience, whose modernist rarefaction put them at a great distance from everyday life in an administered society. And yet, as Nicholsen argues, “the aesthetic dimension of Adorno’s work holds out, and is indeed premised on, the possibility of a valid, that is ‘adequate’ or ‘authentic’ subjective experience.”²⁶ The ideal of genuine subjective experience, not the “jargon” of Eigentlichkeit (the “in-itself” of Heideggerian existentialism), refers to the truth content (Wahrheitsgehalt) of material, sensuous reality, which it is our task to decipher.

When Adorno derides the idealism of an “in-itself,” he does not do away with authenticity as a concept. Rather, his purpose is consistent with the method of immanent critique, and as Trent Schroyer points out in the foreword to the English translation of Jargon der Eigentlichkeit, Adorno’s intent is to “include in the perspective of critical reason the truth of the existentialist concern for the fundamentality of human subjectivity.”²⁷ Adorno, then, saw the rescue of truth residing in the negation of the “pathos of archaic primalness”²⁸ hidden in the “philosophy of As-If”²⁹ (the “as-if” of existential subjectivism, the “as-if” of ideology as language, and, we might add, the “as-if” of Lacan’s notion of the unconscious structured like a language).

So the authentic for Adorno does not disappear merely because language is incapable of grasping it (in this, as in much else, his thinking differs from that of the French Heideggerians). In fact, he referred to the overburdened readings of the power of meaning alone as “linguistic mendacity.”³⁰ However much one wants to indict Adorno for contradictions in his thinking, the range of his works reveals a conviction about the content of truth pressuring what exists (as art or nature) through its preponderance, without itself becoming identical with truth. Totality, by no means a suspect category in his constellation of ideas, can be conceived as he says, “only in the absence of images.”³¹ By this light, the authentic is part of the content of materialism, of thinking totality in the present. Indeed, Fredric Jameson reminds us that “Adorno’s materialism... wishes above all to elude the representational; in it fulfillment and the somatic realization of the object world must somehow exclude the intermediation of the image.”³² In other words, it is the representation of truth that contributes to inauthenticity, not truth itself; moreover, there must be some way, beyond the mediation of the image, to actualize the authentic—not through any simplistic ascription of what Adorno calls a “positive vision of Utopia”³³ but from within the experience of history and as its critical cancellation. What Jameson calls the “necessary dilemma of the representation of ‘totality’”³⁴ is thus at the heart of Adorno’s dialectical and materialist relationship to the conceptual instrument of totality and to the negative content of the category of the authentic.

Though a great deal of Adorno’s thinking about authenticity, truth, nondiscursive rationality, and subjective experience is conducted at a dense level of philosophical conceptuality, what I take from it is his recognition that it is necessary to return our philosophical or theoretical assumptions about the world to the world itself. Therein lies a secular “resurrection of the flesh.”³⁵

One would be correct to hear Benjamin echoed in the idea of resurrecting the flesh. Important commentators on the work of Adorno and Benjamin (such as Jameson and Rolf Wiggershaus) have pointed out that much of what Adorno had to say early on in The Jargon of Authenticity and later in Negative Dialectics were elaborations of Benjamin’s critique of Kantian conceptions of the relationship between knowledge and truth. Benjamin’s insistence on holding fast to a notion of objectivity (for instance, in his enumeration of the “dialectical image” or of “true” experience [Erfahrung]) had occasioned Adorno’s early charge (in the Adorno-Benjamin correspondence of 1935) that Benjamin’s “dialectics lacked mediation.” Adorno retracted this criticism twenty years later in the intellectual portrait of his dead friend in Prisms (1981), having incorporated many of Benjamin’s insights into the contents of a negative dialectic. There is both subjective irony and objective consequence to the fact that Adorno’s later positions vis-à-vis the problematic of cultural truth are very much in tune with Benjamin’s emphasis (sometimes muted by Adorno, his institutionally better-established
younger colleague) on the necessity to reckon with the “human element in objects which is not the result of labor.” This human or authentic element, variably cited as a nonsensuous correspondence between the animate and inanimate world, the transmissible and enduring aspects of a work of art, the affirmation of the monad, or the essential translatability even of a life forgotten, traverses the course of Benjamin’s own writings from the Trauerspiel book, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, onward.36

