

“FLOATING ISLANDS”  
An Exploration of Cultural Identity and the “Tyranny of the Mean” in Three  
Food Memoirs

Jaimie Michelle Hays

Critical Paper & Program Bibliography  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MFA (Master of  
Fine Arts) in Creative Writing, Pacific Lutheran University, August 2009.

“Floating Islands”: An Exploration of Cultural Identity and the “Tyranny of the Mean” in  
Three Food Memoirs

America has long been considered the melting pot, replete with milk and honey to satiate thirst and hunger for immigrants, the poor, the down-on-their-luck. According to Homeland Security’s immigration statistics, as of 2007, there are currently 1,052,415 legal permanent residents residing in the U.S. (“Immigration Statistics”). These immigrants bring with them fragments of the old country, pieces of a cultural puzzle including, most importantly, for my purposes, distinctive foods, that do not quite fit with America’s “apple pie” image.

E.N. Anderson points out in *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*, that aside from the more traditional Chinese and Mexican immigrants in California, most immigrants “gradually change their food-ways. Eventually, they usually come to eat like the majority in the new home” (203). Interestingly enough, while America has been “Coca-colonizing” the rest of the world, Mexico, Italy and China have been placing their mark on American food culture in large ways (Anderson 206). Even in William Inge’s *Splendor in the Grass*, which took place in the 1920s and 30s, we can see the mark of the burgeoning Italian influence on the American culture when Angie offers Bud a piece of “Italian” pizza. Arguably, apple pie is not even a true American trademark, nor is spaghetti, lasagna, or hamburgers and French fries, all American cultural food icons these days. All have roots in European, even Egyptian, dishes, but those ties have been forgotten when assimilated into American culture, almost as if culinary taste can be swept away, much like one’s identity.

John Donne once said that “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent,” but for many immigrants or child of immigrants, the U.S. appears to be a landmass where they do not fit and they find themselves drifting off course. Many immigrants eventually will relinquish the place of their birth, which leaves them adrift and afloat in two separate stases. The body recognizes the new world; the soul and heart long for home and the old ties. This fragmentation of identity results in a fracturing of the self, a longing to displace the old identity and to embrace an identity that is safe and homogenized in a new way, by offering a sense of belonging.

In each of the following food memoirs, Eduardo Machado’s *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile’s Hunger for Home*, Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*, the writers become “floating islands,” adrift in a sea of uncertain identity, doing their best to embrace the new cultural world that has been thrust upon them, and in the process, often failing to retain the vestiges of the old world. Sadly, this failure to keep the old identity often leads to a sense of regret and shame, a denial of the “other” cultural self.

Eduardo Machado begins his memoir with his Cuban childhood and the familial ties that still bind him to the land. His exile from Cuba to the United States traumatizes him and the America he encounters is much colder than his childhood island. The Cuba he remembers is kind, gentle and forgiving. Life with his grandparents in Cuba is sweet, idyllic, even. He recalls eating black beans with his grandfather Fernando, slurping newspaper soup with his grandmother Cuca, savoring French napoleons or éclairs from a Cuban bakery with his grandfather Oscar. The family recipes Machado includes are full of flavor and spice and made of ingredients that are casual and organic to the landscape:

cumin, garlic, green pepper, jalapeno, oregano are used in liberal amounts, each adding its own layering of taste and texture to round out the perfect portion of soup or black beans. Machado describes his grandmother Cuca's "newspaper soup" with reverence: "The waxy starch of *malanga*, the nutty thickness of *yucca*, and the sweetness and color of pumpkin all combined to produce a complex heartiness" (5).

The complex heartiness is reflected in Machado's own Cuban familial ties. Machado lives with his paternal grandmother Cuca and grandfather Fernando, as well as his own mother and father, and is also surrounded by a phalanx of cousins, aunts and uncles. Close by are his maternal grandparents, Oscar and Manuela, in "a Frank Lloyd Wright knockoff" home (Machado 9) where his grandmother's brothers and sisters also reside. Machado is wistful in recollecting this extended family, the family ties that he loses once he is sent from Cuba, in 1961, with other children whose parents would eventually follow them to the United States. It is like a "perfectly planned and executed garden party, every morning, day after day" (3), a safe haven that is interrupted once the Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs intercede.

Seemingly overnight, Machado is displaced from Cuba, sent along with his brother and unaccompanied by his parents on "Operation Peter Pan", a religious endeavor dedicated to resettling Cuban children in America. He is haunted by his grandfather's silent entreaty to remember, to remember the Cuba of his birth, to never forget his family and cultural heritage, the smell of jasmine, the taste of sweet pastries and the subtleties of spices, the sound of water lapping at the shore. Machado recounts, "He was telling me, remember all this. Remember me" (61). The very act of memory is tied to food, the taste that clings to his tongue, the taste buds that cry out that he is Cuban.

Once he lands in America, living with relatives he barely even knows, his first meal is white rice and SPAM, a far cry from his grandmother's soup and baked beans. The SPAM doesn't come in the blue box with yellow lettering, a typical American fare, but a huge Army ration can. Machado can barely stomach the meal; he relates, "I don't know which color induced nausea faster, the dirty gold of the tin or the sickly pink of the processed meat" (70). The processed food is nothing like the wholesome, organic food that his grandparents can pluck from their gardens or buy at markets.

Not only does Machado need to situate himself in a land where he is viewed askance because of his Cuban heritage, but he also is confronted with the idea of a pre-packaged product, the land of the slap-and-dash, ready-from-box-to-plate meals. Gone is the leisure of those extended family meals, there isn't even enough room for the family to sit together at the dinner table.

