

The Representation and Significance of Food
in Three Works of Native American Fiction

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Brandy B. Alba, B.A.

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Committee Members Approved:

Robin Cohen, Chair

Priscilla Leder

Dickie Heaberlin

Approved:

J. Michael Willoughby
Dean of the Graduate College

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Introduction

As Sarah Sceats observes, “What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why...are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society...Food and eating are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in the definition of family, class, [and] ethnicity” (9). Not only does food comprise who one is physically in the biological sense, but specific attitudes concerning appetite, food procurement and preparation, and the rituals and etiquettes regarding consumption also contribute significantly to the emotional and psychological understanding of personal and cultural identity. With regard to contemporary Native American fiction, an understanding of the representation of cultural foodways offers unique insight into both individual characters and cultural groups. The use of food imagery in these texts often further reveals how individual and societal attitudes and practices regarding food have changed through contact with other cultures and by experiences in colonization. Examining the use of food imagery and attitudes surrounding food-related practices in specific works of Native American fiction illuminates how Native authors perceive that such changes have affected individual and communal relationships with food and, by extension, the personal and cultural identities that centered on these relationships.

With these issues in mind, this study explores the representation and significance of food in three works of contemporary Native American fiction: Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, James Welch’s *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, and *Gardens in the*

Dunes by Leslie Marmon Silko. These particular novels were selected for analysis both because of the diversity of their authors and because of the variety of perspectives offered within the texts themselves. Sherman Alexie is of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene descent, tribes which are indigenous to the Pacific Northwest region. *Reservation Blues* is set in the latter part of the twentieth century, primarily on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, where Alexie himself grew up. In contrast, James Welch grew up on the Blackfeet and Fort Belknap reservations in Montana, and his novel offers insight into an indigenous culture of the Great Plains region. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, which, like certain portions of Alexie's fiction, is based on true events, chronicles the account of an Oglala Sioux from South Dakota who joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Through a series of tragic events that reflect the political context of the late nineteenth century, Charging Elk finds himself alone and stranded in Marseille, France.

The final text selected for this analysis is *Gardens in the Dunes*. The author, Leslie Marmon Silko, is of mixed ancestry (European American, Mexican American, and Laguna Pueblo), and although the action of this particular novel extends to the northeastern United States, the jungles of Brazil, and even the continent of Europe, the work largely represents the American Southwest region. While the main characters of *Gardens in the Dunes* belong to a fictional tribal group, the Sand Lizard people, many of the events woven into the narrative were inspired by the social and political realities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The varied cultural and historical perspectives offered by these three texts provide a diverse sampling of Indigenous relationships with food, both individual and communal. Each text also presents a unique interpretation of how these relationships are impacted by

contact with other cultures and by colonization as it has been experienced by the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the Great Plains, and the American Southwest, respectively.

This thesis analyzes the aforementioned works with respect to their individual contexts in an attempt to divulge how the representation of food functions within each. Food imagery and the attitudes presented surrounding the procurement and preparation of food have been examined using not only the post-colonial lens suggested above, but also with consideration for psychoanalytic and cultural perspectives and with attention to how food imagery functions as a literary mechanism. The order of discussion proceeds as follows:

Chapter One, “‘Real Meat,’ Jesus Frybread and Commodity Cheese: What We Are Talking About When We Talk About Native American Food,” establishes the distinction between indigenous foods and foods introduced into Native American diets as a result of colonization. Indigenous foods are highly regionally specific and include not only those staple foods which would normally be consumed by Native peoples, but also particular “famine foods,” which are consumed only when there is an extreme shortage of normal foods. With regard to non-native foods, a distinction is made between foods which have been traditionalized, or culturally adopted, such as frybread, and non-traditionalized foods. The category of non-traditionalized foods is further divided into two groups: those foods which, despite their designation as non-traditional, frequently make up a significant portion of Native diets, such as government commodity foods, and those foods which, for a variety of reasons, seldom factor into Indigenous diets. As this

investigation reveals, each of these four food types carries specific attitudinal significance within the three texts chosen for this study.

Chapter Two, “Changing ‘a Can of Sardines into a River of Salmon’: Food Imagery as a Literary Device,” examines the literary significance of food as it functions within each of the selected works. The analysis presents how food imagery develops character, including what it reveals about overall personality and character traits, as well as how food references establish the immediate emotional state of the character. This chapter also investigates how food imagery establishes setting and mood, as well as how it contributes to the plot. Furthermore, Chapter Two examines how the foodways depicted in these works reveal cultural and racial tensions between Native Americans and the dominant EuroAmerican culture, which is a major theme in each of these novels.

Chapter Three, “‘There was Never Enough Meat’ or ‘All I have is Pepsi and Coffee’: Reservation Foods and the Colonization of Indigenous Diets,” discusses specifically the representation of reservation foods. This chapter first examines how and why food and food practices have functioned as agents of colonization in the specific ways in which they have with regard to Native American peoples. Subsequently, the significance of the *absence* of particular foods, or of food altogether, is examined with regard to how this absence contributes to, indeed dictates, the existence of certain other non-nutritive or unhealthful foods in Native diets. This chapter discusses government commodity foods and alcohol at length, with emphasis placed on the attitudes surrounding their consumption and the impact of these foods on Native health. Ultimately, this section scrutinizes the representation of commodity foods and alcohol in these works regarding what it reveals about post-colonial relationships, in general.

Interestingly, attitudes surrounding the consumption of commodity foods and other post-colonial foods are such that eating traditional Indigenous foods often becomes a conscious political act and a means of resistance to colonial oppression. This reality is prominently reflected in the three novels selected for this study.

Chapter Four, “An Invitation to Dinner: The Social Significance of Food,” investigates how food imagery functions to reflect interpersonal relationships and social customs within these works. Among the topics considered in this chapter are how the use of food establishes and develops friendships and romantic relationships in these novels. Additionally, this section discusses social customs regarding food, such as in host-guest relationships, and investigates food practices as indicators of economic affluence and social class. Furthermore, this chapter examines what attitudes surrounding food procurement and preparation reveal about gender roles and how the introduction of post-colonial foodways complicates the understanding of traditional Native gender roles.

Finally, Chapter Five, “‘Strong with Meat and Song’: The Spiritual Significance of Food,” discusses the religious significance of food as presented in the three texts selected for this study. A relevant issue investigated here is the role of food in rituals, including those reflecting Indigenous religious practices, Christian rituals, and hybridized religious practices that incorporate aspects of both Indigenous and Christian faiths. This chapter also investigates the representation in these texts of the spiritual customs surrounding the procurement of food and sustainability practices, as well as how these novels represent the association between specific food sources and entire cultural religious systems and faith-based worldviews.

The arguments presented in each of these chapters are based on relevant historical, literary, and culinary research. When relevant, every attempt has been made to acquire sources which present cultural information from the appropriate cultural perspective, in other words, documents written by individuals who belong to that particular culture. Pertinent examples include annotated cookbooks and handbooks for dietary decolonization practices written by Native American authors. Whenever sources have been used which were written by individuals not belonging to the culture in question, readers have been alerted to the possibility of cultural bias and/or misunderstanding inherent in the given information.

A Note about Terminology:

The term “Native American” is problematic, not only because anyone born on the North or South American continents can claim “Native” status, regardless of ethnic origin, but also because it suggests a singular, unified “Native” identity, when in reality, there are many such identities and they seldom, if ever, present a single, unified perspective. However, as this is the term most often used to refer to the Indigenous peoples of North America, it has been used throughout this analysis. The term “Indian” is only used when quoting another source verbatim, as it is even more inaccurate (although many Native peoples have adopted this term and freely use it themselves). The term “Indigenous” is also used throughout this study as a synonym for “Native.” Following the lead of several Native authors and scholars discovered during the research process for this paper, “Indigenous” is capitalized when used as a title adjective for Native peoples, and left in the lower case when referring to other naturally occurring entities, such as native plant life.

Special Note Regarding Historical Context:

Certain readers may find some of the perspectives presented in this analysis to be controversial. This includes, but is not limited to, the United States government's intentional participation in the buffalo slaughter and the motivations behind the introduction of government food rations and commodity foods in Native diets. The intent of this project is not to debate historical fact, but to present the vision of history that informs the scholarly resources, personal narratives, and works of fiction which are consulted or analyzed herein.

Chapter One: “Real Meat,” Jesus Fry Bread, and Commodity Cheese: What We Are Talking About When We Talk About Native American Food

For most people, the phrase “Native American food” probably conjures images of bison hunts, fields of corn, or baskets of golden fry bread. Although not, perhaps, technically wrong, these images are overly simplistic. For example, bison constituted the traditional staple meat source only for those tribes who lived west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains, collectively known as the Great Plains tribes. Corn, or maize, was a far more widely distributed food source than bison prior to European arrival. Various agricultural tribes “of the Southwest, Southeast, Northeast and some of the Plains” relied on corn as “the nutritive anchor of (their) entire culture” (Berzok 50). However, as the aforementioned tribal list is not comprehensive, corn, although certainly more prevalent in Indigenous diets than bison, cannot be considered a universal Native American food, either. Finally, fry bread, the third item mentioned, is perhaps the most widely recognized contemporary Native American food, but was not even introduced into Indigenous diets until the nineteenth century.

So what *does* constitute Native American food? First, one must eradicate the notion that there was or ever will be *one* Native American reality, regarding food or anything else. Indigenous foodways have always been highly regionally and culturally specific. Therefore, the discussion of literary food imagery throughout this study attempts to examine the meaning of particular foods in their appropriate cultural and

regional context. To do otherwise would be fallacious and futile. Furthermore, one must acknowledge the problem of chronology and what it means for a food to be “traditionally” Native American. Can a food introduced into Native diets as a result of European colonization ever be considered “traditional?”

For the purpose of this study, the foods discussed in *Reservation Blues*, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, and *Gardens in the Dunes* have been divided into two main categories: indigenous and post-colonial. Indigenous foods can further be divided into those foods which would normally comprise a Native American diet and “famine foods,” which are eaten only out of absolute necessity. Post-colonial foods are non-native dietary items which have been introduced into Indigenous diets as a result of European colonization. Some of these foods, such as fry bread, have subsequently been “traditionalized.” Among the post-colonial foods which remain non-traditional are those which, despite their non-traditional status, are frequently present in Native diets, such as government commodity foods, and those which, for one reason or another, rarely factor into Indigenous diets. Therefore, there are a total of five essential food types recognized in this study: Indigenous staples; Indigenous famine foods; traditionalized post-colonial foods; frequently occurring, non-traditional, post-colonial foods; and seldom present, non-traditional, post-colonial foods.

This chapter provides a framework for understanding the origin and significance of various food types, in order to better contextualize the subsequent investigation for readers who are unfamiliar with this topic. Please note that the overview presented here mentions numerous issues relating to Native foods which later chapters of this analysis discuss in much more detail. For example, the consumption of alcohol is only briefly

introduced here. However, Chapter Three specifically discusses the health effects of alcohol, while Chapter Four analyzes the literary representation of the social significance of alcohol within the works selected for this study.

1. Indigenous Staple Foods

Indigenous staple foods include those consumables which would have regularly featured in Native American diets prior to European colonization, and as noted above, these foods are highly regionally and culturally specific. For example, in Welch's novel, *Charging Elk* is a member of the Oglala Sioux, one of many tribal groups of the Great Plains region. The dominant, pre-reservation system staple food of the Oglala Sioux was the American bison, "and it also became the focus of their entire culture" (Berzok xvi). Technically a type of wild ox, American bison were misnamed "buffalo" by the Europeans, and the erroneous name stuck. Despite its inaccuracy, as they are "not properly a buffalo at all," most Americans, including many Native Americans and *Charging Elk*, refer to bison as buffalo (Berzok xvi). Therefore, this paper, while recognizing the biological inaccuracy of the name "buffalo," uses the terms "bison" and "buffalo" interchangeably.

Charging Elk's cultural identification with the hunting of bison prominently emerges early on in Welch's novel. For example, when lamenting that the reservation agents were forcing the Oglalas to practice agriculture, *Charging Elk* remarks, "The American bosses were making the *ikce wicasa* plant potatoes and corn. What kind of life was that for the people who ran the buffaloes?" (29). Here, he clearly identifies the type of food a people consume with a particular "kind of life." He also identifies his people as "the people who ran the buffaloes," showing how closely food, as well as the methods of

procuring that food, and cultural identity are connected. Great Plains cultures were traditionally nomadic in order to follow and hunt the great herds of buffalo, and the animals provided “them with all their basic needs—food, clothing, and housing (tipis)—and [were] also used to make tools, musical instruments, and even children’s toys” (Divina 76). Surplus buffalo items were used for trade with other cultures. The entirety of most Great Plains tribal cultures, then, centered on the ability to hunt American bison.

Furthermore, *Charging Elk* so closely associates the concept of food with buffalo meat, that he often uses the word “meat” as a term for food, in general. As Linda Murray Berzok, a Non-Native food historian, asserts regarding another Great Plains tribe, “the Blackfoot called bison the ‘real food’” (78). Because James Welch, the author of *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, was himself of Blackfoot descent, it is not surprising that the novel’s title character would share this equation of food with bison meat. For example, at one point *Charging Elk* fears becoming an old man and having “nothing but memories of bad winters and no meat and no woman” (33). On another occasion, after having had nothing to eat but bread and fruit for some time, he notes that “his stomach had tightened into a hard knot from lack of real meat” (43). Therefore, “real meat,” meaning buffalo meat, is essential not only to maintain cultural identity but also to ensure individual health in a body that has evolved to depend upon it.

In contrast, salmon constitutes the focal indigenous staple of the Spokane peoples represented in *Reservation Blues*, but salmon defines their sense of cultural identity just as significantly as hunting the buffalo does for *Charging Elk*’s people. Although the Spokanes would have also traditionally consumed “considerable quantities of wild plants,” the novel emphasizes the importance of salmon, and the people most prominently

identify themselves with that food (Berzok 11). For example, in response to Father Arnold's misguided, but not uncommon, expectation that he would find "tipis and buffalo" upon his arrival to the Spokane reservation, Bessie laughs, "There weren't any buffalo here to begin with. We're a salmon tribe. At least, we were a salmon tribe before they put those dams on the river" (36). Her declaration, "We're a salmon tribe," demonstrates how closely food sources connect with the people's sense of cultural identity.

Native American author Elizabeth Woody (Navajo/Warm Springs/Wasco/Yakama) explains how fishing for salmon defines cultural identity in her article "People of the Salmon." Just as Charging Elk uses the term "meat" to signify food, in general, Woody uses the term "food" as a synonym for salmon: "We collectively honor and thank the food for returning each season" (140). Interestingly, regarding the preparation, or roasting, of the salmon, Woody comments on the importance of maintaining a positive attitude throughout the process and savoring those flavorings which are "transmitted (to the fish) by the fire" (140). Similarly, in *Reservation Blues*, Thomas decides to use a smashed guitar as firewood and remarks that he "planned on smoking some salmon anyway and figured the smoke from the burning guitar would make salmon taste like the blues" (21). This passage, which may seem odd to readers who are unfamiliar with salmon cultures, reflects the belief that the smoke and fire used to prepare the salmon are highly impressionable entities which contribute greatly to the fish's flavor.

Unlike in *Reservation Blues* and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the main characters in *Gardens in the Dunes* belong to a fictional culture, the Sand Lizard people,

in which the central Indigenous dietary items are not types of meat, but plants. The Sand Lizards live in an isolated area of the desert in the Southwest. They eat an assortment of native plants, including bush beans, acorns, pumpkins, and various roots and tender shoots referred to collectively as “sand food” (40). The primary staple, however, appears to be amaranth, which is a type of grain roughly similar to corn. Jack Weatherford (Euro-American) notes in *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World* that “amaranth is considerably more nutritious than most grains,” having a “high protein content of 16 percent, compared with 7 percent for rice and 13 percent for wheat” (75). In addition, amaranth “has twice the lysine found in wheat and as much as is in milk, making it far more balanced in proteins than most plant foods” (75). According to Indigo in *Gardens in the Dunes*, “amaranth grew profusely at the foot of the dunes. When there was nothing else to eat, there was amaranth” (14). The Sand Lizards consumed boiled amaranth greens, and “later, as the amaranth went to seed, they took turns kneeling at the grinding stone, then Sister Salt made tortillas” (14).

While the culture of the Sand Lizard people centers on the careful cultivation of desert gardens and the gathering of natural plant foods, they do also consume a small amount of meat, although only the men hunt. Sand Lizard women acquire meat by trapping small animals or stealing fresh meat from the coyotes. For example, Grandma shows Sister Salt and Indigo “how to set bird snares woven from their own hair to trap birds as they landed by the pool,” as well as how to “distinguish the coyotes’ language of barks and howls so they would know when the coyotes got lucky” and could quickly steal the fresh kill away from the animals (47, 45). The one time Indigo and Sister Salt

actually do this in the novel, they harvest a litter of newborn rabbits with which Grandma Fleet makes soup, so even this method generally results in very small amounts of meat.

At one point in *Gardens in the Dunes*, Indigo, who has journeyed to Long Island, New York, encounters and shares a meal with a group of Matinnecoaks, a non-fictional, Algonquian-speaking tribal group native to Long Island. The two foods Indigo enjoys with the Matinnecoaks are dried kelp and steamed clams. According to E. Barrie Kavasch, an ethnobotanist and food historian of mixed ancestry (Cherokee/Creek/Powhatan/English/Scotch-Irish/German), many types of seaweeds would have been consumed by coastal-dwelling Native Americans, because “they are rich sources of minerals and vitamins” (112). It is therefore probable, even though Kavasch does not mention kelp specifically, that kelp comprised at least part of the Indigenous diets of Northeastern coastal cultures, such as the Matinnecoaks.

