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## In Situ 2010 vol. 2: University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate Research Journal

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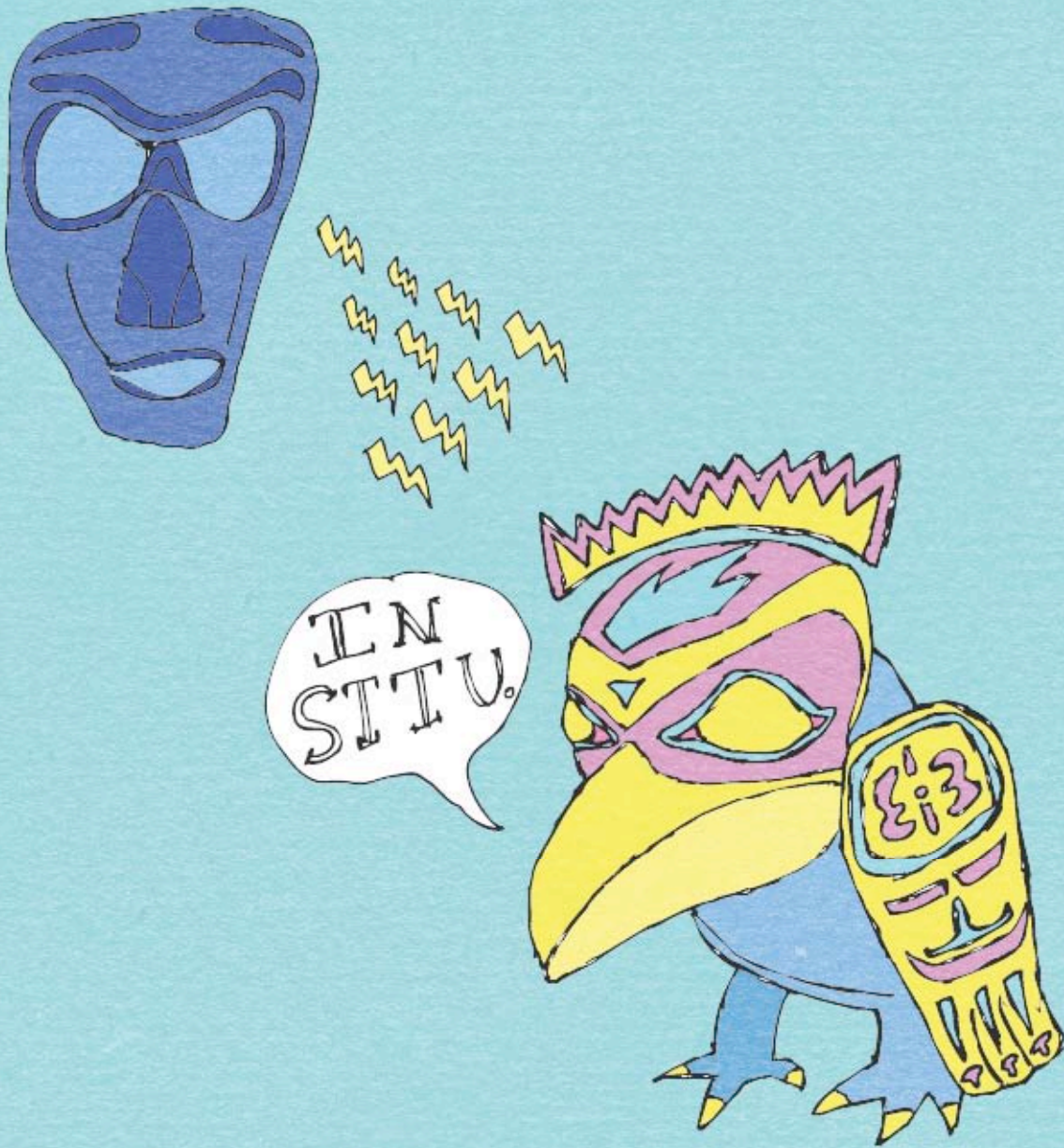
## In Situ 2010 vol. 2: University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate Research Journal

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**E D I T O R I A L  
B O A R D**

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**C O V E R  
D E S I G N**

Francis Tseng

# EDITOR'S PREFACE

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We proudly present to you the second volume of *In Situ*, the Undergraduate Journal of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

This text itself is a small precipitate of the diverse and rigorous intellectual work undertaken by undergraduates in anthropological research throughout the semester. The following collection of works crystallizes around the amorphous and indefinable theme of culture and its manifestations in lived experiences of sexuality, identity, food, and technology. Using a variety of research methods, from ethnography to archival investigations, these works highlight the multiplicity with which we understand and engage with culture and its articulations, both collectively and through personal, idiosyncratic experience.

The following works included in this volume were nominated by faculty mentors from a diverse range of Anthropology courses and were chosen based on originality, clarity, and excellence. We would like to thank faculty who nominated student papers for inclusion in this volume. We would also like to thank Dr. Adriana Petryna, the undergraduate Chair of Anthropology, for her support and guidance, as well as Charlene Kwon, the Undergraduate Coordinator. Lastly, we would like to thank Francis Tseng, the cover designer, for his original and striking artwork.

If you would like to submit to *In Situ*'s Spring 2010 edition, apply to the *In Situ* Editorial Board, or learn more about the Undergraduate Anthropology Society and its upcoming activities, please visit the Undergraduate Program tab on the Penn Anthropology website for more information: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro>.

Thank you for reading,

Lauren Kapsalakis  
Chair, Undergraduate Anthropology Society

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Molly Hude

*Two Burners*

**Molly Hude** is a junior majoring in Anthropology. She spent her summer conducting an ethnographic study of personality development and identity formation at the Burning Man Festival in Black Rock City, Nevada. This photograph depicts “two burners, fiendishly dressed to watch the Temple Burn on Sunday evening, the last night of Burning Man, it's culminating, and most emotional, event.”

## **AN APPRAISAL OF SIX ETHNOGRAPHIC WORKS ON THE THEME OF URBAN SEXUALITY**

Lana Z. Porter

Anthropological approaches to urban sexuality must reconcile the a priori meanings inscribed in the term, the subjective experience of it in everyday life, and the ways that it is imposed, regulated or constructed by the city-state. That 'sexuality' can signify so many different things (reproduction, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexism, etc) allows great breadth in the kinds of situations, life worlds and locales one can study and in the kinds the analyses and theoretical structurings one can perform, but also requires careful attention to terminology, particularly regarding the distinction between sex and gender. Anthropologists employ various theoretical schema in the study of sexuality, incorporating the work of feminist and queer theorists, linguists, geographers and biologists, and one's orientation to and experience within these disciplines comes to bear on the type of ethnography that is produced. The following ethnographies of (or relating to) urban sexuality come from Western (or Westernized) departments of anthropology, and as such follow the tradition of inscription, transcription, and (thick) description as their methodological and explanatory model. Some take specific practices or acts as the starting points for their discussions of sexuality, while others look more broadly at the day to day of certain populations and observe the way sexuality is a constitutive part of urban life.

This collection of ethnographies reveals the ways in which sexuality connects synecdochically to broader issues of identity, desire, and survival. Sexuality is at once deeply personal yet universal; it is a force of agency yet a force for subjection. One endeavors to construct identity, subjectivity, and "boundaries of the self" (vis-à-vis sex and gender, the body, behaviors, history and values) in order to fulfill one's desires (physical, material, etc) and in order to survive (in the market and on the street), but in doing so must confront various tensions and dichotomies (public and private, active and passive, insider and outsider, for example). Here, the city is the sticking-place of this struggle. Using identity, desire and survival as themes-to-think-with, I will explore how seven different anthropologists take up urban sexuality in six very different ethnographies about such disparate topics as transvestites in Brazil and advice hotlines in China.



