Scattered: The Assimilation of Sushi, the Internment of Japanese Americans, and the Killing of Vincent Chin, A Personal Essay

Frank Wu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/faculty_scholarship
Scattered: The Assimilation of Sushi, the Internment of Japanese Americans, and the Killing of Vincent Chin, A Personal Essay

Frank H. Wu†

ABSTRACT

In a personal Essay, Frank H. Wu discusses the acceptance of sushi in America as a means of analyzing the acceptance of Japanese Americans, before, during, and after World War II. The murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 is used as a defining moment for Asian Americans, explaining the shared experiences of people perceived as "perpetual foreigners."

ABSTRACT................................................................. 109
INTRODUCTION ............................................................ 109
I."BORN IN THE U.S.A."................................................. 114
II.DISCOVERING CHIRASHI............................................. 117
III.RECOVERING THE INTERNMENT............................... 120
CONCLUSION............................................................... 126

INTRODUCTION

Coming of age as the Japanese economy was coming to be envied for its rise, I started eating sushi when Americans were just willing, curiosity overcoming disgust inexorably, to sample it, chopsticks and all.¹ The late
celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain said the desire for sushi was a “big win.”2 Back then, in the throes of economic war circa the early 1980s, characterized as another Pearl Harbor, “sushi” was synonymous with nigiri, raw fish atop vinegared rice perfected late in the Edo Period.3 Sushi is a metaphor. Initially, it was invasive. The hostility to sushi would seem baffling, in light of the developments. By 2006, sushi restaurants had attained the status of Americans’ favorite choice for dining out.4 In 2011, the documentary Jiro Dreams of Sushi was a sleeper hit at the box office, elevating the octogenarian star, proprietor of a Tokyo café in a subway station, to global celebrity.5 Culinary xenophobia had been vanquished. Only after “Japan Inc.”—as the seeming monolith of Japanese economic might was dubbed—bubble burst even more spectacularly than it had inflated, in a lost decade that birthed the “freeters” (young people who elected to stay unemployed), myself having accumulated a decade of practice dabbing wasabi (horseradish) paste to barely below the point of the overdose which cleared the sinuses in a thrilling moment, did I wonder what the menu meant by chirashi.6 The superlative bargain in Japanese food is chirashi. Unlike Sushi


5. JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI (Preferred Content, 2011).

A and Sushi B, this more specific title lacked a description for the uninitiated, vouchsafed for those already in the know. This dish is presented according to the principle that “the eyes eat first”: sashimi (slices of the meat), with other ingredients such as pickles, displayed over a bed of sushi rice. The literal translation of “chirashi” is “scattered.” (Movie posters, or flyers, are called by the term too, because of the way they are distributed all around.)

In this personal Essay, I describe the dichotomies produced by Japanese food in the United States, as a means to contemplate how Asian immigration has been received. Eating sushi was once how Japanese conserved their identity; eating sushi now is how Asians become American. The murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 was a fateful moment: as Japan gave the impression of invulnerability, Asian Americans were defenseless.

Narrative commands understanding. The story of how raw fish came to be ingested by the United States is two stories. The first story is about the American mainstream gorging itself on sushi, so much so that global stocks have become endangered. Past is the time that sushi brought on collective nausea, a revulsion trumping the etiquette which would deter ridicule of another’s taste. Then it came under regulation, with the warning it could endanger health. Yet it has cachet, other than in the cruel variant of ikizukuri (food consumed while the animal is living). The second story is about the Japanese endeavoring to maintain quality, or more accurately cultural control over the aesthetic codes of washoku (traditional cuisine). Following a cancelled Japanese government attempt to police the legitimacy of sushi overseas, formal societies were organized to self-regulate. Such
supervision may verge on conflict with equality norms, by implicitly discouraging non-Japanese, who would dare try their hand at the art, on the dubious grounds of innate affinity, or women, on the spurious basis of menstrual stigma. Authoritarian rules, however, have not dissuaded a public eager for novelty from trying out the fusion of Japanese food with everything else, as in the sushi-burrito, alongside ever more obscure grey market imports such as Japanese whiskeys, single malt and blended. Sushi is less susceptible to the anxiety about “cultural appropriation,” since Japan is not subordinate (though Japanese Americans did not occupy the same position when they started peddling sushi). Claude Levi-Strauss, in his science of mythology, posited that binary oppositions such as the “raw” and the “cooked” demarcate our respective worldviews. Sushi is raw, Eastern, submissive.