The Native American peoples of the Northeastern coast also would certainly have eaten steamed clams, although the traditional method of steaming would have been different than the practice presented in Silko’s novel. Silko describes an event that bears striking resemblance to a modern clam-bake:

Indigo saw a number of people who appeared to be digging in the sand not far from the water’s edge. An old man and two boys each carried baskets of odd white rocks to the hole. When Indigo got closer she saw the hole was actually a cooking pit lined with smooth flat stones nestled in a thick layer of hot coals. The baskets of flat smooth rocks were emptied into the cooking pit and then the pit was covered with large flat stones....In just a short time, the flat white rocks cooked and cracked open. (168)

The “flat white rocks” Indigo refers to are obviously clams, although she has no reason to recognize them as such, since she has grown up in a very isolated Southwestern desert community. The modern New England clam bake tradition continues to exist in much the same form as is depicted above. However, as Linda Murray Berzok notes, “serious doubts have been raised that this method of pit steaming can really be traced to Native Americans...Far more likely was that the Indians made their clambakes aboveground on a circle of rocks” (115). Berzok then goes on to offer excavation-based evidential support for this assertion, concluding that “it is agreed that the Indians probably did their steaming above-ground, not in pits” (115). Therefore, while the Matinnecoaks presented in *Gardens in the Dunes* are, in all likelihood, consuming food that, for them, would be traditional staples, the way in which they are preparing this food, at least the clams, reflects not Indigenous practices, but outside cultural influences.

The three novels selected for this study reveal the highly regional and cultural particularity of normative Indigenous foods. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* presents one of the many Great Plains cultures that historically depended upon buffalo as the food source most central to their survival and cultural identity, while *Reservation Blues* depicts an Indigenous culture of the Pacific Northwest region which traditionally relied upon salmon fishery to fulfill these needs. *Gardens in the Dunes* alternatively presents a fictional Southwestern desert culture which consumes primarily native vegetation, supplemented only moderately with meat. This third novel also briefly introduces a tribal group native to the Northeastern coastal region and the clams and seaweed which would have traditionally factored into their diet as regular staples.

2. Indigenous Famine Foods

Indigenous foods include not only normative foods, but also include what are known as famine foods. Famine foods, also referred to as “low preference foods” or “queer foods,” are “resources that are known to be edible but are not consumed in any quantity during times of normal food availability” (Minnis 35). As noted by archeologist and ethnobotanist Paul E. Minnis in *Social Adaptation to Food Stress: A Prehistoric Southwestern Example*, “many of these resources have low nutritional value and high bulk, produce adverse effects with prolonged use, or require tedious processing to make them edible” (36). (Information regarding Paul E. Minnis’ ethnic and/or cultural heritage is not available; however, he is probably of Euro-American descent.) One modern example Minnis gives of famine food is “hobo shoe-sole soup” (35). Interestingly, in Welch’s novel *Charging Elk* recalls a time when he and his friend, Strikes Plenty, had run “out of meat and coffee and tobacco and had to boil the rawhide they used to patch their moccasins,” creating a “soup” of sorts very similar to the hobo potage to which Minnis refers (129).

Minnis identifies three other common types of famine foods which are exemplified in the works selected for this study: tabooed foods, seeds reserved for future planting, and immature crops. Tabooed foods include those which are prohibited for religious or spiritual reasons and/or those which are culturally abhorrent. For example, in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the title character almost becomes physically ill when he realizes that the cuts of savory-looking red meat he has been eyeing longingly at the meat market are actually horse meat. He recalls having:

eaten the flesh of *sunka wakan* before, during the bad winter after the fight on the Greasy Grass, when the people were hungry all the time, but he hadn't eaten it since. Now he looked at the meat and he thought of all the horses the Oglalas had owned before they came in to Fort Robinson. None of the people were happy to eat their horses that winter but they (the horses) had saved many from starvation. (411)

The encounter referred to by the Sioux as the Battle of the Greasy Grass is known to most Euro-Americans as the Battle of the Little Bighorn or, more famously, Custer's Last Stand. The persecution and hunger which followed this military conflict is well-documented. As a result and as Charging Elk remembers, many of the starving people were forced to consume famine foods, including their horses.

Horse flesh constitutes a famine food among the Sioux because of the spiritual significance of horses in that culture. The name of the animal, "*sunka wakan*," literally translates as "holy dog" or "mysterious dog," because "*wakan*" means both "holy" and "mysterious" (Williamson). These two words, "holy" and "mysterious," have similar connotations in Sioux, as the primary deity for Sioux cultures is referred to as *Wakan Tanka*, or The Great Mystery. Therefore, the word for "horse" signifies the spiritual importance of horses among the Sioux. The people were driven by hunger to violate spiritual customs by eating their horses, as well as committing what, to them, constitutes a heinous act. Consequently, horse meat constitutes a tabooed food used as a famine food.

Gardens in the Dunes offers further examples of eating tabooed foods as famine foods, and the consumption of immature crops and seeds reserved for future planting.

Minnis observes, “It is not infrequent for people faced with starvation to consume their seed stock,” even though “they recognize that eating these reduces future yields...Likewise, immature crops may be eaten, and again this lowers future yields” (35). Because the Sand Lizard people described in Silko’s novel leave choice crops untouched, both to naturally reseed the fields and in spiritual observance, to eat these crops would not only be eating “seed stock,” but also be consuming tabooed food.

However, the narrator in *Gardens in the Dunes* recounts a time when

the people were starving. They ate the dried-up seed pumpkins and squash left in the garden the year before as first harvest offerings; they consumed seeds set aside for planting next season. They ate everything they could find. They cleared the wild gourd vines and boiled the roots of weeds and shrubs. They even dug deep into the sand in the old gardens to expose sprouted seeds. (18)

Because the people were starving, they were forced to deplete food sources which ensured future food. Another example the narrator recounts occurred when “hunger drove the people to eat the pack rats; but the hunger was far worse afterward because there were no pack rats left to gather and store seeds” (47). The fictional Sand Lizard people often raided the nests of pack rats to gather seeds, nuts, beans, and, at least in the case of Indigo and Sister Salt, dried dates. However, they were careful not to damage the nests and to leave the pack rats enough food to survive, which ensured the presence of pack rat nests in the future. So eating the pack rats resulted in the absence of their nests, a vital source of food.

There is a distinction made between acute famine and chronic malnutrition and the foods consumed in each situation. The characters in *Reservation Blues* are largely suffering from chronic malnutrition, so the foods they are consuming, although they may share certain characteristics with the foods discussed above, are not famine foods. For example, although Junior is forced to eat “peanut butter and onion sandwiches,” even though he can “never stomach” them, because little else is available to eat, his eating of these sandwiches is not analogous to the Oglalas’ eating their horses in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (18). First, Junior suffers from chronic malnutrition, and the offending sandwiches, apparently, constitute a regular part of his diet. In addition, Junior violates no religious or cultural sentiment by eating the sandwiches; they are simply revolting to him. The only ingredient in the sandwiches which could be considered native to pre-European-contact North America is the onion (and depending on what type of onion it is, maybe not even that). So that food itself cannot constitute an *indigenous* famine food.

3. Traditionalized Post-colonial Foods

The third type of food recognized in this study is traditionalized post-colonial food, food introduced into the diets of Native Americans by Europeans and subsequently adopted into Native cultures. The most prominent example is fry bread. George P. Horse Capture (A’aninin) asserts that “June berries and fry bread are gifts from the One Above. Every group of people has a favorite food that is identified with them. For the French it may be escargots; for Russians, borscht; and for Mexicans, tortillas. For us the magic food is fry bread” (Divina 95).

Fry bread has undoubtedly become a Native American staple; however, there is nothing indigenous about it. To counter Horse Capture’s assessment of fry bread,

Waziyatawin (Wahpetunwan Dakota) quotes Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne/Hodulgee Muscogee) as saying “Fry bread was a gift of Western civilization from the days when Native people were removed from buffalo, elk, deer, salmon, turkey, corn, beans, squash, acorns, fruit, wild rice and other real food” (70). Waziyatawin then explains why fry bread is not Indigenous. First, the standard ingredients are refined white flour, sugar, salt, lard, and water or powdered milk. In addition,

while most Indigenous societies had some kind of bread prior to colonization (frequently made from such nutritious bases as corn, beans, or nuts), fried foods generally were not a part of the Indigenous diet. Because hard-earned oils from animal fats were precious commodities, they were not used for the wasteful practice of deep-frying other foods. In fact, they were sometimes not consumed at all, but instead used for such things as fuel or moisturizing and softening agents. We might then consider the adoption of such food practices as deep-frying as a colonized adaptation. (70)

Therefore, fry bread is a post-colonial food in everything from its ingredients to the way it is cooked.

However, fry bread has been adopted into many Native American cultures with undeniable intensity, as exemplified by the following passage in *Reservation Blues*:

Thomas was hungry on a reservation where there are ninety-seven different ways to say *fry bread*.

Fry bread. Water, flour, salt, rolled and molded into shape, dropped into hot oil. A traditional food. A simple recipe. But Indians could spend

their whole lives looking for the perfect piece of fry bread. The tribe held a fry bread cooking contest every year...

“Fry bread,” Jana Wind had whispered into the ear of Bobby Running-Jones as they lay down together.

“Well, fry bread to you, too,” Bobby had said to Jana after he came home late from the bar.

“Do you want to do the fry bread?” Indian boys often asked Indian girls at their very first reservation high school dance. (47)

As this passage clearly shows, fry bread has not only “become an Indigenous staple” as a food, despite its non-Native origins, but both the preparation and eating of fry bread has also become deeply ingrained into many Native American cultures (Waziyatawin 70). Charging Elk also refers to fry bread more than once: “They sat before a fire and chewed on drymeat and frybread that Charging Elk’s mother had given them” (32-33). As evidenced by the above excerpts, the significance of fry bread extends to multiple Native American cultures.

Fry bread is not the only post-colonial food to enjoy traditionalized status. Coffee has also been widely adopted by Native cultures. Contrary to popular belief, coffee beans are not indigenous to Central America. Anthropologist Jack Weatherford notes that coffee is actually an “Old World stimulant...which could not be grown in Europe and therefore cost the Europeans dearly, [but which] took readily to the soils of the Caribbean and Brazil” (215). It was therefore introduced to Native peoples after contact with Europeans. However, coffee was readily adopted by many Indigenous cultures. Throughout *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, for example, the title character refers to

coffee as *pejuta sapa*, or “black medicine.” He recalls that his mother “always has a pot of black medicine on top of the stove and they would drink it out of tin cups with handles” (32). Additionally, in *Reservation Blues* Thomas and Chess sit “down to coffee at the kitchen table” and talk in order to get to know one another (62). Hence, coffee joins fry bread as being a post-colonial food that does not bear the stigma of being considered non-traditional.

4. Frequently Occurring, Non-traditional, Post-colonial Foods

Most foods introduced into Native American diets as a result of colonization have not been traditionalized or socially adopted into Native cultures in the way that fry bread and coffee have. However, some of these post-colonial foods, despite their non-traditional status, are frequently present in Indigenous diets, regardless. The most prominent examples of this type of food are alcoholic beverages and government commodity foods.

Alcohol is a post-colonial dietary addition for Native American peoples, at least in the quantities in which it is presently available. However, its status as “traditionalized” or not is difficult to declare absolutely. Many Native people regularly consume alcoholic beverages. The “incredible rate of alcoholism” on many reservations is well documented and features prominently in *Reservation Blues* (Glover 12). Alcohol is regularly mentioned in *Gardens in the Dunes* and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, and not always negatively. In fact, the latter two novels often refer to various alcoholic beverages positively, as when Charging Elk fondly recalls drinking “*mni sha*, the forbidden wine,” with his comrades in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show (29). Additionally, Sister Salt, Maytha and Vedna take great pride in brewing their own beer in *Gardens in the Dunes*,

so an argument can be made to place alcohol in the category of culturally adopted, post-colonial foods.

However, the texts which feature alcohol in a positive light are those which are set near the turn of the twentieth century. The one which is set more recently, at the end of the twentieth century, *Reservation Blues*, depicts alcohol in an unwaveringly negative manner, as shown in the following excerpt (which also includes a reference to commodity food):

Thomas gave them all a glass of commodity grape juice. It was very sweet, almost too sweet. Thomas loved sugar.

“Our cousins are drinking this stuff mixed with rubbing alcohol at home,” Chess said.

“Really?” Thomas said. The creativity of alcoholics constantly surprised him.

“Yeah, they call it a Rubbie Dubbie.”

“Drinking that will kill them.”

“I think that’s the idea.” (100)

As this passage clearly indicates, the negative health effects of alcohol are widely known, and it is condemned, at least by some, for that reason. (Granted, in this instance it is “rubbing alcohol,” which is not intended for human consumption, regardless. However, other forms of alcohol, including beer, vodka, wine, and so on, are equally condemned throughout the work.) Additionally, although *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* embraces alcohol early on, it actually ends up condemning alcohol through the initial presence and subsequent absence of alcohol in the romantic relationships between first Charging Elk

and Marie and then Charging Elk and Nathalie. Therefore, alcohol shall be considered a non-traditionalized dietary item, because whatever the historical reception of alcohol has been among Native peoples, they currently view it as a negative influence.

Commodity foods, however, embody none of the ambiguity regarding “traditionalization” or cultural adoption that alcohol does. Federal food programs contributed to the cultural reprogramming, or “civilizing,” of Native American peoples by rejecting traditional foods and Native food practices and substituting Euro-American foods such as beef (or bacon), flour, coffee, lard, sugar, and, more recently, such items as commodity cheese, powdered milk, juice, and peanut butter. As Linda Murray Berzok observes, the original intention of government food programs “was to supply rations only as an interim solution until Native Americans were raising enough food of their own. Instead, Indians became wholly dependent on rations and there were never enough” (32).

All three of the novels selected for this study often refer to government food rations, which have more recently been known as government commodity foods. Charging Elk recalls at one point how he “had laughed and mocked those Indians who had given up and lived in the wooden houses at the agency, collecting their meager commodities, their spoiled meat, learning to worship the white man’s god, [and] learning to talk the strange tongue” (20). This excerpt exemplifies not only the presence of government food rations on the reservation, but also the role these foods played in what was, essentially, a complete cultural takeover. Similarly, in *Gardens in the Dunes*, Grandma Fleet insists that “she would die before she would live on a reservation,” in part because “Reservation Indians...[eat] white food—white bread and white sugar and white

lard” (17). Therefore, Grandma Fleet unmistakably equates the unhealthy commodity food itself with the culture that provides it.

The most abundant references to commodity foods occur in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*. Alexie makes frequent reference to commodity cheese, grape juice, meat, powdered milk, and peanut butter, as well as the monthly wait in line to collect these foods. He also comments on how these foods impact Native health and how commodity foods and the methods by which they are distributed influence concepts of gender identity and interpersonal relationships on the reservation. Therefore, government commodity foods are an ever-present reality for many Native peoples, and many Indigenous peoples consider these foods to be both symptomatic of colonial domination and a symbol for the numerous, negative cultural changes that have resulted from that domination. Consequently, commodity foods have not been traditionalized or culturally adopted by Native peoples, although these foods frequently factor into Indigenous diets.

5. Seldom Present, Non-traditional, Post-colonial Foods

The fifth and final food type recognized in this study is food that has been introduced into Native American diets as a result of European colonization and remains non-traditionalized, but that seldom factors into Indigenous diets, anyway. There are various reasons a specific food may hardly ever constitute any part of a particular people’s diet, including regional availability, affordability, and cultural distaste.

For example, in *Reservation Blues*, Junior reminisces about a particular annual family excursion involving this type of food: “Junior’s father had owned a couple hundred acres of wheat that he rented out to a white farmer. Every harvest, Junior’s father made enough money for a family vacation to Spokane. They stayed at the Park

Lane Motel, ate Kmart submarine sandwiches, and watched bad karate movies at the Trent Drive-In” (24). The submarine sandwiches from Kmart were, apparently, expensive enough that the family could only afford them once a year when they collected the harvest money, and/or the absence of a Kmart store on the reservation caused the sandwiches to only be available when the family traveled to Spokane. Therefore, this type of food would not regularly factor into their diets, because it is not affordable and/or not locally available.

Another reason a particular food may be absent from Indigenous diets is that the food is culturally distasteful. For example, in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the title character notes that “the Lakotas were surprised and disgusted with the things these people (the French) ate. Especially the slimy many-legged thing that seemed to melt into itself. Featherman had said something obscene about it and everybody laughed. Still, they were horrified” (65). Later, it becomes apparent that “the slimy many-legged thing” is octopus, which is a French delicacy. Charging Elk, however, refuses to eat them, despite the fact that they are available, as he is in France. Octopus would not, perhaps, be readily obtainable for other Native American peoples for financial reasons and/or reasons of regional availability; however, Charging Elk’s reason for not eating the creatures is cultural. He simply finds them disgusting.

