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Cover art: Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, *To Curry Favor* (detail), 2015. Site-specific installation. Shankill Castle, County Kilkenny, Ireland. Turmeric, cumin, coriander, garam masala, and chili powder from Kilkenny Halal Foods and Shortis Wong Deli applied to the walls of the conservatory. Courtesy of the artist.

In memory of David Lenson (1945–2020)

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Acknowledgments

I began thinking about this book many years ago, and only in the wake of one of the most trying periods of my life was I finally able to start seeing the ideas clustering in my head as a book. I started to write in earnest at a low point in my life, and I completed the revisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. To say that duress and trauma were the waters through which I swam in order to finish this book is an understatement.

This book is about intimate eating publics. It is about the unexpected intimacies that emerge among people who are not direct kin but nonetheless feel so deeply like family. It is about finding love and nourishment in strange places. It is about valuing the fleeting moments of intimacy that feel precious against the pressures of heteronormative time. It is about finding a way to hold dear those who care about one another, not because they have to, but because they want to. Those people are who buoyed me forward and to whom I am most grateful for sustaining me in every way possible. They helped me find a way to the shore when life felt unimaginably cruel.

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In her artistic oeuvre, the multiracial visual artist Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik uses multimedia and tactile approaches to food and race in the United States to subvert what she describes as the "hegemony of vision."[1] We have developed a critical vocabulary within cultural studies and ethnic studies to think about visual culture, because often art that "deals with other senses suffers from under theorization."[2] Much of Bhaumik's artistic work revolves around the use of curry, that ubiquitous signifier of Indianness, even as curry itself is a British colonial invention. For Bhaumik, curry was a way "for colonizers to contain the vastness of empire and consume the difference within it," even though curries varied dramatically in taste, smell, and texture among the various places they were consumed.[3] Thus her use of *curry* is not coincidental. Bhaumik asks: "What is curry? One, a delicious food. Two, a wholly inadequate word to describe a wide diversity of dishes served around the world."[4] Imagining curry as malodorous and "out of place" in American homes and certainly within the space of the sanitized museum is part of what motivates her "curry art." Bhaumik's interest in this perceived incongruence led her in 2011 to create an installation titled "The Curry Institute" at the Sheehan Gallery at Whitman College.

Here Bhaumik designed a three-walled installation that included four pieces of art titled "Curry Cartography," "Sweet, Sour, Salty, Bitter, Curry," "Gilt," "Laced." These works, respectively, were a site-specific map of the world created with a combination of Behr paint and curry powder, a table filled with curry-scented jars, a site-specific curry-scented wallpaper, and a bottle of

Figure I.1 "To Curry Favor." Site-specific installation at the Begovich Gallery, California State University, Fullerton. Materials: curry powder from Oasis Food Market in Oakland, California, adhesive. 4 × 15 ft. © 2011. Photo credit: Sita Bhaumik.

curry-scented eau de toilette. The wallpaper invited people to engage multiple senses at once: while looking at the aesthetic design of the print, one could also lean in close to touch the walls of the art gallery—behavior typically proscribed by art galleries and museums—and smell the artwork. The jars invited people to pick them up, open the lids, and smell the aromas wafting from what appeared to be colorless liquids. And the map of the world didn't merely map the routes by which spices traveled from India and Asia to Europe; rather, the interactive map allowed gallery visitors to place pins over the locations around the world where they had eaten dishes that could be described as curry, however broadly construed. In this way, the journey of spices was not being determined by their colonial and commoditized travels but by the intimate ways in which museumgoers experienced "curry" in their lives and through senses other than the visual. As Bhaumik notes, she wanted to find a way for curry to travel, and to chronicle the malleable meanings that accrue around the signifier of curry.[5]

At the heart of the exhibition was the issue of whether the odor of curry would have a disruptive effect on the other installations, because the smell refused to stay in place and migrated throughout the space of the museum. In essence, the private was out of place because it entered into the public realm. Bhaumik's exhibit suggests that such unruliness is an undesirable feature of immigrant and racialized bodies. Museums, after all, are typically ordered spaces where artwork remains in place and one is transported to a sanitized space where unruliness is kept at bay. Similarly, immigrants and refugees and people of color are reminded often of the unruliness of their bodies and of their foods, and where and how abject or aberrant bodies need to be mindful of the spaces they can occupy. But the refusal of Bhaumik's smell-oriented art to stay in place suggests that food creates unexpected adjacencies and intimacies. Smell, after all, does not remain in place but wafts where it wishes.

Race, as Elam et al. have suggested, is not merely a problem of visuality but one that stems from bodily inscriptions of otherness.[6] Bhaumik's curry art falls within the spectrum of edible metaphors that combine vision, taste, and smell. When an encounter with difference interrupts the experience of sociality, what might be some of the ways in which food, typically imagined as a source of comfort, can be reconfigured in order to productively mine the value of the space of discomfort, conflict, and the thorny, as Bhaumik so artfully renders explicit in her olfactory installations? Bhaumik notes that her desire to think about curry as art began when she read a post on a website in which someone complained about the smell of curry emanating from a neigh-

bor's home. To her question asking what she should do, another person posted the xenophobic response, "Call the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] and have them deported."[7] In this context, the complainant was making visible their overt racism and a refusal to accept the intimate proximity of the indelibly foreign-seeming body, wholly unassimilable to the nation. And the knee-jerk response (whether serious or not) to call the authorities accessed a narrative that those who embody difference deserve to be expelled from the nation. To wit, what kinds of questions can one ask about the radical asymmetries emerging from a culture of intolerance that structure what is deemed edible and inedible, who belongs and who doesn't?