C.J. Fuller and Harpriya Narasimhan's ethnography "Information Technology Professionals and the New-Rich Middle Class in Chennai (Madras)" India demonstrates how the women of the 'informational global' economy are on seemingly equal footing with their male counterparts but must still negotiate the fault lines between traditional family values and expectations and new economic and social freedoms. Fuller and Narasimhan note that, while there may not be a gender bias or difference in technical skills, the role of women as wives, mothers and daughters, particularly as seen by potential husbands, parents, and parents-in-law, comes into question or is reconstituted by their participation in this new sector. The man's desire for a stay at home wife, the parents' fear that close proximity to young men in the workplace will lead to sexual misconduct and mar the daughter's reputation, the woman's sense of priority between work and home, and her ability to contribute economically to the home are some of the ways sexuality in the form of gender expectations manifests in the IT industry, which the authors characterize as a modernizing element of Indian society and credit with the emergence of a "new-rich" middle class. Traditional notions of sexuality prevent the industry from actually "revolutioniz[ing] the position of women in India."

In "Phone-to-Phone, Heart-to-Heart," Kathleen Erwin also examines the collision of old ideologies and new technologies and subjectivities in her discussion of advice hotlines in China, which serve to open up discussions about sexuality, gender and marriage yet impose state notions of what is good and what is proper. Erwin frames the emergence of the hotlines within the context of the modernization of China: the technological capability to have hotlines, the 'intimacy and anonymity' they enable, and types of open discussion they elicit. That citizens, male and female, voiced their desires for 'satisfying sexual relationships' was seen as truly modern. Yet the advice offered by the counselors embodied ideals about gender roles, health and family values that were sanctioned by the state; the state "overheard" the personal details callers shared. Calling upon Foucault's notion of biopower, Erwin suggests that, while under the guise of modernity and liberation, "...the flourishing public discussions of sexuality via hotlines may point to new insertion of discursive and disciplining power" (p. 168).

Emma Tarlo's piece "Hijab in London" explores notions of sexuality, religion, regulation and multiculturalism with regard to women's decisions to adopt hijab. Looking at the experiences of several women who have directly or indirectly dealt with the practice of wearing hijab and situating them within the (over)celebrated multiculturalism of the global city of London, Tarlo's discussion of sexuality stems from the importance of the distinction between visibility and invisibility and public and private in Islam. She points out that while the covering of the hair and other parts of the body

makes them invisible – removes them from public view (in an effort to protect modesty, avert or hamper the male gaze and, in some senses, de-sexualize), hijab ‘make women visible as Muslims.’ Adoption of hijab can allow a woman to feel more like a part of the Muslim community, or it can alienate her from or create unease among non-Muslims. Here, identity is intertwined with the competing desires to belong and to maintain autonomy, for the survival of honor and one’s own survival among peers and non-Muslims. As a backdrop for this struggle, the global city complicates notions of agency and autonomy. Large population, diversity, and neoliberal economic policies render the postmodern assertion of difference via individual agency possible, yet the expression of individuality can be seen as threatening or subversive to the state. The French government perceived hijab as a threat to the integration of the state and as a form of religious oppression, but, as Tarlo demonstrates, hijab can act as a liberating force for some women.

Radhika Chopra’s ethnography, “Invisible Men,” examines veiling practices and the adoption of “effeminate” behaviors among male domestic workers in urban North India. Focusing on “...veiling practices as a way of undoing or decomposing gender” (p. 156), Chopra discusses the ways workers confront issues of visibility and invisibility, public and private, and insider and outsider. The men who seek domestic jobs are perceived as threatening because they are outsiders/migrants and male, so the adjustment of behaviors (de-masculinization) in order to put potential employers at ease is a strategy for economic survival. The ability to earn a living comes at the price of altering the self. Effeminacy and ‘muting’ of the body counteract the dangers of male sexuality (which is more dangerous in the city, where population density affords anonymity) and prepare the worker for life in the domestic sphere, a place that is divided and which the worker must learn to navigate according to the “rules of exclusion, permission, and prohibition” (p. 160). Chopra supplements her ethnography with linguistic analysis of the terms and names used within the home among members of the family and domestic workers. Speech, appearance and gesture make up the “frontier of dispositions” unique to the domestic worker. Chopra does not address her own experience in conducting fieldwork, nor does she include many quotations or passages from her field notes; as an insider in North India yet and outsider in the homes of her informants, an appraisal or analysis of her own gendered subjectivity in conducting her fieldwork might have benefitted the piece.

Don Kulick offers an ‘ethnomethodological’ and feminist/historical study of urban sexuality in his ethnography of transvestites in Salvador, Brazil. Rather than concentrating on one practice or act, Kulick (who, in his introduction, mentions his own homosexuality and how it comes into play)

sets out to study the life worlds of his travesti informants and “the ways in which gender is imagined and configured in Brazilian society” (p. 11). Travestis identify as male homosexuals who, in adopting feminine physical attributes, attempt to become more ‘complete, beautiful and perfect’ homosexuals. Kulick draws on the work of Judith Butler (for whom sex and gender are culturally constructed concepts) to suggest that travestis are of the male sex but share a gender with females (p. 233). In their construction of the self, travestis physically alter their bodies by injecting silicone to create feminine features such as breasts, hips and a fuller backside, growing out and carefully grooming their hair, removing facial hair and plucking their eyebrows, adjusting their genitals in order to achieve a certain smoothed appearance, and take female hormones. Embodying the feminine also involves certain social behaviors, ways of dressing, standing, speaking, and interacting with men and women. Paradoxically, the construction of oneself as feminine for travestis involves “desire for naturalness [physically and behaviorally] and the need for artifice [to achieve those things]” (p. 200), but active adjustment of visible features, unlike the male domestic workers in North India, goes to the fulfillment of desires: the desire to be with men and to have pleasure. That prostitution is the primary source of income for travestis renders their sexuality a form of survival in the market. Survival in the street is also an important part of travesti life. As Kulick notes, travestis must constantly “reassert their rights to occupy urban space” (p. 30); in a city that is violent, politically corrupt, hierarchical and patriarchal, survival of the gaze, the police, gangs, fellow travesties (competitors in the market) and the state becomes difficult: an alienating and frightening task. Like hijab in London, assertion of difference via public displays of identity can be liberating yet constricting, dangerous and threatening. In the final pages of the ethnography, Kulick explains how travestis in Salvador are generally open and willing to assert their identity, contrary to the appraisal of the transvestite as a ‘postmodern androgyne.’ But, Kulick says, the embodiment of femininity ‘on the [city] streets where they work’ ultimately places travestis under the tutelage of ‘patriarchal imperatives’ and Brazilian conceptions of beauty and expectations of women. Fortunately, they are prepared to defend their desires and maintain their subjectivities with razor blades hidden on their bodies and the active will to survive.