To conclude, the assortment of foods consumed by the characters in the books selected for this study can be divided into five types, belonging to two main categories: post-colonial and indigenous. Among the post-colonial foods are those which are openly considered non-traditional and either seldom or frequently factor into Native American diets. Specific post-colonial foods may seldom be present in Native American diets due

to such factors as regional availability, affordability, and cultural distaste. Among the non-traditional, post-colonial foods which frequently factor into Indigenous diets are government commodity foods and alcoholic beverages. The third post-colonial food type includes those foods, such as coffee and, more notably, fry bread, which, despite their post-colonial origins, have been traditionalized or wholly adopted by many Native cultures. The two primary types of pre-colonial foods, or those which would have been indigenous to Native cultures, are famine foods, which would only be eaten out of absolute necessity, and the regionally and culturally specific foods which would have traditionally comprised the majority of Native American diets.

Chapter Two: “Changing a Can of Sardines into a River of Salmon”: Food Imagery as a Literary Device

Food is not only biologically “necessary for survival,” but is also “inextricably connected with social function” (Sceats 1). It is not surprising, then, that food imagery frequently factors into works of literature, as writing is very often a social practice. As Sarah Sceats, a British literary critic, poignantly observes, “the major significances of eating...are not biological but symbolic” (1). Therefore, the representation of food and food practices in literature commonly conveys meaning beyond the readily apparent interpretation of the characters simply fulfilling their biological needs. This chapter seeks to examine how food imagery operates symbolically within *Gardens in the Dunes*, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, and *Reservation Blues* to reveal aspects of character, establish setting and mood, contribute to the plot, develop the theme of intercultural tension, and establish the importance of other cultural elements, such as music.

As noted by Delmer Davis in his study of the significance of food in the works of Betty MacDonald, characterization is often tied “to eating, cooking, and culinary tastes, with characters categorized as superior or inferior in relationship to (another character’s) food abilities and preferences” (116). This observation holds true for the works selected for this study, as well, in which food imagery actively functions to develop character. A specific character’s relation to food and food practices reveals intimate details about that character’s overall personality, as well as his or her immediate emotional state.

For example, *Gardens in the Dunes* largely develops the character of Big Candy through food imagery and references to specific food practices. His name, Big Candy, provides the most obvious example of his relationship to food imagery. Although “he told everyone to call him Candy because he always had a little sack of penny candies,” his name actually symbolizes the role he plays in Sister Salt’s life (209). Candy, both the consumable treat and the character, is fun in the short term, but cannot be relied upon for long-term sustenance. Candy, the character, remains in Sister Salt’s life only long enough to develop a shaky relationship with her, one that is complicated by prostitution, various business dealings, a loan to pay off her jail fine, and the theft of his life savings, in other words, money. Consequently, although Sister Salt mostly enjoys Candy’s company during their brief but meaningful affair, when he leaves shortly after the premature birth of their child, Sister Salt realizes that she is better off without him.

Food imagery further develops Candy’s character by representing his desire for power, a power he seeks to acquire through food. Big Candy is a master cook who wants “a restaurant of his own...now, while he [is] still young enough to enjoy the fine food and pretty women that he [will] have there” (210). Furthermore, Big Candy believes, as he tells “Sister Salt more than once, the person who prepares the food has more power than most people think” (217). Big Candy is an entrepreneur. He desires a specific kind of business-related power, and he seeks to obtain that power through his cooking.

Despite the depiction presented in the previous two paragraphs, Big Candy does not constitute an entirely negative character. He is a trustworthy employee, and he truly relishes having his hard work appreciated, and again, both of these traits are conveyed to the reader through food imagery. For example, Wylie, Candy’s boss, claims “that he

could detect whether someone was trustworthy after the person had cooked him one meal,” and he hired Big Candy before he even tasted the dessert of that first meal (335). True to Wylie’s instincts, Big Candy never betrays him. Big Candy, for his part, “liked Wylie at once as he watched him eat the first meal Candy cooked for him” (337). Furthermore, Big Candy enjoys surprising Wylie with creative and difficult to acquire culinary delights, even when they require extensive effort on Big Candy’s part, because Wylie shows “great appreciation for Candy’s cooking no matter what new concoctions Candy devise[s]” (336). Therefore, food imagery develops Big Candy’s character as an employee who can be trusted, who likes to be appreciated, and who likes to make the extra effort to surprise his employer.

However, one must note that Big Candy’s devotion here is to his *employer*, or the man who *pays* him. Just like the “penny candies” after which he has named himself, Big Candy’s services are retained only in exchange for money. His devotion to Sister Salt noticeably wanes after the nausea of pregnancy prohibits her from working in the laundry and thereby providing him with a percentage of those profits. So, again, Big Candy is true to his namesake in a way which ultimately hurts Sister Salt. Just as the “greasy” Euro-American foods Big Candy prepares for Sister Salt throughout her pregnancy result in the premature birth of their baby, the romantic relationship between Big Candy and Sister Salt terminates prematurely due to his devotion to money, a character trait ominously foreshadowed through the imagery of the “penny candies” for which he is named.

Possessing exceptional culinary skills, as Big Candy does, is a character trait that is appreciated across cultural lines. In *Reservation Blues*, the near-exclusive presence of

distasteful government commodity foods amplifies the status of individuals who can prepare palatable cuisine with those ingredients to an almost revered standing. For example, David WalksAlong, the Spokane Tribal Council Chairman, “was nearly a gourmet cook and could do wondrous things with commodity food” (42). Similarly, in *Keeping Heart on Pine Ridge*, Vic Glover observes that his “neighbor over there across the road, Sandy, feeds multitudes. Seems to delight in making muffins, cakes, pies, soups, and everything. Even delivers it. Seems to be especially challenged by groups over twenty. ‘Creative cooking with commodities,’ she calls it” (49). In both of these instances, being able to prepare meals using commodity ingredients is aligned with at least one other positive quality. In the case of David WalksAlong, it is leadership, while Sandy is depicted as being very generous. Therefore, being able to cook well with government commodity foods is a skill that is appreciated in its own right to such an extent that the mention of it in the description of a character serves to highlight other positive traits.

In *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, food imagery is also used to establish various aspects of character in many instances. For example, when Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty audition for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, they are described as being “lean and hard from the years of living on meat and turnips and sometimes with nothing” (34). Here, what they have been eating, or have *not* been eating, such as the case may be, is referred to in order to help the reader conjure an image of what the physical appearance of the two young men would be. Later in the novel, food imagery portrays the type of businessman René, a French fishmonger, is:

René was assiduous in arranging his fish and crustaceans in the most attractive way. He even arranged lemon halves artfully in the beds of chipped ice, although this time of year they came from Africa and the southern portion of the Levant and were too expensive. Madeleine scolded him for buying the lemons, which were only thrown away at the end of market, but René knew it was these little touches—like laying the hogfish on its ice bed with its mouth propped open to show its cavernous maw, or arranging the shrimps so that they seemed to be spilling from a wicker cornucopia—that attracted customers to his stall. (138)

This passage gives the reader a very good idea of René's professional personality. The care and artistry René devotes to the presentation of his wares shows how much pride he takes in his work. His use of the lemons, especially, exemplifies how René is willing to be extravagant and even a little wasteful in his pursuit of creating the most visually appealing fish and crustacean displays possible.

In addition to revealing various character traits and aspects of personality, in Welch's novel food imagery reveals the immediate emotional state of individual characters. For instance, when Madeleine makes a raisin-and-honey cake, the narrator observes that "she had come to realize that she only baked when she was upset. The act of putting a sweet together, all the small steps, the measuring, the folding, the beating, the decorating, allowed her to think things through without really thinking" (150-151). Hence, the fact that Madeleine is baking at all alerts the reader that she is, at present, "upset." What has upset Madeleine, of course, is that her husband has decided to host Charging Elk in their home, and she fears for the safety of her family, especially her

children, because she believes Charging Elk to be a “painted, screaming savage” (151). Her anxiety causes her to “beat the batter a little more ferociously than usual” (151). Use of the word “ferociously” here indicates not only her agitation with her husband, but also that Madeleine feels that she must be the one to protect her children from Charging Elk. Therefore, her act of baking and the way in which she undertakes the various processes involved lets the reader know exactly how Madeleine feels about the situation her husband has created for them.

Food imagery in this text also serves to enlighten the reader as to Charging Elk’s emotional state when he wakes up lost and alone in the hospital after being very ill and craves “some meat and...sarvisberry soup, [even though] he still didn’t know where it had been that he had tasted the soup, or even that it was made of sarvisberries,” because he just wants “the taste of something familiar” (7-8). Charging Elk’s mother always made sarvisberry soup for him, as he later recalls, but at this moment, he cannot remember that. This passage exemplifies Charging Elk’s confusion at his surroundings, his longing for home, and the separation he feels from everything familiar. It functions very powerfully to establish his emotional state using references to food.

Food imagery also functions to reveal the emotional state of characters in *Gardens in the Dunes*. For instance, at one point, Sister Salt and Indigo are left alone in the old gardens while Grandma Fleet goes to visit a friend of hers to, hopefully, get some news about her daughter, Indigo and Sister Salt’s mother, who is missing. In Grandma Fleet’s absence, Sister Salt and Indigo uncharacteristically gorge themselves on dried fruit and jerky. After Indigo falls asleep, Sister Salt continues to eat until she realizes that:

her stomach was so full it felt swollen, but still the hunger raged inside her, demanding that she eat. She reached for the lid on the jar, but stopped herself short; she did not move for a long time. She knew she was full, she knew she didn't need to eat any more. Where did this hunger come from? If Grandma Fleet or Mama had been there they might have explained what the trouble was. (40)

Here, it is not food, per se, that reveals Sister Salt's emotional turmoil, but her hunger for food, any food, and excessive amounts of that food. However, the emptiness she feels is not exactly hunger, but loneliness caused by the absence of her mother and grandmother. This loneliness is accompanied by worry, although Sister Salt recognizes neither emotion as such. It is ironic that she longs for her mother and Grandma Fleet to explain the feeling to her, because if they were present, she would not be feeling the way she does (and she and Indigo would not be free to raid the stores of carefully preserved food, either).

At one point later in the novel, after Indigo has traveled to Long Island with Hattie and Edward, she becomes frightened to such an extent that it is almost impossible for her to eat, despite her attempts to do so. Indigo had seen Edward's sister, Susan, having an affair with the gardener, and Susan knows Indigo saw her. When the child discovers that Susan has asked to come for dessert that evening, she fears what the woman will do to her: "As the time of Susan and Colin's arrival approached, Indigo chewed the food, but even with sips of water she was barely able to swallow the pork roast and sweet potatoes" (192). Therefore, while Sister Salt responds to the fear of being separated from Grandma Fleet and not knowing the location of her mother by

overeating, Indigo's fear of being scolded (or worse) by Susan very nearly prevents her from being able to eat at all. In both cases, the character's relationship to food and the act of eating reveals their inner psychological and emotional distress.

Beyond what it reveals about character, both with regard to overall personality and in reference to immediate emotional state, food imagery also functions to establish elements of setting and mood in each of the three novels selected for this study. For example, in *Gardens in the Dunes* a conspicuous contrast is made between the life Hattie enjoys in Riverside and the formalities she must endure in Long Island, and the difference manifests itself largely through representations of food practices. In Riverside, Hattie, Indigo, and the pet monkey, Linnaeus, take pleasure in a "lovely morning ritual" which includes a stroll through the orchard to "pick ripe oranges for breakfast" and then a leisurely meal, followed by a walk in the garden outside (109). When Hattie considers their imminent return to Oyster Bay, she dreads "the whirl of teas and dinner parties her mother and Edward's sister would organize to honor their visit" (113). The "whirl" and organization of the formal, indoor meals stands in stark contrast with the leisurely breakfasts of freshly picked fruit followed by calm walks through outdoor gardens. The description of food practices in each location clearly reveals which lifestyle Hattie prefers: that of the Riverside residence. However, despite how Hattie feels about Oyster Bay, she is unable to avoid the visit and ultimately takes Indigo along, as well.

The description of the food on the eastbound train subtly reveals how Indigo feels about the trip. The narrator observes that "not long after the train left Riverside, the waiter brought a tray of covered dishes to the parlor car, where they ate fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy while the groves of lemon and orange trees passed outside the

window” (117). Indigo is essentially trapped within the train car with the highly processed, unfamiliar foods, separated from the natural foods to which she is accustomed, which are outside of the train and are rapidly being left behind. For an extended portion of the ensuing train ride, no such fruit trees are visible through the windows of the train (at least, none are mentioned). However, when the travelers finally reach New York and are riding in a coach toward Hattie’s parent’s home, Indigo notices that there are “farms, planted with corn and beans” and she becomes “very excited” when she sees this, because these foods are familiar to her (155). Shortly thereafter, the coach passes “through big apple orchards,” and again, Indigo becomes “very excited when she [sees] the small green fruit on the trees” (155). These discoveries are exciting to Indigo, because of the close connection she has to gardening and gathering natural plant foods. It would be reasonable to conclude that seeing these types of food-producing vegetation, especially those with which she has intimate knowledge, such as the corn and beans, makes Indigo feel more secure about her new location; it is obviously a place that can sustain life in a way with which she is familiar.

In *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, food imagery helps to establish the setting of Marseille, France, as well as, more specifically, the jail and the prison within which Charging Elk is held. Marseille is described as being “a large city [which] smelled of the sea, of salt and winter, of smoke and food, from the chestnuts roasting on braziers on street corners to the golden *pommes frites* in the brasseries to the thick honey sweets in the tea shops” (39). Marseille, then, is a city full of delicious, aromatic food, and Charging Elk is wandering about in the middle of it, starving to death. The narrator observes that Charging Elk’s “stomach was constantly growling now as he smelled food

everywhere he turned” (41). The description of Marseille, therefore, serves to highlight the discrepancy between the seemingly overabundance of food on the one hand, and Charging Elk’s near starvation on the other. This emphasizes his estrangement from his surroundings and the many ways in which he remains completely lost and alone.

Additionally, once Charging Elk is arrested and sent to jail for vagabondage and for having “left hospital without permission,” food imagery sets up the unpleasant and disagreeable nature of the jail, itself (88). The basement in which Charging Elk is being held is described as smelling “of cooking, of rancid oil, onions, and cabbage, with a strong hint of disinfectant. The combination was not agreeable to St-Cyr’s (a reporter visiting Charging Elk) nose, and he felt the brioche and the sweet café au lait move in his stomach” (91). Additionally, once Charging Elk is arrested the second time, this time for murder, he laments that he “would be locked away in the small cell with the high window. And he would be fed the sour soup with the stringy green things and the dry bread which disintegrated into hard crumbs when he bit into it” (332).

Both of these descriptions of the Marseille jail use food imagery to attest to its revolting nature; however, the initial depiction of the prison to which Charging Elk is later sentenced connotes an even more ghastly atmosphere: “Charging Elk spent his first week in an underground cave secured by iron bars. The cave was one of a series dug out by the Crusaders to store their wine and grains and dried fish. They butchered animals in the caves and hung the carcasses to cure and keep in the cool, dry air. Now the prison utilized the caves as a kind of reception area” (346). This description establishes that the prison “reception area” is cold, conceivably claustrophobia-inducing, and potentially permanently tainted by the stench of fish, blood, and freshly butchered meat. The

overall impression is that the prison is tightly confining and houses inmates who will, for the most part, ultimately die there. The coffin-like atmosphere of the prison, appropriately named “La Tombe,” is largely developed by references to the types of food, namely dried fish and butchered meat, that were once stored there.

Food imagery also functions in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* to ascertain the literary mood and advance the plot. For example, when Charging Elk first escapes the hospital, the totality of his situation is made most evident through food references:

He managed to fill his belly a little with things he stole or picked out of trashbins behind restaurants. A couple of times he came upon a neighborhood open-air market and he walked among the stalls, smelling good things – rough dark bread, red glistening meat, stacks of oranges and nuts, trays of olives, and cheeses of every color and size and shape...

That first day, in spite of attracting so much attention, Charging Elk did steal a small bag containing four apples from beside one of the stalls. And that night he found some bird bones behind an eating house that still had some of the pale meat on them. But after that the pickings were slim – orange peelings, cabbage leaves, pieces of hard bread, a few soggy *pommes frites* in a paper wrapper that had small white man’s words written on it. (45-46)

The description of the abundance of fresh foods in the first paragraph evokes a sense of hunger in the reader, which correlates to the sense of hunger felt by Charging Elk. The second paragraph exemplifies how, like Robert L. in Marguerite Duras’s *La Douleur*, “he becomes Hunger...He exhibits no preference for any particular kind of

nourishment...[and shows] no connection to those around him” (Gelber 163). Charging Elk steals food out of necessity, to fend off starvation, and feels no remorse for the act, because he is completely emotionally estranged from his surroundings by his dire physical condition.

Charging Elk’s isolation is further illustrated as he watches through a window while a family dines together at a restaurant:

Many people, men and women, even a few children, were crowded around a table. Charging Elk saw a big chunk of cooked beef being carved by a waiter in a white shirt and black vest. Bowls of potatoes and other things were being passed around, and Charging Elk felt his mouth water...

Charging Elk stood in the shadows outside the window and watched the platter of meat being passed around. He imagined that he could smell it and that he could taste it...

Charging Elk [tore] himself away from the family of eaters and [walked] farther along the quai. (62-64)

The way in which Charging Elk refers to the people, “the *family of eaters*,” serves to highlight by contrast what he himself is: alone and hungry. At this point in the narrative, Charging Elk finds himself completely isolated from those around him, alone in an unfamiliar part of the world, unable to speak the language, and with no money to purchase food or shelter. His loneliness is equally as devastating as his hunger.