I begin with this discussion of Bhaumik's art to center the questions that animate this book: How might the culinary be mobilized to strategically critique, advance, and contravene into discourses of intimacy? How do ideas of public and private become central in thinking about the provenance of food? In particular, how can food be used—not to tell us what people eat per se, but to illuminate how radical publics and intimate spaces of belonging (and unbelonging) are created for nonnormative subjects? With an intellectual debt to Michael Warner's work on publics and counterpublics, *Intimate Eating* argues that it is nearly impossible to imagine a social world without the existence of publics. "Publics," Warner argues, are "queer creatures."[8] In our heavily mediated worlds, many activities are oriented to publics. Whether they appear in the form of television, movies, or other visual and print media, texts cannot make meaning without their publics. Warner proceeds to argue that the publics that consume these media are not necessarily populated only by those who directly belong to our worlds, but also by those who function as strangers. A public, therefore, is at once familiar, intimate, and strange. I build on Warner's logics to ask what happens when eating occurs within the realm of the public. Further, the particular dynamics with which this book engages take seriously the notion that eating does not operate under an optics of color blindness or cultural deodorization.[9] Seeing queer bodies and bodies of color eating together produces different *narratives* of intimacy while also inviting different *kinds* of scrutiny of the bodies that are eating and the foods being prepared.

To this end, no two publics are the same across time or space. Yet markedly different power dynamics are at work when one shifts focus from thinking about eating within the realm of the private (the home) to consider instead how eating occurs within the realm of the public (restaurants, office spaces, food trucks). Recognizing that certain forms of intimacy occur within the

home via eating and cooking, this book examines how nonnormative intimacies can be brokered through food in the realm of the public. I look at how social worlds—the queer publics Michael Warner describes—are formed, mediated, and sustained through forms of eating with the recognition that different forms of sociality structure the experience of eating. Attending to the notion that eating publics contain ambiguities and contradictions, this book advances an understanding of the public that works with its possibilities but also recognizes its limitations. A public in and of itself is not radical. Rather, it is how one inhabits the space of the public, how one remakes the public, how one reshapes the public to accommodate difference beyond a vision of neoliberal multiculturalism that lends the intimate eating public its radical potential. The argument I put forth about the intimate eating public underscores that how one eats, consumes, and distributes food must reconfigure how we think about networks of intimacy beyond the familial, the heteronormative, the couple, and the nation.

What is an intimate eating public? I suggest that an intimate eating public is a vexed and contested space that is hybrid and evolving. Every act of eating with others, or alone, is a form of intimacy. And yet each gesture of eating is laced with multiple meanings that acquire differential public meanings. Eating is contingent on socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Whom we eat with, how we eat, and how these rituals are imagined are important, particularly in works that consciously rework how we think about the connection among eating, intimacy, and the public. *Intimate Eating* takes seriously the notion that whether eating occurs in a restaurant, at an office desk, after a cooking lesson, or after cooking with others, it establishes a form of kinship that refuses to be contained by narratives of heteronormativity. Therein lies the potential for radical intimacies to emerge.

Not all eating, however, focuses on public meanings. As Clare A. Sammells and Edmund Searles note, "the conspicuous consumption of public feasting seems an ancient and ubiquitous part of human sociality but this is distinct from the realm of quotidian eating in family homes, market stands, diners, and other less ostentatious spaces."[10] They also note that the term *semipublic* refers to the ambiguous, hybrid spaces that connect producers, merchants, and consumers to friend- or kin-based feasts, neighborhood restaurants, village markets, and roadside stands—places that are not quite private but not quite public either.[11] Following this lead, *Intimate Eating* focuses on narratives in which those who occupy the spaces where eating occurs intimately understand these spaces to cross the seemingly rigid demarcations that would

separate the public from the private. It is to this end that I use the term *intimate eating publics*, remaining cognizant that a commitment to tear down the structures of neoliberal multiculturalism belies the formation of this kind of radical eating public.

Within food studies, several scholars have attended to the collapse of the distinction of private and public that is, as Sammells and Searles note, "created, maintained or understood in semi-public dining spaces."[12] Further, Karla Erickson argues that restaurants often strive to reproduce the intimate, personal ambience of eating at home and are productively thought of as "third spaces."[13] Within studies of food and sociality, third spaces are something other than either domestic spaces or workplaces but are nonetheless essential for community building and public sociality. As restaurants incorporate elements of both commercial activities and noncommercial domesticity, they are somewhere in between public and private. This book engages with eating cultures where the lines between the public and the private are contextual and in flux, even as the boundaries between the two remain important. To wit, I argue that the boundaries between the public and the private are not arbitrary or meaningless. Rather, the public and the private intersect to create new spaces that give rise to alternative cultural imaginings that, at their best, reimagine radical possibilities for nonnormative bodies.

Within postcolonial and diaspora studies, however, third spaces carry an entirely different meaning. As Homi Bhabha notes, the third space is a "hybrid" space that doesn't simply emerge from a combination of the other two. Rather, the third space "displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority and new cultural logics."[14] In this book, I ask how these intimate eating publics are critical third spaces—both in culinary and in diasporic terms—wherein food, forms of eating, and commensality become sites from which to resist imperialist policies, homophobia, practices of racial profiling, and articulations of white supremacy.