The visceral, feeling in our gut frames the rational, a limitation in the law that is invisible. Sushi has become marked politically, a token of liberal elitism in the catechism of “tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show.” Sushi discloses the illusory nature of “authenticity” in “post-modernity,” as California rolls, spam musubi (spam topping rice, wrapped in seaweed), and innovation in the kitchen introduces recipes that would not be approved at the source of the inspiration.

---


18. The issue of “authenticity” is much discussed in everything from performances of Shakespeare to how to lead life. A leading account of authenticity in life is CHARLES TAYLOR, THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY (1992). See also SIMON FELDMAN, AGAINST AUTHENTICITY: WHY YOU SHOULDN’T BE YOURSELF (2015); ANDREW POTTER, THE AUTHENTICITY HOAX: HOW WE GOT LOST FINDING
Food has always been identified with people, as in “our people” versus “your people,” the shunning of the cuisine being prompted by the status of the community and sovereignty being vulnerable to a rage for refreshments unfamiliar. For the gourmand, food tends toward fetish. Sushi is not unique as representing an affiliated people: savory puddings fell out of favor as foreign; pizza pie was once ethnic food; slanders about Mexican beer being contaminated by urine are about Latino hygiene; the bagel was advertised as a “Jewish English muffin” to be noshed with any topping. Chinese food is as ubiquitous now even if “John Chinaman,” Celestials, Mongoloids, and Orientals were despised previously, and the flavor enhancer MSG has been


For an accessible critique of “authenticity” as itself artifice, in particular a Western concept, from an Asian (Chinese) philosophy perspective, see MICHAEL PUETT & CHRISTINE GROSS-LOH, THE PATH: WHAT CHINESE PHILOSOPHERS CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE GOOD LIFE (2016).


Dietary recommendations premised on health considerations may be intended to promote cultural assimilation as well. See CHARLOTTE BLITKOFF, EATING RIGHT IN AMERICA (2013). Industrialist Henry Ford, for example, had assembly-line workers participate in an assimilation program designed by his corporate sociological department, to leave behind their former cultural practices and take up American habits. See GEORGIOS P. LOIZIDES, HENRY FORD’S PROJECT IN HUMAN ENGINEERING: THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEPARTMENT OF THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY, 1913-1941 (2014).


Food retains its appeal as symbol. It stays within the literary province of the consummate memoirist M.F.K. Fisher, even as it succumbs to scientific scrutiny, disciplined by academic study. To talk and write about a source of nutrition as more than protein, fat, carbohydrate, and trace chemicals, is as important as to cook and eat, culturally."

I. "BORN IN THE U.S.A."

According to President Ronald Reagan, the “Great Communicator,” his
victory in the 1984 election would bring “Morning in America.” That year saw the first compact disc manufactured in America, popularizing the digital format invented in Japan and advertised as both perfect and permanent. Appropriately, this silver disc that would replace the vinyl album premiered with Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.,” a celebration of working-class values that would be a breakthrough hit for the New Jersey rocker known as “the Boss.” With a slipcase cover depicting a man in blue jeans, a baseball cap stuffed into his back pocket, the title song told of an individual who had “got into a little hometown jam, so they put a rifle in [his] hand” and “sent [him] off to a foreign land, to go and kill the yellow man.” The tune told the story of a brother’s demise at the hands of the Viet Cong and love for a woman from Saigon. Springsteen’s earlier Nebraska had featured a number, “Johnny 99,” about an autoworker, drunk and distraught, who had committed murder and then requested execution over imprisonment. Springsteen’s patriotic appeal was so triumphant that President Reagan sought to use “Born in the USA” as his campaign theme song. Springsteen demurred. He was by then an icon. His song was sympathetic to Asians. But they were distinct from Americans.

