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The Edible I in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*

Veronica Austen

vjausten@uwaterloo.ca
ORCID: 0009-0002-0489-6986
University of Waterloo, Canada

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ABSTRACT
This article explores Kim Fu's 2014 *For Today I Am a Boy* through the lens of critical eating studies. In this novel's portrayal of Peter (see note 3), the trans woman protagonist, images of food and acts of eating (or the denial of these acts) are deployed as a meditation on the navigation of body, hence of self. This paper positions the act of eating as representing more than just a physical, biological process, but rather a placing of people in relationship with the edible matter and all the conditions of its production, including its socio-cultural/familial meanings. In interpreting Peter's experiences of self in continuum with the experiences of both Peter's mother and Mrs. Becker (the mistress of Peter's father), this paper observes characters figured not only as hungry, but also as edible due in part to their battered subject positions but even more so due to the forced repression and denial of these identities.

Keywords
Chinese Canadian Literature; Critical Eating Studies; Gender; Trans Literature

1. Introduction

> . . . with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably,
> knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but
> mainly of ourselves.
> –M.F.K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*

Since its publication in 2014, Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a* Boy has garnered both popular and scholarly discussion of its representation of Peter, the novel's largely closeted trans woman protagonist. With some discussion of the novel critiquing it as forwarding a "'transness as tragedy'" (Horvat 80) message,[1] the majority of the scholarship centres on the implications of Peter's intersectionality as a second-generation Chinese-Canadian trans woman. As Andrea Ruthven summarizes, *For Today I Am a Boy* is "[a]s much a story about coming of age as a transgender individual as it is about the competing claims of second-generation Chinese-Canadian identity"; thus, it is a narrative that "addresses the ways in which heteronormative masculinity intersects with racialized identities" (Ruthven). As such, scholarship about this text, while remaining largely focussed on the protagonist's navigation of gendered identity, is interested too in the dynamics of family and culture and the resulting pressures of heteronormative and patriarchal constructs.[2] In line with this scholarly conversation,

1 Both Casey Plett and Ana Horvat critique the novel as an example of a cis-gender author writing a trans narrative that is not representative of the fullness of lived experience and that, therefore, instead reiterates old tropes. Plett, for instance, notes a tendency in such novels to make the character's navigation of their trans identity the sole focus of the plot to the exclusion of other dimensions of their identity and experience. While Plett's and Horvat's concern regarding the impact of representations that focus on trans identity as tragic is, of course, well-founded, neither Plett nor Horvat acknowledge the racial and cultural specificity of Peter's character as a factor in Peter's navigation of trans identity. As such, while their main point that cis-gender authors need to be more careful in their representations of trans experiences is true, they seem to overlook the intersectionality of Peter's character and, in doing so, risk denying the validity and authenticity of such experiences of hesitancy and dilemma.

2 Scholarship interpreting the intersectionality of Peter's identity is growing. While Stephanie Hsu positions *For Today I Am a Boy* alongside other Asian-American texts to "imagin[e] a trans feminism that is also anti-racist" (135), Ruthven looks to this novel's intersections between race and gender in order to demonstrate that this novel rejects the "homecoming narrative" of trans identity. Danielle Seid argues for a trans-generational approach that "makes visible the narrative and aesthetic dynamics of generational conflicts and intimacies surrounding gender and sexual expectations, debts, and roles within the immigrant family, as well as affinities between trans and immigrant experiences across generational lines" (142). Lily Cho and Serena Guarracino both turn their focus to specific tropes evident in the novel. Cho interrogates the experience of visibility seeking to "reorient[] the question of visibility as one of capture" (71). Cho thereby asks "what it means to be captured" and conceptualizes "capture as something more than subjection" (71). Guarracino focusses instead on the representation of "the high male voice," arguing for "the association of male falsetto with ethnic difference, to highlight the intersectionality of race and gender as complementary but also competing para-

the following discussion positions the trope of eating as a voice for the novel's broader exploration of the conditions that compromise Peter's ability to claim I's womanhood.[3]

Looking to the novel's frequent focus on food, cooking, and acts of ingestion, this article approaches *For Today I Am a Boy* through the field of critical eating studies. As coined by Kyla Wazana Tompkins, critical eating studies "weds food studies to body theory" (2) with the aim to "more closely bind food studies to feminist, queer, and gender studies, as well as to critical race theory" (3). It does so by turning the attention to eating as action that both literally and metaphorically unites a body with its surroundings. As Tompkins describes, "acts of eating cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological" (1). What this means is that, as Sidney Mintz argues, "eating is never a 'purely biological' activity" (7). Instead, foods carry with them their histories, personal and cultural significances, and conditions of production (Mintz 7), all of which are ingested when the food is consumed, and thus all of which become the body and/or the energy to sustain it. In this way, acts of eating not only "involve[] us in relationship with others, whether human, animal, or otherworldly" (Roy 194), but also signal our bodily dependence on and development out of these relationships, histories, and conditions. In other words, as many have said before, we are what we eat, but what we eat is not just the food object itself, but rather all that has produced that object and inflected it with meaning.

digms in Peter/Audrey's journey" (129).