To mine most productively the tension between the meanings of the third space in both food studies and postcolonial and transnational studies, I turn to works with an explicit transnational bent that also engage specifically with the culinary practices and rhetorics of transnational South Asian and Arab contexts. My archive for this book includes the South Asian film *The Lunchbox*; several popular memoirs including Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, Julie Powell's *Julie & Julia*, and the lesser-known *Ginger and Ganesh* by Nani Power; the romance novel *Bodies in Motion* by Mary Anne Mohanraj; the cooking show *The Great British Bake Off*; and two culinary art–inspired ventures, in-

cluding the now-defunct Conflict Kitchen and art installations by Michael Rakowitz titled *The Spoils of War* and *Enemy Kitchen*. I argue that this particular constellation of texts and cultural objects—spanning different locales across the United States (after September 11, 2001), the United Kingdom (after Brexit), and India—allows us to inquire into how racialized South Asian and Arab brown bodies become visible through acts of culinary intimacy at moments of heightened anxiety about brown and queer bodies. In assembling this particular archive, I look to works that do not neatly map onto areas of study that have often been privileged within the academy. Rather, I bring works together, in some ways following what Gayatri Gopinath dubs "queer curation." For Gopinath, a scholar of queer South Asian diasporas whose work has always inspired the way I think about cultural critique, acts of queer curation are fundamentally about caring for the objects one writes about while also attending to the ways that cultural analysis can go beyond revealing "coevalness or sameness." As Gopinath so wonderfully puts it, queer curation is about the "co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies and temporalities."[15] Assembling, finding, and documenting cultural texts—some that enjoy mainstream appeal and others that may be of only a fleeting interest to some—is part of a queer curatorial project. It is a way to reaffirm that cultural texts produced by QTBIPOC artists and writers are important regardless of the size of their audiences. In the data-driven neoliberal academy, we are always asked to document the value of certain fields of study. Numbers drive the game, and the small gets jettisoned. Queer curation is embedded instead in practices of care and aims to find connections among texts and cultural pasts that might seem discontinuous. To Gopinath's assessment I would add that this kind of methodological practice also takes seriously the study and exploration of texts that are deemed frivolous, unimportant, subliterary, or all three. Many of the objects I have assembled for this study are not important because of some perceived long-standing cultural value. In all likelihood, they will fade into obscurity within a decade. And yet they remain important because they allow us to reorient how we think about certain cultural processes while making legible the ways in which eating can be about possibilities and potentials other than securing the good life of heteronormative bliss.

In my own act of queer curation, then, I stage a conversation among this series of texts across varied locations to focus on the idea of how the act of eating within the realm of the public allows us to see where and how that act becomes freighted with meanings that go beyond normative understandings

of commensality. Discussion about South Asian and Arab transnational foodways are my focus because cuisines associated with South Asian and Arab subjectivities are often policed vigilantly and imagined to be out of place within the realm of the public. Although we might typically link these spaces through moments of war and neoliberal disaffection, my readings across the chapters suggest that we can also link them through the ways in which certain foodways allow us to think through the tension between "anxiety" and comfort (food). Because of its provenance among "enemy" nations, Arab cuisine is incredibly fraught in the United States. Restaurants that serve Iraqi food, for example, must often use more benign monikers such as "Middle Eastern." Similarly, South Asian food—often understood through its extremities of being too hot, too oily, too spicy, too pungent—also constantly has to negotiate the terms under which it is presented and consumed among its publics. Thus, each chapter examines how cultural texts strategically center the act of eating in the service of imagining different kinds of publics—ones that continually reimagine forms of belonging for marginalized bodies.

Across this book, I suggest that it is nearly impossible to imagine a social world without the existence of publics. And yet these publics are not necessarily populated only by those who directly belong to our worlds; they also include those who might more typically be considered strangers.[16] In turning my attention to the idea of the eating public, in this book I ask how social worlds are formed, mediated, and sustained through forms of eating, recognizing that different forms of sociality can structure the experience of eating. In attending to the world-building function of intimacy that Lauren Berlant describes, I look to the kinds of intimacies that "bypass the couple."[17] Berlant implicitly argues that what we can think of as minor intimacies develop alternate aesthetics and ways of being. Intimacy, as I understand it, is not about imagining lives teleologically oriented toward securing forms of normativity or couplehood that are buoyed by the desires of the nation. The desire for a normative kind of intimacy so easily eliminates from analysis those for whom access to this purported "good life"—intimacy with its continual attachment to heteronormative happiness—is not simply just unattainable but also often undesirable. I think here most specifically in the terms Berlant usefully provides. They note that this almost overbearingly hegemonic version of a kind of intimacy oriented toward a telos of heteronormative happiness is a kind of narrative or story. And yet, as they note, "those who don't or can't find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves."[18] To imagine how it is that the

queers, the singles, and the "something elses" find ways to create imaginable narratives is an important critical trajectory of this book.

As someone who separated from my spouse in my mid-forties, I find myself particularly compelled to hold space for these queer and queer-adjacent subjects who are often imagined as lamentable figures in need of rescue or pity. If these nonnormative subjects are so easily removed from these kinds of narratives to the extent that they can no longer even imagine ways forward, part of the task of Asian American literary and cultural critique is not merely to install these subjects as viable but to read narratives, broadly conceived, as ones that reorient us toward other forms of intimacy wherein the goal is not necessarily unmitigated happiness or securing the "good life" but—at the risk of sounding Pollyannaish—ways of being in the world that are radically fulfilling in other ways.

To this end, I take a page from the work of Asian American literary scholar Nicolyn Woodcock. In her article on forms of intimacy in Asian American literature, Woodcock poses the question of what worlds can be built when narratives of intimacy are placed at the center of reading Asian American literature and culture. Woodcock asserts that although "common sense suggests that personal relationships form as a result of choice, consent and affection—and that they are not the business of the state—thinking of the intimate contacts between Asian and American through such traditional notions conceals the forced nature of US imperial relations with the Asia-Pacific regions."[19] Although Woodcock's archive comprises works that directly engage forms of militarization, the heuristic she develops is useful insofar as it illuminates how the state and official apparatuses contravene into the most seemingly innocuous and nonpoliticized relationships in ways that enable or militate against certain kinds of intimacy.