Sushi, the internment, and Vincent Chin are mixed together for me, because they are about coming-of-age, the transition from adolescence to Asian American-ness. For a preternatural geek, there is no assurance of acceptance as an adult. I entered college in 1984. The internment preceded the murder of Chin chronologically, but not personally. Each of us has unique version of history according to our experience and our education. Like most Americans schoolkids of the time period, I was not exposed to the internment until I sought out the information; even some whose parents had endured it were shielded from the truth. Before the Chin case, I wanted desperately to be “normal.” I would have run away from anything Asian. I blamed my parents, immigrants from China via Taiwan, for the common childhood cruelty of the teasing and taunting. Asian American children are accustomed to bullying no matter how much they attempt to copy their social superiors. You are “trying too hard.”

The essential event of Japan bashing was the murder of Vincent Chin.

---

Japan bashing was the temptation to accuse Japan for all American misery. Vincent Chin became its representative casualty. A Chinese American, he was the victim of mistaken identity twice over: Japanese in lieu of Chinese ("you all look the same," I was told repeatedly growing up) and perpetual foreigner instead of American. In the summer of 1982 in my hometown of Detroit, he was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two autoworkers, who happened to be white and apparently blamed him for the success of imported cars. The part-time waiter at a Chinese restaurant had been celebrating his bachelor’s party, so his wedding guests attended his funeral instead. The two defendants, who never denied the actus rea, commission of the act, were steadfast in insisting they had been wrongly impugned, because they had no mens rea, intention, rising to a hate crime—it had been nothing more than a bar brawl.

“It’s because of you little motherfuckers, we’re out of work,” they had shouted to instigate the beating, a witness testified at trial. Various racial slurs were used by the perpetrators, as attested to by others. The Motor City in that day depended on the Big Four US automakers, who took for granted an oligopoly of 99 percent market share before the oil crisis that segued into a moral crisis according to President Jimmy Carter, beleaguered with the Iranian hostage crisis as another in the series of crises leaving the nation paralyzed and powerless, the captivity of a nation counted by days on the evening news. An unremitting recession imperiled the livelihoods of everyone in a magnificent wreck of a city, a demonstration of American industrialization and deindustrialization alike. It was no wonder President Carter, moral but hapless, lost to challenger Reagan, the former Hollywood pitchman who pledged prosperity would prevail. Carter had been unable to halt the Japanese cars coming by container ship, with the funny names that would be scoffed at before miles-per-gallon (MPG) ratings mattered. Cars, status symbols for individuals, were representative of nations. To “buy American” was to be a patriot.28 The American luxury land yachts managed as little as six MPG. “Jap crap” could achieve five-fold that figure. There had been no expectation that Asians would be capable of competing. The men who bludgeoned Chin were sentenced to probation for three years and a fine of three thousand dollars each.

Racial antagonism was conventional. It was candid. Asian Americans were a convenient target.

“Little yellow men,” Congressman John Dingell proclaimed, were

---

responsible for the economic woes of his constituents. An early advocate of the World War II internment as a “reprisal reserve” of hostages, his father had held the same seat in the House of Representatives, hailing from the manufacturing heart of the Detroit metropolis. The scion was heir to political power, ultimately becoming the longest serving member of Congress at more than 59 years’ tenure. Their inheritance of allegiance over generations was what they perceived in others. By their reckoning, the land of the rising sun was to be avoided, not associated with.

“A Jap’s a Jap, and that’s all there is to it,” Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt had testified to justify the internment he presided over. He perceived the Japanese as an enemy race.

Sushi is incomplete as metaphor. Asian food has become popular while Asian people have not. “It’s possible that Asian food is more prominent in the American imagination than the Asian people who produce it,” opined Hua Hsu in The New Yorker more than thirty years after Chin and seventy-five years after the internment. The name of the author and his placement in a periodical the paragon of sophistication itself is a declaration of sorts. Who we eat with and who serves us are not incidental.

II. DISCOVERING CHIRASHI

You can lose face at any meal in public. Dining alone within the sight of others is embarrassing even if you are confident nobody is staring. Yet you can feast by yourself at the sushi bar. The moment is contemplative. There should be no shame in your solitude. You partake in ritual. The setting is exact. Everything ought to be just so. Since discovering chirashi for
myself, I have rarely ordered anything else at a Japanese restaurant if it is available, risking mercury poisoning with its symptomatic loss of memory. I commend it to anyone who enjoys sushi and is ready to advance in experience. I secretly suppose that the chef realizes someone requesting chirashi is a kindred spirit who appreciates the science and the spirituality of a cuisine which embodies a culture.