Not only does the leisure time disappear at the family meals but Machado's mother cannot find Cuban ingredients to even emulate the family meals. When his mother, father, and sister reunite with him and his brother in Florida and the family eventually relocates to California, they are baffled by the lack of ingredients and staples to even contrive a Cuban dish, or brew a stimulating cup of café con leche. To welcome the Machados, the Catholics prepare typical American dishes: glazed ham from a can, hot dogs, sticky white bread and butter, tuna and macaroni salad, though Machado notes that the salads are strangely "saccharine and bland" (94). When trying to emulate a cup of Cuban café con leche, the smell and taste that could possibly hold a semblance of their island life, their attempt to construct their old life falls devastatingly flat. The coffee "look[s] pale brown like river water, sick compared to the rich, dark, almost red espresso

we drank in Cuba” (Machado 97) and the cream is pronounced as having “no taste” because of its pasteurization. It is clearly a symbol of the emotional and physical distance that they will face in their new adopted country, where blandness and conformity are tied to the palate and people.

The final blow to their emotional upheaval arrives in their first actual trip to the local supermarket. The Machado family has planned and prepared for this moment, building the supermarket up in their minds as their personal salvation, where they will be able to find the ingredients to prepare their authentic Cuban dishes. They salivate over the thought of fresh foods and vegetables, reciting in their minds, plantain, yucca, lemon, lime, avocado, real bread, cumin, saffron, *naranjas agrias*. Once Machado’s mother enters the door, the reality hits her square in the face. Bananas, but overlarge and without flavor. Potatoes and yams that are orange and not white. Avocadoes that are small, dark, not Caribbean green. The food disgusts her, offends her, is not a replacement for the variety she wants and clearly longs for. The trip that is supposed to be the solution to the family’s seasoning and variety problems turns out to be indicative of the land’s blandness. Machado’s mother cooks a meal with the ingredients she manages to procure, adapts the recipe from those ingredients that is better than SPAM and Velveeta grilled cheese sandwiches, but Machado points out that it is not like home.

Like Machado’s memoir, Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* centers on displacement of country and culture. Nguyen is eight months old when she flees Vietnam in 1975 with her sister, father, and grandmother. They choose Michigan over California and Wyoming, only to be confronted with scowls and none-so-subtle threats that alternately warn them to learn the English language and to disappear, to

return to where they came from. Nguyen reflects that she came of age in the 1980s, “before *diversity* and *multicultural awareness* trickled into western Michigan. Before ethnic was cool. Before Thai restaurants became staples in every town” (10). As with Machado, fruits prove to be problematic to find, lemongrass and real jasmine a mirage. When Nguyen’s grandmother Noi buys fruit from the farmer’s market, according to Buddha’s customs, the fruit is first offered to Buddha’s golden statue, the fruit round and ripe, the choicest pieces chosen to honor him and Nguyen’s dead relatives. She is tempted to devour the glistening fruit but is constantly aware of Buddha’s closed eyes and deceptively jolly posture. The resistance to touch and taste becomes a lesson in patience and desire, a way to resist longing and sustenance.

For Nguyen and her sister, Anh, the fruit becomes symbolic of their connection to the old traditions that Noi still holds close to her heart, safety and security in a slice of orange, in a sliver of an apple. Rosa, their new stepmother of mixed ethnic heritage, understands the symbolic gesture offering up gifts to a deity, though Rosa is still very American at heart, and neglects the finer distinctions. Nguyen cherishes Noi’s rituals: the journey from farmer’s market, to Noi’s hands, to Buddha’s plate, to her hands. For Nguyen, the ritual cements herself to Noi, makes her feel warm and safe. However, the ritual is disturbed once Rosa and her daughter Crissy join the household. Rosa picks a Red Delicious apple, “the kind Noi never chose” (Nguyen 29). Her new stepmother carelessly cuts the apple, not bothering with whittling the pieces into fine, delicate, symmetrical strips.

Assimilation and survival comes in the form of fast food, labels, and names. The Nguyen girls learn quickly through their interaction with their classmates how much

McDonalds, Jordache, and a name like Kim can make them more American than anything else. Nguyen relates that “Names meant a whole new self. Overnight, Thanh’s children, Truoc, and Doan, became Tiffany and David, and other families followed. [...]. They created two lives for themselves: the American one and the Vietnamese one” (48).

The connection between food and identity is clearly highlighted in Nguyen’s assessment of the cultural split that was available to her at this time. Change a Vietnamese name into an American Tiffany, Jennifer, Michelle, and the identity was halfway there in a remake into a classic American. Eat American fare like Campbell’s soup, grilled cheese sandwiches, Chef Boyardee and Pringles and the transition was almost complete. Nguyen is not allowed to change her name into a chirpy, cookie cutter American name, because Rosa tells the girls that they need to be proud of who they are. This is problematic for Nguyen in more ways than one, as her first name is Bich, pronounced “bic” but her American teachers and classmates continually refer to her as “bitch.” The degradation Nguyen suffers isolates her from those around her, because she cannot find the words to tell her father and Rosa. Nguyen says that “The shame layered upon embarrassment equaled silence. I felt I could judge the nature and compassion of teachers, especially substitutes, by the way they read my name” (49). Her name becomes repugnant to her, and she envies those who seemingly can transform into the American she wishes to be.