Food studies, a wide-ranging interdisciplinary area of research that has received thorough scholarly attention, has become an established area of intellectual inquiry. Since I published *Culinary Fictions* in 2010, critical work in food studies has exploded, and academic and nonacademic presses continue to publish a range of titles in this area. Despite the growth of critical work in the field over the past two decades, a need remains for more politicized readings of food in the humanities that press on the radical possibilities for imagining commensality. Scores of volumes tell us what people eat and why they eat what they eat. But a critical lacuna (filled by only a handful of texts) exists that strategically centers the culinary, not to ask what people eat, but to treat the culinary as a starting point from which to inquire into how different

forms of embodiment—racial, sexual, and gendered—use food to dismantle the often stifling notion that we can overcome difference by eating together as a means of seeing the basic humanity of people whom we deem suspicious.[20] At heart, my particular intellectual intervention into food studies is to drive home the point that the culinary can serve as a heuristic to articulate nonnormative forms of intimacy that go beyond the idea of queerness as consonant with sexuality alone. To this end, my work owes an intellectual debt to the methodological orientations of queer of color critique. In particular, I work to unearth the multivalent gestures of pleasure and social justice that can underpin the modalities of eating.

The texts I work with all respond to contemporary social justice movements that highlight how late capitalist formations and neoliberalism have created spaces that are unrelentingly hostile to nonnormative bodies—queer, immigrant, female—that seem to be out of place and out of time. These texts use the discursive and affective value of food to enact their political and cultural work of imagining other worlds and possibilities. Although food is traditionally mobilized as a metaphor for the coming together of communities and the melding of differences, I argued against this logic in my previous work and sought instead to look at how food stigmatizes, isolates, and marginalizes communities of color, immigrants, single people, and queer people. The logic that eating together brings people together has always puzzled me, and I had only begun to think this through when I wrote *Culinary Fictions*. *Intimate Eating* presses this logic further by theorizing what we can think of as neoliberal multiculturalism. Taking a cue from my previous work on palatability, I argue that we must understand neoliberalism as a force that structures multiculturalism in ways that celebrate normative forms of difference. Neoliberal multiculturalism names the kinds of difference that insist on a vision of familiality and familiarity securely bound up with normative understandings of personhood, family, and nation. Those who are queer, single, and otherwise nonnormative fall outside of this vision of multiculturalism precisely because they are too messy and complicated. A main trajectory in this book is to center those cultural objects and narratives that would strategically upend narratives of normative normalcy as the necessary end goal of eating together. The intimate eating public, I argue, is one necessarily at odds with this vision of neoliberal multiculturalism, and it responds to and reframes its underlying investments that often feel oppressive to those who do not fit so easily within a vision of a carefully curated multicultural, neoliberal nation.

At the same time that neoliberal multiculturalism orients itself toward a vision of coexistence that would see all differences as equal and desirable, it successfully reproduces its ideological investments by overtly valorizing forms of eating that take place within the private home. The home, after all, is a central apparatus for imagining and securing the "good life." And the dinner table in particular is that vital site where normative families reproduce themselves. *Except when they don't*. I have never understood why so much emphasis is placed on families eating together because, to be brutally honest, I hated family dinners. If anything, the latent hostility around my family dining table was a daily reminder of the artifice necessary to maintain the illusion that heteronormative familial arrangements were in any way, shape, or form beneficial to women and nonnormative subjects. For me, the dining table and mealtimes were always incredibly fraught. I grew up in a very traditional nuclear family, and my mother labored tirelessly every day to ensure my brother, father, and I had warm meals and fresh food.

As I grew up as a part of the South Asian diaspora in Malaysia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, eating was as much about keeping the family together as it was about retaining and affirming cultural knowledge of Indianness. Everything was meticulously chopped and prepared by hand. Despite it being the 1980s, my mother never used shortcuts in her kitchen. Cooking was a labor of love for my mother, but it was also a respite from my father's unpredictable and toxic behavior. In the kitchen, she maintained autonomy. And still, despite knowing her food might be criticized, she labored to produce elaborate dishes for every meal. Canned foods were never part of our diet, nor were ready-made meals. My mother was raising two children in the diaspora, and she wanted us to grow up knowing Indian food. But mealtimes were always tense, in large part because of my father. For all intents and purposes he was an unyielding and exacting patriarch. At the dinner table, this took the form of his incredibly judgmental attitudes about the food my mother cooked. If she accidentally added too much chili powder, or perhaps not enough salt to the sambar or dal, he would fling the dish across the table and deem it inedible. If the *chapattis* weren't fresh, he would complain. If my mother prepared carrots, coconut, beets—any ingredients he did not like—he would yell at her because she seemingly did not care about his tastes. If she made eggplant for a second day in a row (never mind that he refused to drive her to the grocery store to buy other vegetables), we would all hear about it.

To this day, I hate eggplant with a fierceness that can only be understood with this history in mind. The caprice with which my father would judge meals

as good, bad, or inedible made for incredibly tense meals. I would never know what might set him off, and although most meals passed with relative calm, a cloud always loomed overhead, threatening to drench us in an outpouring of my father's anger du jour. As a child I would eat as quickly as possible—sometimes not eating as much as I wanted to—and then escape to the kitchen to do the dishes before retreating to my room to do homework. In this way, I could avoid being accused of being lazy; after all, I was helping my mother do the housework. At the same time, doing the dishes allowed me to orient my body away from my father. The sound of running water would drown out the sound of his voice. I always heard my mother's voice gently cajoling me: "Just be nice." "Don't talk back, it'll be easier for you." "I'll bring you some *anna mosuru* [rice with plain yogurt] to your room later if you're still hungry." "Do it for me." I can barely write these words without tearing up at the thought of how much work my mother put into cooking, knowing it was thankless labor and would often result in painful admonishment. There is no recipe that allows one to produce the kind of meal that will always satisfy the capricious and yet predictably toxic desires of heteronormative cis male patriarchy.