Throughout, Benjamin’s concern is to retain theoretical and material contact in his “philosophical anthropology” with issues of the flesh or corporeal truth. The world of objects, bound up in processes of reification under capitalism, is subject to the mystifications of the commodity form and as such conveys something about reified consciousness that is not altogether caught up within language (since, against idealist philosophies of language, subjective determination is not seen as exhausted within and by operations of the sign). Such a view is simply irreconcilable with the readings to which it has been subjected within poststructuralist conceptions of the role of language in generating the subject (and its others).37 Benjamin does rely on formalisms between language or signification in general and other “ideogrammic” methods of adequate reality. But for him the proximity of representation to the real takes its definition from “techniques of nearness” (for example, the anecdote, fragment, film, and photography), which share the formal property with contemporary reality of having been structured by the objective social and historical conditions of capitalism. In other words, the relationship of resemblance is very far from metaphorical; rather, it is almost a palpable sense of copresence among the anecdote (or in the case of cinema, the frame), the lived detail, the administered life, and its “click” of authenticity. In Benjamin’s constellative system, the flash of the photograph or the click of the camera produces not just a likeness with the fleetingness of truth but its actualization. According to him, “[t]he true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our own space (and not to imagine ourselves in their space).”38

In this reading, the question of authenticity has more to do with the phenomenal click of the presence of the past, of some ideal of truth occluded (but not merely fantasized), than it does with the retroactive click of a deferred action in which experience becomes the remembrance of something that was never true in the first place. It is not entirely surprising that such a reading departs from Freud—or, more to the point, from contemporary Freudian criticism—given that Benjamin (as opposed to Adorno) relied on Freud’s writings only occasionally and regarded as exorbitant many of his claims about the constitutive force of latency or retroactivity in the practical actions of everyday life.39 Nonetheless, the overall line of argument developed here with help from both Adorno and Benjamin suggests that tarrying with the authentic is a matter of “making things present,” an exact imagination of past things in present spaces.

Food and Value

Let me switch analytic gears and return our attention to the detail that earlier caught it: immigrant investments in authentic Indian cooking and eating. It would be flippant but true to say that the food habits of my ethnographic interlocutors resurrect the flesh in more ways than one. Not only is there a clear emphasis on a form of sense perception devalued elsewhere in the economy of bourgeois means and tastes, but there is also a form of sociability associated with meals that has everything to do with making present a collective—as opposed to individualistic—sense of identity. The hypertrophy of the senses of sight and sound at the expense of what, in a McLuhanesque mode, may be called the “hot” media of taste and touch emblematises a bourgeois hierarchy of the senses, one in which the interiority of the individual reigns supreme.40 Within such a hierarchy, ocular and aural values are privileged in ways that are not shared by those of touch, taste, or smell, on account of the latter’s association with baser instincts and bodily attractions. None of this is unexpected as a description of a bourgeois regime of senses, just as it is by now a commonplace that the bourgeois subject’s emergence is predicated on the bildungs projects of reading and listening (books and music or painting and drama) as contrasted with eating, drinking, and other carnivalesque practices.

So it is quite appropriate and not all that extraordinary to find extravagant rituals of food consumption acting as local exhibitions of an ideal of propriety inherited from traditional, preimmigrant, and even prematerial forms of value. Within such an ideal, to touch the feet of an elder or to eat sumptuously at weddings emblematises a sensibility and a respect for the senses of touch and taste quite out of kilter with the high regard that modern Western etiquette places on visual decorum and aural civility. To be polite in the West is to listen to one’s interlocu-
discourses have received considerable attention, most notably in the work of Bourdieu, Certeau, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and, earlier, Georg Simmel. I have found this body of work tremendously helpful in organizing my own ideas about that which Lévi-Strauss calls “food that is good to think.” But I should like to contend that the anthropologisms (of Lévi-Strauss and Certeau) and, by contrast, the sociologisms (of Bourdieu and Simmel) are escaped or at least sublated in what I have had to say so far. To wrap up my discussion of food matters, let me attempt to distill a few important features from two of these paradigmatic accounts of living and cooking because they reinforce my arguments about Indian food and immigrant conceptions.