Her embarrassment is not only significant in her identity but in her relation to American food. Her stepmother, a self-proclaimed penny pincher, harbors suspicions about name brands and labels, not only when it comes to clothes but to products such as Chef Boyardee, Beefaroni, and Hamburger Helper. Nguyen guesses it is due to her

stepmother's refusal to spend a lot of money when there are seven mouths in the household to feed, but she craves and obsesses over American food so much that she dreams about it, searches through the cupboards and refrigerator at home, waiting for those items to appear and mark her as truly American. She transforms her longing for Buddha's gifts into processed foodstuffs. In a remarkable litany, Nguyen lists and describes how her American food desires are outstripping her Vietnamese preferences and ends with "I dreamed of taking it all" (51).

Notice that she says she dreams of "taking it all"; as with the Buddha's fruit that she initially longed for in the beginning, and American food transforms into her longing for sustenance, although in a much different way than her longing for Buddha's gifts. With Buddha, it was emblematic of safety and security, the old ties that bind, but with the sugar-loaded candy, it is a desire to belong. Of course, these items are not available in her home, so she can only sit by and watch people such as her neighbors, the Vander Wals, the epitome of Midwestern values, bake their Toll House cookies and consume what Nguyen is fast labeling the American dream—the dream of brand labels and fast food that ultimately cause her to eventually spurn all that she identifies as Vietnamese, though Noi stubbornly clings to the old ways.

Nguyen admits that she still likes her grandmother's food, that they still have "an iron grip on her heart" (56), but in her seven or eight-year-old heart, she knows what "real people" eat. In her mind the "real people" are the Americans and she wants to become this real person so badly that she spends all of her time thinking of ways to coerce her parents to buy Whoppers or Big Macs. The split between the two identities becomes too much for her to bear, and the beginning of her transition to assimilate to the

American version of herself, or at least a façade that others could possibly believe. The delicious homemade Toll House cookies that she eats, constructed out of flour, sugar, and chocolate, not a factory product, sparks her realization about creating a new person, a new identity. Nguyen decides to change herself; even if she can't entirely have control over food and her identity, she can still have a measure of some control in how she presents herself to others. However, even in this new skin she appropriates, she still has questions about her race and identity, "but it was so much easier to deny them than to speak out loud and court the embarrassment and shame that always lay in wait for me" (59).

Shame and embarrassment seems to be a common theme for Eduardo Machado and Bich Nguyen as part of the two separate worlds that they inhabit, and this is no exception in Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir, *The Language of Baklava*. Unlike Machado and Nguyen, Abu-Jaber is an American born citizen, but she still feels the displacement and pull of two different worlds—her Jordanian father and her American mother. Her father, nicknamed Bud, feels the Jordanian ties and moves his family to Jordan when Abu-Jaber is a young child.

In Abu-Jaber's first awareness of the distance between the two worlds, she confronts the idea that the Arabic language and food she consumes is considered animalistic and lowly, even though she exalts in the *sambusik* cookies that are among her favorites. She adores playing with her Jordanian friend Hisham and his cronies and begins to find her way in the labyrinthine Jordan streets. She meets Bennett, a young boy who is about her age, who is an English transplant while his diplomat parents. Abu-Jaber quickly feels the dissonance and pull between Bennett who is close to her American

upbringing and Hisham and his friends who embody her father's Jordan childhood.

Bennett is entirely English; he does not like Jordanian food, "native food" he sniffs, while Abu-Jaber is hurt by his dismissive tone, since she is part "native," according to his definition. In the defining moment of whether Abu-Jaber will choose Bennett and his craving for crumpets and clotted cream over the gray gum and *sambusik* cookies Hisham makes especially for her, Bennett sums up her conflict between these two different stases:

You don't belong with them! You *know* that. You know that. The sort you are belongs with the sort I am. Like belongs with like. Father says. No in-betweens. The world isn't meant for in-betweens, it isn't done. You know that. (49)

The fact that she is an "in-between" is not only reflected in the food Abu-Jaber prefers but in the fact she is not allowed to speak Arabic language at school, since it is deemed animalistic. Her in-between status is also confirmed when Bennett mentions that her skin color is like his, pale, not dark like her Jordanian father, which automatically would place her in the "other" category. Up to this point, Abu-Jaber has not consciously thought about how her food preferences as well as skin color can determine how she is placed on a spectrum, a line that is clearly defined as white and non-white, or American/English and Jordanian. Her Arabic lies inside of her, waiting to creep out, to dominate her English. Arabic is a language that comes so easily to her that once she has been indoctrinated and submerged into the culture, she forgets English and Arabic spills from her mouth so quickly that she cannot even remember how to phrase the Arabic into English.

The floating aspect of language and food is another way Abu-Jaber reflects on her disembodiment between Jordan and America. Even food as familiar as pancakes are transformed once she is in Jordan, and Abu-Jaber bemusedly recalls,

It's as if there's only a certain amount of space in my brain, and the more space Jordan takes up, the less room there is left for America. Sometimes I

lose track of what language I'm in and gibber between the two of them, substituting English words for Arabic and vice versa. My favorite breakfast is no longer pancakes, but bread doused with oil and *zataar*. [...] I stop and think: Am I still an American?. (58)

Abu-Jaber mentions the “floating” aspect of the America language quite often when she tries to describe the split between her two battling identities. Her family eventually returns to America, because Bud, her father, cannot reconcile with the changing face of Jordan, or perhaps more so the fact that he also changed during his time in the United States. Palestine and Israel’s political situation during the 1970s command her family’s attention, which causes family disputes when they are all gathered around the table trying to ferret out the rights and wrongs.