3 This essay uses "I" to refer to Peter in the third-person and thus, aims to have "I" hold the third-person much as "they" has come to hold the singular. Within the context of this novel, no other available third-person pronoun—"she," "he," nor "they"—is suitable for Peter. "He" is an undesired identity, and while "she" may be Peter's identity, it remains largely out of reach and unexpressed, except in fleeting moments. Furthermore, Peter has been conditioned to construct gender too much in terms of a binary to be able to experience the self as fluidly inhabiting a "they." The novel's choice of a first-person perspective is vital: Peter can be an "I" and have that "I" hold together a complexity of experience—a despised masculinity, a wished-for femininity, and all the doubt, hesitancy, and chaos that the constant clash of these identities bring for Peter. In this essay's use of "I" as a third-person pronoun, the complex unity of self that only "I" itself can hold is respected. Although others have read the conclusion of the novel as a scene confirming Peter's transition, the following reading will suggest that that hope remains unrealized. This essay, consequently, uses "Peter," rather than "Audrey," to refer to this character. Given the context of the narrative, "Peter" does not represent a deadnaming of this character, who, while desiring to be Audrey, struggles to imagine being called anything but Peter: "'What else would you call me?'" (Fu 226). In Peter's worldview, "you couldn't just rename yourself, you couldn't tear down the skyline and rebuild and think there wouldn't be consequences" (226).

In reading *For Today I Am a Boy* through critical eating studies, this essay draws on Maggie Kilgour's assertion that "images of eating provide a model for the encounters between individuals" (6). The discussion subsequently expands upon arguments that declare that "we are, in fact, constituted by the food we eat" (Curtin 12)—or the food we do not eat, as the case may be. In this text, the portrayal of food, and, by extension, the interrogation of what is edible, speaks the story of Peter's identity construction, namely, Peter's navigation of trans identity and the difficult claiming and expression of I's womanhood. With a father who both forwards a toxic heteronormative masculinity and enforces a denial of ancestry for the purposes of assimilation, Peter comes to navigate I's identity in terms of threatened destruction. In this way, the novel places Peter in a continuum with the narrative's other female characters. Peter navigates I's own womanhood through I's observations of how the various other women in I's life are treated and how they react. For example, Peter puts on make-up desiring to be beautiful like I's eldest sister, Adele, but must also then contend with next oldest Helen's condemnation of Adele's beauty as a signal of "[h]ow badly [Adele] needs people to like her" (Fu 33); even more destructively, Peter experiences a dark satisfaction, a "terrible unexpected pride. A kind of sisterhood. A womanly rite of passage" (137) after experiencing sexual assault and realizing that younger sister Bonnie has also experienced this violence. Although Peter's navigation of womanhood occurs through I's interpretation of the experiences of many other women, the following discussion argues that Peter's observations of I's mother and Mrs. Becker are particularly key to Peter's troubled expression and birthing of self. Through these characters, Peter must confront I's own edibility. What the imagery of food and eating reveals is not that those inhabiting subject positions that the father seeks to deny are edible, but rather that the repression of identity makes them so. In other words, it is not their womanhood and/or their Chineseness that has rendered them consumable, though toxic attitudes like the father's would wish them so. Rather, the very repression of identity and consequent denial of desire threatens to turn these characters into the eaten. For Peter's mother, Mrs. Becker, and Peter, finding voice to express their battered subject positions is largely not an option; the novel's imagery of food and eating instead becomes the voice that the characters can not themselves achieve.