Chirashi is especially pure. It is not only fresh, which all of the ingredients but the deliberately aged should be at any fine dining establishment, but also simple, which is not necessarily the ethos even among the itamae (the nihonjin, ethnic Japanese, chief of the kitchen). Chirashi is on the verge of achieving cult status. It betokens the diversity of spice, as does omakase (the selection of the day) albeit coming out all at once rather than as a series of plates. We are signaling by calling for “chirashi” that our taste is discerning or perhaps discriminating in the positive sense, even as sushi is threatened by being in vogue. Nowadays, suburban supermarkets stockpile it at the prepared foods counter with meatloaf. Some people seem oblivious to its Asian provenance. Neither ceviche nor crudo, the Latin American marinated and Italian oiled cousins to Japanese raw fish, has suffered the same fame.

Yet after introducing karaoke and isolating the umami sensation, it turns out that Japanese conglomerates and their executives retreated rather than conquered. Japan did not continue their dominance. The disgrace of a white working man is to submit to an Asian supervisor: for example, in the Back to the Future II movie, starring Michael J. Fox as Marty McFly, the embodiment of the Everyman was fired by a Japanese boss, the disgrace being delivered by fax machine. In the absence of the Japanese big spenders, the proliferation of “sushi style” rolls complies with no criteria, ending up doused in shoyu (soy sauce) as would trouble anyone who has ever been within walking distance of Tokyo’s Tsukiji Market.
demands of commercial production and mass consumption. More than one traditional Japanese dining room boasts a sign, “No California rolls!” — never mind the Hawaiian specialty of spam musubi.42

At the upscale Japan Inn in Washington, D.C., where diplomats conducted business before it shut its doors forever, the abundant assortment of chirashi needed two lacquered boxes.43 In the piscine, there was everything from the starter of tamago (omelet from chicken egg, an item that served as a test of quality), sake (salmon), and hamachi (yellowtail) to the ama-ebi (sweet shrimp, meaning raw; fried heads ushered out separately as they were done), ikura (salmon roe), and uni (sea urchin). In the vegetal, there were the bonus items from seaweed to dried bonito flakes to shiitake mushrooms cooked and seasoned and enoki mushrooms likewise but more faintly, and the full range of tsukemono (preserves), such as beni shōji (pickled red ginger), fukujinzuke (relish), takwon (daikon radish, naturally dyed golden yellow), and the single sour umeboshi (pickled plum). As generously decorated as the lids of the containers were, the treasures were within. It remains rare, even among those who fancy themselves “foodies,” to encounter sakura denbu, the “floss” processed from fish, a relation of rou song, its Middle Kingdom porcine peer. There must be rice of course.44 Without rice, whatever else is put away cannot constitute a meal.

Japan Inn was furnished to live up to its name, as if we had chanced upon it hiking through the forest in the movie Rashomon.45 There was no glamour to lure the crowd incompetent to distinguish maguro (tuna) from toro (fatty tuna). Instead there was that air of discretion; if the handful of surviving salarymen on the other side of the paper screen imbibed too much, you ignored their boisterous camaraderie recalling better days before the crash. The owner emblazoned the tapestries with her mon (family crest), a trio of arrow feathers, the central shaft inverted. The servers were as choreographed as the kuroko (Japanese stagehands dressed in black) who are silent and stealthy as they set the scene.

My wife and I went there when we felt we could splurge. That is part of the charm of chirashi. If you were to opt for the equivalent quantity of

---

42. The California roll is credited to a Canadian, who has since been honored by Japan. See Danny Lewis, Japan Honors of the Creator of the California Roll, SMITHSONIAN (June 16, 2016), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/japan-honors-creator-of-california-roll-18095446 [https://perma.cc/N2WG-EM8F].