Donna Goldstein’s ethnography “Laughter Out of Place” follows the life of Glória in Felicidade Eterna, a slum in Rio de Janeiro. The piece, like Kulick’s, does not set out to detail a specific practice but attempts to reveal the structural and defining forces that are at work in the lives of the urban poor in Rio. Laughter amidst chaos, violence, discrimination and poverty is a way for Glória and others to comment on and, in a sense, reclaim life. According to Goldstein, sexuality

serves those purposes and at the same time undermines them. Sexuality in *Felicidad Eterna* regulates and constitutes the way men and women interact; it is a strategy of subversion, resistance, and dominance, a source of pleasure, a gauge of economic responsibility, a mode of violence and an expression of power. Sexual activity and the expression of sexual desire occurs at a very young age, though for boys, sexual conquest is an affirmation of manhood and for girls, one ‘becomes a woman’ the more honorable she is in the eyes of the family. Goldstein describes how the sexual metaphor of eating or being eaten that is often invoked within *Felicidad Eterna* links to notions of activity and passivity, giving and receiving, and economic responsibility. Women in *Felicidad Eterna* constantly “...overturn the gender hierarchy embedded in the eating metaphors that make men symbolically dominant in the language of sexuality” by being seductive or adulterous, ‘consuming too much,’ or gaining material goods and economic protection from the man. In doing so, however, they “...adhere to the same standard cultural scripts that inevitably re-produce aspects of the sexual hierarchy they worked so hard at times to subvert” (p. 242-243). Desire and survival are played out through the interaction between the sexualized self, the family, the community and the state. Protection from ‘transgressive male behavior’ is not always possible, though, as sexual abuse, violence and rape (including the rape of Glória’s daughters) are not uncommon in *Felicidad Eterna*. But Glória and her family survive, in part because they use humor to frame and make sense of their suffering and powerlessness. Goldstein invokes Foucault in her discussion of class-based sexuality and the inequalities of the city. The urban poor do not have the “well-developed psychological and medical discourses” available to the middle and upper classes that “tend to desexualize children in particular ways” (p. 257) and make them less at risk. Ultimately, Goldstein calls for a democratization of the rules of law for all citizens regardless of class, race and gender that will protect people like Glória and her children from the structural and physical violence they encounter every day.

In the city, sexuality unites individuals but separates the citizenry. Along the lines of class and ethnicity, the city is already a structured space of separation, and sexuality further complicates that division by introducing the physical desire for pleasure as well as notions of gender and equality into the everyday struggle to assert one’s own identity and survive. The six preceding ethnographies demonstrate how sexuality is a form of consumption in the context of different markets; divorced from the biological drive to reproduce, sexual desire and sexual identity are expressed by and pursued through transactions involving different kinds of currency (like Bourdieu’s different forms of capital). The purchase of goods like clothes to make oneself feminine or to attract potential

partners, fabric for headscarves, silicon and hormones to alter the body, paying to use hotlines, prostitution, and sex as bargaining power are all examples of the use of monetary currency to promote or satisfy sexuality and the use of sexual currency for economic and social gain. The ethnographies show different ways that people conceive of and construct identity vis-à-vis sexuality through transactions within and navigation through various markets and spheres, though some reveal more violence and inequality than others. Like Foucault's biopower, sexuality is exercised through techniques of the self. Yet other regulatory forces within the city restrict and regulate the individual expression of sexuality, like the male gaze, structural sexism, ignorance or archaic patriarchal values and ideologies. For the city-state, these restrictions and forms of power, along with the neoliberal economy that allows global capital to accumulate centrally among an elite few, serve to subdue and further marginalize the citizens whose difference makes them threatening and for whom structural violence limits access to resources of all kinds.

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Lauren Kapsalakis

*Patricia*

**Lauren Kapsalakis** is a junior majoring in Anthropology. She spent her summer researching attitudes towards the use of biomedical contraception within the Toba indigenous population of Formosa, Argentina. This photograph shows a Toba girl in front of her laundry in the peri-urban community of Barrio Nam Qom. (Photo by Johanna Nubyecae).

## **FOOD AND DIABETES: CONSTRUCTING A DIABETIC IDENTITY THROUGH FOOD**

Heather Alpino

I was compelled to write this paper because of my seventeen years as a diabetic. Diagnosed with Type I diabetes at the age of four, I have often struggled with my love of food and the fact that food can also be my worst enemy because of the medical consequences related to its consumption. In addition to the academic and research goals explained below, this project served as a way for me to connect with other diabetics, thus forming a small diabetic community at the University of Pennsylvania. Not only was it enlightening and helpful to hear about the subjects' life experiences as diabetics, this project forged a bond between the interviewer and interviewee, and every person with whom I spoke thanked me for this opportunity to discuss issues pertinent to their lives that they could not openly speak about with their non-diabetic friends.

In her article *Food and Emotion*, Deborah Lupton writes: "Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, or sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inextricably linked with subjectivity" (2005, p. 317). Food has important characteristics that allow people to fashion their identities around what they eat. The foods that parents feed their children, for example, can play fundamental roles in the adults their children will become, instilling in them important cultural values at the national, and, more specifically, the familial level. Examples of this include Anne Allison's discussion of Japanese mothers and obentos (2008) and chapters of E.N. Anderson's *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture* (2005). In this paper, I will show how substituting certain foods in favor of more diabetic-friendly foods changes the cultural histories that are transmitted from generation to generation as well as among people of the same generation. This occurs because having a diet different than that of most eaters plays an important role in shaping the individual identities of diabetics, distinct from their larger social setting.

Subscribing to culturally-accepted food choices symbolizes one's identification with that group and demonstrates control over the body (Lupton, 2005, p. 318). Food becomes, then, a way for diabetics to distinguish themselves from those around them, thus separating them from certain communities and simultaneously creating a converged community of diabetics. Within this specific

cultural setting, foods that are perceived to be neutral by the average eater can be seen as disgusting and can represent fear because they can damage the diabetic's health (Rozin, 1997).

I had three main foci of interest in mind for this project. The first involved how having a detailed knowledge of how nutrition affects diabetics' consumption choices. Secondly, I was interested in what diabetics eat, especially in comparison to non-diabetics. Finally, and most importantly, I was interested in the "Otherness" of diabetics, since diabetics have their own unique culture in contrast to the greater social context that surrounds them. For example, there are certain foods that diabetics are not supposed to consume, such as sweets, and this can differentiate them from their peers. At the same time, however, these peers can affect diabetics' food consumption patterns. A central theme running through these three main topics is that of a shared diabetic culture in light of a lack of a diabetic community. The people whom I interviewed all shared diabetic experiences to which they felt non-diabetics could not relate. Through this project, I was able to connect the dots in the diabetic community that exists at the University of Pennsylvania, since each interviewee offered personal anecdotes that, taken with those of the other interviewees, painted a picture of diabetic life at Penn.

In this paper, I will be discussing the convergence of the diabetic culture, the role nutritional knowledge plays in choosing what to eat, what diabetics eat and various ways of negotiating health and the freedom of food choice, the importance of cooking for diabetics, the loss of self through food, food as a nuisance, diabetes and weight management, the loss of pleasure derived from not eating out and abstaining from alcohol in a college setting, the guilt and psychological complications related to food and diabetes, and diabetics' relationships with food vis-à-vis non-diabetics.

## METHODS

I interviewed five people who were diagnosed at various points in their lives: ages six, seven, ten, fifteen, and sixteen, respectively. All five have attended the University of Pennsylvania and are Type I diabetics, of which three use insulin pumps and two use injections of insulin to control their blood glucose levels. I spoke with four females and one male, all from middle-upper class backgrounds and within the age range of eighteen to twenty-two. Four of the subjects were White, and one subject was Asian-American. Even within this small group of subjects, there were a variety of circumstances surrounding their diagnoses. Diabetes does not run in TF's family, and it is believed that she got diabetes after catching a virus. PL was also the first person in her family to be diagnosed with Type I diabetes, although her uncle and grandmother both have Type II diabetes. It is a similar case for KL, although her mother and some of her cousins are hypoglycemic. Diabetes



runs in JB and FR's families; two of JB's grandparents and FR's younger sister and grandmother having the disease.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF TYPE I DIABETES

Before I begin a discussion of the diabetic culture of my interviewees, I think that it is useful to understand some fundamental information about Type I diabetes. Type I diabetes is a disease in which the pancreas does not produce insulin. It can be contrasted with Type II diabetes in which one's body does not produce enough insulin or one's cells cannot properly use the insulin. Type I diabetes is usually diagnosed at an earlier age than Type II diabetes, and it was formerly termed "juvenile" diabetes because many patients are diagnosed as children or young adults. Type I diabetics can use either insulin pumps or injections of insulin to manage their diabetes. Regardless of the method they choose to manage their diabetes, it is recommended that Type I diabetics check their blood sugar levels frequently, as often as eight times a day. Poor management of Type I diabetes can lead to harmful complications, since consistently high blood sugars can lead to cardiovascular disease, retinopathy, neuropathy, and kidney damage (American Diabetes Association, 2009).