Abu-Jaber only half knows the situation, but she even has forgotten what it was like to live in this world, since it has been several years since she has lived there. She recognizes that “[...] it’s already too long from Arabic. English is as clear as a glass mirror, and Arabic is the silver inside the glass—hidden and essential” (126). This hidden and essential quality also connects to a dish that is often prepared at family meals, a dish called *magloubeh* which means “upside down,” a conglomeration of rice, onions, eggplant, cauliflower and lamb which may or may not have its original ties to Jordan. A family friend who teaches politics at Cornell scoffs at the dish and calls it Jordan’s “national identity,” which combines with friend’s disdain for the British control of the Middle East. Throughout the family strife, the words that often flash by too quickly for Abu-Jaber to catch and analyze, the family eats the *magloubeh*, Abu-Jaber herself trying to circumvent the cauliflower and the eggplant, pushing the food around on the dish. She says that the table undergoes a “balkanization”—“women on one side, men on the other—the children forming a private island, remote from the world of grown-ups and

their dreary talk” (129). Again the connection between the floating aspects of language and country appear in this quiet assessment of forming private islands, separate and remote from one another.

The older generation, led by Abu-Jaber’s father, tries to retain some of the rituals and customs associated with food preparation that can possibly be carried over to America. Abu-Jaber quickly learns that “We are Arab at home and American in the streets” (5). At home and with their uncles and aunts, they eat stuffed grape leaves, kibbeh, roasted leg of lamb, shish kabob, kibbeh. Unlike Nguyen who is not allowed to change her name into one that is “American,” Abu-Jaber’s father and uncles have no such reservations: Hilal is Hal, Jaffer is Jack, Hamdan is Danny, Quadir is Frankie.

However, even though they have Americanized their names, they still believe that they are the tough, wiry boys from Jordan, ones who ran barefoot in the lemon, fig and olive orchards, drew water from a well, baked bread in a stone oven and slept underneath the stars in the same way their Bedouin ancestors had done for centuries. They also watched as their fathers’ slaughtered sheep, a far cry from the neatly packaged slabs of meat sold in American supermarkets. The desire to connect to this pastoral, yet violent, life becomes a pitched thrum and one afternoon, the brothers decide that they will slaughter Lambie, in recognition of their Jordanian customs. They do not tell their children that the stuffed shish kebab is actually ground lamb, the lamb that the children have petted and fawned over early that afternoon.

The story takes twenty years to tell, but the killing of Lambie turns out to be distinctively different from the way they remember sheep slaughtering in Jordan. The plan is simple: four brothers will hold the lamb and one will make the sacrificial cut. The cut

is not deep enough to kill the lamb, who bucks in its dying death throes, spurting blood all over the brothers who are extremely ineffectual in taking the life of an animal. An uncle misses the lamb's throat yet again and makes another shallow cut on its face; another brother attempts to pick up a rock and bash it in the head but loses his grip; finally, Abu-Jaber's father picks up the bloody knife with both hands and plunges it in the lamb's neck. Bud can hardly recount the true story to his daughter, knowing that the story demonstrates what Abu-Jaber also knows: "But killing the lamb showed them: they were no longer who they thought they were" (19).

The story represents the displacement of cultures, how old rituals and traditions have to become modified in America, how some traditions perhaps are best left to their origins and have no place in a modern world, especially a world that relies so much on materialism, modernity, and marketing. As much as Abu-Jaber loves her Jordanian family and her father Bud, the connection to the Arabic world that is essential and dear to her, there comes a time when she will deny and reject this Arabic identity, most likely due to the complications of living in a "floating" world.

Because of this complication of trying to fit in a "floating" world, all of these memoirists eventually come to a point in their childhood or young adulthood where they begin to reject the "other," to assimilate into being an American. Each illustrates the shame and embarrassment of being cast as the "other." Along with the cultural rejection of their "other" identity, they also spurn the food that links them to a part of themselves—effectively cutting themselves into half, denying the cultural traditions that bind them to the "other." The food that they force into their mouths is American, free of the constraints of the other identity, yet unmistakably marking the first point of American

acceptance when they consume what they think they are supposed to eat, undeniably cementing their transformation.

Adaptation becomes part of their transformation, as Machado finds out the years he spends in California. California is a hybrid of all sorts of immigrants, much like he and his family, and they are even able to find *Cubanos* who speak their language. However, even though their group finds solidarity and community with other transplants, they are still outsiders within the larger America.

The fear of losing an integral part of himself haunts him during childhood, adolescence, adulthood, until he makes his journey back to Cuba, trying to assess and weigh in his mind exactly who he is: Cuban/American, Cuban, or even perhaps only American. He embarks on his journey with conflicting questions about identity and place: “What did it mean for me, after discovering that I would always belong in Havana, to also feel American? What kind of American was I? An immigrant? An exile? Was I a Los Angelino? A West Coast kid who had spent twenty years in New York?” (Machado 298).

His journey to Cuba is the beginning of his healing process as a “floating island,” a person with one foot in each country, yet with a heart that is torn apart no matter how many years have passed since his last visit to Cuba. Machado speaks of the waves in his conclusion, how the sea and the taste of sea food has followed him and shaped him all of his life. He reminisces, “When you live on an island, everything is in the sea. You are surrounded by it and you live for it. You smell it, you eat from it, you breathe it. It is the sea that comes back to you when you are eating a piece of salt cod with tomato sauce” (352). He connects this love of the sea to the Pacific waters, the connection between

Cuba and America. The cod that clings to his tongue reminds him of sunny Caribbean waters and simply says, “These are the same waters I have been floating in my entire life” (Machado 353). Though his last words are “floating,” what seems to be indicative, even through the displacement, shame and embarrassment that eventually led to assimilation, Machado is not an island anymore, though he is “floating” between these two worlds. The cod connects his American and Cuban self, the food that recalls Cuba in the precise moment it hits his tongue. Food has fused him together again in ways that language and culture could not.