To say I hated family mealtimes is an understatement, and yet for some reason, we always sat down together as a family for every meal throughout the entirety of my childhood. I can only understand this as the external manifestation of an ideological orientation that both my parents had so successfully internalized. Domesticity called for, even demanded, families eating together. Indeed, the seams of heteronormative normalcy and intimacy were stitched together by what sometimes felt like a laughably lamentable attempt to adhere to the notion that the family that eats together stays together.

And yet, the dining table was also the site of other anxieties. It was where my father would hold court and verbally lambast my brother, my mother, and me for our perceived failings and indiscretions. To this day, unless I am hosting a dinner party, I find it incredibly difficult to sit at a dining table for an everyday meal. The silence at the dining table I now have, as a single woman—that I so craved as a child—is deafening because it feels like too little, too late. Eventually, a time came when my nuclear family ceased speaking to one another. My brother hasn't spoken to or seen my parents since 1994. I tolerate my father but I hold my mother very dear to my heart. I am the only person in my family who speaks to all three other members of the family, and I weary of it. Eating together certainly did not do its ideological work of saving this family.

At the age of eighteen, I left Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, and went to college as far away as I could—two hemispheres away, in Madison, Wis-

consin. There I had a temporary respite from these forms of eating. I learned to enjoy meals and not be constantly on edge—something I kept with me through my graduate school days in Amherst, Massachusetts. Sadly, that feeling also eventually disappeared a few years into my marriage when my then-husband decided to become vegetarian and refused to eat anything I cooked. The injury to me felt particularly acute because we had fallen in love over meals and I had painstakingly learned to make the foods that my white Midwestern husband loved: meatloaf, lasagna, macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes. Once again, mealtimes felt fraught. I love meat with a zeal that might be unbecoming of a lapsed Brahmin. I would cook for myself and he would eat frozen foods because I had zero interest in preparing two meals, especially if one involved piercing holes in plastic film and heating it in a microwave. I had not developed a robust and enviable set of culinary skills only to have them jettisoned in favor of Michelina's finest cheesy ziti. Going out for meals also became less interesting because he would insist on not sharing food. His meal was his and my hand would be playfully swatted away if I reached for a bite from his plate. We would only order as much food as we could eat and never try new dishes.

Eventually I tired of this nonsense, and around the same time I became friends with a queer man who shared my passion for food. During our commutes home from Oxford, Ohio, where we both worked, we would take circuitous paths back to the apartment building where we lived in Cincinnati to find the hidden culinary gems of our city, often located in the suburbs and occasionally across the river in nearby Kentucky. Meals became fun again. My friend and I would order more food than we could possibly consume. We would try all manner of immigrant food available in our city: Uzbek, Korean, Nepalese, Somali, Pakistani, Szechuan. Aware that it might appear unseemly to have too much fun with a man other than the one I was married to, I would try to include my husband on some of these culinary adventures. Despite repeat invitations, however, my husband would refuse to join us, saying that he would be left out of the conversation because my friend and I would inevitably not only want to talk about what we loved about this particular meal, but proceed to plan future meals. "All you and your fussband do is talk about food. I have nothing to say," my straight husband would complain. *Fussband* was his slightly derogatory and homophobic moniker for my friend: a portmanteau of "food husband" and a nod to the episode of *The Simpsons* called "The Food Wife." It wasn't long before I ceased inviting him to meals out with my friend. And it wasn't long thereafter that we ceased to be, period.

But of course we would have to eat with friends on other occasions. I have been fortunate to have friends who will meticulously plan meals and culinary itineraries if they know I am along for the ride. Often the excuse would be that I was a minor expert on food studies and so they needed to meet my expectations and standards. What can I say? Writing about food has its perks. I rarely have a bad meal when out with friends; it more often occurs when strangers invite me to a meal. On the rare occasion when my husband ate with us, my friends would sigh when I mentioned he was joining us. "Does he have to?" they would ask. "He's so fussy and seems to hate food. Why are you married to him anyway?" Perhaps they knew something about my failing marriage that I did not.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, we eventually divorced. I had noted how our meals had gradually become unpleasant over time. Although I can now describe the events with a clarity unavailable to me at the time, I barely noticed then how meals with my husband had progressively become as affectively fraught as the ones with my family. There was never the threat of physical abuse, but meals did not bring us together. Indeed, nothing about eating together helped to buttress our heteronormative familial arrangement. Rather, over time, eating with my friends and my queer *familia* became what sustained me. At home, food did not bring me closer to the ones I was supposed to love—my father, my brother, my husband. I experienced love, warmth, and friendship only when I sat down to meals with my chosen family of QTBIPOC. Occasionally I cooked for friends, but more often than not, feelings of joy came from shared meals in intimate public spaces with people whom I chose as family.

I share this rather long and noncontinuous history of my own fraught experiences with domesticity and shared meals as a way to drive home a minor but significant point. In my experience, meals rarely worked to maintain the smooth workings of heteronormativity. Familial intimacy required much more than shared meals. It required acts of caring and the kind of emotional labor that often goes unremarked when thinking about food. And at the same time that I was all too aware of how fraught eating in the domestic space could be, I found reprieve during meals eaten with friends in public spaces, most notably restaurants and occasionally in the semipublic spaces of our offices.

In the years after my divorce I was also able to find immense pleasure in solo dining. For a woman to eat alone is to invite pity, fear, or even reproach. But my own experiences with eating alone led me to find intimacy—good and bad—in unexpected places. I've often been told I have a kind face (despite my attempts to cultivate resting bitch face and my incredibly dexterous skills

when it comes to throwing shade) and perhaps that is why strangers often come up to me when I am eating alone, inquire about what I am eating (I often order unusual things), and offer unsolicited opinions about their admiration of me for eating alone, my choice of meal, or the mere fact that I seem to actually enjoy eating. Waiters—usually men—are often delighted that I want a table of my own and that I want to linger over my meal. They frequently offer me small tasting portions (sometimes framed as being compliments of the chef) or tell me about the meal because I am clearly there for the food. On one occasion, at a restaurant with three Michelin stars, one of the waiters was so impressed that I lingered for three hours over a very expensive meal that he presented me with a copy of the leather-bound menu from the fabled restaurant. I had asked for a copy of the tasting menu, which he could not find. He returned with the menu, pressed it toward me, placed a finger to his lips, and said, "Shhh. Tell no one about this. It's my gift to you for so obviously enjoying your meal." In this way, strangers become intimate—albeit briefly—for the duration of my meal.