#### THE CONVERGENCE OF A DIABETIC CULTURE

Often we speak of communities in terms of diaspora--a "local" diaspora, for example the children of a family going off to college and trying to continue the culture they learned at home--or a "macro" diaspora, for example Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and Armenian refugees from the Armenian genocides continuing their lives in new places all over the world (McCabe, Harlaftis, & Minoglou, 2005). Sometimes separated by vast distances, these people attempt to replicate and renew a culture, continuing imagined communities and links to their communal past. Diabetics, on the other hand, never started out living together and sharing a common culture. Instead, they are scattered around the world, but eventually come to share a common diagnosis of Type I diabetes as well as similar diabetic lifestyles. At some point after diagnosis, diabetics may find themselves at a point of convergence with other diabetics, because to some degree they share a diabetic identity and culture. The narrative begins here: A diabetic is initiated into the diabetic culture by a doctor who diagnoses her at a hospital. The doctor then teaches her, and perhaps her parents, about the diabetic lifestyle in the hope that she will continue this lifestyle in order to remain healthy. Her next task is even more daunting, however, since she has to return to the real world--largely peopled by non-diabetics--and put this diabetic culture into action. She has to reject the urges to be like her non-

diabetic peers, to eat cupcakes and chocolate bars, and must consciously choose her diabetic culture over the prevailing peer culture. Over time, she develops her own slightly modified way of managing her diabetes, thus showing some individuality with the collective diabetic culture. Even if there are other diabetics in her town, she will most likely not interact with them, since there is no centralized location where one finds diabetics, and thus, no real diabetic community. These ideas extend to the lives of the diabetics at the University of Pennsylvania, since while many diabetics live on campus and share similar diabetic lifestyles, they are dispersed, and do not form a true community. The diabetics whom I interviewed began their diabetic lives scattered and remain so, since the five of them knew of only one or two diabetics at the University of Pennsylvania. These diabetics were often not close friends, however. Even at home before college, only PL had ever had close diabetic friends, two girls in elementary school whom she never saw again once middle school began.

One would think, perhaps, that people sharing a common interest and goal would naturally group together to form a support system, but this does not seem to be so, at least on a day-to-day basis. All five of the respondents attended diabetes camps in the past - both as participants and as counselors, forming a network of diabetic “acquaintances” within this space where a diabetic community seemed to exist. All five of the students regret, however, the fact that there is no clearly-defined diabetic community at the University of Pennsylvania. When she arrived at Penn, KL went to Student Health Services to meet the staff and asked if they could give her the names of some diabetics at Penn in the hope of starting a club and support group. Because of privacy reasons, she was unable to get this information and has instead found a support system through online blog networks. She says: “You know, having a community is really important. It’s so nice to hear people express the things that have been at the back of my head.” PL thinks interacting with other diabetics is extremely important, but that “you still need to be individual and manage things your own way. I want to hear about new ways to manage my diabetes, but I don’t want to be preached to.” “Every diabetic is different,” says JB, “but it’s just nice to know they’re around.”

These differences are discussed in a paper by Julie Wagner (2004) that addresses ways to evaluate the quality of life of diabetics. She writes: “While diabetes may affect many domains of an individual’s life, the domains that each individual values most may differ across individuals as well as within individuals over time” (2004, p. 1280). These differences can be anything from changed family relationships vis-à-vis diabetes when students go off to college, for example diabetics having

to cook for themselves for the first time without their help of their parents, to varied diets and body image problems that can result from girls wearing insulin pumps.

### “KNOWING” DIABETES

The American Diabetes Association’s 2009 Standards of Medical Care in Diabetes cites insulin treatment, diet, and exercise as important components in living a healthy diabetic life. Medical Nutrition Therapy (MNT) continues to be a “cornerstone of diabetes therapy” (Lipkin, 1999, p. 41), and this latest report recommends intensive nutritional training which includes understanding carbohydrate counting and how to use the glycemic index. Alcohol should be limited, and antioxidant supplements are encouraged. There are many things to consider when deciding how much insulin to inject, including carbohydrates, fats (which can affect how and when both the insulin and the food start affecting the body), and portion sizes of food items like lean meats that are not, in normal-sized portions, significant sources of carbohydrates.

All five of the people whom I interviewed had gone through some type of nutritional training. Regardless of the age of diagnosis, four of the five respondents said that their parents, especially their mothers, played an important role in their everyday food choices up until college since they did not yet fully comprehend the appropriate diet for a diabetic. Because of this, one could say that there are two overlapping levels of transmitting knowledge to diabetics, especially if they are diagnosed at a young age: doctor to parent coupled with parent to child. TY was diagnosed at age 16 and met with a nutritionist at every six-month checkup, yet she says she often fell asleep during these meetings, leaving her mother to do the carbohydrate-counting and to portion out foods. PL was diagnosed at age 7, and it was up to her mother to learn all of the nutritional information that would keep her daughter healthy, weighing her food and buying books about nutrition. Since FR’s sister had been diagnosed with Type I diabetes twelve years before him and since his father is an endocrinologist, the nutritional transition was not too difficult despite the fact that he never had formal nutritional training. Instead, his father passed on to him his own detailed knowledge of diabetes, telling him about “good” and “bad” foods and how to deal with sweet foods and low blood sugar levels.

This knowledge about diabetes care management has been shown, however, to not always be applied when food is involved. Watkins, Williams, and Martin and colleagues (1967) studied diabetics at home to see how they managed their diabetes without the aid of a doctor or medical practitioner. They found that a better general knowledge of diabetes correlated with better home

management of their diabetes. Although the patients took their insulin injections on time and tested their urine for ketones more often, their diet did not seem to vary as much with regards to knowledge about diabetes. Only 16 of the 60 patients that they studied were judged to have eaten complete meals that were reasonably spaced out and that were "acceptable" for a diabetic patient. McCaul, Glasgow, and Schafer's (1987) studies confirm that knowledge is a poor predictor of adherence to diet rules. Next, we will see how Penn's diabetics express their knowledge of diabetes in their everyday food choices, negotiating food with sacrifices such as having to take more insulin, monitor blood glucose levels more closely, and to potentially have an increased risk of diabetic complications if blood sugars are not controlled.

### WHAT DO DIABETICS EAT?; NEGOTIATING RULES AND DESIRES

Steve Ferzacca (2004) sees the nutritional training that diabetics go through as inculcating in diabetics a "sense of necessity," as per Pierre Bourdieu's insights into taste (1984). This "judgment of taste" (Bourdieu, 1984) for diabetics involves dietary guidelines developed by nutritionists to guide food choices for people of many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, in addition to these peoples' own personal taste preferences. Diabetics are expected to subscribe to these recommendations in order to be healthy, but the decision to do so requires them to completely change their current dietary habits. The necessity to keep oneself healthy is often in conflict with diabetics' food desires.