2. Consuming Mother

In this novel, Peter's mother—a character who remains unnamed aside from "mother"—is a powder keg of repressed identity. With a husband whose "project of Westernization" (Fu 47) seeks to make the family's race "invisible" (46),

the mother's expression of cultural heritage is silenced except in vague actions of unspoken desire: secret visits to the Chinese Association (43, 174); "[a] flash of pleasure" (129) when finding an opportunity to speak Cantonese at a dim sum restaurant; a quick and fleeting question about whether Peter's girlfriend is Chinese (130). The opening of the novel performs in graphic detail the impact of this repression of racial and cultural identity. The novel begins, "On the day my sister Adele is born, my mother goes to the butcher" (ix), a description that fashions the mother to be both consumer seeking meat and the animal about to be sold as meat. Seeing "[a]n enormous sow . . . laid out in the display case" (ix), Peter's mother becomes that animal:

> Mother replaces the pig's body with her own: her legs hanging on hooks at the back; her tiny feet encased in rounded, hoof-like leather boots; the shinbone ready to be held in a vise and shaved for charcuterie. Her torso is cut below the breast and lies flat, showing a white cross-section of vertebrae. Her head is intact, eyes clouded yellow and rolled upward. The dried-out edges of her ears let light through. Human ears probably taste similar to pig's ears, she thinks. A glutinous outer layer with crisp cartilage underneath. She could stew them, char them in a skillet, watch her skin blister and pop. (ix)

In this image, the mother does not just see herself as consumable flesh; she sees her body in pieces: legs hanging, meat from the shinbone ready to be shorn, torso cut revealing bone. With all of this imagery of dismemberment, the head being whole becomes a contrast of note; the head, often perceived as the locus of personality, announces here that what appears is not solely edible matter but an animal who once lived. This figuring of the abject is furthered by the permeability of borders that become apparent in this imagery: the bone that should be hidden is visible; the skin is not intact but blisters and pops; the expected opaqueness of flesh lets light through.

Culinary acts may, in general, be considered acts of empowerment with the preparer and consumer exerting control over the edible material "as the self [the eater] absorbs the other's [the eaten's] energy in its own interest" (Kilgour 229). The mother's vision, however, positions her as more than cook and consumer; she too is what is cooked. In this scene of imagined edibility, the dish that the mother becomes is pig's ear, a cuisine not exclusive to Chinese culture but, in this scene, certainly suggestive of her navigation of repressed heritage. After this envisioning of self as butchered pig, the mother is brought back to reality with the butcher asking her what she would like: "'A pound of sausages,' she says. She feels a stab—homesickness, maybe, or dread at the thought of more burned sausages and boiled potatoes" (Fu ix-x). To order sausages and be brought away from her vision of pig's ears is to become aware of her loss of

home. Her desire for pig's ear warps into a vision of herself as consumable flesh precisely because her desire for this object of alimentation is impossible due to the Westernized appetite forced upon her by her assimilation-driven husband. Further, as the "stab" of the contractions of giving birth begin, the mother's legs "give out and she lands on her hands and knees" (x), a quadruped posture that symbolically further enacts her transformation. In showing the mother to be both the cook/consumer and the consumed in this scene, the imagery speaks the impossibility of the mother's hyphenated identity. Because she cannot have pig's ear, she must become it.

The incommensurability of her cultural cuisine with her husband's ideals of assimilation is even further confirmed in Peter's depiction of her attempt to share her gastronomical heritage: her own mother's white-fungus soup. That food is an expression of culture is well-known. As Anita Mannur argues, food plays a key role in creating "the cultural imagination of diasporic populations" (8); Wiebke Beushausen and colleagues similarly assert that "[e]ating and drinking nourish an individual but also serve as a means to reconstruct communities and identities" (21) by "translat[ing] memory, longing, and nostalgia" (19). Peter's mother, however, is denied this opportunity of reconstructing heritage and expressing culture. Despite the mother's attempt to share the familial legacy of this dish, her husband discards her effort, "dump[ing] it on the lawn" (Fu 6) before it even makes it to the table. Dinner the following night features instead "split-pea soup with ham" (6), a more Westernized food choice, much like the sausages and boiled potatoes that the mother earlier dreaded. Peter describes the discarded white-fungus soup as follows: "The sweet broth sank into the earth, leaving behind a heap of frilly white. On the first day, it looked like a girl had stripped off her nightgown and abandoned it there. On the second day, like a pile of bleached bones" (6). The remnants of this soup personify the mother's loss, her heritage becoming corpse, interred without dignity, and decomposing down to its skeletal remains. It is not, however, the dish itself that is portrayed as abject; it is the discarding of this dish, the denial of culture, that makes it so.