The pleasure of the solo meal is hard to explain. It is not always about securing happiness; it can be about a different kind of affective fulfillment. With apologies to Virginia Woolf, rather than a room of my own in which to write, what I really wanted was a table of my own.

Thus, building on my previous work, I posit that in this archive I have assembled, the culinary is central to an effort to imagine more just and democratic forms of political belonging that enhance our understanding of the work intimacy can do. Exploring these visions and the constructed worlds that enact these imaginings is central to this book. Buoyed by work in queer studies, critical ethnic studies, and studies of intimacy, this book problematizes how reformulated nationalisms and transnational subjectivities presented in even the most progressive of texts can often implicitly reproduce the idea that eating together can form new and more democratic publics. To this end, I implicitly suggest that even progressive texts that represent eating together can reproduce neoliberal ideologies.

Intimate Eating gestures to the possibility of understanding citizenship and human coexistence in new ways. In so doing it provides an account of how and why QTBIPOC subjects look radically different when we more stringently take stock of the ways in which how, where, and what we eat, smell, and see are related to how we shape, and are constructed by, our racial and ethnic worlds. At the same time, this book also urges us to consider how eating can be a form of sociality that operates at many levels—with the self (solitary), among strang-

ers, and across generations. The book is an effort to press the implications of how cultural narratives strategically deploy food to posit the formation of alternative spaces of intimacy and belonging that traverse the private and the public to challenge this normative understanding of food that is always already about ushering in comfort and national belonging.

The first two chapters are closely related; they take up questions about the individual diner or stranger who strategically deploys the culinary to transform notions about intimacy and eating publics. I begin with the figure of the individual because we so often imagine dining and sociality to be about conviviality that is often exclusively about forms of kinship structured around normative structures like the couple or the family. And yet, what are the ways that a public can emerge around a solitary figure? To begin with the figure of the single is to center on the figure of the queer eater and to dislodge the notion that to eat alone is to embody the abject or to be misanthropic or a failed subject. Foregrounding forms of solitary eating is this book's way of asking us to decenter normative couplings that so often structure how eating is imagined. Even as the realities of many lives do not abide by these strictures of normativity, it is worth considering how pervasively the hegemonic ideal of commensality maps onto the cultural imagination. Together, these chapters examine how public spaces of cooking, and performances of cooking, become venues to articulate new kinds of intimacies that subtly work against a mandated form of heteronormative coupling. I argue that each text creates a space from which to imagine cooking and eating to be queer acts about satisfying one's needs as a single person or one's desires that exceed the strictures of marriage or coupling.

In chapter 1, I provide a close reading of the independent film *The Lunchbox*. As context, each day in the crowded city of Mumbai, five thousand men in white outfits (dubbed *dabbawallas*) rely exclusively on public transportation to transport 175,000 lunches across the massive city. The exclusively male workforce retrieves the iconic tiffin boxes from domestic spaces across the city and delivers them to office buildings in Mumbai, transporting meals each day from mothers, wives, and daughters to husbands, fathers, and sons. This system of dabbawallas—in place since the days of British colonialism—is a hallmark of this thriving cityscape and continues to serve as an iconic example of a successful form of business that is largely driven by labor-intensive work and navigation of public space. I begin with this chapter because the dabbawalla is an essential figure who allows the private to enter the public. He is a broker

of a kind of intimacy that can occur within the public space. And yet, despite being the person who is constantly in proximity to the food itself, the nature of his position as alienated labor prevents him from establishing any kind of intimate kinship with the families he serves.

Chapter 1 focuses less on the travels and travails of the figure of the dabbawalla, and more on the narrative of intimacy that emerges within the film. An epistolary film, *The Lunchbox* explores what it means for the lunchbox to traverse the space of the city, from stranger to stranger, through an error in a seemingly perfect system. Using public transportation, the dabbawallas deliver home-cooked meals to offices with remarkable accuracy. *The Lunchbox* is about a potentially grievous error in a system where errors are few and far between. What if the wrong dabba goes to the wrong workplace? In the film, Ila's dabba accidentally ends up at the desk of Saajan Fernandes, a stranger. The pattern continues and each day Saajan returns the lunchbox with a note, and thus develops an epistolary romance of sorts. In closely examining this film, I explore the intimacy that develops across public and private spaces among strangers who never meet but form an intimate public simply through the act of sharing meals and letters.

Developing the idea that intimate eating publics often explode the binary between the public and the private, chapter 2 hones in on narratives of eating alone. The chapter juxtaposes two distinct kinds of cultural work. The first is a series of photos of people dining alone. In the series of photos taken by New York–based photographer Miho Aikawa, one notices the various ways in which individuals are photographed eating alone. Aikawa's photos are fascinating because of the ways in which they train us to reorient our gaze on the solo diner. What if, instead of seeing isolation and a lack of happiness, we saw scenes of solo eating as profound acts of intimacy brokered by a radically different relationship between the diner and their meal? The other work to which I turn in this chapter is *Bodies in Motion*, a diasporic romance novel by the Sri Lankan American writer, Mary Anne Mohanraj.