As a result of their nutritional training, all five interviewees take what they eat fairly seriously, some more than others. TY hardly ever eats pasta and refuses to eat pizza, foods high in fat, and foods high in the glycemic index. Of course, these carbohydrate- and fat-filled foods were all things that she had enjoyed eating before her diagnosis at age 16. Like TY, PL grew up eating a healthy diet, so her diet did not change drastically. For all of the respondents, however, eating healthfully before diabetes did not exclude moments of cheating, when they could eat a slice of pizza, a cheeseburger, or a nice big slab of chocolate cake. Now, these are taboo, things to be scared of, and they are potentially harmful to these diabetics' lives.

Most of the respondents said that they really enjoy food. PL says: "I'm definitely a food person. I pretty much plan my day around when I eat. When I'm at home, I ask my mom what's going to be for dinner the day before that meal." JB says: "Food is my life," and FR adds: "I'm a food aficionado." As I am sure is apparent, it is difficult to love food so much and to have diabetes because of the ways in which certain foods act on a diabetic's body. FR likes a wide variety of foods, such as Indian and Ethiopian food, that have a high fat content and that make controlling his

blood sugar much more difficult. This variety seems to be worth it for him, however. He said, “You know, it’s true you have one life to live... and it’s a bit of a push and pull between diabetes and gastronomic happiness.” JB says: “It’s about balancing the rewards and consequences. It’s subjective. It’s probably pretty different for every diabetic.” Other people, do not see food variety as a good enough reason to risk complications with their blood sugar levels and instead of eating from food carts and McDonald’s, they cook their own food, opting to travel downtown to shop at the Reading Terminal Market and at Trader Joe’s.

Even the risk-taking adventurous types have had to make some substitutions in their diets. FR says that he “absolutely love[s] calzone. It’s so good,” yet calzone has caused him to have ketones, a by-product of his body burning stored fat for energy as a result of high blood sugar levels, four times at Penn. Thus, he has finally decided to give it up for good. For him it is also goodbye to baklava, syrup on pancakes, and his favorite cereal, Cocoa Puffs.

#### LOSS OF SELF THROUGH FOOD

For many of these people, being diagnosed with diabetes meant giving up a significant part of their cultural identity. Although they now live in Canada, both of TY’s parents were born in China, and the majority of her extended family still resides there. Although rice is a significant component of most Asian diets, TY has now given up rice as a part of her diet, separating herself in a way from traditional Asian culture. Chinese food in and of itself, she says, contains a great deal of added sugar, so she tries to stay away from Chinese food as much as possible. In addition, TY now has to hide this new diabetic identity from her father’s more traditional side of the family. She says: “It’s definitely an Asian culture issue. You’re not supposed to be open about having an illness. It’s shameful in a way, since you don’t want to dishonor your family and make your mother look bad in case they think she’s the reason you got diabetes.”

FR shares some of TY’s frustrations. He comes from a Jewish family that adheres to kosher diet restrictions. Since birth, he has been eating foods and food combinations that are deemed acceptable by the Jewish culture. Before being diagnosed, the restrictions imposed by kosher eating had little effect on him, but now he faces diabetic complications if he does not learn to combine a kosher diet with a diabetic diet. He confided to me that he is now “less kosher than in the past,” but that only two or three people know this, not including his family. For him, combining dairy and meat means fewer carbohydrates, which makes it easier for him to manage his blood sugar levels. He says: “It’s been great in the sense that I’ve expanded my diet, but if my family knew, there’d be hell to pay.”

## FOOD AS A NUISANCE

All five respondents follow the American Diabetes Association's exercise recommendation. Four of them work out almost every day, and the fifth respondent works out about twice a week. KL says that "Man wasn't meant to atrophy. You just have to work out to be healthy." For many people, exercise can be a tool to lose weight, and many people do not eat before exercising in the morning. Things are quite a bit different, however, for diabetics. PL "really hate[s] it" when she wakes up in the morning with a low blood sugar level and must eat something before working out since it "totally defeats the purpose."

The other major complaint was having to eat when they did not want to. As a child, when she had low blood sugar levels during the night, PL drank large glasses of milk even though she did not feel like it. As a result, she now associates milk with these experiences and rarely drinks it. TY hates having to "force feed [herself] and shove things down [her] throat" when her blood sugar level drops. The opposite situation, in which blood sugar levels are high but the person is hungry, is seen equally as a nuisance. JB said "There are times when I feel absolutely famished but my blood sugar is through the roof, so I have to eat a salad or something with very little sugar. It sucks because that stuff never fills me up."

Further, many of the interviewees cited vacations as especially difficult times because they were unable to cook for themselves and had to rely on going out to eat, for which it is more difficult to estimate nutritional properties. TY hates going to Hong Kong because there is little nutritional information on packaging, which "really scares [her]." FR says that he dislikes family events and parties where he "hate[s] to be rude" and eats the food anyway.

## DIABETES AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Exercise, weight, and food all play important roles in these diabetics' lives. The weight issue seemed to play a much more important role in the lives of the female diabetics, which is consistent with more general social norms. TY was diagnosed at age 16, which was, according to her "the peak time of insecurity and feeling down on yourself," so she was already trying to diet and exercise more often. PL really cares about her fitness and the way that she looks, saying that she is a "Diet Coke, Splenda, vegetables, and few desserts kind of girl... I kind of do the South Beach diet without really doing it since I love meat and veggies," she says. Like some of the other diabetics, she uses the amount of insulin she takes as an indicator of how much she is eating. JB says "If I'm consistently taking more than a certain amount of insulin every day, I know I'm eating too much and that I will get fat," since insulin doses correlate with the numbers of calories a person eats. PL, who claims to

have gained the “freshman five million,” limits her bread and carbohydrate intake based on what she ate earlier in the day.

She, JB, and KL all say that they often skip breakfast before they go to the gym in order to “maximize fat burn.” Even though they are diabetics, these young women seem to resemble the typical female Penn student. Some of them, like PL, however, criticize some of the techniques used by diabetics to increase their weight loss. There are research findings (Daneman, 2007) showing that it is fairly common for young female diabetics to keep their blood sugars high in order to burn an additional fifteen percent of calories a day. Almost all of the interviewees were outraged by these findings because of the repercussions of allowing blood sugar levels to remain elevated for extended periods of time.

#### LOSS OF PLEASURE: EATING OUT

Food connoisseurs and people across the globe enjoy dining out and sampling the diverse tastes the world has to offer. Not all diabetics, however, allow themselves to try these delicacies. Some take the “diabetic rules” more strictly than others. All five of the interviewees found it difficult to go out to eat, since nutritional information is not readily available. In addition, almost all of them mentioned the fact that “you really don’t know what’s in the food... like if there’s secret additions of creams and sugars.” For this reason, some of these diabetics eat “countable things” when they eat out, foods for which it is easier to estimate their nutritional properties. TY will not eat pasta when she goes out to eat and instead opts for a salad. “Bland and a bit boring,” she says, “but I know my blood sugar won’t get too out of whack.” Occasionally she will choose a burger, but it is not the quintessential American burger since she removes the bun in order to limit carbohydrate intake and to make it easier to estimate the carbohydrates in it. When they do go out to eat, however, they try to limit themselves to certain restaurants for which they have been able to obtain some sort of nutritional information.

#### BEING A DIABETIC IN COLLEGE

An important part of the freshman experience is eating at the dining hall with your hallmates and other friends. Since freshmen are required to be on meal plans at Penn, the dining hall is a place where students convene to discuss their classes, have fun, and have a meal. This is difficult for diabetics, however. As a freshman, TY rarely went to the dining hall and instead cooked her own food in her apartment, since she found that the dining menus and schedules rarely reflected what was actually being served.