45. RASHOMON (Daiei Tokyo Studies 1950).
food in another format, it would be twice the cost. We calculated it: my wife preferred lobster teriyaki, and that extravagance was more than offset by the frugality of the chirashi. We were honored to be recognized as regulars at the forty-year fixture in the upper Georgetown neighborhood. (The family’s subsequent venture, Chez Mama San, was an experiment in yoshoku, Japanese versions of Western entrees. Yet another tale of East meets West along the lines of yoga and paintings following Western schools.46)

To eat sushi, as an Asian American, is to face down the prospect of humiliation. It is to embrace the conduct that is caricatured by the stereotype: practicing martial arts regardless of casual childhood cruelties of teasing and taunting, challenged as “Bruce Lee” to playground fights, or taking up photography, notwithstanding the mockery of the Japanese tourist in Hollywood satire or even by the otherwise enlightening cultural critic Susan Sontag.47 Bullying extends to the cafeteria, the “ick” reaction to an immigrant child’s lunchbox contents, the expropriation of milk money.48 Asian Americans are taught they have to avoid Asia to be accepted as American.

III. RECOVERING THE INTERNMENT

Ironically, my wife, who falls between nisei and sansei (second- and third-generation Japanese American), has always had somewhat an aversion to raw fish. Her father, an immigrant who claimed to be from a fishing hamlet so small he had to swim to school, had ingested enough of it as a child that he was eager to adapt to the American palate. In the internment camp mess halls, the “weenie royale” and its like replaced chirashi and its like, even as the spiteful speculation spread that the Japanese-American prisoners were feted with steak on a regular basis while others subsisted on rations.49 My wife, growing up in the Midwest well after World War II, was compelled to be as ordinary as possible, conforming to the majority.50 So I, Chinese and


50. See generally NAOMI HIRAHARA, LIFE AFTER MANZANAR (2018); GREG ROBINSON, AFTER
not Japanese by lineage, am the committed enthusiast among the two of us for her ancestral aesthetic, including artistic ideals such as wabi-sabi (the allure of fallibility revealing the human hand at work, a Japanese nationalist style distinct from Chinese refinement in crafts such as ceramics). If you are sensitive to the histories that impinge on one another, to be Chinese would make one much more figuratively distant from the Japanese than any European, despite the literally close relationship of the two countries. Proximity promoted rivalry. The inhabitants of Taiwan, some of whom seem nostalgic for Japanese imperialism as they are confronted by the amalgamation of mainland Chinese Communism/capitalism, still put on the table fare derived from the Japanese. My mother was fond of a savory egg custard main dish, chawan mushi, with its hidden tidbits of chicken and dried shrimp. The Koreans, once subjects of the Japanese Empire, boast of their own version of chirashi, called hwe dup bap, with more of a salad style dish with the addition of hot sauce. Koreans and Japanese would not quarrel with one another that the two forms should not be mistaken for one another, any more than the populations. Asian Americans all have these anecdotes about food as a marker of difference and indicator of assimilation. When I was a kid, my brothers and I turned up our noses at what my mother toiled to make every afternoon. The repast was a traditional Chinese meal, usually featuring a steamed whole fish. We clamored for hamburgers and hot dogs, spaghetti and meatballs, and whatever else was being devoured next door, in the naive belief that earnest mimicry would ensure our welcome. Our friends’ parents would never


51. See generally LEONARD KOREN, WABI-SABI FOR ARTISTS, DESIGNERS, POETS & PHILOSOPHERS (1994); DONALD RICHTER, A TRACTATE ON JAPANESE AESTHETICS (2007).


become our parents’ friends, and for that matter we could not be so sure that our friends were friends either. My parents shopped downtown at Eastern Market for the Great Lakes freshwater species they had substituted for what was found in the old country. An old-fashioned emporium of stalls hawking every comestible, the butcher alongside the cheesemonger, the florist and the fishmonger, it was one of the few civic spaces where black and white, Arab and Jew, Latino and Asian, all gathered. I marveled at the chitterlings in glass display cases and the trotters hanging from the rafters. Our elders assuredly were not taking us for sushi. I was not acquainted with fine dining until adulthood, because we ate only at Chinese restaurants. That typically meant over in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, with its more easygoing multiculturalism, except – in common with my future wife – for the special occasion at the Red Lobster chain (my late father-in-law brought his own shoyu). I assumed, with the reasoning of a child, that in Canada, everybody was foreign. Yet I cannot complain. I never went hungry at night.