Although the novel narrates the story of a multigenerational Sri Lankan family in diaspora, it also includes the perspective of a female character who does not migrate. The single woman, deemed unworthy of marriage because she is not attractive enough and does not possess the cultural capital to make her worthy of entering into the marriage contract, is the one left behind—the single woman who is seemingly incapable of being loved—in stark contrast to the large family whose members all attain mobility and move to various nodes

of the Sri Lankan diaspora. Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam and Michael Cobb, I read the figure of the single woman who cooks for herself as a queer agent, not as a failed subject.

Centering on the scenes of cooking in the novel, my analysis asks what it means to stay in place and to want to earn the right to not migrate; or, to use Alicia Schmidt Camacho's terms, what might "el derecho de no migrar" look like for a woman whose desires cannot be accounted for via a teleological narrative of heteronormative migration?[21] I argue that the single nonmigrant female in this novel is a kind of queer failure in the terms Jack Halberstam might use to advance a critique of the typical teleological narrative of migration. As someone who eats alone but also is aware of how people watch her eat, the character Mangai creates an intimate eating public by deliberately creating a hybrid space wherein the private becomes public.

The last three chapters turn to the field of visual culture, public art, cooking shows, and digital space. I examine art installations that prompt engagements with the viscerality of race, empire, and globalization, and the use of digital media to construct intimate eating publics. Whereas chapters 1 and 2 focus on the idea of how intimate eating publics coalesce around the figure of the solitary eater, chapters 3, 4, and 5 turn to different modalities of alienation and commensality. The third chapter describes work where seemingly alienated individuals in large cities turn to online communities (the blogosphere and Craigslist) to create forms of intimacy with strangers. To a large extent, the chapter focuses on exploring the *rhetorical strategies* that bring strangers into close quarters. The fourth chapter extends this logic to some extent by looking to the *cultural logics* that very strategically bring strangers together to share meals in public spaces. Chapter 5 turns to a much beloved cooking show where strangers cook together. In sum, these chapters advance a critical reading practice that helps us to see that shared acts of eating can help us to identify the distinction among cultural differences and cultural diversity.

Chapter 3 moves away from writing *by* Asian Americans to look at work *about* Asian Americans. As its starting point, it examines Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007), a memoir that immediately captured the fancy of middle-class white women everywhere. Chronicling the travails of one year of her life, *Eat, Pray, Love* was among the first of a new wave of neoliberal feminist writings that centered on the growth of a white female feminist—seeking refuge in otherness—over the course of a year. Not unlike *Eat, Pray, Love* are two other memoirs, Julie Powell's *Julie & Julia* and Nani Power's *Gin-*

ger and Ganesh. This chapter examines this pair of culinary texts, similarly organized, that turn to digital media to build a narrative about a year-long experiment with food. Through this juxtaposition of two very similar texts, the chapter sets in motion a debate about how Asian Americanist critique can further our understanding of this subgenre of internet-based writing. Whereas most of the texts examined in this book actively refute neoliberal multiculturalism as a means of building an intimate eating public, the books explored in this chapter most explicitly *rely* on the tenets of neoliberal multiculturalism. Although my analysis remains critical of the latent implications of each text, I am not denigrating the value of either one nor dismissing their potential to articulate female subjectivity through the lens of the culinary. Rather, my interest in these particular texts derives from wanting to make sense of how writings by avowed feminists who make use of the internet to construct a form of gendered solidarity that ostensibly crosses lines of age, race, and class might also produce familiar neoliberal Orientalist orthodoxies that continue to marginalize communities of color, particularly women of color, in ways that mark a deep anxiety about the position of the middle-class white feminist in the contemporary racial moment. I examine how these texts use food to apparently build intimacy within the hybrid spaces of home/blog/memoir while at the same time producing narratives of white privilege.

Developing the thread of how intimacy is created in public spaces, chapter 4 turns to a very different example. In this chapter, I explore how the figure of the "enemy" is constructed in public culinary sites. The spaces I examine are Michael Rakowitz's performance art installation *Enemy Kitchen*, and Conflict Kitchen, a now-defunct takeout restaurant in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Briefly, both of these are art installations devoted to the dissemination of culinary knowledge about nations and spaces the post-9/11 US nation-state has deemed enemy territories. Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen* is a public art project that explores the relation between hospitality and hostility. Rakowitz and his mother collected and compiled recipes from the Baghdad area. They turned these recipes into dishes that US veterans of the Iraq War served from a food truck designed by the artist. Conflict Kitchen was a restaurant that served cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict. Each Conflict Kitchen iteration was augmented by events, performances, publications, and discussions that sought to expand the public's engagement with the culture, politics, and issues at stake within the region of focus. The restaurant rotated identities in relation to current geopolitical events.

In juxtaposing these sites and exploring the performative politics deployed within each context, I ask what it means to turn to the tactile, olfactory, and palatal in order to reflect on questions of US diplomacy and foreign policy that have advanced cultural xenophobia in the wake of the war on terror and 9/11. By focusing on the use of what I describe as "radical hospitality," I ask how meals in Rakowitz's art installations and the curated meals and menus of Conflict Kitchen become spaces to provide a counternarrative to xenophobia and the discourse of the enemy combatant. The very idea of hospitality is suggestive of the need for a public. As Michael Hernandez notes, "in the process of going out to eat, we enter a social world, taking part in a play of sociability within the confines of the marketplace."[22] This play of sociability, I suggest, is a hallmark of radical hospitality, wherein the diner necessarily enters into this sociable world and is invited to reflect on the profound inequities that structure eating worlds. To be welcomed into spaces like Conflict Kitchen or *Enemy Kitchen* is also to be invited to recognize that a different modality of sociability needs to be enacted for subjects who are often refused hospitality. Creating public spaces that welcome the presence of subjects and cuisines that have been treated with hostility, I argue, is central to the form of radical hospitality that animates these spaces. Creating a different kind of public that allows for productive intimacies to take place through the consumption and preparation of "enemy" food is one way to think about how the intimate eating public allows for the thoughtful and critical consumption of food.