Nguyen is perhaps quicker to identify with her American identity, impatient to slough off her Vietnamese skin and fully assimilate into Michigan’s “proper” ways. Nguyen internalizes this almost subconscious repulsion into shame and embarrassment, and even more fervently wishes that she can become the generic Midwestern product that Jennifer and the Vander Wal family embody, free from the taint of difference. Nguyen remarks that “Every immigrant knows the dual life, marked by a language at home and a language outside. For me it was also the face I saw in the mirror. It was the smell of rice simmering in its cooker” (65-6).

Nguyen’s immersion into the American life overwhelms and submerges her efforts in the Vietnamese world as well. Her last ditch effort to coalesce both sides into a whole ends with a party celebrating the Vietnamese Tet holiday. As Nguyen and her sister Anh stand around trying to make small talk with the other party goers, they are uncomfortably aware of their distance in the Vietnamese world as well. Nguyen relates, “The fact was clear: the other Vietnamese kids had been united all that time we had stayed home. [...] They knew each other, had grown up together, and had no need for us.

They sat in a group, laughing and speaking a flurry of mixed Vietnamese and English” (114). Bewildered, all they can do is turn to the food, rejected as outsiders even in their own community, a community from which Nguyen and her sister, through their own desires to identify with American culture, have been alienated.

Interestingly, the food is even unfamiliar and unpalatable to them, the *cha gio* too thick, too thin, too lumpy, bland, pasty, soggy. As they sit and eat, Nguyen worries that the other girls will call her a Twinkie—yellow on the outside, white on the inside. As she bites into a *banh chung* cake, a banana leaf that contains sticky green rice, she is transported from the cake’s smell and taste to Noi’s bedroom, her place of quiet meditation where Buddha resides with his offerings of fruit. In her growing acceptance of both Vietnamese and American, Nguyen is jolted by the thought, “[...] I always had choices: to go to parties or not. To call my friend Loan or not. To keep up my Vietnamese or not” (116) This thought is perhaps the beginning of her search to combine both worlds, with the taste of the *banh chung* cake releasing a taste that she calls “a secret long kept, old and familiar and unspeakable” (116).

As with Machado’s memoir, Nguyen’s memoir also ends with reference to water and its healing powers in transforming her disconnect into a stronger connection to Vietnam. Nguyen journeys to Hoam Kiem Lake, a self-described “Vietnamese-born American girl returning for a visit” (253). She thinks of the train ride and the moonlight on the rice paddies, the glow of the cooking fires when the train stops, transforming her hunger and longing into something more settled, more at peace, the “mysteries floating through [her] household” (249) at rest within herself. Nguyen recalls the legend of a turtle who had reclaimed a magic sword from the lake waters, and whomever finds the

turtle, lurking in the waters, will receive good fortune. She ends, “There are those who sit at the lake every day, waiting for the vision to rise from the early morning mist” (253), a clear indication that her inner turmoil has ceased for the time, that she has found restorative powers in her homeland, but that she is also identifies herself as “Vietnamese-born” American. Her split between the two has been re-pieced and sewn into a whole, one that she has made on her own terms.

Like Machado and Nguyen, Abu-Jaber feels the shame of her heritage, which soon encourages her to pull away from her Jordanian father and relatives. Bud worries that his children are becoming too “Americanized”; he is tired of the decadent culture and the fact that his girls are acting more and more American each day—in dress, food, and speech. Bud announces that they are moving back to Jordan, to which the teenage Abu-Jaber is nothing short of a death sentence. She bemoans, “It hasn’t been easy for me to construct this American self. I’ve had to observe closely. I have finally acquired hip-hugger jeans and a long shag haircut [...]” (135).

Forgetting an “other” identity seems to be the easiest way to deal with teenage angst and identity. As Machado and Nguyen dealt with their own childhood and adolescent years, Abu-Jaber also succumbs to, simply because it is easier to ride the wave of identity crisis and food and reinvent oneself into some semblance of the American ideal. However, like Machado and Nguyen who eventually need to reconnect with their birth homelands and to find some sort of stability with their floating identities, Abu-Jaber eventually journeys back to Jordan to find who she is.

Abu-Jaber’s body has physically rejected Jordanian food; when she returns from college, she has bouts of nausea and vomiting from the food that she once could devour

in mass quantities. Her body's betrayal is more than a rejection of food; it is a rejection of something more powerful. In her startling reconnection to herself, her food, and Jordan, her moment of epiphany comes in the early morning, where a veil has been lifted from the physical world and she is allowed to see the infinite. In this infinite universe, Abu-Jaber describes the ensuing feeling:

I feel a startling cellular jolt of exquisite love and connection to the people who lie asleep in the purple lights and in all the sleepy, snowbound houses around us. It is like a benediction. I sense the distance between places, the country house and the suburbs, even between America and Jordan, start to disintegrate. Geography turns liquid. There is something in us connecting every person to every other person. (229)

This connection between land masses, even through the distances, calms her, allows her body to accept Jordanian food, to see even herself as connected, as dissonant as she sometimes feels in America. Instead of allowing the two identities to conflict with one another, to make her feel adrift in a sea of uncertainty, she begins to see the completeness in each identity, even though whenever she returns from Jordan she is still assaulted by American billboards, large vehicles, rush hour traffic.

Like Machado and Nguyen, she has come to terms with the "other." However, Machado and Nguyen seem to have a deeper connection because of their journey to their birth homelands, a way for them to embrace each part wholly, while Abu-Jaber embraces the simultaneous connection and disconnection. Abu-Jaber's memoir doesn't end with explicit water imagery, perhaps because Vietnam and Cuba are literally and figuratively "floating islands," Machado and Nguyen are able to connect water, food and identity more clearly than Abu-Jaber.