The internment was a revelation. Suddenly the “gaslighting” of my youth, being admonished that I needed to fit in better; that you had to be able to take a joke; as a child to retort, “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” then as a college student not to be too “politically correct,” made sense.

I had not been told about the internment, though I did have a friend in high school who was a quarter Japanese, a fact that he let slip only after we were pals but would not have been guessed. But I was writing a term paper in college, and in the stacks of the library I found only a handful of books, all of them the entirety of what had been published about Asian Americans to that point, and among the titles were studies of this episode. I read the two leading anthologies cover to cover. I could claim, credibly, to be an expert, possessing information ignored by my teachers. Even those who were acquainted with African Americans had scant knowledge of Asian Americans beyond stereotypes they could not sense were degrading.

Well before Pearl Harbor, Japanese immigrants and their American-born children were loathed by other Americans, such as the Native Sons of the Golden West who believed California was reserved for the white race. The legislative enactments that discriminated against them included racial


57. ASIAN-AMERICANS: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES (Stanley Sue and Nathaniel N. Wagner eds., 1973); ASIAN-AMERICANS: SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES (Russel Endo et al. eds., vol. 2 1980).

58. ROBINSON, supra, note 56.
segregation in San Francisco schools, culminating in the White House negotiating a “Gentleman’s Agreement” with Japan under which the Japanese already present would not come under further denigration if additional Japanese could be prevented from joining them. The Chinese Exclusion Act eventually was extended into an Asiatic Barred Zone. The Japanese who were resident could not pass the test of being “free white persons,” neither the pale color of their skin nor their acquisition of American values being sufficient. They thus could not naturalize. As “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” a category corresponding to Asian, they could not own land. They also were prohibited from intermarriage with whites and acquisition of professional licenses. The racism of the internment, like that of the Chinese Exclusion Act, omitted from textbooks was explicit not implicit. It was blatant, overt, even prideful, allied to Jim Crow, anti-Semitism, Indian genocide, and the nationalism of the “old stock” that would even set apart swarthier European ethnics as not quite white. There was no denying the facts, so they could only be covered up. It wasn’t an interpretation in my own head, susceptible to cursory dismissal. A blue-ribbon federal commission summarized that the internment had not been justified by military necessity, and the absence of evidence against the Japanese Americans in the aggregate had been known during internment (rather than being ahistorical hindsight). The official study concluded that the program was the product of wartime panic, poor leadership, and racial prejudice. In 1988, Congress granted redress of $20,000 per person, pennies on the dollar. German Americans and Italian


Americans were not interned on a mass scale, though foreign Germans and foreign Italians were on a limited basis. Even so, during the Congressional debate, comparisons were made to the conduct of the Japanese government toward American prisoners of war, recapitulating the assignment of Japanese Americans to the role of enemy combatants. (Contrary to such bigotry, the vengeance of the Japanese would be inflicted to the maximum degree on Japanese Americans.)

It is impossible to predict how people will behave, as in following a recipe there are too many variables to take it as if it were a list of rules guaranteeing an outcome. My late father-in-law exemplified equanimity that could be called characteristic with sensitivity to the risk of affirming the cliche.66 He bore no grudge toward the United States government that had imprisoned him, his California native wife, and their infant daughter. He was suspected without charges or trial. He was released from the Tule Lake internment camp on the condition he join the Army as a civilian.67 Thanks to his bilingual skills, he was able to train as a cartographer. He gained a career in a profession he otherwise would not have been able to pursue on either side of the Pacific Ocean. His positive attitude was a form of racial resilience.