The final chapter follows on the heels of the previous one by turning to the immensely popular television baking show *The Great British Bake Off*. Where Conflict Kitchen and *Enemy Kitchen* are provisional spaces or third spaces that center on the formation of an intimate public, the forms of intimacy in *The Great British Bake Off* emerge within the provisional space of the white baking tent, where a group of ten to twelve home cooks from across Britain gather week after week to bake all manner of sweets and savories. Not home, not office, and not restaurant, this space is yet another in which networks of affiliation, though provisional, serve to construct an image of a nation that establishes and renews its links in the intimate public sphere. The nation becomes an intimate space wherein baking together forms the basis of a shared vision of the future. Although the actors themselves are important to this vision of a nation in which centrifugal forces bring people together, the baking ingredients also establish the ethos of this nation's imaginary. I argue that in its construction of a multicultural, postcolonial utopia away from the realities of

an exclusionary post-Brexit United Kingdom, race plays an important part in defining what can be baked into quintessentially British fare. Examining the role of the three South Asians who have appeared on the show (notably the season 6 winner, Nadiya Hussain), I explore how race and sensory difference play an important role in creating a sense of comfort on the popular baking show. I show how South Asian spices have a special place in every season of *The Great British Bake Off*; bakers have attempted to fuse curries, masalas, and chutneys with traditional fare. For the most part, the judges convey excitement at the prospect of a successful dish that would represent the ethnic flavors and spices of Britain's former colonies. I argue, however, that the domestication of Indian ingredients in UK kitchens and pantries also requires that we consider which aspects are rendered assimilable in order to enhance the flavor of British baked goods against the kinds of pungent spices that are seen as being too excessively foreign.

Collectively, these chapters signal a way forward in navigating the contours of imagining intimate eating publics that are undergirded by a logic of challenging the status quo. These spaces of eating are not simply about imagining food as that which brings people together; to the contrary, the sum total of stories and narratives that emerge from these chapters allows us to imagine alternate, queer, and often radical ways that marginalized communities can find spaces of belonging amid a world that is structured to obscure and often deny their existence.

Introduction

1 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 139.
2 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 139.
3 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 140.
4 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 140.
5 For further details about this exhibit, including details about the materials used to make the exhibit, see Sita Bhaumik's website, http://www.sitabhaumik.com/the-curry-institute (accessed February 7, 2020).
6 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 141.
7 Elam et al., "Beyond the Face," 141.
8 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 5.
9 For Koichi Iwabuchi, cultural deodorization is a process by which traces of foreignness are removed from commodities as they enter a global market. As he notes, "The cultural odor of a product is also closely associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin." Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, 128.
10 Sammells and Searles, "Restaurants, Fields, Markets, and Feasts," 129.
11 Sammells and Searles, "Restaurants, Fields, Markets, and Feasts," 130.
12 Sammells and Searles, "Restaurants, Fields, Markets, and Feasts," 130.
13 Erickson, quoted in Sammells and Searles, "Restaurants, Fields, Markets, and Feasts," 130.
14 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 37.
15 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 4.
16 For a useful discussion on the role of the stranger and how the immigrant or racially marked body is often deemed to be a stranger who is out of place, see Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters*.
17 Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," 285.

18 Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," 286.
19 Woodcock, "Narratives of Intimacy," 1044.
20 In large part this idea has been the driving impetus behind the 2020 series *Taste the Nation*, hosted by Padma Lakshmi. As she tours the United States sampling various immigrant and Indigenous cuisines, her show drives home the point that food is complex and helps us to understand the lives of immigrants who make up the nation. The show is not without its detractors. As Bettina Makalintal notes, "The language of 'food unites us,' as it's sold in shows and stories like these, suggests that because we eat similarly, our beliefs must be more similar than we think. Through food, we are all American—or at least, that's the tale these shows want us to believe. But as nice as this idea is—as much as it inspires a wholesome image of a communal American table—who is this narrative meant for, and who does it ultimately serve?" See Makalintal, "Does Food Actually Unite Us?"
21 Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 4.
22 Hernandez, "Forming Family Identity," 22.

Chapter 1. The Tiffin Box and Gendered Mobility

1 Although Harris uses the spelling *dabbawallah*, several transliterations exist, including *dabbawalla*, *dabbawala*, *dabavala*, and variants thereof. For consistency I use the spelling *dabbawalla* unless the word is spelled otherwise in the source material.
2 Harris, "An Indian Appetizer, Subtly Spiced."
3 Patkar, "In Conversation with: Valay Shende."
4 Krishnamachari, "An Interview with Bose Krishnamachari."
5 Krishnamachari, "An Interview with Bose Krishnamachari."
6 Seen and Gaensheimer, *Subodh Gupta: Everything Is Inside*.
7 For an important and interesting reading about the materials Gupta uses in his art, see Allie Biswas's "Dialectics of the Local and Global in the Work of Subodh Gupta." There, Biswas discusses the historical importance behind each of the natural and human-made materials that Gupta uses. She usefully notes that many of Gupta's installations use stainless steel, a material that is commonplace in Indian home kitchens. And indeed, the dabbas in *Faith Matters* are made of stainless steel and speak to a moment in India's history that saw the ascension of stainless steel as the material of choice for most cooking utensils and eating ware among the Indian middle class.
8 Conlon, "Dining Out in Bombay," 115.
9 Bose Krishnamachari quoted in Mehta, "Think Out of the Dabba."
10 Mehta, "Think Out of the Dabba."
11 Marathi is the main, and official, language of Maharashtra, the state that is home to many of the dabbawallas.
12 The word *tiffin* is used interchangeably with *dabba* and refers to the actual stainless-steel tiered lunchbox. The person who transports the meals is known as a dabbawalla.