Later in the novel, Charging Elk’s situation changes considerably, and the changes are made evident most prominently through the representation of food and food practices. After having been aided considerably by a benevolent French family, the

Soulases, Charging Elk secures employment, retains his own apartment, and becomes in all practical ways entirely self-supporting. As exemplified by the following passage, he begins to learn to navigate his new situation and establish a familiar routine:

As usual his first thought (following his after-work nap) was of food. He didn't have an icebox, so each evening he had to decide whether to go out to the *charcuterie* or the *épicerie* to buy a meat stick, or sometimes a rotisserie chicken, or pâté and rough bread. If he didn't, he would eat stale hardtack and sweating cheese, a pomegranate or an orange. Since he never seemed to have enough food around, he usually ended up going out to the shops. (191)

The number and variety of foods now available to Charging Elk exemplify the improvement in his available options and his contentment with his circumstances has improved accordingly. His satisfaction with his situation is especially apparent in that he may choose freely from a selection of multiple, equally pleasing foods. While the residual effects of his period of extreme hunger are still apparent, as “he *never* seemed to have *enough food* around,” his situation is greatly improved, because he now has the means to purchase food as he so chooses. The discerning reader, however, will note that none of the foods to which Charging Elk now has access are traditionally Indigenous in nature, and that, therefore, they should not be expected to satisfactorily sustain him in the long term. Indeed, this is exactly the case.

As Charging Elk begins to become more confident in his surroundings, he expresses this confidence by altering his food practices. Charging Elk carries “himself with a little more assurance; he [begins] to look people in the eye; he [takes] to going to

the bathhouse around the corner from his flat; and he [eats] out almost every night” (204). The practice of “eating out almost every night” stands in stark contrast to his former practices of eating in the privacy of his flat or, prior to that even, quickly and desperately consuming stolen foods while hiding in some dark alley corner. While eating in private or in hiding was done merely in order to survive, eating in public becomes, for Charging Elk, a way of asserting his identity and his confidence in that identity.

After a period of time, however, Charging Elk becomes bored with even this routine, including the food options which accompany it. He becomes “tired of living alone in the one room, of eating the tough chickens from the rotisserie or the rough country pâté and the goat cheese on baguette. Once a week he ate at the North African restaurant around the corner, always the couscous and flatbread. He...even tired of that” (214). Charging Elk’s boredom and growing dissatisfaction with his solitary lifestyle will ultimately propel him to seek romantic companionship; however, the choices he makes in that regard very nearly lead to his demise (as will be discussed in Chapter Four).

Just as food imagery illustrates Charging Elk’s emotional, physical, and situational progression, food selections and the way in which food is consumed reflects situational realities in *Reservation Blues*. For example, when the nearly-bankrupt band Coyote Springs travels to Seattle for a gig, only to discover that they are expected to pay for their hotel room and food themselves, they opt to sleep in their van and send Thomas into a supermarket to procure whatever food they can afford. Thomas comes out of the supermarket “with a case of Pepsi, a loaf of bread, and a package of bologna. Silently, Coyote Springs [builds] simple sandwiches and [eats] them” (136). All of the food

selections Thomas makes are highly processed, minimally nutritious, non-traditionalized post-colonial foods. They cannot sustain the members of Coyote Springs spiritually, emotionally, or physically in anything beyond the immediate present.

Furthermore, although communal eating typically acts as “a shared body experience that dissolves some of the rigid boundaries of the individual,” as observed by Sarah Sceats, the members of Coyote Springs keep their personal boundaries intact through their lack of communication during the meal (79). Although they are united through the bodily task of eating, they are disconnected from each other through their silence. This corresponds to the ways in which the band members are outwardly bound to each other, by being in a band together and all being Native American, but are also emotionally detached from not only each other, but most of society. Therefore, the depiction of their meal, both what they are eating and how they are eating it, reveals the tensions inherent in their situation. The band members are far away from home in unfamiliar surroundings with no money and wholly dependent upon each other, individuals with whom they feel little connection and whom they do not fully trust.

Food imagery in *Reservation Blues* not only reveals the personal tensions amongst the members of Coyote Springs, but also the greater tension that exists between the entire Native American community and that of Euro-America. For instance, the following passage depicts how Thomas equates white America with the presence of everything he feels that he himself lacks:

As he slept in the Warm Waters' house, Thomas dreamed about television and hunger. In his dream, he sat, all hungry and lonely, in his house and wanted more. He turned on his little black-and-white television to watch

white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned.

(70)

As James H. Cox (Non-Native) notes regarding this passage, “television in *Reservation Blues* distributes idealized representations of European Americans—like the trust-fund heiress Veronica Lodge of *Archie* comics or the Cleaver family on *Leave It to Beaver*, for example—and convinces Spokanes like Thomas that they have nothing” (169).

Significantly, food constitutes the possession referred to most often in this excerpt from Alexie’s novel, referenced directly once and twice by noting Thomas’s lack of it, his hunger. The images distributed via television, therefore, creep into Thomas’s dreams and convince him that white America does not suffer the hunger he suffers, thus adding to the racial tension that is a primary theme throughout the novel.

Food references also highlight interracial tensions in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. For instance, when St-Cyr, a reporter, visits Charging Elk in jail for the first time, he asks the jailer if Charging Elk has been eating. The response is “Like a bird...He eats his soup and drinks his tea—that’s about it. He leaves all the vegetables in his soup bowl. He has no taste for bread. I think the Peau-Rouge does not eat like real men” (94). Inherent in the jailer’s declaration is the assumption that Native Americans (“Peau-Rouge” translates as “Red Skin” or “Red Indian”) are not “real men,” and he cites Charging Elk’s refusal to eat as evidence of this. St-Cyr, however, does not suffer from the bigotry afflicting the jailer, and responds “perhaps you are not feeding him the right food” (94). Indeed, this is exactly the case. Charging Elk later refers to the vegetables as “the things that floated in the soup” and reveals that the bread was “sour,” so the food that he was

being offered at the jail was unfamiliar, unappetizing, and possibly rancid, which is why he would not eat it (105). The fact that the jailor offered these foods to Charging Elk at all shows a lack of understanding for Charging Elk's culture, as well as the attitude that Charging Elk is less than fully human. This attitude is confirmed by the jailor's assumption that Charging Elk's refusal to eat the unfamiliar and unappealing food is an indication of his status as something other than a "real" man.

Food references in this novel further illustrate the ways in which Euro-Americans view Native Americans as existing to serve as a source of entertainment. For example, Charging Elk recalls how, while he toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, the "big town people—in both New York and Paris...had wandered among the lodges of the Indian village, watching the women cook or sew or repair beadwork...Some even entered family lodges, as though the mother fixing dinner or the sleeping child in its cradleboard were part of the entertainment" (51). This passage exemplifies the sense of entitlement Euro-Americans feel regarding the viewing of Native American lives, including their Indigenous food practices. This mindset contends that every intimate practice of Indigenous lives should be made available for the leisurely viewing of white people, as Native peoples really only exist for entertainment, anyway. Charging Elk asserts that "Rocky Bear (his friend) said that Buffalo Bill and the other bosses approved of this rudeness because it made the people hungry to see the Indians in the arena" (51). Use of the word "hungry" here puts the "Indians" in the position of food; they have become consumable.

In addition, Charging Elk's job in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show is to ride his horse and chase "the small buffalo herd around the arena," because the American and

European audiences “liked to see the wild Indians chase the buffalo” (15). So, what was once for Charging Elk an act of manhood and a means of hunting food has become, instead, a performance intended to entertain white audiences. What makes this particular scenario even more disturbing is that, by this time, the buffalo in America have been all but exterminated by the United States’ government and Charging Elk’s people have been forbidden to hunt them in the traditional manner. Therefore, because the hunting of buffalo is only permitted within the confines of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, the staged buffalo hunt embodies the way in which traditional Native practices are seen by Euro-American audiences as existing *for the sole purpose* of their entertainment.

The food practices in *Gardens in the Dunes* also reveal broad-scale cultural differences between Indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans through the representation of flowers. To the Sand Lizard people, who “ate nearly everything” and “never found a plant they couldn’t use for some purpose,” flowers are food (84). Indigo, especially, eats various flowers and blossoms throughout the novel. In fact, when Hattie shows Indigo “diagrams of a lily bulb and gladiolus corm” in a botany book, Indigo becomes excited, because “these bulbs were giants compared to the bulbs of little plants she and Sister Salt used to dig from the sand and eat raw” (178). Therefore, she thinks of flower bulbs in terms of whether or not they can be eaten and how much food they provide.

However, to Hattie, Edward, and Susan, all Euro-Americans, flowers are respectively for decoration, significant only according to their monetary value, and for decorative purposes intended to improve one’s social standing. In other words, Hattie thinks all flowers have aesthetic value, while Edward sees flowers in terms of what they are worth monetarily. Susan, for her part, spends months (at least) getting ready for a

single-evening party in her garden, “the Masque of the Blue Garden,” in preparation for which she has spent a considerable fortune on imported and hard-to-acquire plants and flowers (184). According to Susan’s perspective, the more beautiful, expensive, rare, and difficult to acquire the flower is, the better. Many of the flowers she selects for her party can survive in New York only in a carefully tended greenhouse and will die as a result of their exposure during the masque; however, this does not matter to Susan, who sees the plants only in terms of their potential social value, or how their presence at her party will improve others’ perceptions of her. She remarks that the flowers “had to last only one night—the night of the ball” (184).

This attitude toward plants contrasts starkly with the concern shown by the Sand Lizard people in the care of their gardens: “In years when the rains were scarce, the people carried water to the wilted plants in gourd canteens, from the spring in the sandstone cliff. Each person had plants to care for, although the harvest was shared by everyone. Individual plants had pet names – Bushy, Fatty, Skinny, Shorty, Mother, and Baby were common names” (16). Because the plants constitute a principle, if not *the* principle, food source for the Sand Lizard people, they treat the plants as having considerable value and extend great effort in caring for them. Conversely, because plants represent only monetary and social value to Susan, she does not care if they perish entirely once they have served their single-evening purpose. She does not see the plants in terms of their potential food value, because she has ample access to food elsewhere. These two disparate attitudes toward plants therefore serve to highlight the conflicting intercultural relationships and opposing worldviews presented in *Gardens in the Dunes*.

Reservation Blues exhibits the final way in which food imagery serves as a literary mechanism in these texts by incorporating food imagery to establish the significance of other cultural elements. *Reservation Blues* compares the cultural significance of music to the importance of food and water for physical sustenance. The comparison between food and music is made throughout the text. For example, at one point when the magical guitar begins to play, “music rose above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down. The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar...The music kept falling down, falling down” (24). Comparing the music to rain proclaims that music, like rain, gives life. As the guitar itself states, the residents of the reservation “need the music” (23). It has empowering cultural significance. Furthermore, the newspaper review of one of the band’s performances asserts that “Coyote Springs served up a healthy dish of country music, spiced it with a little bit of rock, and even threw in a few old blues tunes for dessert” (90). Here, the music of the band is compared to a substantial meal. The band has taken various musical forms and, in a declaration of Native identity, made them their own. The tribal music of Coyote Springs tastes “like good food,” because it nourishes the people culturally, just as Indigenous foods would nourish them physically (73).

Food imagery in *Reservation Blues* symbolically establishes the cultural significance of music, because the comparison of music and food shows how music provides spiritual and cultural sustenance, just as food provides physical nourishment. Food references also illustrate the themes of intercultural tension and cultural differences, which exist in all three of these novels, as well as how Native peoples are viewed as existing for the entertainment of Euro-Americans. Food imagery in the three novels

selected for this study also helps establish and develop the literary elements of plot, setting, and mood. Finally, food imagery functions within these texts to develop and reveal aspects of character, not only with regard to overall personality, but also in terms of the character's immediate emotional and psychological state.

Chapter Three: “There was Never Enough Meat” or “All I have is Pepsi and Coffee”: Reservation Foods and the Colonization of Indigenous Diets

When Sherman Alexie reflects on the first poems he ever read by Native American authors, he recalls that they “were poems about reservation life: fry bread, bannock, 49s, fried boloney, government food, and terrible housing” (Highway 25). It is significant that four of these six major aspects of “reservation life” are types of food, but that only one, bannock, a type of flat bread, could be argued to have existed in any form in Indigenous diets prior to colonization. Indeed, in order to understand the present nature of the food-related (and food-dictated) realities experienced on many Native American reservations, one must examine and understand exactly how food and food practices factor into colonization as it has been experienced by the Indigenous peoples of North America. This chapter, therefore, investigates several major issues, emphasizing how each is represented in the literary texts selected for this analysis: how and why food and cultural foodways have functioned as agents of colonization in the specific ways in which they have with regard to Native American peoples; the resulting significance of the absence of particular foods, or absence of food altogether, on reservations; how this absence contributes to, indeed dictates, the presence of other non-nutritive or unhealthful foods in Indigenous diets; the impact of these detrimental, post-colonial foods such as government commodity foods and alcoholic beverages on Native health; what the consumption of such foods reveals about post-colonial relationships; and how the

consumption of traditional Indigenous foods becomes, as a result, a political act and form of resistance to colonial oppression.

There are two fundamental reasons food and food practices appeared as agents of colonization in America in the ways in which they did: the particularities of the “virtuous yeoman” colonial identity and the biological need for food. In order to understand the first, one must recognize the importance of food in the Revolutionary War and the founding of a national (colonial) identity. James E. McWilliams presents an excellent, in-depth study of this phenomenon in *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America*. He asserts that unfair British policies regarding food and the colonists’ rights to their own produce created a “Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary equation of food and political freedom” (294). It would follow, then, that the post-Revolution Americans, freed of British rule, “in awe of themselves,” and seeking to extend their own empire, would subsequently attempt to deprive Native Americans of their political freedom and cultural identity through dietary control, which is exactly what happened (McWilliams 313). As noted by Waziyatawin (Wahpetunwan Dakota):

At the same time that Indigenous populations were dying through disease and violence, attacks were made on Indigenous food sources...

The attacks on Indigenous life did not stop after the invasion phase, however. The colonization process required that Indigenous ways of life be eradicated completely so there would be no distinct population to object to or resist the continuing theft of Indigenous lands and resources.

(69)

The young but ambitious United States government recognized the connection between food, political sovereignty and cultural identity and sought to assimilate and subjugate Native peoples by destroying Indigenous food sources and, at least initially, forcefully promoting agriculture.

On the Parker reservation featured in *Gardens in the Dunes*, for example, Indigenous peoples are encouraged to engage in agriculture, although they are “not permitted to farm their traditional fields any longer” (204). They are restricted to government allocated lots, which are ill-suited to agriculture. Because working these barren fields yielded insufficient food, the residents at Parker are forced to collect the “lard, cornmeal, salt, and...sugar [that] were issued once a week” (205). Any men who dared to attempt to supplement their diets by hunting “rabbits in the sandhills outside the reservation boundaries did so at the risk of jail” (205). They were also not allowed to “leave the reservation to gather mesquite beans” or “to go to the sandhills in the spring to gather delicacies—sprouts and roots,” as these traditional methods of food procurement were also strictly prohibited (17). These selected excerpts provide evidence that dietary control was a key feature in the system of domination imposed by the United States government on Native peoples.

In addition, the systematic and extensive slaughter of the American bison herds provides well documented evidence of at least one instance in which the United States government intentionally set out to destroy an essential Native food source for political reasons. As Dee Brown (Euro-American) asserts in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*:

Of the 3,700,000 buffalo destroyed from 1872 through 1874, only 150,000 were killed by Indians. When a group of concerned Texans asked General

Sheridan if something should not be done to stop the white hunters' wholesale slaughter, he replied: "Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilization to advance." (265)

"Civilization," here, signifies agriculture, as opposed to nomadic hunting, and Euro-American domination of Native Americans, a domination that was ultimately achieved through unconscionable violence and nutritional terrorism.

Throughout *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the title character longs for bison meat and dreams "of buffalo hump, of belly fat and boss ribs, of brains and marrow bones" (46). Because of the "wholesale slaughter" of bison by white hunters, "the buffalo seemed to disappear" and Charging Elk's people find themselves starving and forced to relocate to the reservation and submit to the complete cultural control of the United States government, which dictates not only that they may no longer hunt the buffalo, but also that they must convert to Christianity, speak only English, live in wooden houses, wear Euro-American clothing, and practice agriculture (12). This last is highly significant.

The reason the United States government was so insistent that the Native Americans practice agriculture, and the reason it was viewed as essential to the "civilizing" process, was that:

there was, it was thought, nothing more virtuous than making a living from tilling the soil and sowing and reaping its rewards. It was from the act of farming that colonial Americans—in the face of threats to that basic right by the mother country—elevated virtue to something of a secular creed, a national slogan, or a myth to idealize. Making a living from the

land, as the colonists came to portray it, allowed the yeoman to practice true virtue...

[This principle] took hold only because so many Americans owned the land that they worked. We mustn't forget that they worked it to provide food—food for themselves, their families, their neighbors, other colonies, and, in many cases, a transatlantic market. That necessary and ongoing and identity-shaping activity, and the threat that England...posed to it, motivated the American colonies to unite around the essential political imperative that virtue had to be guarded with vigilance. (McWilliams 298, 300-301)

Thus, “virtue,” as the early post-Revolution Americans saw it, was synonymous with agriculture and imperative to the concept of American identity. The point of requiring Native peoples who belong to traditionally hunter-gatherer cultures, such as the Great Plains Tribes, to engage in agriculture, then, was to supposedly make them more “virtuous” and more “American,” simultaneously. The political nature of the act is not lost on Charging Elk, who refuses to become “a passive reservation Indian who plants potatoes and [holds] out his hand for government commodities” (52). The act of engaging in agriculture went hand-in-hand with submitting to the authority of the United States government and adhering to its cultural ideology, and Charging Elk vehemently wants no part of any of it.