Furthermore, one must recall that it is through Peter as narrator/focalizer that this scene is depicted. In fact, Peter's narrative perspective throughout the novel is noteworthy for its simultaneous internalization of the father's toxicity (re: masculinity, heteronormativity, and cultural assimilation) and contention with it. That the image in this scene is a girl's discarded nightgown transforming into bones speaks also to Peter's own navigation of identity: to discard girl's clothing is to decompose. As well, Peter's contention with the father's toxic cultural assimilationist ideals is also confirmed by this scene. The father force-feeds Peter the split-pea soup despite Peter's physical revulsion. Beyond Peter's agency over I's own eating being thwarted in this scene, the act of eating itself is

rendered slant. Instead of ingesting this food, Peter describes "inhal[ing] it like air" (7), replacing one life-sustaining act of the mouth/throat—eating—with another—breathing. Yet, these life-sustaining activities become destructive when combined. If this metaphor is extended, one would note that to inhale food is to compromise one's airway; to inhale food threatens infection, even death.

In Peter's portrayal, thus, the mother cannot nourish the family, and the effort to do so becomes grotesque. While watching her prepare the shrimp for dinner, Peter observes, "[s]he inhaled sharply as she cut her finger on a spiky leg. She lifted her finger high enough for me to see the drop of red falling into the bowl of naked shrimp, and then she went on. Their briny gray juices got into her wound, and she went on. We would eat her blood for dinner" (Fu 39). Although a mother's body, her production of milk, is often a child's first food source, in this image, the mother's body is not excreting food, but rather losing a modicum of its own life force. Amidst circumstances wherein she has been so repressed, she can feed her children with little more than her own destruction.

And yet, despite this scene's figuring of the mother's seeming hopelessness in combatting her own edibility, the focus perhaps need be instead on Peter's fleeting, yet repeated observations of her perseverance: Her blood falls, and "she went on"; the brine gets into her wound, and "she went on." In Peter's portrayal, despite the repression that renders the mother edible, she is not, in the end, destroyed. In this way, her character can be read as an example of Tompkins's observation that "the fantasy of the body's edibility does not mean that body will always go down smoothly" (8). In Tompkins's context, "nineteenth century black bodies and subjects stick in the throat of the (white) body politic" (8); they "fight back, and bite back" (8); they "choke[]" (92) those who seek to consume them; they, "pictured as edible[,] hardly concede to that relationship" (11). In Peter's mother's case, the husband who rendered her edible dies, and as Peter observes, "Mother was like a different person" (Fu 172). Importantly, Peter's focus is on the re-emergence of her voice. Her mouth, which once not only was silent but also went hungry, is now generative: Peter's image is that she "blossomed at the mouth" (172). Even though her stories of the past are said to have "grown strange or impossible from too much time in the dark of her closed throat" (173), these stories signal that despite the conditions of her married life, she was not fully consumed, a lesson that proves important for, though unacknowledged by, Peter. Furthermore, two of the stories she shares concern one of her children's triumph of consumption and desire: Helen, the second oldest daughter, is said not only to have "bit a wasp right out of the air and chewed it before it could sting" (173), but also to have emerged from her early speech delay to voice her first words in the form of a full sentence: "'Can I have a cookie?' Can you believe that, Peter? 'Can I have a cookie.' No jibber jabber, no *mama, dada*, like the rest of you" (173). That her memory of her own

child is figured in relation to food suggests a valuing of the strength to be an eater and of pursuing those desires, even if she herself did not have the same opportunity. These stories of the past coupled with her having earlier placed the "household gods" (154) and a number of photographs of the ancestors on the *kitchen table* suggests that she can now offer a form of nourishment to her children, even if, as turns out, she does not offer it in a way that is healthy or that makes them want to consume it.[4]

3. Apricots and Pennies: Mrs. Becker

Mrs. Becker's experiences of edibility are likewise an important touchstone for Peter. While more a minor character, Mrs. Becker, the family's neighbour and secret mistress to Peter's father, is portrayed in ways akin to I's mother. In Peter's depiction, Mrs. Becker too is in a constant state of threatened consumption, her perfume's "generic berry scent" (Fu 54), for instance, prefiguring her body's edibility. With Peter as the storyteller, the portrayal of Mrs. Becker, much like that of the mother, is in terms reflective of Peter's own confrontation of the pressures of the father's heteronormative and gender-biased worldviews. Through Peter's narration, Mrs. Becker's edibility, much like the mother's, results from repressed emotions and unfulfilled desires, in her case those having to do with becoming a mother.