“Living and cooking,” as readers will no doubt recognize, is the phrase Certeau and his collaborators use (in volume two of _The Practice of Everyday Life_) to capture the gamut of practices surrounding the French concept of _terroir_—everything having to do with attachments to the earth, land, and food and with the borrowing of regional cuisines in the remaking of identities. Since the French have already provided a major foil for my reading of the alimentary customs of immigrant Indians, Certeau’s insights allow the comparison to continue. We learn, for instance, the transitive fact that _terroir_ is rooted in the popular Latin _territorium_, referring to earth, land, or soil, which is an alternation of _territorium_, referring more specifically to territory. _Terroir_ is often employed in the context of food products that come from or have a flavor unique to a particular region. The connection, we might even say conflations, of territorial and dietary matters underlines the intimacy among what we eat, how we belong, and who we are. However, the connection is not merely metaphorical or synecdochic (as in the saying “We are what we eat”); it is substantive insofar as the materiality of social identities are given their most solid value in food.

In a chapter titled “Plat du Jour,” Certeau observes that “[e]ating, in fact, serves not only to maintain the biological machinery of the body, but to make concrete one of the specific modes of relation between a person and the world, thus forming one of the fundamental landmarks in space-time.” The alimentary is immensely practical, according to Certeau, although that by no means indicates lack of complexity: “What does one eat? It seems obvious that one eats what one can ‘get’ or what one likes—a proposition full of false clarity and loaded with erroneous simplicity.” The right answer has to do with the interweavings of mem-
ory and matter, ritual and calculation that give form to the taste for something definite: the masala chai served in the southern New Jersey household no less than olive oil served in Provence. Facts of food also remain the most durable and authentic point of reference in exile or for other brands of “life abroad,” away from the genitive and generative locus of origins. These facts are, in Certeau’s words, “a way of inscribing in the withdrawal of the self a sense of belonging to a former land [terroir].” The interiorized self of the immigrant Indian—the emphasis on domestic discourses and privatized self-fashioning I have elaborated—can be aligned right alongside such an understanding of food as the last refuge of hope for those whose settlements with embourgeoisement have produced both psychic and class anxieties.

The class-configured lineaments of taste preferences including (but not limited to) food practices receive elaborate attention in Bourdieu’s Distinction. His systematic analysis of the habitus in terms of a social class or class fraction and its ways of expressing a uniform logic across various aspects of lifestyle is a useful corrective to explanations about alimentary prescriptions that teeter between binarisms and voluntarisms. Whereas the binaristic propensity is to regard food, cooking, or eating in terms of theorems about purity and pollution, about the raw and the cooked—that is, as reductively structured—voluntaristic propositions allow for no structuration at all. At this end, the idea is that, like other signifying practices, rituals of food exhibit a semiotic plenitude that resists any reduction or thematization. I would say that both the reductive and the archly semioticized views on dietetics run the risk of mere anthropologisms about cultural alterity. They exemplify alimentary equivalents of the Balinese cockfight: useful in specifying the “function” of ritual acts or in providing descriptive accounts of the plenitude of consumption, but less so for the purposes of theorizing the expressive systematicity of culture.

More reflexive in its approach, Bourdieu’s modeling of the habitus and the intersecting coherences of food, clothing, furniture, music, and so on tells us some important things about the subjective choices people make, relative to their objective conditions defined by class position and social status. Suspended between practice and structure, or between preference and determination, Bourdieu’s is an exercise in dialectical sociology. The following passage is instructive by way of the contrast it poses between the “working-class meal” and my own focus on middle-class Indian food habits:

Plain speaking, plain eating: the working-class meal is characterized by plenty (which does not exclude restrictions and limits) and above all by freedom. “Elastic” and “abundant” dishes are brought to the table—soaps or sauces, pasta or potatoes (almost always included among the vegetables)—and served with a ladle or spoon, to avoid too much measuring and counting, in contrast to everything that has to be cut and divided, such as roasts.

In opposition to the ease of the working-class meal, the “bourgeoisie is concerned to eat with all due form.” Such preoccupation with form, Bourdieu avers, is as much “a matter of rhythm, which implies expectations, pauses, restraints,” as of sequencing fish, meat, cheese, and dessert. According to him, the forms and formalisms that the bourgeoisie impose on the appetite inculcate an air of correctness and a disposition defined by restraint and censorship, however gentle and discreet. (One example Bourdieu gives is of the bourgeois male who shaves and dresses first thing in the morning, “refusing the division between home and the exterior”—presumably because he is always and everywhere at home).