Of course, the real ‘kicker’ was that Native Americans’ attempts at agricultural almost universally failed. This is because the land set aside for them as reservations was almost without exception the land that no white people wanted. The soil was generally

not very fertile, or the land itself was located in the desert or on a floodplain or some other location that is difficult to irrigate. Furthermore, if there was any fertile land on the reservation, it was usually leased to white farmers by the reservation agent for extended periods of time. This reality features prominently in *Gardens in the Dunes*. For example, Maytha and Vedna, the Chemehuevi twins who are Sister Salt's closest friends, lament that their grandmother's sister had only "a tiny stone house on the dry floodplain of tumbleweeds and river gravel south of Needles," because the "government took away her farmland on the river to lease to white men" (334). "White farmers claimed the best river bottom land," whereas the land "above the fertile river bottom," where their grandmother's sister was now forced to live, was "impossible to irrigate" (204). Later, when Hattie, a white woman, inquires about purchasing land in that area, she is told that if she does not "mind being around Indians, the cheapest way to go was to lease Indian land from the Indian Bureau. Forty-year leases were cheaper than the ninety-nine-year leases and just as good, with options to renew for another term" (440). Fertile reservation land was readily available to white people, but at the expense of the Native peoples who were restricted to the reservations and desperately needed access to fertile farmland.

Although traditional Native food sources had been prohibited and/or systematically depleted and official policy was to enforce agriculture as the only acceptable livelihood for Native Americans, fertile reservation land was regularly leased to white farmers, which left the Indigenous peoples with little to no food at all. As astutely noted by Commissioner of Indian Affairs W. A. Jones in "a rare sympathetic report to Congress in 1900... 'To confine a people upon reservations where the natural conditions are such that agriculture is more or less a failure and all other means of

making a livelihood limited and uncertain, it follows inevitably that they must be fed wholly or in part from outside sources or drop out of existence” (Berzok 33). The two alternatives for Native peoples, then, are to accept government handouts or starve to death, because there is nothing else to eat. This absence of food features prominently throughout the works selected for this study:

There was nothing to eat on the reservation. (Silko 17)

My heart is empty and I've been so hungry / All I need for my hunger
to ease / Is anything that you can give me please. (Alexie 1)

Chess and Checkers sat in the kitchen of Thomas' house and chewed
on wish sandwiches. Two slices of bread with only wishes in between.
(Alexie 187)

As these passages pointedly exemplify, hunger is a reservation reality that is well-documented in these works.

Hunger is the body's unavoidable, biological response to food deprivation, and it became a powerful tool in the subjugation of Native peoples. For example, when Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show finally returns to France, one of the Lakota performers informs Charging Elk that on the reservation back in South Dakota, they “are forbidden to speak [their] language. [They] are forbidden to practice [their] ceremonies. If [they] do, they (the government agents) threaten to cut off [their] rations. Many people who didn't believe them now go hungry. There are many hungry people who beg at the agency” (432-433). Provision or withholding of food rations has therefore been an unabashedly forthright method of ensuring the submission and assimilation of Indigenous peoples. Because the alternative is starving to death, Native American peoples residing on

reservations have largely submitted to United States governmental authority, to at least some extent, and coincidentally relied on the one food source that *has* been available to them: government food rations, or, as they have come to be called more recently, government commodity foods.

There is no doubt among Native peoples that forced reliance on commodity foods constitutes a form of social control. For example, *Reservation Blues* presents a list of commandments, taken from “The Reservation’s Ten Commandments as Given by the United States of America to the Spokane Indians” (154). Commandments Four and Five read:

4. Remember the first of each month by keeping it holy. The rest of the month you shall go hungry, but the first day of each month is a tribute to me, and you shall receive welfare checks and commodity food in exchange for your continued dependence.

5. Honor your Indian father and Indian mother because I have stripped them of their land, language, and hearts, and they need your compassion, which is a commodity I do not supply. (154)

Clearly, commodity food is not seen as being given in benevolence or without strings attached. It comes with a price, one that has been horrifically but very clearly articulated.

Furthermore, government food rations are generally of poor quality and only minimally nutritious. The following passages from Alexie’s novel exemplify the substandard quality of commodity foods and the distaste many Indigenous peoples feel for them:

They (Native men) savagely, repeatedly opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored. (14)

No matter how long an Indian stirred her commodity milk, it always came out with those lumps of coagulated powder. There was nothing worse. Those lumps were like bombs, moist on the outside with an inner core of dry powdered milk. An Indian would take a big swig of milk, and one of those coagulated powder bombs would drop into her mouth and explode when she bit it. She'd be coughing little puffs of powdered milk for an hour. (260-261)

Commodity foods are generally distasteful and often repugnant. As was discussed in Chapter Two, the ability to prepare palatable cuisine using commodity ingredients was/is an impressive and desirable skill.

In addition, not only do commodities and other reservation foods fail to provide adequate nutrition, but they are actually actively detrimental to the health of Native peoples, who have evolved to consume and digest a very different assortment of dietary items. As noted by Waziyatawin:

the government commodities program additionally served to wreak havoc on Indigenous diet and health. Instead of eating hand-grown and -harvested fruits, nuts, and vegetables, the lean meat of wild game, and fish loaded with essential fats, Indigenous Peoples instead consumed highly processed canned, salted, and sugared foods, canned fatty meats, and high quantities of refined sugar and bleached white flour. (69)

Waziyatawin further cites the specific health detriments of particular foods, while also acknowledging that “once these foods entered Indigenous diets, they became firmly entrenched in spite of their ill effects” on the bodies of Native peoples (69).

One food that could be readily made using commodity ingredients that is particularly harmful to Native health has, problematically, become especially entrenched in Native culture: fry bread. Fry bread appears in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, but it features prominently in *Reservation Blues* as an almost revered cultural staple.

Waziyatawin, although she acknowledges the importance of fry bread in modern Indigenous communities, asserts that Indigenous peoples are “not helping [themselves] by continuing to eat it” (70). She quotes Suzan Harjo as making the following remark: “Fry bread is bad for you? Well, let’s see. It’s made with white flour, salt, sugar and lard. The bonus ingredient is dried cow’s milk for the large population of Native people who are both glucose and lactose intolerant” (70). If that is not sufficiently condemning, there is also the problem of “traditional” fry bread toppings. Fry bread is frequently “served with powdered sugar or honey” or, alternatively, “smear[ed] with what one would call poor man’s butter—a layer of lard with salt lightly sprinkled over it” (Berzok 36, *Horse Capture qtd. in Divina* 95). While honey, along with maple syrup, would have historically been used as a sweetener by some Native Americans, depending on regional location, it would not have been consumed in the quantities in which it is currently available, as evidenced by Waziyatawin’s assertion that sweets “would have been a rare treat in most Indigenous diets” (69). According to Berzok, sugar was introduced to the Americas by Columbus (25). The other two toppings mentioned above, powdered sugar

and “poor man’s butter,” are clearly post-colonial in nature and unhealthy in anything but the smallest amounts.

Furthermore, as was noted above, “an extremely high percentage of Indigenous peoples are lactose intolerant,” which makes not only commodity powdered milk problematic for Indigenous digestive systems, but also commodity cheese (Waziyatawin 69). Commodity cheese is mentioned several times in *Reservation Blues*, and Charging Elk also makes numerous comments regarding this particularly offending dietary item. For example, he remarks that he “didn’t like the cheeses—some were dry, others smelly or sticky on his teeth, all gave him diarrhea. But the reservation Indians, who were used to the white man’s commodities, ate the cheeses whole and farted all night, much to their enjoyment” (45). At one point, however, Charging Elk becomes “too hungry to remember that he didn’t like cheese” and eats some, anyway (55). The dietary upset it causes is preferable to starvation, which is most assuredly why Indigenous peoples initially accepted and continue to consume commodity foods at all.

Reservation Blues actually directly equates government commodity foods with the suppression of Indigenous cultures and Euro-America’s rejection of Native peoples. When Thomas is trying to find a record label to sign Coyote Springs, the response is “Indians?...You mean like drums and stuff? That howling kind of singing?” followed by “form rejections. Black letters on white paper, just like commodity cans. U.S.D.A. PORK. SORRY WE ARE UNABLE TO USE THIS. JUST ADD WATER. WE DON’T LISTEN TO UNSOLICITED DEMOS. POWDERED MILK. THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST. HEAT AND SERVE” (187). The rejection of Native peoples by the colonial United States and the dismissal of their cultures are visibly aligned with

government commodity foods, which both negatively affect the health of Native bodies and physically represent the absence of Indigenous foods and traditional food practices.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie also lists the following non-commodities as “reservation staples: Diet Pepsi, Spam, Wonder bread, and a cornucopia of various carbohydrates, none of them complex” (12). It is significant that he mentions *Diet Pepsi*, as many Native peoples suffer from diabetes as a result of poor nutrition and an overabundance of simple sugars in their diets. In *Keeping Heart on Pine Ridge: family ties, warrior culture, commodity foods, rez dogs, and the Sacred*, Pine Ridge reservation resident Vic Glover remarks:

Up here on Pine Ridge, where diabetes hits half the population over forty-five, The People eat government commodities from black and white generic cans. Lots of sodium and sugar. And as a result, coupled with the lethargy of unemployment and the welfare-state mentality, a lot of The People are obese. Many of The People believe the government is trying to exterminate them through the food. (48)

(Information regarding Vic Glover’s cultural heritage is not available; however, he is possibly of Oglala Lakota descent.) As Glover asserts, obesity joins diabetes as a prominent health problem resulting from the consumption of reservation foods. In *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, the title character and his friend, Strikes Plenty, recognize in discouragement that their only two choices are to be “out here (not on the reservation) alone with others like [them], starving and cold” or to surrender and live on the reservation and become “fat with potatoes,” a starchy food they would be forced to grow and consume, but which would be metabolically harmful to individuals who have

evolved to rely on not starches, but meat, specifically bison, as their primary source of nutrition (36).

The condemnation of post-colonial foods in these works, therefore, is not limited to government food rations, but extends to most Euro-American foods, in general. Waziyatawin contends that Native peoples are “affected by the same health struggles affecting the colonizing society because [they] have not only become avid eaters of highly processed and refined foods, [but they] have also become participators in the fast-food frenzy” (70). *Reservation Blues* offers ample proof of this phenomenon, depicting characters sporadically consuming such foods as “microwave burrito[s],” “fried chicken,” “Big Mac[s],” Pepsi, and “bologna” (12, 16, 34, 136). However, the effects of non-Indigenous foods on Native health are more compellingly detailed in *Gardens in the Dunes*.

Silko’s novel comments on the effects of post-colonial foods on Native health most prominently through the character of Sister Salt’s baby, officially named Bright Eyes but frequently called “little black spider baby” or “the little black grandfather” (351, 353). Throughout her pregnancy, Sister Salt observes that her baby complains “about the place and the food” (338). The baby wants “her to eat Sand Lizard food, not all [the] animal grease and cooked food” that Big Candy, the baby’s father, prepares for her (339). Big Candy wants “a big strong son and insist[s] she (Sister Salt) eat plenty of meat, and each night he [brings] back big platters of left-overs—beef rib roasts and stuffed pork loins and bowls piled high with orange yams and stewed okra” (339). However, “the odor of meat and its grease made (Sister Salt) nauseous; she ate the okra and yams but pushed the

meat aside” (339). Even so, Sister Salt’s baby remains discontented with his mother’s diet, and when he is born too soon, Sister Salt blames the food she has been eating.

One day, while she is still pregnant, Sister Salt decides to go for a walk “to gather wild greens,” and she ends up half-desperately gorging herself on melons, sunflower seeds, and “sweet hot peppers” (339, 340). She decides that “the baby must like this Sand Lizard food, because it didn’t complain” (340). Afterward, she curls up to take a nap and awakens to find that she has gone into labor. Following the baby’s premature birth, Sister Salt whispers to him that “it was her fault he was born too soon, for eating too much greasy white-colored food” (342). Calling the food “white-colored” is not so much a comment on the actual color of the food, but instead primarily references the origin of that food; it is Euro-American and not Indigenous. Describing the food as “greasy” also refers to Euro-American practices of grease consumption (i.e., frying foods, using butter and lard, etc.) that, as mentioned in Chapter One, would not have been practiced by Indigenous peoples prior to European colonization. Furthermore, throughout the time that Sister Salt is nursing Bright Eyes, the baby continues to “scold her for eating greasy food” (351). The message, then, is that post-colonial foods are not healthy for Indigenous peoples who are accustomed to, at least from an evolutionary perspective, less processed, more natural dietary practices.

Not surprisingly, then, given the perceived and actual health detriments resulting from the consumption of post-colonial foods, Native peoples equate the forced consumption of these foods with extermination, another standard policy of colonization as it has been practiced in North America. Andrea Smith (Cherokee) quotes Ella Shohat and Robert Stam as observing that Native peoples in America have been expected to

“perform a narrative of manifest destiny in which their role, ultimately, was to disappear” (9). Likewise, as noted by Vic Glover above, “Many of The People believe the government is trying to exterminate them through the food” (48). In the novels selected for this study, Native peoples equate health deterioration and annihilation with not only Euro-American food, but also with the consumption of a specific post-colonial beverage: alcohol.

In *Reservation Blues*, the destructive force of alcohol constitutes a clearly identifiable theme. For instance, the description of Michael White Hawk states that “his mother’s drinking had done obvious damage to Michael in the womb. He had those vaguely Asian eyes and the flat face that alcohol babies always had on reservations” (39). Therefore, “alcohol babies,” or infants with fetal alcohol syndrome, are born often enough that symptoms of the condition are readily recognizable to other reservation residents. In the book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Native author Andrea Smith acknowledges the rate of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) among Native mothers by citing the work of various reproductive rights groups which seek to reduce the occurrence of FAS. One such group organized by Native women, the Native American Women’s Health Resource Center (NAWHERC), seeks to provide Native women with “culturally specific, comprehensive chemical dependency prenatal programs including, but not limited to, prevention of fetal alcohol syndrome and its effects” (105).¹

In addition to the potential damage alcohol can cause unborn children, regular consumption of alcohol can also be very detrimental to the health of adults, which is,

¹ See also *The Broken Cord* by Michael Dorris (1989) and the ensuing controversy involving Louise Erdrich and legislation to reduce the rate of FAS in reservation communities.

again, very well documented in *Reservation Blues*. For example, the following passage explains the role of alcohol in the lives of Victor, Junior, and Thomas:

Victor had started to drink early in life, just after his real father moved to Phoenix, and he drank even harder after his step-father moved into the house. Junior never drank until the night of his high school graduation. He'd sworn never to drink because of his parents' boozing. Victor placed a beer gently in his hand, and Junior drained it without hesitation or question, crashing loudly, like a pumpkin that dropped off the World Trade Center and landed on the head of a stockbroker. Thomas' father still drank quietly, never raising his voice once in all his life, just staggering around the reservation, usually covered in piss and shit. (57)

The references to filth and destruction in this passage are unmistakable. As children, these characters lost their parents to alcohol; Victor's father was an alcoholic, and Junior's parents died in an accident while driving drunk. Now, as young adults, they are losing themselves (with the notable exception of Thomas) to the same destructive force.

After Junior commits suicide by shooting himself, Victor briefly sobers up. However, when he finds himself unable to secure a job, Victor steals "five dollars from Walks-Along's secretary's purse and [buys] a six-pack of cheap beer at the Trading Post" (292). He opens a can, and "that little explosion of the beer can opening sound[s] exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower" (293). The symbolic equation between alcohol and the rifle could not be clearer; both are agents of destruction introduced as a result of colonization, and both can, have, and will kill Native American peoples.

The circumstances surrounding the consumption of post-colonial foods is such that the consumption of traditional Indigenous foods often becomes, as a result, a political act and form of resistance to colonial oppression. For example, before they surrendered to the reservation, “Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty lived off and on at the Stronghold...hunting game, exploring, learning and continuing the old ways with the help of two old medicine people” (14). Their insistence on hunting and eating wild game constitutes a vital part of their resistance. It not only physically nourishes them, but also embodies adherence to cultural traditions and defiance of the colonizer’s demands that Native peoples practice agriculture.

The return to traditional Indigenous foodways carries additional political significance in more recent times, when it becomes not only a form of resistance to dietary colonization, but also a means of protesting Euro-American usages of natural resources and land-management policies. For instance, in the article “Decolonizing Indigenous Diets,” Waziyatawin, a Native rights activist, calls for the widespread return of Native peoples to their culturally-specific pre-colonial diets, a struggle which “is linked to broader Indigenous struggles such as land rights, environmental protection, and ecological restoration” (76). In *Reservation Blues*, the eating of salmon symbolizes this resistance to colonial forces. As noted in Chapter One, Bessie asserts that the Spokane are “a salmon tribe. At least [they] were a salmon tribe before they put those dams on the river” (36). In this passage, the dams on the river, placed there by white people, represent not only the ways in which the United States government has sought to restrict Indigenous diets and thwart the consumption of traditional foods, but also the ecological effects of Euro-American civilization. Simply put, the dams result in fewer salmon by

blocking access to the upriver spawning grounds. The creation of the dams demonstrates a general lack of concern for the salmon population, as well as indifference for the nutritional and spiritual well-being of those Native peoples who have traditionally relied on these salmon. Therefore, when Thomas smokes salmon or when his mother, Susan “draped the salmon across a bare mattress frame, threw the frame over the fire, and smoked it that way,” it constitutes an act of resistance by reaffirming the importance of the salmon as an Indigenous food source (22).