Although Mrs. Becker's motivations for the affair, and whether becoming pregnant is one of them, go unspoken, the affair's role in Mrs. Becker's self-destruction is disclosed in part through the corruption of her ability to nourish others. After having first attempted to connect with Peter's mother and the children through a failed offering of toys, Mrs. Becker bakes an apricot cake and cooks apricot jam for Peter's family, yet her efforts go unconsumed; Peter's mother dumps the cake in the trash the moment she receives it and Peter leaves the fallen unbroken jar of jam with Mrs. Becker on the floor of her kitchen. Symbolically, these culinary acts can be read as Mrs. Becker's attempt to expel her guilt about the affair and have it be consumed, hence eliminated. And yet, the family does not ingest her offerings nor allow her guilt to nourish them. Her

4 The scene after the father's burial wherein Peter finds the household gods on the kitchen table and wherein the mother brings out the photographs and places them there is, in the end, not a particularly hopeful scene. The mother's attempted forcing of Helen to bow to her ancestors results in an explosive argument that leads to the mother banishing both Helen and Peter from the house. Regardless of the exacerbated familial fissures, the mother's reclaiming of ancestry here is nevertheless a reclaiming of agency.

kisses too are figured in terms of abject nourishment, her husband describing that she "liked to eat sour candies crusted with sugar by pressing them to the top of her mouth . . . crystals cutting in and wearing away her soft palate, often doing it until she bled. He could taste it when he kissed her" (Fu 48). According to him, kissing her was "[l]ike sucking on pennies" (48); in consuming, or at least, tasting her blood, Mr. Becker experiences her body not as living body but as metal object literally and figuratively devoid of nutrients.

Peter is silent regarding the significance of Mrs. Becker in I's life; why her story is narrated as part of I's own is not overtly announced. Nevertheless, Peter's descriptions suggest that Mrs. Becker's role in I's story is in large part a contemplation of the paradoxes of transgression and, by extension, the paradoxes of pursuing one's desires.[5] Mrs. Becker is at once a symbol of transgression—she pursues an affair—and a barrier to transgression—she informs Peter's father both about Bonnie's teenaged sexual activity and about Peter's wearing of an apron. She too is a symbol of pursuing one's desires, a moment of overt wistfulness regarding the prospect of having a child that looks like Peter revealing that the affair at least in part is valued for its possibility of yielding a child. Nevertheless, she too is a symbol of the costs of that pursuit: her mental health is fractured to the point of suicide. When Peter reflects upon the affair and Mrs. Becker's suicide, I's characterization of Mrs. Becker is telling. Peter asks, "Where was Mr. Becker when my father clutched a fistful of red hair and she pretended it didn't hurt, pretended to like pain?" (Fu 56). Although not directly admitted by Peter, Mrs. Becker's experience becomes a mirror for Peter's own: the father's hold is destructive and there are costs to pretending your experience is something other than what it is.

4. Peter and the Edible I

Through the narrative's positioning of Peter's experiences as corollary to those of I's mother and Mrs. Becker, the difficulty of Peter's expression of womanhood is demonstrated. As much as Peter is a woman and desires to be able to express that identity, womanhood is not an easily claimable position. Thanks both to broader heteronormative, gender-biased, and assimilative cultural

5 She too may represent in some way Peter's own unfulfilled desire for children. In one scene of daydreaming, the magic of imagining dissipates and Peter's vision of having a husband and children ends with "[t]he children d[ying] where they stood, stiffened into painted smiles and stickers for eyes" (Fu 206). In this instance, mothering is revealed to be a key aspect of Peter's idealized femininity.

currents and, most particularly, to the father's repressive enforcement of such ideologies, in Peter's experience of role models, to be a woman is to be forcibly repressed and victimized. As such, for Peter, with the added complexity of having been born biologically male, pursuing womanhood is not an easy choice. Of course, for Peter, not being openly a woman is equally unsustainable; this repression of identity renders I unnourished and consumable.

Throughout Peter's portrayal of I's development, acts of ingestion—or the lack thereof—come to symbolize the complexity of Peter's relationship with body. Peter is rarely an eater and, even more so, rarely a healthful eater. For Peter, the fact that food breaches the borders of an outside and inside serves as a symbol of the impossibility of the connection between Peter's own outwardly gendered identity and I's internally repressed one. As Parama Roy observes, "the body in alimentation stages the fraught relationship between an inside and an outside" (194). Such an assertion generally addresses the fact that to eat is to challenge the autonomy of the self—the inside—by signalling its dependence upon outside matter, matter that at once is conquered by being subsumed and yet that to which one is vulnerable. I here draw on Maggie Kilgour's assertion that "bodily needs also indicate that the appearance of autonomy is an illusion, for the body must incorporate elements from outside itself in order to survive" (6). She continues in her argument to contend that "eating, physically tasting, reveals the fallaciousness of the illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy that the inside/outside opposition tries to uphold by constructing firm boundary lines between ourselves and the world. The inside depends upon, is nourished or harmed by, substances that come from outside" (9). Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* even further focusses on the act of eating as bringing an inside and outside together. For Bennett, ingestion is "a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry" and the outside matter is an actant with the "power to affect and create effects" (49). In other words, that which is eaten is not merely subsumed by the eater but must be acknowledged as having the power to change the eater.