The import of much of what Bourdieu has to say about the form and manner of oppositions between working-class and bourgeois practices of consumption among the French is of direct interest to our own case because, among other things, it reveals the combinatory aspects of the middle-class Indian meal. For one thing, the generalized Indian passion for food is akin to the “free and easy” manner of the working-class meal, as Bourdieu presents it. Likewise, abundance is valued and signified by both vegetarian and nonvegetarian dishes (such as chicken curry, dum alu, or biryani—all of which are served heaped on plates, defying measurement in the same way as do the pasta or sauces of working-class meals). Yet a calculus of restraint and correct eating also obtains in the middle-class Indian case, as with its bourgeois counterpart in France. Though the constraint against eating noisily or carelessly is removed (contrary to the manners of the French bourgeoisie), Indians are extremely particular about the proper ways to serve oneself. These range from using the correct utensils specified for each dish to not “contaminating” the general offerings. For example, no cook would ever taste a preparation with a serving spoon and then return the spoon to the pot.
without washing it first, since it would be both vulgar and dirty to do so. Similarly, no guest would touch the food laid out at a party with a spoon, fork, or fingers that had already been raised to one's mouth. There are other proscriptions and prescriptions in the manner of eating and serving that very much guarantee the propriety of a meal. So though Indians may undervalue judgments about the "vulgaritiy" of indulging in the immediate satisfactions of food and drink, they greatly overvalue the ceremonial status of food and make pointed distinctions regarding the "correctness" of color, convention, and aesthetic aspects of dietary refinement.

Middle-class Indian tastes thus represent both a midpoint in the opposition between freedom and restraint as well as a reformulation of bourgeois expectations themselves. Moreover, they confound the opposition between (bourgeois) form and (working-class) substance precisely to the degree that the homology between taste culture and class culture expresses, as well as fails to express, the specificities of postcolonial articulation. Of such culturally relative confusions is class anxiety made.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dialectics of Ethnic Spectatorship

It is Indian but it is universal. It is past but it is present. It is personal, immediate, full of high drama and tense story, but it is ceremonial. It is simple, recognizable, but it has another dimension.

—Cover blurb from The Mahabharata by Jean-Claude Carrière

[1] In the house of the hangman one should not speak of the noose, otherwise one might seem to harbor resentment.

—Theodor Adorno,
"The Meaning of Working Through the Past"

Estrangement

In the 1998 translated collection of Ernst Bloch's Literary Essays there is a highly suggestive discursus on the distinction in German between alienation (Entfremdung) and estrangement (Verfremdung).¹ The former, Bloch avers, has a peculiarly economic tint to it, "having been applied from earliest times in the context of commercial activity." In the Hegelian tradition and particularly for Feuerbach, the word "entfremden" takes on the negative connotation of becoming alienated from oneself. Bloch tells us that only with Marx does entfremden get the final gloss of a "system of exploitation wherein nothing remains of the human being who is forced to sell himself except the form of the disempowered worker."² By comparison, the word verfremden ("to estrange") takes its meaning from the 1842 German novel New Life, which depicts the estrangement and deep
22. Ibid., 193.
20. Procedural considerations have been described in chapter 1. Here I wish only to convey that early in my fieldwork I decided not to enter every social occasion with the paraphernalia of observation: tape recorder, notebook, or camera. Though far from resulting in genuinely spontaneous interactions with my ethnographic interlocutors, this was indeed less disruptive and made for better maintenance of “rule-governed behavior.” Moreover, I was able to keep within sight of my interest in how narratives get produced in taken-for-granted interactions (rather than through more self-consciously calculated measures).

22. Ibid., 193.
23. The advantages and particularities of “insider knowledge” have been explored in other ways by Lila Abu-Lughod in Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), see especially 1–35.
24. The names of my informants are pseudonyms. I have tried to maintain the “spirit” of people’s names: to be consistent, for instance, on matters such as whether people were addressed habitually by their initials (“Deejay” or “P. C.”), by a recognizable “pet name” (such as “Bout”), or by their first names (such as “Sudhir”). Names are, of course, crucial in the construction of identity; Indian names, in particular, connote specific meanings that, whether Hindu or Muslim, derive from Persian, Sanskrit, or Urdu roots (e.g., Sudhir, “the calm one”; Ajit, “the unconquerable”). The suffixes -da/dada or -di/didi in Bengali and -bhai or -bathi in Hindi, when attached to names, designate age differences between men and women who were older than 1.
25. Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 191, original emphasis.
26. Ibid., 196.
27. The trope of recovering the self—connoting, as it does, an image of disease—is expanded upon by Ashis Nandy in his The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
29. Mrinalini Sinha has argued that the ideology of the “effeminate” Bengali was an integral part of the British colonial system in India, which propagating an overt myth of civilization while concealing its covert purposes of exploitation. Rendering the educated Bengali as excessively emotional and feminized was a way of justifying the rule of the Raj and of withholding power from educated and Anglicized natives (who might otherwise be regarded as competent to govern themselves). See Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1995).
30. Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 193, original emphasis.
31. The neologistic formulation “the inapproriate/d other” is from Trinh T.