However, Abu-Jaber speaks of anchoring in her final essay, of the fluidity of boundaries, countries and continents. Her father and his brothers "live their lives in the

air, in the ether of in-between, the borderlands” (326). Abu-Jaber watches as the grandchildren accept the fluidity and wonders if children can tether themselves to a place long enough to call it home. She reflects, “Once we are grown, we are no longer so porous, our identities don’t connect with place as much as they do when we grow up with a place and the places, in turn, grow into us” (327). Her reflection seems to indicate that children are fluid, floating islands, little cups that are filled to overflow when encountered with the conflict of duality between two identities, which might be why Abu-Jaber, as well as Machado and Nguyen felt this fluidity much more sharply because they were displaced when they were young children.

Through an in-depth look at all three of these memoirs, it seems clear that this duality conflict is inevitable; anyone who is displaced from their birth homelands before coming to America will feel his or her ties are compromised, whether those ties are food, culture or language, that connect them to these countries, as Machado and Nguyen demonstrate. Even Abu-Jaber, who was born in the United States and is a citizen, feels the same disconnect due to her Jordanian ties through her paternal line. When confronted with an either/or option to retain the “other” identity, the memoirists chose the American identity over the homeland identity to begin to fit in and assimilate into what was expected, and most powerfully to avoid shame and embarrassment. This choice, sadly, led to all three floating in their own separate islands, or worlds. The American identity is new and raw; the old, “other” identity is the soul and heart, but an identity that they can’t cling to when confronted with their own adolescent angst of wanting to belong, to stamp out any trace of the increasingly “repugnant” and foreign identity.

However, once time had passed and the memoirists were able to return to what they consider their homelands, the old identity returned to them, through cod, through Buddha's fruit, through baklava. It is only when they are adults that they are able to combine both identities, to submerge themselves in both worlds, to float in the waters that they have created, instead of remaining dissonant, disparate pieces.

Examining all of these memoirs certainly forced me to question my own identity in relation to food, as a white woman who moved from working class to middle class and who is also classified as obese. Until recently, I had never written about my experiences with food, weight and class. It was really no one's business but my own, and I shied away from any material that even came close to examining my own weight issues. The pressing issues of my emerging middle class life were also taboo in contrast with my blue collar background. "It's nobody's business, but ours" I was repeatedly told as a child, to safeguard family shame, so it was extremely difficult when I had to explain to a pack of teenager friends why our telephone wasn't working, explain to my sixth-grade teacher why I didn't have lunch money, or why I didn't invite many people over to our home to witness the seedier side of poverty and anger. The potential for shame and embarrassment was too much for me to handle; it wasn't that I was ashamed of how poor we were, when so many of my Montanan classmates were probably faced with similar situations. It was the desperation and bitterness that I feared, the desperation that caused my father to lash out in frustration, not caring whether or not a friend was nearby to witness his cruelty. To allow people into this world was potentially an invitation in viewing humiliation, to bear witness to the shame I felt too often to count. Therefore, when writing fiction, my heroines were thin with beautiful heart-shaped faces, their class quite firmly in the

middle, their language intelligent and wry. It seemed to me that no one really cared about the working class: they were dirty, lazy, fat, and on Welfare. Who would really want to read about their struggles?

I must have been able to obscure my blue collar background quite well when I went to my university; I was able to buy a fashionable item of clothing now and again and I'm sure that I appeared well-read to my professors, always willing to read classics, contemporary novels, comics, really anything. I had no sense of discretion. I knew what I liked, not being overly bothered with the idea that some material was "trash" or that I should read certain novels because they attained the highest standards of language. My ruse was complete when I took an Advanced Playwriting class my senior year and the professor, one who I never had worked with outside of the classroom, remarked in relation to a piece that I had read, that I didn't seem to be the type who would hang out at a seedy bar, I seemed more the Harry's Uptown type. Harry's Uptown is the fanciest restaurant in town; housed in the old Wareham Hotel with chandelier lights, business suited guests, house Chardonnay and Merlot, muted acoustics. It bothered me that I was able to transform so much. Perhaps the transformation really wasn't so much a change but just what I reflected to others—no one guessing at the shy blue collar gal underneath who trembled inside when faced with fancy accoutrements, almost as if I were consciously rejecting my family's status for something better.

Nowhere could I find a woman role model who was intelligent and slightly on the round side; I grew up with the television show *Roseanne* which was finally more like the family I went home to everyday, but I knew Roseanne was still classified as shrewish, loud, mouthy—a poster girl for the working class. No problem, great, fabulous, fine.

However, working class stereotypes lingered: the lazy, the unemployed, the obese, the uninformed.

However, in 1996, Wally Lamb wrote *She's Come Undone*, which I eventually read a couple years later as a university sophomore. Dolores Price, my new heroine, a girl who was smart, sassy, working class, and unfortunately, suffered with weight issues. She could have been me in many ways—dark haired and blue eyed; however, my weight issues did not stem from an act of violence when I was 13-years-old; my weight issues seemed intertwined with class and upbringing, the inevitable meat/potato/gravy days. I wondered: Why could I find no one writing about weight and class? As much as I hate to say what I'm writing in the following sentence, even in Lamb's novel, Dolores' weight issues seemed forgivable because she was raped; like the title, she was "undone" by her rapist, when she could finally piece herself back together again, the weight loss came with her newfound identity, which had nothing to do with her class, but more of by way of an acceptance of herself.