The stress of college life causes further difficulties for diabetics. Almost all of them mentioned feeling overwhelmed during exam weeks when they have to study for tests and have to write term papers. Again, almost all of them report not being able to stick to normal eating times, which although manageable for a non-diabetic, can be quite difficult for these students. Two of the interviewees had their own ways of dealing with this. TY pre-cooks food before exam periods so that she does not go out to get food that is “inappropriate for [her] diet,” and KL pre-portioned out her food into bags containing twenty carbohydrates that she can grab on the go.

#### LIMITING ALCOHOL AND SOCIAL REPERCUSSIONS OF ABSTAINING

TY did not consume any alcohol her freshman year at Penn, as she did not know anyone well enough to take care of her if she had blood sugar problems because of it. She started moderately drinking once every two months during her junior year. Of course, alcohol does not make or break someone’s happiness in life, but alcohol is a visible component of the typical college student’s social life. For some of the students whom I interviewed, not partaking in alcohol caused them to feel a bit “out of the loop,” since they truly want to have fun with their friends but are afraid of the health consequences of a night of drinking. The two people whom I interviewed who rarely drink choose instead to “hang out with people who are more like [them] – more low key. [They] just try to avoid putting [themselves] in situations where something could go wrong.” KL has never tried alcohol saying “Even with a trusted friend, drinking would be really hard for me. Not drinking has become a problem recently though since I just turned 21, and all of my friends want to go out to happy hours. It’s definitely awkward.”

The other three students drink on a fairly regular basis, at least once a weekend. They too, however, have concerns. PL says “It’s really hard to figure out the right balance with alcohol since it’s so tricky with your blood sugar. It makes your levels go down first but then it can spike up later. I try to make sure there’s at least a little fruit or something with sugar in my drinks.” Others are less concerned with the changes in blood sugar that alcohol can cause and are more worried about carbohydrate content and the glycemic index. These students said that they usually drink diet soda with some type of liquor such as vodka or whiskey and avoid things with “loads and loads of sugar like Mad4Mex margaritas.”

#### YUCK: FOODS MADE FOR DIABETICS

All of the interviewees had, at some point in their lives, tried sugar-free diabetic foods. PL has some not-so-fond memories of eating sugar-free cookies as a child, while FR’s grandmother



continues to send him sucrose chocolate despite that fact that he hates it. All of the respondents agreed, however, that they prefer the “real” version of a food, even in a more limited quantity, as opposed to an “anemic, worthless, gross-tasting copycat.” TY says that she “had the unfortunate experience of tasting diabetic bread... needless to say it tasted like cardboard.” Despite having diabetes, FR continues to use full-sugar syrups in his coffee as opposed to sugar-free syrups that “taste like nothing.” For those respondents who drink soda, they all seem to agree that Diet Coke or Diet Pepsi is acceptable, however. All of the respondents have reported using Sweet ‘n Low or Splenda sugar substitutes, except for KL who says that “sugar-free stuff tastes weird. Plus, it upsets my stomach, so I avoid it at all costs.” Some of the respondents, such as KL, say that despite the fact that they stay away from sugary foods, they get their sweet fix in other ways. KL satisfies her sweet tooth with fruit, light apple juice, gum, and hard candy. JB, FR, and PL all keep portionable sweets that they can enjoy in small quantities, such as pieces of dark chocolate, in their dorm rooms to combat the urge to eat large amounts of sugar.

#### GUILT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DIABETES

Some of the diabetics used food as a way to combat their health situation in a slightly passive-aggressive manner. TY says that she went through a six-month period of depression after being diagnosed with diabetes, both because of the harmful effects of the disease and the limitations she would have to put on her food intake. “I was totally freaked out by everything,” she says, “but I was in high school. I needed to rebel against this forbidden food.” As a result, she says: “I began a carb-craze to pretend that nothing was wrong with me and that I could eat whatever I wanted.” Even she admits that this behavior was passive-aggressive and that choices like these were very dangerous for her health.

All of the interviewees seemed preoccupied by the consequences of diabetes, despite their daily food choices, JB even saying that she was “scared shitless” by diabetic complications. Some take these worries perhaps a bit too far, such as TY who said that a year after she was diagnosed, she would not eat any carbohydrates until she felt “like [she] would drop dead without some.” She blames this on the fear of carbohydrates raising her blood sugar levels, but she and the other respondents, especially the girls, certainly show signs of preoccupations with their weight as well as with their diabetes, perhaps indicating that they use their diabetes as a cover up for further self-imposed dietary restrictions.

## BEING AROUND NON-DIABETICS

All interviewees state that it can be difficult to eat with their friends, who can “eat pretty much whatever they want.” KL remembers being a child and on Halloween having to donate her candy, only being able to have one fun-sized candy bar. TY says that it is when she eats alone that she eats “the best” since “it sometimes is hard to resist temptations when [she eats] with [her] friends.” KL seems to have a fascination with non-diabetics, often watching them in class while they eat, considering the differences between their and her consumption patterns. “It’s true,” she says, “I have a bit of pancreas envy.”

Most interviewees cited examples of when their friends would try to pressure them into eating non-diabetic-friendly foods, such as a slice of birthday cake. JB says: “I remember one time when it was a coworker’s birthday while I was doing my internship last summer. Most of the office knew I was diabetic, but they still said ‘Oh! This cake is so good. You have to try it.’” Studies have been done on situations like these, as discussed in the paper “Diabetes Regimen Behaviors: Predicting Adherence” (McCaul et al., 1987). As part of a study on Barriers of Adherence (to proposed diabetic regimens), subjects had to imagine that they were out to eat with a group of friends who were pressuring them to eat a piece of cheesecake. The researchers determined that a diabetic’s social circle can, in fact, have strong influences on how a diabetic eats, as is often the case for non-diabetics as well.

In addition to the peer pressure that goes along with not partaking in alcohol and foods unsuitable for diabetics, the mere presence of non-diabetics can affect how diabetics behave and consume food. KL says that she “sometimes [feels] the need to fill the role of the diabetic. I eat well in general but I eat especially well when people know about my diabetes. I don’t want them to think I’m bad, and I have to keep up my [reputation] as the healthy one.” JB agrees that people like to see diabetics fulfilling that role. “I can deal with eating with non-diabetics,” she says, “but I hate when people say ‘shouldn’t you not be eating that, I thought diabetics couldn’t eat sugar.’”

## CONCLUSION

Diabetes becomes a way of life for diabetics, an overarching theme that guides their daily food choices and behaviors. In Julie Wagner’s study (2004), the diabetic lifestyle seems to be a typical way that diabetics characterize their world. In order to assess diabetics’ quality of life, the authors went through a three-part study: a semi-structured interview in which they nominated five “life domains” that they considered most important in terms of the quality of their lives, a process of

rating each domain, and a final process of weighing each domain against the others. Diabetes was the third most frequently listed domain, coming in right behind family and friends.

Diabetes seems to serve as both a centripetal and centrifugal force, bringing diabetics together, since they share fairly common lifestyles, and forcing them apart, since each individual diabetic has her own way of managing her diabetes. The diabetic culture is, thus, a tense one that is difficult to define because of its convergence characterized by a great deal of individuality. The people whom I interviewed do not interact with other diabetics on a daily basis, thus demonstrating the lack of a diabetic community. Diabetics do seem to share a common culture, however, since they are often clearly marked from their non-diabetic counterparts by their food choices and their overall lifestyles, taking insulin, exercising, and monitoring blood glucose levels. The centrifugal forces facing the diabetic culture include varying degrees of managing diabetes, some diabetics choosing to eat non-diabetic-friendly foods and others strictly adhering to nutritional guidelines. Although to some degree diabetics share a common culture, many diabetics express a desire to be members of a diabetic community. The diabetics whom I spoke with, for example, seem to feel that having some sense of diabetic community is important in terms of mutual support in light of a common disease. Because of this, I think that it is important to encourage dialogue among diabetics on all aspects of diabetic life, especially regarding food. Creating a more present diabetic community in everyday life can be beneficial, and this can have more value than an “imagined” diabetic community based simply on the general convergence of diabetic lifestyles. More concrete diabetic communities can be built through food since it is such an important part of diabetics’ lives. Fostering a group dialogue about different food choices and how to best negotiate deriving pleasure from food and managing diabetes could be a life-changing step in diabetics’ lives, especially those at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Rachel Gittelman

*Avistaje*

**Rachel Gittelman** is a junior in the college majoring in Biological Basis of Behavior. In this picture, she is observing the foraging patterns of monogamous Owl Monkeys in the Gran Chaco, Argentina.