Minh-ha. It draws on the idea that the subaltern woman is an “inappropriate” subject within the dominant culture as well as in mainstream feminist or anthropological discourses (which continue to presume and disimulate the white woman as their point of interest). The other woman is also an absent representation tout court and in this sense is "un-appropriate." The neologism, then, is a condescension. See Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
33. Ibid., 87.
34. Ibid., emphasis in original.
39. Ibid., 19.

4. Food and the Habitus

1. Pierre Bourdieu is usually credited with the concept of the habitus, but Bourdieu borrowed from Norbert Elias’s early (1939) use of it to distinguish between the old-fashioned notion of “national character” and the accumulated weight of “the fortunes of a nation…sedimented into the habitus of its individual members.” For more on Elias’s laying out of the concept, see his The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, trans. Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (New York: University Press, 1996 [1989]), especially the preface, ix, and notes to the preface, 438–93. We may note that Benjamin also refers to “the habitus of a lived life” (in drafts of the Arcades Project), but as I understand it, he does not elevate the term to identify a concept.
3. Ibid., 192.
4. Ibid., 191–92.
5. Ibid., 192, quoted from Col. J. L. Sleeman, Thugs, or A Million Murders (London: Sampson Low, 1933 [1920]), 79.
7. Ibid., 174, emphasis added.
9. My thanks to Prabhakara Jha for recalling an occasion when, on being introduced, a woman gushed at him, “You’re Indian? I love Indian food.” To which he
responded, "On behalf of Indian food, I thank you." I continue to appreciate his insights into and witticisms about the Western reception of "postcoloniality."


11. Ibid., 63, original emphasis.

12. Ibid., 69–64

13. To give a couple of examples, nationalist aspirations of formerly colonized countries cannot be equated with (or seen as equivalents to) those of imperial nations any more than "women's studies" can be said to have the same scholarly agenda as that of various conservative-sponsored "men's studies" programs. In other words, history is not (and has never been) a level playing field in which all positions are formally equivalent.

14. Tautology, Barthes argues, is among the features of myth. See his "Myth Today," in his Mythologies, 52–53. In this context, his distinction between the mythologist and the "myth-consumer" is also worth remembering. The former is "condemned to live in a theoretical sociality" (157), whereas the latter lives with and speaks about the "proverbial," existential quality of life. Crucially, this difference leads Barthes to focus on the bourgeois, which is to say class-determined, nature of myth; it is also what prevents his analysis from becoming preoccupied with culturalist explanations of mythological doxa. For an overwhelmingly existentialist account of the commonplaces and mythologies of Soviet Russia, see Svetlana Boym's Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

15. In Bourdieu's words, "the social agents whom the sociologist classifies are producers not only of classifiable acts but also of acts of classification which are themselves classified." See his Distinction, 467.


19. Ibid., x, original emphasis.


22. To be a bit more careful than Stewart, we might think of the difference between transcendence and the transcendental. They are connected but not identical: Whereas the former is concerned with overcoming human suffering and is premised on the idea that human life is transitory, belief in the latter implies an idealist and pathos-filled sense of human nature, seen as stemming from the void and having no purpose. The one is sociohistorical in orientation; the other, metaphysical. (The poststructuralist haste to condemn Marxist thinking as a supposedly degraded universalism has led to some conflationary accounts of the two.)

23. Jameson has suggested that the hostility to the concept of totality stems from"

42. Ibid., ix.

43. Ibid., 181.

44. Ibid., 183.

45. Ibid., 184.

46. Approaches that fit food into binaristic and functionalist accounts have been very influential in cultural studies, though the underlying methodological difficulties have been studiously ignored. However, on the assumption that such problems are (and should be) easily detected in the source material, let me direct the reader to Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1966]); and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).


48. Ibid.

5. The Dialectics of Ethnic Spectatorship

It should be understood that I use the terms “ethnic,” “immigrant,” and “postcolonial” somewhat interchangeably here. I do not think this compromises the specificity of my “object,” since a generalized visibility of others is exactly what is at stake in understanding how postcolonial subjects fit within a scheme of specularity and representation.


2. Ibid., 240.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., emphasis added.

6. Ibid., 241.

7. Ibid.