Even in the Obama/McCain political campaign, a campaign that I followed intensely because of the current economy and my interests in how my own family struggles were reflected, how little by little every day, they were sliding backward into depression and self-destruction, compounded with my own fears of finding stable employment. I was devastated to realize that not one candidate was overly concerned for the working class or the poor. It was all about the "middle," how "middle class families were struggling" and that Main Street wasn't Wall Street. Of course, Main Street isn't Wall Street, but who defines Main Street? What does Main Street look like? Is everyone married, with 2.2 kids, a house, two vehicles, two dogs, a white picket fence, a college

fund? Or is it more similar to my Main Street—where you are lucky, fortunate beyond all belief if you own a house, can pay your bills, and maybe take a vacation to the Ozarks once in awhile?

Why is there such a focus on making sure that we are taking care of the middle class? I queried some of my freshman students, when we approached the social construction of class as outlined by the *New York Times* chart, where an individual can place themselves regarding class in the areas of education, income, wealth, and job status. Many students immediately thought they were middle class, but to their shock, most of the students who thought they were “merely middle” were ranked much higher, even into an upper-class category. Some, of course, questioned the concept of the middle class, but no one was quite able to answer my question about the middle and why there was all this focus on the middle. I had an answer, of course, but being the kind of teacher who likes to receive thoughts instead of impose them, I gave them ample time. It could have been a slow day for inspired thoughts, but no one could quite answer my question; perhaps they were somewhat chagrined to realize that their families were much better off than they had thought, that Ipods, Blackberrys, Wiis, XBoxes, university tuition, and a decent vehicle to get them around were luxuries, a standard that they had never thought to question.

So my answer: if we don't take care of the middle class, then we will only have two classes: upper and working class. All of the American ideals of having a home, providing for children, fairness and equality for all will dissipate in a flash if one is too poor to have the means to procure the means, or if one is so wealthy that the means don't matter. We might as well return to feudal England with the peasants and nobility, a system that we fought to get away from as well as many other reasons when Europeans

first arrived on American shores. It is too easy to slip from middle class to working class in American society, too easy to go from small comforts of eating out, going to movies, having all the latest technology gadgets to worrying how to pay the bills. Eula Biss in her essay “The Pain Scale” mentions the “tyranny of the mean,” which I think applies to this class standard; no one wants to be poor, grinding out their days in back-breaking or mind-numbing labor, but no one wants to be upper class, snobbishness included. There is comfort in the middle; it is a bed that is “just right.”

For me, and for the memoirists that I chose with careful deliberation to read and discuss here issues relating to food and identity, we do exist in a middle ground, when it comes to these two categories. However, this middle ground is an in-between state, without the stability of the tyranny of the mean. While the memoirists’ dilemma mainly focused on issues of race and identity, how to fit into a world that was not warm and welcoming, not one memoirist really tied their identity to class, with perhaps the exception of Nguyen.

I can best align myself with Nguyen perhaps because she is the closest to my own age and because her life and yearning for certain similar food treats and toys in the 1980s mimicked my own longings. While Nguyen is most concerned with how her Vietnamese heritage conflicts with her American identity, she does mention that her new stepmother will not buy certain brand name foods because of their tight budget and the need to feed a large family on little money. This focus doesn’t comprise the entirety of her memoir, but she does have a smidgen of the class consciousness. Machado and Abu-Jaber seem to focus primarily on how their life changed because their family ties to Cuba and Jordan were compromised, and how this made them different by American standards because of

the color of their skin or the seemingly odd items that they ate, an experience that is foreign to me, simply because I did not grow up in a different country and move to the United States. My foreignness, or “otherness,” if I may call it that, is due to an outsider’s status who is classified as obese and whose classification may or may not have anything to do with the socioeconomic background in which she was raised, heredity aside.

I claim the status as an outsider even though I’m wary of those who will not see me as such; after all, according to many, I can lose the weight, and when I drop those pounds, the outsider status will fade away. My skin is blemish-free; I should drop the pity and seek the body that matches the pretty face that I have been told that I have. (Nobody likes a whiner, I’ve been told. Get off the pity pot.) However, I do question if losing pounds will simply slough off the identity that has been a huge part of my life. I have a hard time forgetting those days of hunger; even if we weren’t hungry for food, we hungered for something better, something pristine, something marvelous and grand that education would help us grasp what so many others seemed to effortlessly have.

It is precisely the lack of sympathy for the poor and the obese that makes me reluctant to write about these experiences; in fact, this analysis makes me feel that I am exposing too much of myself to an audience who will snort, disregard me, and say “Then why are you eating that cheeseburger? You’re simply undermining yourself. Can’t you see how you are poisoning your body?” Case in point: when surrounded by vegetarians, vegans, non-dairy eating, non-wheat eating people, where non-meat eaters outranked meat-eaters, it seemed a crime of the highest nature to crave red meat and sugar. I wrote to a friend that I felt like a crack addict who needed a hit of a burger to keep me going, and I acknowledged the shame of that desire. Strangely enough, the irony of obesity is

not lost on me. All my life I was cowed by poverty's shame and embarrassment and worked to hide what I lacked; now here I am, my lack of control and willpower clearly on display for others to view. Unwillingly, my body now can be a source for potential embarrassment and ridicule. After all, I wouldn't look like I do if I didn't eat like I do, right?