In terms of eating staging the complex relationship between an inside and outside, what Peter ingests—or does not—performs I's struggle with the internalization of heteronormative, gender-biased, and assimilationist ideals. Importantly, Peter does have one key period of becoming an eater, although a gluttonous and unsatiated one. Peter realizes I's intimate "hyperfeminine fantasies" (Fu 168) when in a relationship with Claire, a likewise closeted individual. As they binge on animated Disney romances, "[they] ate all of the cookies and two whole cakes without noticing. The next cookie was in [I's] hand before [I] had finished the last one so that there were no pauses in the pleasure" (168). In this instance, Peter may be able to consume, but the eating is harmful; the calories

are empty and both Peter and Claire eat voraciously until they are "too full to move" (168). The food being taken in, cast as it is in terms of a heteronormative ideal, is ultimately unnourishing, even self-destructive for Peter.

Peter's use of ingestion as a means of thinking through I's experience and expression of gender becomes particularly overt towards the end of the novel when just after learning that workmate John too is transgender, Peter attends a dinner party at John and his girlfriend Eileen's apartment. While the conversation is outwardly about food allergies and sensitivities, Peter is clearly speaking about matters of personal agency over identity construction. As Peter later reveals, I's key frustration with this group is their inability to acknowledge their privilege: "Who were these kids? What right had they to be born into a world where they were taught to look endlessly into themselves, to ask how the texture of a mushroom made them feel? To ask themselves, and not be told, whether they were boys or girls? You eat what's there or you starve" (Fu 218). In other words, in Peter's philosophy, one's only option is to internalize that which has been externally proffered. Since, to Peter, the "food"/gender identity given to I at birth is inedible, Peter must suffer the consequences and go hungry. As Peter observes, in a room full of people with a litany of food restrictions, Peter's plate ironically is "the only one still empty" (216). For Peter, this metaphor of I's plate staying empty signifies the barriers Peter faces in accessing and expressing I's closeted self. Much as Peter cryptically notes, "[i]f you lived somewhere where the dominant food was shellfish, you'd just have a reaction and die, and no one would know why" (216), no one knows that Peter is being destroyed by the assigned-at-birth identity that I has had to digest.[6]

Furthermore, one must note that the ingestion of identity is in fact a literal act in this text. Early in the narrative, Peter relates one particularly climatic act of ingestion. Peter is forced by the father to ingest a remaining shard of I's destroyed apron. Peter had experienced this apron as a conduit into womanhood; it is what Peter wears while nakedly cooking and cleaning for the family and taking on the persona of the sultry television host Giovetta. Although an inanimate object, this apron, to Peter, becomes a body to put on.[7] Peter's treatment of this

6 Although this article's discussion of Peter in terms of alimentation focusses primarily on I's expression of gender, one would note that eating—or the lack of doing so—also performs Peter's difficult relationship with cultural heritage. Peter, for instance, brings I's mother to a dim sum restaurant where she can connect with the "trailing the sounds and smells of what [she] had lost" (Fu 130). But simultaneously, this is a place where Peter remains hungry: "I could hear the women pushing the carts shouting the names of their dishes, could smell the breading and garlic, feel the wet heat, but they never seemed to come any closer" (130).

7 Peter's treatment of this apron as a second skin, a womanly skin, to don can be seen

apron as a new, more comfortable body is clear in I's descriptions: Peter first observes that the apron is "starting to get the rubbery smell of [I's] own body" (Fu 45) and then that it is "like a second skin—a better one" (50). When Peter's donning of the apron is discovered, the father's hands and keenly apparent disapproval corrupt it. The apron loses its "shine"; it now "looked like skinned animal" (54). Since the apron was a "second skin," Peter, and Peter's womanhood too, is animalized and, by extension, rendered edible matter. Even further, according to the progression of the imagery, the apron in its destruction becomes even more horrific; it is a corpse—a "skinned animal" (54)—brought to life. It "twist[s] inward as though alive" (55) while on fire.

But importantly, despite Peter's father's attempt to annihilate this object that expresses Peter's womanhood, the apron is not consumed entirely by the flames. A remainder remains. The survival of Peter's womanhood is signalled by the continued existence of the apron as ashen shards. The father's destructive work is, thus, not complete. Consequently, he forces Peter to engage in an act of self-cannibalization by swallowing "a chip, about the size of a pebble" (Fu 55). Although the father's reasoning for forcing this act goes unstated, his actions suggest an attempt to force Peter's conquering of I's own womanhood through the act of ingestion. Peter must consume I's womanhood, not to integrate it into I-self and have it become like the food that "turn[s] into tissue, muscle, and nerve and then provide[s] the energy that drives them all" (Tompkins 3). Rather, this consumption conquers and annihilates as in Bahktin's figuring of the eater as one who "triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured" (qtd. in Kilgour 6). To consume the apron shard is to re-internalize what had been an outward, albeit largely secret, expression of I's identity so as to hide it.