The political context of post-colonial foods, and government food rations in particular, is such that consuming traditional Indigenous foods becomes a political act and method of resistance to colonial oppression. Restriction of Indigenous foods and enforcement of non-Native food practices has been a standard component of colonization as experienced by the Native peoples of North America. The impact of some of these post-colonial foods, such as fry bread, alcohol, and certain commodity food items, has been exceedingly detrimental to Native health. However, these food items, despite their negative impact on Indigenous bodies, continue to factor into Indigenous diets because of the absence of alternative foods. Traditional Indigenous foods are largely missing from Indigenous diets as a result of the prohibition of these foods during the colonial process of assimilation and/or the eradication of these food sources by the United States government. While attempts were initially made to convert Native peoples to practitioners of agriculture in order to “civilize” them and make them more “American,” these efforts were largely unsuccessful because of the inferior quality of land provided to Native peoples. The result of this process has been that many reservation-bound Indigenous peoples have no way of providing themselves with food and are wholly

reliant on government handouts. However, in order to understand the nature of these complicated and devastating realities, one must examine and understand how food and food practices factored into colonization in America, a system which can most accurately be described as dietary imperialism.

Chapter Four: An Invitation to Dinner: The Social Significance of Food

The underlying premise of this chapter is that food and food practices are “an integral part of social interaction. Food is used as a vehicle to initiate, maintain and end relationships. Food is often used symbolically within the social organization of a culture or group to denote status, prestige, or identity of some kind” (Madeira 212). Taking into consideration the multifaceted social significance of food, this chapter investigates the specific ways in which food imagery in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, *Gardens in the Dunes*, and *Reservation Blues* reflects interpersonal relationships and social customs. This investigation examines such topics as how food and food practices are used to establish and develop friendships and romantic relationships throughout these texts. In addition, this chapter discusses certain social customs regarding food, including host-guest relationships, and investigates food practices as indicators of economic affluence and social class. Furthermore, this chapter analyzes attitudes surrounding food procurement and preparation with regard to what these attitudes reveal about gender roles and how the introduction of post-colonial foodways complicates the understanding of traditional Indigenous gender roles.

Food is used symbolically throughout these texts to establish, express, and develop interpersonal relationships, including friendships, familial connections, and romantic relationships. These symbolic social functions of food and food practices constitute what Peter Farb and George Armelagos refer to in *Consuming Passions: The*

Anthropology of Eating as “non-nutritive uses of food,” because they “are not primarily associated with satisfying physical hunger and nourishment of the human body” (Madeira 212). For example, in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, Causeret, another prisoner being held at the La Tombe prison who is initially Charging Elk’s cellmate, befriends the title character. One way in which Causeret expresses the camaraderie he feels toward Charging Elk is by bestowing upon his friend gifts of smuggled food:

Causeret was a good companion. He had a job in the kitchen and so twice a day, at four-thirty in the morning and again at three-thirty in the afternoon, he would be gone for three or four hours. Because he helped prepare food for the administrators and the guards, he would sometimes smuggle back a treat – a croissant in the morning, a sausage or chicken thigh in the afternoon. Once, a few days after Charging Elk had lamented that he would never see a piece of real meat again, he came back with a chunk of beef the size of his fist. (331)

Causeret’s smuggling of this food constitutes a symbolic act of friendship, rather than an exclusively nutritive use of the food, and it also represents his understanding that, to Charging Elk, “real meat” is not “a sausage or chicken thigh,” but red meat, specifically buffalo. Although all of the foods Causeret is able to smuggle to his cellmate are, for Charging Elk, non-traditional post-colonial foods, the chunk of beef is as close to buffalo meat as Causeret could possibly acquire. Causeret’s gift of the solid chunk of red meat therefore constitutes a sign of true friendship and cultural understanding.

The sharing of food also sometimes constitutes an act of friendship in *Reservation Blues*. For instance, in a letter written to Big Mom, Junior reveals how Victor “was the

one who came and got [him] when [he] flunked out of college. Victor just borrowed money and his uncle's car and drove to Oregon and got [him]. He even bought [Junior] a hamburger and fries at Dick's. [They] just sat there at a picnic table outside Dick's and ate. [They] didn't talk much. Just passed the ketchup back and forth" (216). The details about this shared meal reveal how it provides only false comfort for Victor and Junior. Hamburgers and fries are non-traditional, post-colonial foods, which are unhealthy for anyone, but are especially damaging to Indigenous bodies. The fact that Victor and Junior are eating this after Junior has just "flunked out of college" represents their shared submission to the colonial system, which Junior has just attempted to navigate by attending college, but failed. The food they are eating embodies the multitude of ways in which they have been defeated: culturally, academically, financially, spiritually, and nutritionally. They do not "talk much," because neither really has anything to say. Their voices are silenced, and their bodies are conquered. The only real sustenance either receives in this passage derives from their friendship, the reciprocity of which is symbolized by the passing of "the ketchup back and forth." Hence, they are nourished emotionally not by *eating* the ketchup, but by the symbolic act of sharing it.

Food imagery and, specifically, the giving and sharing of food also symbolize friendship throughout *Gardens in the Dunes*. For example, Mrs. Van Wagnen gives Grandma Fleet a supply of dried apples, dried apricots, dried venison, and Indian beans, because the two women have bonded as a result of their mutual harassment by the United States Government. Grandma Fleet is, of course, being persecuted because she is Native, while Mrs. Van Wagnen is a traditional Mormon, villainized for practicing polygamy. As the narrator notes, "For years and years, the U.S. soldiers chased Mormons when they

weren't chasing Indians" (38). The reciprocal nature of the friendship between Grandma Fleet and Mrs. Van Wagnen is illustrated by the food gifts Grandma Fleet carries with her when she returns to her Mormon friend: "roots, seeds, and leaves—spices and medicines Mrs. Van Wagnen might need. After all that wonderful food she gave them, it was the least they could do" (38).

Interestingly, in this particular novel, the sharing of food represents not only friendships between people, but also the development of human-animal relationships, specifically, Indigo's relationships with the green parrot and Linnaeus, the monkey. The details surrounding their first shared meal foreshadow the relationship Indigo has with each animal. For example, when Indigo initially attempts to befriend the green parrot, she offers him bits of gingerbread cookie:

The cookie seemed to interest him a great deal. Indigo broke the cookie in halves and ate one so the parrot could see it was good to eat, then she held the remaining half between the bars of the cage near the bird...

"Ummm! Gingerbread! You'll like this," she urged softly. The green parrot opened its beak as it stretched one wing and then the other and ruffled its feathers as it began to move along the perch to reach the bit of cookie. The parrot took a bit of the piece of cookie and tasted it, watching Indigo intently all the while. How thrilling it was to feel the beak daintily plucking off another bit of cookie! (193)

This passage illustrates how excited Indigo is to establish a friendship with the bird, while the parrot, for his part, remains mistrustful, as evidenced by the way he watches her "intently all the while." In fact, almost immediately after he accepts the final piece of

cookie, the parrot bites Indigo, sinking “his hooked beak into the tip of [her] finger” (193). This exchange foreshadows the rocky relationship between Indigo and the parrot, who is very slow to warm up to Indigo and escapes more than once, causing mischief, mayhem, and worry.

Indigo’s friendship with Linnaeus, on the other hand, is both immediate and reciprocal. Again, the way in which the pair shares their first meal together illustrates their mutual understanding:

They studied each other closely. He had shining golden eyes and he seemed to understand the language of the Sand Lizard people when she spoke to him.

“I’m hungry. Is there anything to eat?”

The monkey blinked its eyes and rubbed its hand on its thigh; it looked down inside the cage and Indigo saw the crockery bowls, one full of water, the other with the remains of chopped vegetables and fruit sprinkled with shelled nuts. The monkey looked over its shoulder at Indigo eating from his bowl, then gleefully bounded up the outside of the cage. (104)

The differences between this food exchange and that between Indigo and the parrot are staggering. First, the conversational part of this interaction occurs in the language of the Sand Lizard people, rather than English. In addition, the foods being consumed are traditional Sand Lizard foods, raw vegetables, fruit, and nuts, rather than the post-colonial gingerbread cookie. Furthermore, Linnaeus responds “gleefully” to this exchange, whereas the parrot mistrusts Indigo and bites her as a result. The initial exchange of food between Indigo and each of these animals foreshadows the nature of her relationship with

each, as well as her relationship to the culture with which they are each aligned through the aforementioned imagery. Linnaeus and Indigo immediately bond with each other in a natural and understanding friendship. However, Indigo and the monkey are separated for an extended period of time, then eventually reunited, just as Indigo is separated from her Sand Lizard home and culture for so long, but eventually allowed to return home.

Indigo's relationship with the parrot, on the other hand, is fraught from the onset with misunderstanding, mistrust, and disaster, mimicking Indigo's relationship with much of Euro-Western culture. However, Indigo does eventually form a connection with the bird, and it returns home with her, just as Indigo takes certain elements of Euro-Western culture (seeds, the practice of writing letters, etc.) home with her, as well.

Other types of interpersonal relationships that are expressed through food imagery throughout these texts are familial relationships. For example, in a specific passage in *Reservation Blues*, the close bond Chess and Checkers Warm Water have with each other is contrasted with their emotional estrangement from their father through the representation of Pepsi. In this excerpt, Luke, their father, has just returned from searching for their missing mother and has brought each sister a bottle of Pepsi as a gift. The sisters have buried the Pepsis "in a snowbank so they would be cold, cold [sic]," and then they sing songs with their father while he plays the piano (69). After a while, their father asks them where the Pepsis are:

"Outside," Chess said and knew they were in trouble. The three rushed outside to the snowbank and discovered the Pepsis had exploded from the cold. The snow was stained brown with Pepsi. Luke grabbed Checkers by the arm and shook her violently.

“Goddamn it,” he shouted, “you’ve wasted it all!”

He shook her harder, then let her go and ran away. The sisters fell to their knees in the snow and wept...

Chess...scooped up a handful of Pepsi-stained snow, and held it in front of her sister...

“Look,” Chess said. The snow was saturated with Pepsi. Chess bit off a mouthful, tasted the cold, sweet, and dark. Checkers...shoved handful after handful of snow into her mouth. The sisters drank that snow and Pepsi until their hands and mouths were sticky and frozen. Soon, they went into the house to build a fire and wait for their father’s return.

Checkers and Chess lay down together by the stove and held onto each other. They held on. (69-70)

While their father sees only destruction and waste in the exploded Pepsis, and his resulting anger irreparably fractures his relationship with his daughters, Chess recognizes something salvageable in the mess and uses it to bond even more closely with her sister.

Furthermore, the chromatic imagery of the exploded Pepsis, the white snow “stained brown,” arguably represents the Native presence in the post-colonial United States. Luke sees the “stain” as ruination, overwhelmed and destroyed by the white snow and representative only of all that has been lost. Consequently, he abandons his daughters physically and emotionally, just as most of the parental figures throughout *Reservation Blues* have abandoned their children. Chess and Checkers, however, blend the white snow and brown Pepsi to create something new, enjoyable, and unifying. They

recognize that what is left exists not in its original form, but they salvage what they can, and most importantly, they hold “onto each other.”

Romantic relationships constitute the most prominent types of interpersonal relationships developed through food imagery in the three texts selected for this study. As Sarah Sceats observes, “Connection through sharing food may be almost too obvious to mention, but is of vital importance. Mutuality in shared sensuousness makes for an unspoken communication” (78). The emotional and physical pleasures, both “anticipatory and actual,” of procuring food, cooking for, and/or eating with a potential lover are intense (Sceats 79). The act of eating emphasizes physical embodiment, and the sharing of the pleasurable, bodily experience of eating alludes to other forms of mutual bodily enjoyment in no subtle way.

Not surprisingly, then, food prominently factors into the romantic relationships featured in the three novels selected for this analysis. For example, in *Reservation Blues*, when Chess invites Thomas back to her house, he agrees to come in to “drink some coffee” (61). While this would, perhaps, quite often be a convenient euphemism, in the case of the very inexperienced Thomas, it is not. He and Chess do actually drink coffee while carrying on a lengthy and personal conversation. Because Thomas and Chess do, ultimately, form a successful romantic relationship, this illustrates the importance of communication in such relationships, including eating as a communicative act. This is why the narrator notes earlier in the novel that when Victor calls out “Ya-hey” to the full-blood Native women, the Native women shout back “Ya-hey,” which constitutes “the extent of the conversation. Most Indians never needed to say much to each other. Entire reservation romances began, flourished, and died during the hour-long wait to receive

commodity food on the first of each month” (45). These relationships fail because of the lack of communication and because of the lack of food, as the reservation residents engaging in commodity-line romances are “waiting” for food, rather than actually eating any.

The types of foods being consumed throughout a particular relationship are also frequently accurate predictors of the eventual success or failure of that relationship. For example, as was discussed in Chapter Three, Big Candy’s eventual abandonment of Sister Salt in *Gardens in the Dunes* is foreshadowed early on through the post-colonial and nutritionally-deficient foods with which he is associated. This same use of food imagery is also especially prominent in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. Charging Elk’s food practices throughout his relationship with Marie, a prostitute with whom he falls in love, ominously foreshadow the near ruination in which that association will result. Shortly after he begins his “courtship” of Marie, Charging Elk becomes increasingly extravagant and irresponsible, buying wine, eating out more often, and living “from payday to payday...without a thought of saving any money” (251). Additionally, he always drinks wine or anisette, a type of “clear, very sweet liqueur made with aniseeds, [and] tasting of licorice,” when he visits Marie, and given the well-documented ill-effects of the over-indulgence in alcohol, especially for Native peoples, this serves as a clear warning sign of the troubles to follow (Rolland 29). Indeed, Marie ultimately betrays Charging Elk, drugs him, and remains largely responsible for the series of events that result in his being sent to prison.

Just as the food imagery involved in Charging Elk’s relationship with Marie foreshadows the eventual disaster which will result from that association, the food

imagery connected with Charging Elk's relationship with Nathalie indicates the positive nature of that union. After Charging Elk is pardoned and released from prison, arrangements are made for him to work on the farm owned by Nathalie's father. Nathalie works in the vegetable garden and is, therefore, associated within the text with the outdoors and fresh, healthful foods, such as potatoes, tomatoes, and beans, all of which, significantly, are indigenous to North America, according to Jack Weatherford's *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*. (Charging Elk's nomadic Great Plains culture would not have grown or gathered these foods in any great quantity themselves, although they would have had access to them through trade with more sedentary tribal groups (Berzok 9).) Additionally, the beverages consumed within Nathalie's home are primarily coffee and milk. The family does not consume alcoholic beverages, and as a result, neither does Charging Elk while he lives with them. All of this stands in stark contrast to the toxic food imagery surrounding his relationship with Marie. Nathalie, unlike Marie, is a loving, trustworthy, and understanding partner to Charging Elk, and she eventually becomes his wife and, later, becomes pregnant, a positive outcome which is foreshadowed early on by the bountiful and healthful foods associated with her.

One social custom regarding food that could arguably be even as long-held and widely-spread as using food to initiate and sustain platonic, familial, and romantic relationships is the role food practices play in guest-host relationships. Customs and formalities regarding the use of food in guest-host situations feature prominently in such works as *Beowulf* and, more famously, *The Odyssey*, and they are equally acknowledged in the three novels selected for this analysis. As Linda Murray Berzok notes of

Indigenous cultures, food constitutes “the common currency of hospitality” (137). For example, in *Reservation Blues*, Thomas recognizes that “he had to offer food to his guest, no matter how little he had, [and] even if Junior and Victor were the guests. The cupboards were nearly bare, but Thomas managed to find a jar of peanut butter and some saltine crackers” (26). With these ingredients, Thomas makes what he calls “reservation appetizers” (26). This passage reveals Thomas’s understanding of the protocol that he, as host, provide food for his guests, even though he has almost nothing to offer and even though the guests are not exactly his friends.

Vic Glover explains what is culturally expected of both host and guest on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the following passage:

You share whatever you’ve got. If someone shows up right at dinnertime, you set out another plate. Give ‘em some coffee. “The Creator sent that person to your door, so you feed them,” Loretta said. “The Creator’s looking down, and he sees this house feeding The People, and that’s where The People go, so he makes sure this house always has lots of food.”

“These people over here,” she said, motioning toward the floor with a shake of her hand, “they never put anything out for people, so sometimes their cupboards are empty...”

The poorest people will make you eat when you stop by. And you can’t just jump up...in and out. You have to drink a pot of coffee. You can’t say, “Sorry, I don’t care for any of the artery-blocking, triple bypass tanega (cow intestines) soup,” or whatever. You gotta eat. (48-49)

This excerpt illustrates that not only is the host expected to provide the guest with food, but the guest is expected to eat whatever food is served. Correspondingly, Berzok quotes one European captive who observed that “with them (Native peoples) it is bad manners to refuse to eat when it is offered” (137). Berzok further notes that among some cultures, such as “among the Indians on the Southwest Pueblos, hospitality dictated that under no circumstances could a visitor refuse food or, having asked for it, be refused” (137).