Increasingly, it seems to me that obese people are a distinct target. Let's name the list of depravities: the poor, the smokers, the gas guzzlers, the electricity profligates. What's potentially embarrassing and degrading is how the obese can be lumped into many of these categories—if you're heavy, you probably are poor, drive a guzzler that can accommodate your bulk, sit in front of the television wasting precious electricity, tossing back a pack of GPCs. All of the worst stereotypes apply to the working class and obese. At the very least, you are accused of excess; in a world of irony, suddenly the poor are claiming more literal space and are not the wraiths of medieval times and are taking the place of the royalty “fat cats” who had the money and means to put extra pounds of flesh on their frames. This shift in weight is largely (and yes, the pun is intended) due to the low cost of overprocessed food and the high cost of healthy organic options available in the local supermarket. Fat is cheaper and spreads its wealth around to more hungry mouths. A belly fed on Velveeta cheese, Totino pizzas, and a cheeseburger that costs a \$1 is a much more satisfied belly, because quite honestly, the weight of the carbohydrates and proteins outweighs that of a carrot or celery stick.

Huntington, West Virginia now has the dubious honor of being the fattest American city, an honor that many of its residents shrug at or aren't even aware of. Comprised of people with English, Irish, and German backgrounds, their ancestors

worked long days at the mines and came home to the inevitable meat, tater and gravy meal. Their bodies were able to burn off the caloric intake, but now, their descendents don't necessarily have those back-breaking jobs. But the taste for grease and fat remain, and no one exercises. If they want to spend their days in front of the television, chomping on Cheetos, they figure that is their business. The doctors deplore the fact that they are uneducated about what they eat, which results in the vicious cycle of childhood obesity, thirty-year-olds having heart attacks, and waistlines that stagger statistics.

Which leads full circle to me. I am English, Irish, and German on both my paternal and maternal sides, come from a long line of unskilled laborers, and carry too much weight on my short frame, yet, I am not uneducated. I have a line of degrees that some solidly middle class people would not necessarily have. Judging by my house, the vehicles I drive, and my education, I am white collar, but my blue collar background is still evident when I still look for the best bargain, attend a tractor pull, and enjoy a bonfire in the woods where everyone sits around and drinks to pass a cold Friday or Saturday night. While I love vegetables, fruits, granola, yogurt, there are also times when the taste of fat and grease is my siren's call. My own background is similar to those in West Virginia; never did I remember coming home to a meal in my home that was low in fat, yet hunger satisfying, nutritious and inexpensive. We scarfed down Velveeta sandwiches, Banquet Salisbury steaks, Totinos pizzas, and when the family was really doing well we drooled over meatloaf and mashed potatoes, steaks, spaghetti. One doctor pointed out in the West Virginia story that for many of the children, lunch time would be their only balanced meal. This was exactly the case for me and my family. Those school lunches, which many deemed as nasty and gross, thrilled me with their carefully

portioned tray sections, the fresh salads, the roll and a pat of butter. Best of all, mom and dad never had to worry about buying food for us when we qualified for free lunches, so we didn't look a gift horse in the mouth; if it was heavy on salt, fat, grease, so what? At least we were fed and content. Food was a comfort, a bright spot in the routine of the mundane.

Food memoirs are increasingly popular these days, and it seems that Machado, Nguyen and Abu-Jaber have tried to carve out their own niche on how food ties into cultural identity. Overwhelmingly, their memoirs insist that the space that they embrace is one in the middle, a person who tries to keep one foot balanced on a rock crossing a river, all the while as they are trying to retain a foothold on that stability knowing that one careless slip will cause them to plummet into deep water. This precariousness never quite leaves them, but by the time their memories come to an end, the adult has acknowledged a new equilibrium. They are able to embrace both selves; they claim the otherness, the fact that they won't be able to truly resolve both parts of outsider and conformer in others' eyes, but the childhood worry of acceptance doesn't nag at them. All end, as I have mentioned, with water motifs.

This water motif perhaps was an unconscious one when I worked on my own pieces, an idea that I didn't consciously connect to my own writing until I had to gather up all that I had written. Then the water references overwhelmed me, especially when I associated the weightlessness of water with my own weight and class struggles. I thought I had a straight arrow direction when working on my own creative thesis, but during the course of examining all of these memoirs for the past year, my creative work took a

different turn, much like water that carves its own way, an unstoppable flood that I didn't resist.

I am still looking for other food memoirs that combine class and weight issues. Perhaps it will be awhile until I find them. As it is, I can sympathize and rejoice in Machado, Abu-Jaber, and Nguyen's concept of the outsider. I am not as certain that I have embraced my weight and class identity as fully as they have seemed to have embraced their duality by their final pages. It might take more time, more inward looking retrospection. In what I believe to be my last essay "Ripple," I think I have finally come to clearly identify the parts of the woman I am. If I can get the parts to resemble a whole, or at least not feel so adrift in uncertainty, then perhaps I can embrace the "tyranny of the mean" and feel a bit more secure in my middle status. I have always jokingly remarked that I have been landlocked all my life, so to align myself with an idea of a floating island was an unnerving, yet ultimately natural inclination. That metaphorical waters have lapped around the edges of my life, I am only now using as an impetus to shape and focus how class and identity slosh against one another. It is my goal to move toward treading those waters with ease and grace.

## WORKS CITED

Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

Anderson, E.N. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*. New York: NY UP, 2005.

Biss, Eula. "The Pain Scale." *The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*. Eds. Michael Martone and Lex Williford. New York: Touchstone, 2007.

"Immigration Statistics." U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 2 Sept 2008  
<<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/>>.

Machado, Eduardo and Michael Domitrovich. *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile's Hunger for Home*. New York: Gotham Books, 2007.

Nguyen, Bich Minh. *Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

Wood elf's island. Rated 4.1 from 37 votes and 4 comments. Details & download ». Mob Farm for Josh. Rated 5.0 from 2 votes and 2 comments. Details & download ». The Floating Island. Rated 3.1 from 31 votes and 1 comment.