Beyond a repression of identity, however, this scene of ingestion is framed as a failed birth of self thanks to the narrative structure that juxtaposes this scene with Peter's contemplation of Mrs. Becker's pregnancy and suicide. The scene of swallowing the apron shard directly leads into Peter's narration of Mrs. Becker revealing her seeming pregnancy with Peter's father's child and her suicide. This juxtapositioning suggests that Peter's vision of her death describes more than just Mrs. Becker's own experience. Peter narrates: "I see her, sometimes, leaning back in her seat, clutching a pear-size baby in her hand, staring into its tiny, sloping eyes, its body hard as plastic, its crown of dark hair no larger than a fingerprint" (Fu 58).[8] Beyond the narrative structure bringing these events

as a precursor to Peter's later assumption of a woman's body through having Margie lie upwards on top of I. Through this positioning, Peter takes on Margie's breasts and genitalia as I's own (Fu 126).

8 In that the next chapter opens with Peter's mother peeling a pear, the very food ob-

and characters into relation with one another, the shard and the (imagined?) miscarried foetus are linked together as edible matter and as plastics. The apron, though not edible, is eaten; the baby, though not edible, is described in terms of edible material, a pear. Further, the apron had been described as an acrylic—hence, a plastic—and Peter's vision of this foetus, which echoes Mrs. Becker's earlier description of a previous miscarriage, is that it is "hard as plastic" (58). This link between the apron shard and the miscarried foetus casts Peter's swallowing of the apron symbolically as a failed birth, namely a failed birth of Peter as woman. Both the apron shard and the miscarried foetus are plastic corpses of unmet desire, and both signal a breeching of the body's borders in monstrous ways: Mrs. Becker's baby should be alive inside her womb, not dead in her hands; Peter's apron, and the womanhood it represents, should exist externally, not be swallowed and forced inside. By swallowing the shard, Peter takes into I's stomach the corpse of I's womanhood, matter than cannot nourish, a foetus that cannot grow, develop, or be birthed.

In this forced swallowing of womanhood, cycles of repression that result in Peter's edibility throughout the rest of I's development emerge. If Peter must consume I's womanhood, then it makes sense for Peter to see I's self as consumable by others. Peter, consequently, frames I-self as food. Peter has a linear-shaped navel that looks like "I had been stabbed in the stomach with a boning knife" (Fu 125), an image that equates Peter's body with meat. Furthermore, Peter is locked in the freezer by a co-worker, thereby symbolically becoming food just like the other items that the freezer holds. Even more importantly, much like Peter's mother had envisioned herself as a pig at the butcher's, Peter has a flash of self as the corpse of a calf. Upon witnessing John with his girlfriend, Peter's narrative makes a non-sequitur leap into the past to a time when Peter was attacked by black flies. Peter depicts John and Eileen as an "uncomfortable" (209) sight in part because John represents an ease of gender transition that Peter feels impossible for I-self and in part because Eileen, to Peter, manifests an unfettered womanliness. This expression of discomfort leads into the following description:

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ject used to describe the foetus, there is a subtle suggestion that Peter's mother too is figured by Peter to be complicit in fostering the conditions that make Mrs. Becker's child an impossibility and that hence contribute to Mrs. Becker's hopelessness and subsequent self-destruction. As Peter narrates in the segue between the scene of swallowing the shard and the contemplation of Mrs. Becker's suicide, the mother has done little to prevent the affair: "We wanted her [the mother] to call him [the father] out, but she didn't, and we were too afraid" (Fu 56).

> That past summer, at the café, someone had left the skins from the roasted hams in the metal garbage bin out back. They sat baking in the sun. When I lifted the lid off at the end of the day, a cloud of black flies poured out and engulfed my head. Their wings brushed my cheeks and hissed in my ears. I thought of a picture I'd seen of a calf dying from black-fly bites, its sores red and swollen. No one heard me screaming in the alley. That moment, flat on my back in the filth around the bin, and this moment, watching John watch his girlfriend back out the kitchen door, felt the same. Loneliness exploding out of nowhere in a screeching swarm, dark and dense enough to blot out the sun. (209)

Unlike the mother who had seen herself as a consumable, even tasty, food, Peter's vision of self is as a rotting corpse, edible only in decay and only by entities lower on the food chain.