## **FRIED RICE: MY TASTE OF CULTURE, HOME, AND FAMILY**

Kevin Chung

On a cold and rainy evening, I return to my dorm after another long day of classes. Despite the drudgeries of the day, I am looking forward to my dinner: a serving of my dad's fried rice. After microwaving the dish, I eagerly bring it to my desk. As the first forkful enters my mouth, I cannot help but smile and savor the deliciousness of the dish. In a moment of glorious gustatory gratification, I experience the wonderful contrast of flavors and textures as I taste the salty and savory roast pork, the buttery and fluffy eggs, and the crisp and crunchy bean sprouts. I am inundated in a wave of flavors as the dish seemingly hits each and every one of my taste buds. And that is just the first bite. As I continue consuming the fried rice, I am struck by a feeling beyond simply the deliciousness of the food itself and begin considering the significance of the dish. For me, fried rice has developed the power to affect more than just my taste buds; it has become associated with my family and representative of my identity as a Chinese-American. With the ability to trigger emotions and represent culture and identity, certain foods are especially meaningful to us.

While fried rice holds personal meaning to me, rice itself has enormous cultural implications as well. Among the Chinese, rice is the single most indispensable food, constituting a large portion of the diet. In Chinese meals, there are two general components: *fan*, or starchy staples, and *cai*, or other dishes (Jensen and Weston 178). Because of their relative abundance and affordability compared to meat and vegetables, rice and other starchy staples are the primary components of traditional Chinese meals. *Fan* is also the Chinese word for "rice" and "meal," a synonymy indicative of rice's cultural significance in the Chinese diet (Cheung and Tan 87). Besides being served as plain white rice, rice has a myriad of other uses in Chinese cuisine, forming the base for dishes such as congee, rice noodles, and, of course, fried rice. These dishes utilize leftover rice, reflective of the Chinese tendency of not wasting food. In a country that faces food scarcity even today, the Chinese find ways to use any and all parts of foods. Chicken feet, tripe, and fish heads, considered inedible by some, are commonly eaten among the Chinese. Fried rice similarly can accommodate any number of leftover foods. Just about anything is fair game, and I have seen fried

rice that has included everything from the ordinary- peas, ham, carrots, and onions- to the unusual- bamboo shoots and dried squid.

The original reason for my attachment to my dad's fried rice was simply because of its outstanding taste. His unique combination of ingredients brought together many of my favorite things to eat. His version contains barbequed roast pork, dried Chinese sausage, shrimp, eggs, bean sprouts, and scallions, but just about any meat or vegetable can be added or substituted. Additionally, the ingredient quantities in this dish are extremely flexible allowing more or less of any particular components to be used to suit one's tastes. Give the scallions and bean sprouts a rough chop, and then dice the roast pork, sausage, and shrimp into pieces of roughly equal size. Microwave the sausage for about sixty to ninety seconds and drain the excess oil. Besides beginning the process of cooking the sausage, this step removes some of the excess fat. Add about a tablespoon of oil to a hot frying pan and scramble the eggs, setting them aside once cooked. In a large wok, add about two tablespoons of oil. Once the oil is hot, add the white scallion stems. After a minute, add the sausage and cook for about two minutes. Adding the scallion stems at this point in the cooking process flavors the oil and provides an aromatic base for the dish. The smell of the sweet scallions and smoky sausage is intoxicating and enough to whet my appetite. Next, add the roast pork and allow it to cook for about two minutes. At this point, mix in the cooked rice and turn the heat to medium. Toss the ingredients well, and then add the shrimp, bean sprouts, soy sauce, and some salt and pepper to taste. Cover the wok for about five minutes, and then mix in the chopped scallions and cooked eggs. Mix the contents well, cover the wok for another two minutes, and then remove the wok from the heat and serve immediately.

While the dish has significance in part because of its taste and flavor, fried rice holds meaning to me extending beyond its qualities as a consumable good. Fried rice has developed into a representation of my culture and identity, revealing a bit about myself and my heritage. Raised in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, I grew up in a diverse neighborhood surrounded by many different ethnic groups. In my elementary school, students were encouraged to celebrate the diversity of the student body by teaching their classmates about their own cultures through particular holidays or celebrations. While other students taught me about Israeli, African, and Jamaican cultures, it was up to me, as one of the few Chinese-Americans in my school, to teach my classmates about Chinese customs. Each year, my mom or dad would come in around the time of Chinese New Year and would serve fried rice to my classmates, oftentimes providing them with their first taste of Chinese food that was not out of a takeout container. I asked my parents to bring in fried rice because I felt

that the prevalence and importance of rice in Chinese homes made fried rice a logical representation of my heritage. Fried rice was a dish that represented who I was, demonstrating my heritage to others, and it became a part of my self-identification. Through fried rice, I felt a greater connection with my Chinese heritage, a sentiment echoed by Donna Gabbaccia, who describes food as something that “entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties” (8). Besides tasting the delicious contrast of flavors and textures in the dish, I experience my identity as a Chinese-American each time I indulge in my dad’s fried rice. Preparing and eating fried rice is a way for me to enhance my connection with my background, something which I am more conscious of because I am American-born.

In addition to representing my culture, fried rice also evokes feelings of family and home. Deborah Lupton describes food as capable of forging strong connections to memories and emotions (320). As one of my favorite and most frequently consumed childhood dishes, fried rice has become associated with my family, particularly my dad, from whom I learned this recipe. Helping my dad prepare the dish has strengthened the relationship I share with him and forged the familial association I now have with the dish. While fried rice can be found at nearly any Chinese takeout restaurant, my dad’s version is comprised of a unique combination of ingredients that makes it different from any other that I have tried. Every time I eat it, I taste not just the savory bits of roast pork and flavorful pieces of scallions, but I am also reminded of my family and home, which have become intimately tied to the dish. Served as a part of nearly all of my childhood dinners, rice has always been a ubiquitous component of my meals at home. For this reason, even plain white rice reminds me of my family, though fried rice stands out in particular because of the extra effort and care taken in its preparation. Furthermore, fried rice is always the last course of a traditional Chinese wedding banquet and whenever I eat it I am reminded of the many relatives and family friends whose weddings I have attended, an association which further strengthens the connection I have formed between fried rice and my family.