Yet when I met him ensconced in the tufted velour recliner of his later years, he immediately recounted the story of who had aggrieved him in life. He had been cheated by kinfolk. His eldest sister’s husband had relieved him of his life savings upon his landing in Los Angeles. The “old man” — how my father-in-law always referred to the fellow even after he himself had surpassed the age of the culprit — promised to make him a partner in a shoe business. He instead was relegated to the role of clerk sizing the feet of migrant farmworkers. Our intimates are more likely than strangers to harm us.68 We recollect ourselves as we were then. Our roles are set. Scottish intellectual Thomas Carlyle bequeathed us the notion that history is the biography of great men. His opinions are rightly dismissed for his endorsement of chattel slavery in his 1853 pamphlet entitled with the “n-word.”69 Contrary to Carlyle, our history is the biography of ordinary men.


69. Different printings of Carlyle’s piece appear with either “Negro” or the “n-word” in its title. The standalone pamphlet version was titled Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question (1853).
In my estimation, my late father-in-law was an individual of importance.

Shortly before our adventure to scatter his ashes from whence he had come but never returned to, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States greeted us at a reception, and, upon learning of the upcoming mission, asked the name of that hometown. My wife replied with a polite laugh that he would not have heard of it, and he said, with a politer smile, that he was, after all, the Japanese Ambassador, so please try him. When she divulged our destination, the urbane gentleman was nonplussed: he admitted he had no idea where that place was on the island nation. He would have been as much an outsider in the remote village of Wakayama prefecture as we were.

The closest landmark was an infamous site of history only a decade prior, bound up with corrupted food: not too far away from where we were en route, in the shadow of a mountain that defined the landscape, a Japanese woman had spiked curry with arsenic, a pot of which she dispensed at a local festival. Her malevolence injured dozens and killed four. According to prosecutors, she was motivated by her alienation from the other housewives in the neighborhood, not feeling she was respected as she was due. She violated the trust needed to share a supper.

We reached the rural settlement, via bullet train and then rental van, welcomed by the widow of the youngest brother among the siblings, a third wife, we were assured sequentially not simultaneously, whom he had wed when she was a teenager and he was fifty years old. The cosmopolitan of the neighborhood, she had been the first to install an indoor Western toilet (i.e., sit down, not squat), circa 1983. The other cousins we met were honest, working-class people. One fellow, who had recently retired from his job as truck driver for a major brewery, initiated us into his private custom of asa-beru (morning beer). I feel guilty even now. He offered me tako-yaki (octopus in dough balls), but I declined despite my ideal of being adventurous. They showed us around. Their English was better than our Japanese. Looking at the little bay, we confirmed that the main house of the extended clan indeed was accessible only by water, during high tide. One’s livelihood there, not merely nourishment, likely depended on seafood from time immemorial.

My father-in-law had not exaggerated about his origins. “Edwin” was the name he had given himself when he took leave of his community. He wanted his English title to be dignified but not an imitation of the royal who would abdicate, Edward VIII, but by the time I called him to request the hand of his younger daughter, he was known to all as “Eddie,” and he was too distracted by the football Super Bowl on television to object to the union. To have migrated a century ago would have been remarkable. Although we remember those who surprise us with their arrival, we forget those who shock us with their departure. It is the same individual who takes such a

---

journey, provoking a response by riding into town but not riding away into the sunset, who lies beyond the ken of his friends, new and old. Those are the two archetypal tales to be told, and they turn out to be one, dependent only on perspective. But the traveler alone is aware of the differences between origin and terminus, directly rather than from hearsay and rumor.

Japanese Americans such as my father-in-law sought acceptance after World War II. They ceased to be the perpetual foreigner by turning into the model minority. They were cast as exemplars of the American “fair play” that had been denied to them. Commentators celebrated their accomplishment as a means of criticizing, in the terminology of the most influential article published about them, “problem minorities.” The fear of the ascent of Japan and the resentment of Asian American overachievement coincided with the spread of sushi, as if absorbing their victuals figuratively would ease lingering apprehensions about foreign persons who were surrounding the body politic.

CONCLUSION

Diet is mandatory, rendering it perforce normative. “Ethnic food” is all about the back stories. Since we are what we eat, observers react to us by watching our dining habits. Americans once adjudged Japanese food to be exotic to the point of inedible. Yet America has been made up of, and by, foreigners who have become a people through the mythos of breaking bread as at Thanksgiving. Chirashi could be celebrated among the meals defining us as e pluribus unum. What appears to be but random is in fact an elegant arrangement. That is the abiding power of food.