Additionally, the above passage from Glover’s text illuminates one very important, culturally specific reason behind offering food to one’s guests: so that The Creator will continue to provide the host with food. As was discussed in Chapter Three, many reservation communities, like those presented in the three novels selected for this study, suffer from a chronic shortage of food. So, if this particular belief is shared by other Native reservation communities, it would provide a powerful incentive, indeed, for always offering food to one’s guests. In addition, Berzok asserts that many Indigenous cultures historically undertook “long journeys [and visited] distant tribes...to renew their friendship” (137). Furthermore, “hospitality protocol required that all feelings of enmity be put aside when guests were present,” and “these rules of hospitality extended even to enemies” (137). For example, “the Zuni and Navajo shared a mutual hatred, but if a member of either tribe showed up at the dwelling of the other, he would be greeted with the words, ‘Enter, sit and eat’” (137). Highly structured host-guest protocols exist throughout the Indigenous cultures of North America, and whether the motivation is to foster intertribal friendships or to garner the favor of a deity, the proffering of food is always involved.

Conventions regarding the provision of food in host-guest relationships exist in every culture presented in the texts selected for this study. Interestingly, in all cases in which the guest belongs to a different culture than the host, the guest is offered food from the host's culture. For example, in *Gardens in the Dunes* the Matinnecock woman with whom Indigo is left for a short time immediately decides that Indigo "must be hungry" and invites her to join them for some baked clams and dried kelp, neither of which Indigo has ever eaten before or is at all familiar with (168). However, Indigo is interested in the food and consumes it without complaint or incident.

Sometimes in these novels, the host's offer of unfamiliar foods to their guest(s) can have disastrous results. This holds especially true in the case of non-Native hosts entertaining Indigenous guests, as illustrated in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. On the first evening that Charging Elk stays with the Soulas family, for example, René insists that his wife, Madeleine, prepare a "traditional bouillabaisse for dinner...in honor of their guest," despite the extravagance of the meal (135). Traditional French bouillabaisse is an expensive dish. A personal survey of bouillabaisse recipes revealed that most require between twenty-two and twenty-eight separate ingredients, including at least three different types of fish and two to four types of shellfish, such as lobster, shrimp, clams, oysters, and/or mussels. The recipes also call for numerous types of spices, including saffron, which has long been "the most expensive spice in the world" (Rolland 565). Even though René is a fishmonger, and could, therefore, easily acquire the fishes and shellfish necessary to prepare the bouillabaisse, if he brings the costly ingredients home, rather than selling them, he is essentially eating his profits. Both René and Madeleine are

well aware of the extravagance of serving such a meal. In fact, they disagree regarding the prudence of preparing it at all:

René had already traded a good-sized hogfish to Monsieur David, the spice trader, for a few strands of saffron and some pink pepper.

Madeleine had insisted that the saffron was too dear, but how can one make a decent bouillabaisse without it?...

Perhaps a hogfish for saffron was not a very good deal, but this was a special occasion. And bouillabaisse without saffron was just fish stew.

(135-136)

It is highly significant that René deems Charging Elk's visit a special enough occasion to warrant the preparation of such an expensive dish at a time when most Euro-Americans held very low opinions of Native Americans. Madeleine, for her part, initially shares in the more widely held belief that they are "savages." (Even Charging Elk notices when she finally begins to see him "as a human being – someone to be considered – not as some strange object or wild animal to be stared at, perhaps to be feared" (166).)

However, René's well-intentioned demand for bouillabaisse does not take into consideration Charging Elk's aversion to fish. (*The Heartsong of Charging Elk* seems to suggest that the title character's aversion to fish is cultural; however, personal research revealed no indication that either the Sioux, Charging Elk's people, or the Blackfeet, of which the author, James Welch, was a member, had any specific aversion to or taboo regarding the eating of fish. It seems only that among most Great Plains tribes, fish would not have traditionally been a regular source of meat, or at least, not *as regular* a source as large game animals, specifically, bison. Nonetheless, regardless of whether

Charging Elk's aversion to fish is personal or cultural, he cannot stomach them.) The bouillabaisse, which René and Madeleine exhausted so much personal effort and expense to prepare, makes Charging Elk physically ill. He later remembers the event as "that disastrous meal of fish soup when he had had to go up to his room to throw up in the slop bucket and was sick all the next day" (166). The cultural food differences between René, who splurges on the decadent and over-priced saffron because "bouillabaisse without saffron was just fish stew," and Charging Elk, for whom the dish is still just "fish soup," saffron or no, could not be more clear. Therefore, although René honors host-guest protocols and shows atypical acceptance of an Indigenous person of North America by celebrating Charging Elk's visit with a bouillabaisse, the French fishmonger's culinary gesture also reveals just how little he understands Charging Elk and his culture.

The only instance in any of these texts in which the "host" even considers that the "guest" may prefer a different type of food occurs when Hattie initially spots Indigo, who has just escaped from the boarding school, and attempts to coax her out of the bushes with something to eat. Hattie offers Indigo "bread with strawberry jam," but wonders to herself "what the school fed the Indian children" and if it was "the tribal foods [to which] they were accustomed" (72-73). Hattie embodies the only non-Native character in any of these texts who does not just assume that Native peoples would prefer Euro-American cuisine, but given the cultural takeover that is in progress, of which the boarding school is an integral part, her musings on the subject reveal both her extraordinary compassion and her extreme naïveté.

In addition, Hattie's ability to *choose* what type of food to offer Indigo, indeed, her assumption that there is a preferential choice to be made at all regarding what types of

food to consume, exposes her privileged, upper-class upbringing. Throughout the novel, Hattie selects foods from an available assortment, at restaurants, in stores, by directing kitchen staff, etc. Other characters, and specifically, *Native American* characters, such as Indigo, Sister Salt, and the Matinnecock woman, to name a few, must consume whatever foods are available to them. These individuals seldom have the luxury of choice. In that way, one's ability (or lack thereof) to choose what type of food to consume becomes an indicator of social class and economic privilege within this text.

That Hattie belongs to a different social class than Indigo, Sister Salt, and the Chemehuevi twins, Maytha and Vedna, is also evidenced by the food that Hattie gives the Native women as gifts. When she drops off Indigo for the first time, Hattie provides the child and her family with candy, "canned goods, sugar, and flour...[purchased] at the trading post" (410). While the group is excited about the candy, Vedna remarks, "Too bad she didn't buy us some lard or coffee—we could have had tortillas and coffee for supper" (411). This shows their extreme poverty, which Hattie has failed to understand. She gives them flour, yet they have no lard with which to mix it for tortillas, and while the sugar would be great with coffee, they do not have any of that, either. Furthermore, the Native women "have no way to open the tins of peaches and corn" (411). In Hattie's socially privileged world, possession of a can-opener is, apparently, taken for granted. However, for individuals who cannot afford to regularly purchase canned goods at all, spending money on a can-opener, which would, obviously, seldom be used, makes no sense. Hattie has good intentions, but her assumptions in this regard reveal how far distanced she is economically from the Native women's everyday reality.

Social class and economic affluence are indicated in these texts not only by whether or not a character has a choice in what they are eating or by what utensils and ingredients they just assume “everyone” has, but also by what they eat, how they acquire their food, and whether or not they prepare it themselves. For example, in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, Olivier, the proprietor of the whorehouse in which Marie works, chides Gérard, the doorman, for his discourteous treatment of Charging Elk by saying, “You mustn’t be rude to such a gentleman. Only two years ago, you were fighting for your meals. Now you think you eat better than our clientele” (221). Olivier’s accusation that Gérard had been “fighting” for his meals reveals that the doorman hails from humble origins, for only very poor and culturally unrefined individuals fight over food like animals. Additionally, the phrase “now you think you eat better than our clientele” actually means “now you think you *are* better than our clientele,” thereby showing the close relationship between food and social standing.

Another example in the same novel is Franklin Bell, the American Consulate, who notes after returning home from visiting Charging Elk in jail that his (Bell’s) “spacious apartment [is] filled with Empire furniture and the pervasive odor of a delicious bouillabaisse that his landlady had created” (83). Bell is affluent enough that he does not need to prepare his own meals; they are prepared for him by his landlady. Additionally, the specific meal she has prepared for him is the same extravagant dish that caused so much financial worry for René and Madeleine Soulas. Bell, however, is not concerned with the cost of saffron or the expense of the individual fishes required for the bouillabaisse, only that it smells “delicious.” His lack of concern (or, arguably, even awareness) of the cost of what, for other individuals, is a prohibitively extravagant dish,

illustrates his economic situation, which is far above the majority of other characters in this novel.

The final social significances of food imagery in these texts which shall be examined here are gender roles, or more specifically, what the attitudes surrounding food procurement and preparation practices reveal about cultural gender roles and how the understanding of traditional gender roles is complicated by the introduction of post-colonial foodways. The usual, although certainly not universal, division of food-related labor in pre-colonial, hunter-gatherer cultures in North America was that women and children performed the majority of the gathering, while men performed the hunting and/or fishing. Both functions were considered to be of equal prestige and social importance.

Linda Murray Berzok asserts throughout *American Indian Food* that the gathering and foraging of foods was “an activity undertaken by women and children” (173). Berzok also mentions that fire-making, the “essential first step” in food preparation, “was usually a male responsibility,” although much of the remainder of the cooking process appears to have been generally relegated to women (110). Some cultures, the Zuni, for example, believed that “food whistles on the spit and sings in the cooking-pot when it is ready, and only women know its music or understand its language” (Frank Hamilton Cushing *qtd. in* Berzok 129). To support these conclusions regarding the gender-based division of labor, most of the photographs and drawings in Berzok’s text depict women performing the tasks of farming, gathering, and preparing foods, while the hunting pictures depict men. There are only a few exceptions. For example, one picture shows individuals of both sexes participating in farming equally, while another shows a man

roasting salmon on a spit. However, these are both drawings created by early Euro-American artists, not photographs, so they must be considered with the appropriate amount of skepticism.

The representations of traditional gender roles relating to food practices in the three novels selected for this study confirm Berzok's summations. In *Gardens in the Dunes*, for example, the Native women practice agriculture and gather a variety of wild foodstuffs. They do not hunt for game, but only acquire meat by stealing part of the coyotes' catch or trapping small birds using snares made of their own hair. The local Indigenous men, on the other hand, are said to have "hunted the river dunes for rabbits" before they were all confined to the reservation where such activities were strictly prohibited (23).

The prohibition of traditional foodways confuses gender- and food-based systems of identity. How can an individual "be a man" when the activities that traditionally defined manhood in his culture become suddenly prohibited and/or otherwise impossible? Sherman Alexie, author of *Reservation Blues*, briefly discussed the situation in an interview with *Cineaste*:

There are feminine and masculine roles within Indian society and, in many tribes, men and women played either role, or went back and forth. But those traditional masculine roles—you know, hunter, warrior—they're all gone. I mean, driving a truck for the BIA is simply not going to fulfill your spiritual needs, like fishing for salmon or hunting for deer once did, so in some sense Indian men are much more clueless than Indian women.
(West 66)

According to Alexie, then, Indigenous masculinity is culturally defined in two words: hunter and warrior.

Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall identify these same two concepts in *Gender Talk* as “provider and protector” and assert that “when men in a male-dominated society are prevented from enacting the normative masculine social and economic roles they resort to overcompensating in other areas,” namely violence and sexuality (132, 134). Although Cole and Guy-Sheftall are discussing African American men, the same principles hold true for many of the Indigenous men in *Reservation Blues*. For instance, when Victor unexpectedly attacks Thomas and puts him in a headlock, the narrator observes:

Thomas was not surprised by Victor’s sudden violence. These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored. Indian men like Victor roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe.

(14)

This passage powerfully illustrates the primacy of food acquisition practices in cultural definitions of masculinity. It also extends what Psychologist Ricky L. Jones argues regarding African American men to Native American men: “Male violence—at its core, when all illusions are stripped away—is about attempts to achieve manhood” (Cole 137).

The Heartsong of Charging Elk also addresses the post-colonial, food-related, gender-identity confusion of Native men. For example, when Charging Elk asks Strikes Plenty if he will plant potatoes after he gets married, Strikes Plenty replies “Maybe. Maybe I’ll have my woman plant potatoes. They say the *wasichu* makes his woman do the planting” (36). Strikes Plenty’s response reveals his confusion about what his role will be, now that hunting the buffalo has been prohibited and he is expected to farm potatoes. He has no cultural relationship to the farming of potatoes, and he is trying to determine what the man is supposed to do and be in that situation. Should he farm the potatoes himself? Is he supposed to make his wife do the farming? What is expected of him *as a man*?

The gender confusion Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty feel symbolically manifests itself in the Holstein cows Charging Elk sees out the window of the train: “One of them was trying to mount another, even though both had bags full of milk” (39). The Holsteins represent Euro-American foodways, because cows were imported to America from Europe, and they effectively replaced the buffalo as the staple source of red meat for the continent. The fact that the cow trying to mount the female cow is also female represents the emasculation Charging Elk feels because of his inability to perform what, for his culture, is the traditionally male function of hunting buffalo.

The food procurement and preparation practices and the attitudes surrounding them in these novels illuminates the traditional understanding of gender roles in the Indigenous societies represented in these texts, as well as how the understanding of gender roles is complicated by the prohibition of Indigenous foodways and the introduction of Euro-American food practices. Furthermore, food imagery within these

texts serves as an indicator of the social class and economic affluence of various characters, while also providing information regarding certain social customs, such as host-guest relationships. Food is also used symbolically throughout these novels to establish, express, and develop interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships, familial connections, and friendships. Food practices, then, play an integral part in multiple aspects of social interaction.

Chapter Five: “Strong with Meat and Song”: The Spiritual Significance of Food

The three novels selected for this study, Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes*, and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* by James Welch, all depict ways in which food practices factor into religious observance and faith-based systems of cultural understanding. As Sarah Sceats observes, “Food is the currency of love and desire, a medium of expression and communication. The crucial centrepiece of Christian worship is a simulated meal – the giving of symbolic bread and wine as a token of love and trust – and in most religions ritual communicative eating of some sort is prominent” (11). Accordingly, food in these texts plays an integral role in spiritual rituals, including those reflecting Indigenous religious practices, Christian rituals, and hybridized religious practices that incorporate aspects of both Indigenous and Christian faiths. In addition, the selected novels present various spiritual customs surrounding the procurement of food and cultural sustainability practices, offer representations of the association of specific food sources with cultural religious systems and faith-based worldviews, and illuminate how these associations can be problematized by the transcultural processes of colonization.

The three novels selected for this analysis all depict the significance of food in various religious rituals. One type of Indigenous observance which traditionally involves food would be a thanksgiving ceremony celebrating a good harvest. As noted by Linda Murray Berzok, pre-colonial Indigenous “feasts were held both as religious observances

in themselves and in conjunction with religious and social gatherings” and “the harvests themselves were...greeted with...celebrations of thanks” (153, 158). An example of this type of celebration is referred to in *Gardens in the Dunes*, when Indigo recalls how “Grandma and Mama used to talk about the celebrations in the old days when everyone came to dance and to feast and to give thanks for a good year” (25). This particular recollection also references another essential feature of Indigenous religious practice: dance.

The importance of both food and dance in Indigenous religious practice is perhaps nowhere more notably displayed than in the Ghost Dance ceremony, which features prominently in Part One of *Gardens in the Dunes*. According to Dee Brown in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, a Paiute Messiah named Wovoka founded the Ghost Dance religion. Brown states that Wovoka believed himself to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. However, *Gardens in the Dunes* states that Wavoka died and spoke with Jesus in heaven and was then returned to Earth to spread the word of the Ghost Dance according to Jesus’s directions (23). Brown quotes Wavoka himself as stating that performing the Ghost Dance would bring the Great Spirit, “bring back all game of every kind,” bring “all dead Indians” back to life, and cause a great flood that would drown “all white people” (416). Similarly, the purpose of the Ghost Dance, as explained within Silko’s novel, is that “only by dancing could they (Indigenous peoples) hope to bring the Messiah, the Christ, who would bring with him all their beloved family members and friends who had moved on to the spirit world” (26). The references to reincarnation and flooding here are arguably Biblically inspired, while the presence of Christ is obviously so. The Ghost

Dance ritual, then, constitutes a hybridization of Christianity and Indigenous religious observance, a phenomenon which shall be referenced throughout this chapter.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, the Ghost Dance itself is described as follows: “Around and around they danced, lightly caressing the Mother Earth with their feet. ‘Dust of the whirlwind, dust of the mountains in the whirlwind, even the rocks are ringing! Whirlwind in the mountains, rock dust rings. Rock dust rings,’ they sang. The whirlwind would transform the Earth...” (30). The dance was performed in a repetitious circular pattern, as indicated in the previous description by the repeated references to rings and whirlwinds. As Berzok asserts, this type of “dance was fundamental to ritual and worship. Repetitious movements carried out over many hours, sometimes all night, could induce a kind of trance state that was by some tribes regarded as confirmation of supernatural contact” (167).

The Ghost Dance ceremony in Silko’s novel not only features dancing, but also incorporates a notable food element, as most dance ceremonies “were held in conjunction with feasts or festivals, and often focused on various foodstuffs” (Berzok 167). The foodstuffs which factored most significantly into the Ghost Dance ceremony, according to Indigo, were piñon nuts and warm water. For example, she mentions how “an old Paiute woman gave them each a handful of piñons, the sacred food of the dancers, and she gave them a gourd dipper of warm water to share” (26). Similarly, Indigo later comments after a round of dancing that “now the dancers were resting on the sand around the fire, drinking water and eating piñons” and, again, after another lengthy dance cycle she observes that “warm water and handfuls of piñons were passed from dancer to

dancer” (26, 27). As evidenced by these quotes, warm water and piñons are as central to this specific religious observance as the dancing itself.