In the navigation of identity and subsequent consumability, Peter is caught in a catch-twenty-two. While Peter experiences the constant repression of self as "[d]iscipline *consum[ing]* [I's] life" (Fu 170; emphasis added), in Peter's vision, to be out is also to face the threat of edibility. While John aims to show Peter that acceptance is possible, Peter experiences John's pressure as devouring. As described by Peter, John's reaction to Peter not immediately dismissing the possibility of going out with them for Halloween is that of "a dog who hears the kibble bag being shaken in the next room" (223-24). In this image, John is the eater; Peter, and Peter's potential willingness to "be whoever [Peter] want[s]" (224), is the eaten. By extension, Peter's moment of triumph—a metamorphosis into Audrey Hepburn through I's choice of Halloween costume—is not without hints of possible destruction. Peter's eyes become his sister "Adele's almond eyes" (228), notably not 'almond-shaped' or 'almond-coloured' eyes, the wording here directly casting Peter's eyes as edible matter. Furthermore, Peter may name the donning of this costume joyful, but the "sweet[ness]" (227) of this experience is one that simultaneously intimates that Peter is under threat of being consumed. Peter describes the physical sensations of wearing the gown as a "sweet constraint around my hips from the dress, tight as a sausage casing" (227), this image again associating Peter, even in an expression of I's ideal of womanhood, with food.

Ultimately, Peter's narration of self concludes with little resolution. The repression of self that has made Peter consumable renders Peter's fantasies of expressing womanhood, too, in terms of threatened consumability. Even in Peter's envisioning of self as woman, there is no recasting of self with the agency of becoming the eater. The novel's final scene, for instance, that has been read by others to suggest Peter's achievement of transition, does not, in fact, offer that certainty. The final paragraph of the novel reads: "Four grown women sit in a pub, raising their tourist steins to the camera. The waiter who holds the camera

comments on how much they look alike. 'We're sisters,' Bonnie says. '*Wir sind Schwestern*. This is Adele, Helen, and Audrey'" (Fu 239). Whether this scene signals a goal realized or a continued imagining of what might be, but is not, remains uncertain. While the majority of the novel is narrated in the past tense, the present tense is employed strategically at times to situate the reader within episodes of past trauma (e.g., the opening scene which depicts the mother's animalistic birthing of her first child) or within Peter's dreams for the future. For example, when Peter and Bonnie earlier imagine a reunion with their older sisters, the passage begins in the past tense–"I looked at the same spot, the same speck of dust, where her eyes were focused. We looked at it together. It was Helen's deck" (137)–and morphs into the present tense as it conveys a daydream for the future–"Helen stands over the barbecue, cloaked in hickory smoke. Tomato plants in the garden box, some of the fruits a shy, blushing orange, some of them explosively red. Adele plucks one and slices it into a salad. Bonnie hands me a drink in a glass overwhelmed by limes" (137-38). The concluding scene's use of the present tense links it to this earlier deployment of the present, suggesting it to be likewise an imagined, not actual, reunion, hence, an imagined, not actual, transition into womanhood. Furthermore, in both of these visions for the future, Peter's/Audrey's acts of ingestion remain incomplete. The dinner is prepared, the drink is offered; the stein is raised. But Peter/Audrey does not consume; Peter/Audrey may be in the proximity of nourishment, but the taking in of that nourishment remains unimagin(ed/able). Furthermore, the disappearance of Peter's first-person perspective in the novel's concluding paragraph is striking. Peter is hailed "Audrey" by Bonnie; Peter's own claiming of Audrey as a permanent identity goes unrepresented. To be recognized and accepted as a woman may signal an achievement and validation of that identity, but the disappearance of Peter's "I" suggests that Peter remains left at the mercy of other people's definitions and assignments of identity.

5. Conclusion: How To Be I

That eating is about more than eating is made clear by this novel. The mother, Mrs. Becker, and Peter all must contend with a repression of and/or struggle to assert their subject positions. Subsequently, they must confront their own edibility. As revealed by this text, the trope of eating can be considered a meditation on the forces that inform and construct, nourish and/or consume one's sense of self. Acts of eating, or not eating, thus become the conduit through which navigations of body and self are performed. In the end, the novel circles on many questions: how to be oneself and not be consumed, how not to

go hungry, how to eat without being made vulnerable to that which is eaten. As these characters demonstrate, to repress identity and desire is not to be protected from consumption; it is instead to be threatened even more so with one's edibility.

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