Berzok states that “the foods used in religious ceremonies and feasts were different from those for everyday meals. They might be more elaborately prepared, less easy to obtain, richer in terms of fat content, grown in special fields or simply consumed only for religious rituals” (163). The water being consumed by the Ghost Dancers in Silko’s text was probably warmed because the ceremony is taking place during very cold winter weather, but regardless of why it was warmed, someone had to warm enough water for the hundreds of dancers present, which would have required no small degree of effort. Furthermore, regarding the consumption of piñons by the Ghost Dancers, it appears that both the second and third of Berzok’s conditions for religious foods would have been true; they would have been less easy to obtain than other foods and are rich in fat content. As stated elsewhere in *Gardens in the Dunes*, piñon nuts were harvested in the mountains, so they would not have been easily or immediately available to the dancers in Needles. *The Food Encyclopedia* states that pine nuts are, in fact, “rich and creamy” (Rolland 506). Furthermore, the consumption of “pinions” is specifically mentioned in the Bible in Deuteronomy 32:11. Therefore, the incorporation of the eating of piñon nuts into the Ghost Dance ritual constitutes yet another way in which the Ghost Dance religion is tied to Judeo-Christianity via the Old Testament. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that the Ghost Dancers ate piñon nuts *only* because of the food’s connection to Christianity, as many Native cultures, especially those in the Southwest, believed piñon nuts possessed “magic powers” and/or that piñon nuts were “the oldest food, the original food” (Berzok 150).

More overtly Christian food practices, Communion, for example, feature prominently in *Reservation Blues*. For instance, when Chess convinces Thomas to accompany her to a Catholic Church service, Thomas avoids consuming the Communion wafer by hiding it in his hands and only pretending to eat it. Afterward, he runs “outside, crumble[s] the wafer into pieces, and let[s] it fall to the earth” (180). Thomas imagines that “the reservation swallowed those pieces hungrily,” and he is “not sure why he even took the Communion wafer in the first place,” but in that moment he feels “the weight of God, the reservation, and all the stories between” (180). Thomas cannot consume the wafer, because he recognizes that doing so constitutes more than a simple act of eating. To eat the wafer would symbolize internalizing and accepting Catholic Religion and the larger Euro-Western culture, which he feels he must forcefully reject in order to preserve his own Indigenous identity. Yet even as he crumbles the offending wafer into dust, he feels the oppressive weight of those colonial forces which would condemn his act of defiance as sacrilegious.

Wherein *Gardens in the Dunes* depicts hybridized Christian-Indigenous religious rituals involving food and *Reservation Blues* portrays Native resistance to Catholicism and Euro-Western culture as a whole via Thomas’s refusal of the Eucharist, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* offers a glimpse of various Indigenous religious customs that had not, at that time, yet been altered by the influence of Christianity. For instance, when Charging Elk recalls the preparation for his vision quest, he notes that he had been purified in “the steamy *inipi*,” or sweat lodge, in preparation for his four-day fast (44). In this case, it is not what is being eaten that connotes religious significance, but rather that *nothing* is being eaten. As Berzok explains, “fasting was a widespread religious practice

among American Indians, both as a solitary undertaking and as a part of a religious ceremony,” and the vision quest traditionally incorporates “a specific kind of fast practiced as part of male pubescent initiation rites” (168-169). Among the Sioux, this ceremony typically involved purification in the sweat lodge, followed by “walking to a distant hilltop and spending four days and nights there alone without food while crouched in what was called a vision pit” (Berzok 169). Berzok also asserts that “the physical sacrifice and humility of a three- or four-day fast,” such as the one Charging Elk recalls having endured, “was believed to open people up in a direct manner to contact spiritual essences” (169). Indeed, this is exactly the case with Charging Elk, who is visited during his vision quest by the spirit of a badger: “When the badger came to him one night, he (Charging Elk) held out his hand and the badger placed its power there” (44).

Not only do food and food practices feature prominently in the Indigenous, Christian, and hybridized religious rituals depicted in these three novels, but the representation of cultural foodways also offers insight into the spiritual customs surrounding the procurement of food and various environmental sustainability practices particular to the tribal groups featured in each of these works. For example, the Sand Lizard people depicted in *Gardens in the Dunes* observe intricate faith-based agricultural practices, and as with many other Indigenous religious systems, the specifics are entirely place-based:

Grandma Fleet told them the old gardens had always been there. The old-time people found the gardens already growing, planted by the Sand Lizard, a relative of Grandfather Snake, who invited his niece to settle there and cultivate her seeds. Sand Lizard warned her children to share:

Don't be greedy. The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals, in gratitude for their restraint in sparing the seeds and sprouts earlier in the season. Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. A few choice pumpkins, squash, and bean plants were simply left on the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth. Next season, after the arrival of the rain, beans, squash, and pumpkins sprouted up between the dry stalks and leaves of the previous year. (14-15)

Even though the Sand Lizard people are a fictional tribal group, these agricultural practices forefront spiritual food offerings, as well as what Berzok refers to as "First Food Observances." Berzok asserts that "a token gift of food to the spirits was a ritual in most tribes" and that "First Food celebrations were occasions both to give thanks and avoid the danger of eating unconsecrated food" (153, 154). First Food Ceremonies generally "included prayers and offerings and functioned as ritual preparation for harvesting... These observations were considered essential to ensuring the continuation of finding and growing food for the next season and many to come" (154). Accordingly, in Silko's novel, the leaving of the first ripe fruits of the harvest constitutes a way of honoring the ancestors, maintaining harmony with other forms of life, giving thanks for the harvest, and ensuring future harvests by allowing the gardens to effectively replant themselves.

A First Food Ceremony also takes place among one of the French families depicted in *The Heart Song of Charging Elk*:

In late August the prunes were ripe. In a small ritual that the Gazier family had practiced for generations, Vincent, Lucienne, and Nathalie, along with Charging Elk, walked out to the orchards and stood under a large old tree that had been a bellwether for at least five generations of Gaziers. They each picked a prune, smelled it, squeezed it until the juice ran out the stem end, then bit into it, tasting the sweet flesh. Vincent pronounced the fruit to be at the firm edge of perfection. He said a prayer to God for once again giving them a good crop and he prayed for a successful harvest. (376)

While this ceremony is particular to a specific family, rather than being practiced by an entire culture, it shares much in common with the Indigenous First Foods Ceremonies recounted in Berzok's book. The ritual involves a prayer of thanksgiving and the first fruit is used within the ritual itself for a symbolic purpose. Furthermore, because the ritual is a family tradition, "practiced for generations," it arguably provides the members of the Gazier family with the same sense of spiritual connection with their ancestors as leaving food offerings does for the Sand Lizard people.

In addition, the Sand Lizard people's agricultural food offering practices help to ensure environmental sustainability and harmony with various forms of wildlife, and cultural regulations regarding the killing of dangerous animals function in much the same way among the Sioux culture depicted in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. For example, Charging Elk believes that:

one does not kill a bear or a big cat or a rattlesnake simply for the sake of killing. These things were put on earth by Wakan Tanka and one lived

harmoniously with them – unless they threatened. Or were meant to provide food. Then one offered up prayers upon killing them, prayers that honored the spirit of the animals. And the world remained balanced – or did in the old days. (297)

Inherent in this practice is the belief in “the spirit world, in which every animal, fish, tree and plant was endowed with a soul” (Berzok 149). It becomes clear, then, that rituals to express gratitude for food, to ensure the continued availability of that food, and to preserve environmental harmony are inseparably linked to entire systems of understanding the world.

The association of specific food sources with particular religious systems and cultural worldviews resonates deeply and powerfully within each of the novels selected for this analysis. Of particular significance within these works is how these associations are changed through transcultural processes, namely, European colonization as it has been experienced by Native Americans. For example, in *Gardens in the Dunes* Indigo successfully negotiates transcultural networks and appropriates select materials and practices to which she is introduced via contact with the dominant culture. As noted by Roland Gerhard Mike Walter (Brazilian), Indigo collects new seeds throughout her journey and:

takes notes on how to “perform the pollination process for hybrids” (303). Back in her place of birth, the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, Indigo plants these seeds and hybridizes flowers. This transcultural move nourishes her kin and, in view of the fact that she uses the flowers as “peace offering” to their Christian neighbors (439, 475-76), builds cross-

cultural bridges. Indigo's use of botanical knowledge should be seen as a transcultural procedure since it is a two-way, multi-level cultural interchange based on borrowings, displacements and recreations. Here, hybridity in a transcultural process does not signify a break with but rather a revision of traditional practices. (8)

As suggested by this excerpt, as a result of Indigo's contact with Europeans, new food sources and planting practices have been introduced to the Sand Lizard culture. Indigo has adopted the Euro-American practice of planting flowers that are beautiful; however, her garden is both beautiful *and* edible. Indigo has only appropriated those aspects of Euro-Western culture which are easily brought into accordance with the Sand Lizard worldview. This exemplifies how she, as the "subaltern," is able to "recuperate the necessary space to actively shape [her] subject position and identity without subsuming original identities" (Walter 9). Much the same can be said of Charging Elk in Welch's novel.

Charging Elk's understanding of spiritual, cultural, and individual identity are renegotiated according to transcultural processes throughout *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. Initially upon finding himself stranded in France, Charging Elk has a crisis of identity. His narrative is split between flashbacks to his life before joining Buffalo Bill's show and the stark contrast of his present reality in France. For example, at one point he reminisces about life before the arrival of white settlers, how "the game was plentiful during those warm times and the people didn't suffer. Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery, rode with them" (11). Here, Charging Elk is associating the presence of traditional food sources with the comfort of a functional worldview and the security of the belief that the

Sioux deity is watching over his people. Later, however, Charging Elk recalls how living conditions changed after the United States government ordered the slaughter of the bison: “We mourned the passing of the buffalo. We thought the sacred hoop was broken when the *wasicuns* came into our country and our people lost their way” (127). Therefore, without the presence of a specific food source, bison, the Sioux religious system and cultural worldview disintegrate. Still, both of these realities contrast starkly with Charging Elk’s solitary existence, homeless and starving, on the street of France. However, Charging Elk, as an individual, successfully negotiates his situation in France without losing his sense of identity as a Lakota. Indeed, Charging Elk receives affirmation that this is the case when Buffalo Bill’s show returns to France and one of the Lakota performers tells him “You are not a stranger. You are Lakota, wherever you might go. You are one of us always” (435-436).

Like Charging Elk and Indigo, members of the reservation community in *Reservation Blues* are also negotiating transcultural networks; however, their search for communal and individual identities feels desperate and volatile to a degree far surpassing that of the characters in the other two texts. For instance, while telling one of the stories for which he is famous, or rather, infamous, Thomas remarks that “when any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they’ll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon” (97). There are multiple, powerful realities inherent in this statement, among which are the impact of Christianity and desire for the return of a traditional food source, salmon.

Reservation Blues makes numerous references to various aspects of Christian faith; however, the characters seem to be especially fixated on Jesus' ability to multiply food. As stated in Mark 6:41-42, "Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he [Jesus] gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied." This specific Biblical account is referenced at least three times in Alexie's novel.

The first instance occurs in the passage quoted above, in which the expected Jesus is asked "to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon," thereby replicating the Biblical multiplication of fish and also, perhaps, alluding to another one of Jesus's supernatural food abilities, that of turning water into wine. The reason Jesus's Biblical food powers would resonate especially powerfully with members of the reservation community is revealed in the second reference to the bread and fish episode, the following conversation between Checkers Warm Water and Father Arnold, the Catholic Priest:

"We need money. We ain't got no money."

"Does everything have to be about money?"

"Of course it does. Only people with enough money ever ask that question anyway."

"There's a kind of freedom in poverty."

That's a lie, Checkers thought and felt worse for contradicting a priest, her priest.

"Jesus didn't have any money," Father Arnold said.

“Yeah, but Jesus could turn one loaf of bread into a few thousand. I can’t do that.” (192)

The overwhelming lack of food on the reservation causes members of the reservation community to fixate on Jesus’s food abilities because the people exist in near-starvation-level living conditions. Significantly, even though these passages make references to Christianity, they also depict the desire to reclaim Indigenous sources of power and traditional religious systems, the first by calling for the return of the salmon and the second through Checkers’s unspoken desire to provide for herself.

However, nowhere is the call for Indigenous religious/food power more notable than in Big Mom’s division of fry bread to feed the hungry people:

“There are only one hundred pieces of fry bread,” Big Mom said, “and there are two hundred of us. Something needs to be done...”

“But there is a way,” Big Mom said. “I can feed you all.”

“How?” asked somebody...

“By ancient Indian secrets,” Big Mom said...

“Watch this,” Big Mom said as she grabbed a piece of fry bread and held it above her head. “Creator, help me. I have only a hundred pieces of fry bread to feed two hundred people.”

Big Mom held that fry bread tightly in her huge hands and then tore it into halves.

“There,” Big Mom said. “That is how I will feed you all.” (301-302)

This passage can be read multiple ways, simply as indicative of the influence of Christianity or as subtly affirming the power of Indigenous religions alongside

Christianity as being equally valid. Big Mom is able to accomplish a feat similar to Jesus's regarding the division of bread; however, she does so by calling on the power of the "Creator" and that of "mathematics," rather than the Christian God (302).

Interestingly, given the health detriments of fry bread consumption, which were discussed previously, having each person in attendance eat only half a piece of fry bread is actually much better for them from a nutritional standpoint and may be considered an act of dietary decolonization. (They also had venison, mashed potatoes, and Pepsi at this gathering, so nutritional needs may be considered beyond the simple consideration of consuming adequate calories.)

Regarding the issue of salmon, the near disappearance of salmon had an enormous impact on the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest region. In a 1996 interview with Tomson Highway, Sherman Alexie stated the following regarding the Spokane Indian Reservation: "We're a Salmon people. Our religion, our culture, our dancing, our singing—had everything to do with the salmon. We were devastated by the Grand Coulee Dam. It took away seven thousand miles of salmon spawning beds from the interior Indians in Washington, Idaho, and Montana. We've had to create a religion for many years" (22). So, the absence of salmon results in far more than simply making a certain type of food unavailable; it robs entire cultures of their customs, their religion, and their sense of positionality in the world. Contrary to what Peter N. Stearns asserts in "Food and History," that "ancient societies, like modern ones, used changes in foodways as filters to find or create a vision of the past," Alexie argues that post-colonial changes in foodways force Indigenous peoples to create a new understanding of the *present* (171).

Each of the novels selected for this analysis depicts a different social response to the transcultural processes of colonization with regard to religious-based food practices. As has been shown, each of the communities represented in these works associates specific food sources with certain religious systems and cultural worldviews. Each cultural network also specifies particular spiritual customs pertaining to the procurement of food and environmental sustainability practices. Furthermore, food plays an integral role in the religious rituals depicted in these works, including those which reflect Indigenous religious practices, Christian rituals, and hybridized religious practices that incorporate aspects of both Indigenous and Christian faiths.

Conclusion

Some aspects of the investigation presented in this analysis have taken a fairly conventional and conservative route. Aspects of food theory have been applied to works of literature in an attempt to divulge additional meaning regarding character, setting, and plot development. As Sarah Sceats contends regarding her own work, “attempting to relate fictional representations of food and eating to pre-existing explanations of human behavior – whether in terms of psychoanalytic theory, the history of manners or socio-political analyses – almost inescapably privileges continuity over change, even when context is taken into account” (184).

However, because this study examines the significance of food in literature written by Native American authors, the concept of change has, in this case, become paramount. If one is to “endorse the idea of food as a language, eating an exchange” and apply this notion to post-colonial texts, one must understand how colonial power structures dictate the use of this language and the dynamics of this exchange (Sceats 184). This understanding illuminates not only how Indigenous relationships with food have changed historically as a result of colonization and how the personal and cultural identities that centered on these relationships have correspondingly been affected, but it also demands a widespread shift in the Indigenous food practices of the *present* if any progress is to be made toward decolonization in the future. In this sense, the implications of this study become far-reaching and extreme.

As this analysis has proven, food practices and eating are central to individual and communal concepts of identity and integral to all aspects of human culture. Because Native American peoples have been dispossessed of so much of their cultural identities through the processes of colonization, any attempts made by Native peoples to decolonize themselves must include, if not emphasize, dietary decolonization. As Waziyatawin emphatically pleads of all Indigenous peoples, “the decolonization of our diets is...linked to other forms of decolonization that will help us physically, culturally, psychologically, and spiritually. We have nothing to lose by decolonizing our diets and so much to gain. Let us work on healing and helping ourselves through the recovery of our traditional foods and lifestyles” (85).

Especially because this analysis is compiled by a non-Native individual, it must be here acknowledged that this call to action should not be construed to suggest that all Native peoples desire decolonization. Such is probably not the case, and even if it were, this scholar has no right to make such an assertion. However, this analysis has proven the connection between food practices and cultural identity. If Indigenous peoples do, in fact, desire to either reclaim their pre-colonial identities or develop post-colonial identities that reject colonial domination, dietary considerations must be fundamental to these efforts.

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VITA

Brandy Beutel Alba was born in Austin, Texas on May 20, 1978. After completing her introductory undergraduate coursework at Austin Community College, she attended Concordia University Texas, graduating in 2008 with a Bachelor's degree in English and a minor in history. She entered the Graduate College of Texas State in 2009, working as a Graduate Assistant while studying English literature and rhetoric and composition.

Permanent Email: brandyalba@hotmail.com

This thesis was typed by Brandy B. Alba.