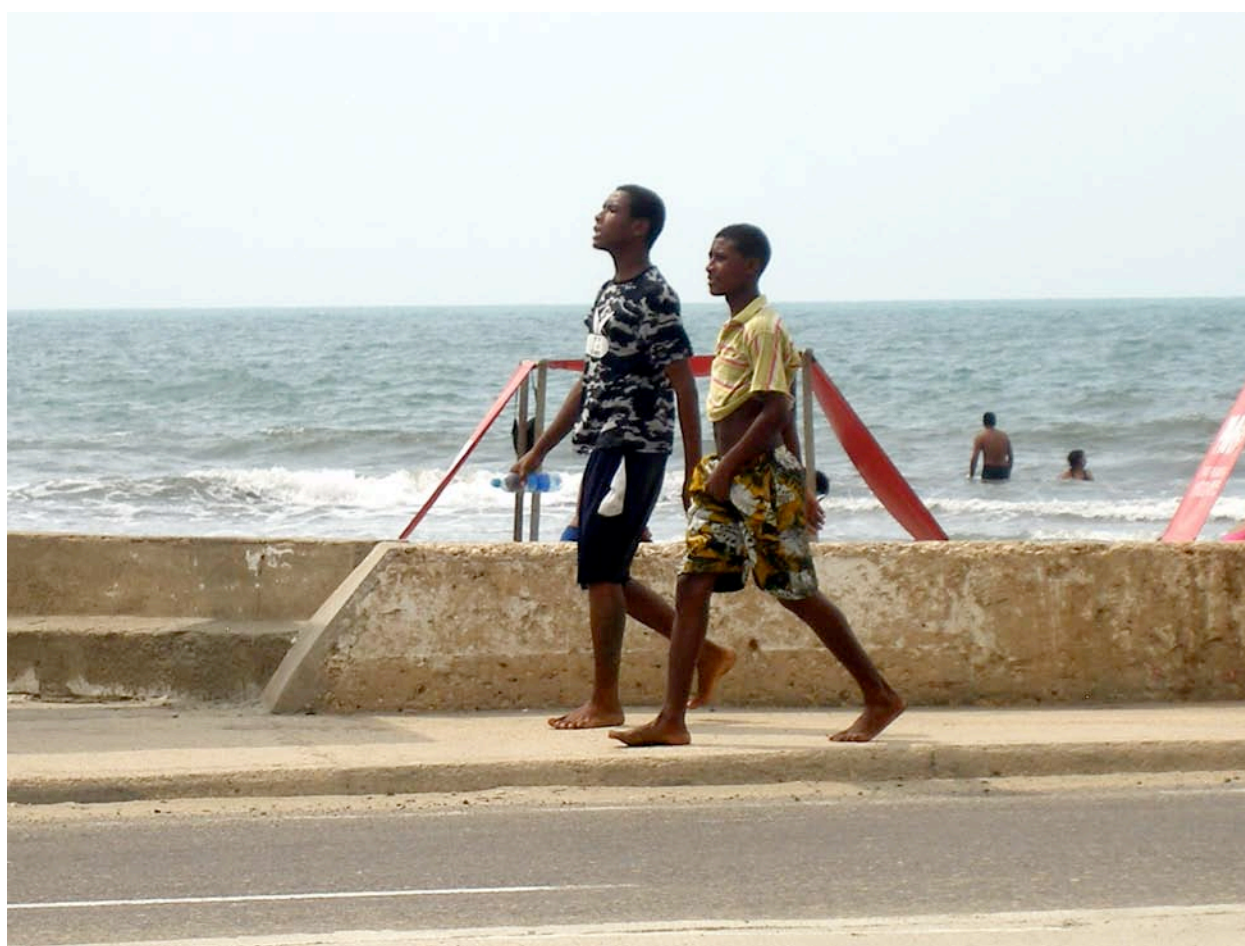
With the power to stimulate such powerful emotions, foods are capable of holding especially significant meaning to us. For me, fried rice is not merely a conglomeration of leftover rice and bits of meat thrown together haphazardly. Instead, fried rice has evolved to represent my identity and culture, and it has also come to be associated with my family and home. Despite its relative simplicity, fried rice is a dish which holds special importance to me because it has helped shape my identity and represent my culture in a way no other food has. Whenever I find myself missing my family or in need of a pick-me-up, I simply microwave myself a bowl of fried rice. One bite and I



experience not just the delicious flavors of the fried rice, but I am also flooded with the emotions which are associated with the dish. As a food capable of evoking such a powerful effect, my dad's fried rice will always be especially meaningful to me.

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Brandi M. Waters

*Cartagena*

**Brandi M. Waters** is a senior majoring in Anthropology and Latin American and Latino Studies with a minor in African Studies. She took this photo in summer of 2008, while working as a research assistant to History professor Dr. Ann Farnsworth-Alvear. This image portrays the daily lives of Afro-Colombians living in Cartagena, Colombia.

## **BUT CAN YOU READ IT ON THE BEACH? EBOOKS AND OUR RELATION TO THE WRITTEN WORD**

Helen Vaskevitch

There have been digital books, or ebooks, in some form for almost ten years, but it is only in the past two or three years that the general public has become aware of them. Today, although ebooks still represent only a tiny portion of the market, they are the fastest growing segment of the publishing industry (Pastor, 2008). To the general population of readers, ebooks are still a nascent technology; as such, they are still very plastic. There are many paths their development could take, and many potential ways in which ebooks could change both the publishing industry and the way readers relate to the written word.

One of the first manifestations of ebooks was Microsoft Reader, a piece of software released in 2000, which formats books to be read on a home computer or on certain cell phones ([www.microsoft.com/Reader](http://www.microsoft.com/Reader)). David Vaskevitch, who works in a group at Microsoft scoping out promising new markets for Microsoft to enter, was one of the first at the company to consider digital books as a potential new market demand, comparable to MP3s in the music industry and their enormous success. As part of normal publishing practices, manuscripts to be published already exist in digital form for ease of sending and editing. It was a simple task for publishers to reformat their books for Microsoft Reader and for bookstores to offer the digital versions alongside the print. However, in this early stage, battery and screen technologies were not sophisticated enough for reading books on palm pilots or laptops to be a satisfactory experience and the ebook market floundered for several years (Vaskevitch, personal communication, April 30, 2009). Then three years ago Sony released the Sony Reader, a dedicated reading device on which you can read downloaded books bought at the Sony online store. The next year, Amazon followed suit with the Amazon Kindle. Though the market is still small, ebook reading devices are growing in popularity. The first version of the Kindle sold out within hours (Carnoy, 2009), and the latest version, Kindle 2, boosted Amazon's ebook sales by 18% (Albanesius, 2009).

Following the trend in digitization of entertainment media, many forward thinkers extol ebooks as the inevitable wave of the future -- the next stage of evolution for the traditional printed book. These predictions, however, are often somewhat one-sided, viewing printed books as a non-

technological relic of the past and ebooks as their digital improvement. I spoke with Dr. Nathan Ensmenger, professor of history of science at the University of Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on the cultural and social developments of information technologies in mainstream America. He explained that to give ebooks a thorough analysis you must recognize both ebooks and printed books as technologies—one that has arisen in the past few years with the digital wave and whose role in society is still being formed, and one that has been developed and refined over centuries to become the sophisticated reading technology it is today, superb in its capacities to store information reliably and to give a satisfying reading experience. Dr. Ensmenger pointed out that when viewed in this light it becomes clear that digitization of media is not “some inevitable trajectory towards some technology, but very specific choices being made in those certain industries, about those technologies.” This comparison is useful and necessary in developing an understanding of the significant differences between these two technologies and whether they will bring beneficial or detrimental changes to the practice of reading.

The most obvious difference between printed versus digital books is the new interface -- the device itself. When you pick up a normal, printed book, you scan the cover, turn it over and read the description on the back, and then maybe flip through the pages to read snippets here and there. It is a familiar act, it is entirely mundane. The interface of the book itself is barely present; you are primarily focused on the content of the book. With a device like the Amazon Kindle, picking up a book is a very different act. The first difference you encounter is that you have to turn it on. You cannot turn it over to read a synopsis, you first have to acquaint yourself with the new interface; there is more than just content, a physical technology has inserted itself between you and the story you intend to read.

The next difference you notice is the price tag. A paperback usually costs around \$10; the Kindle 2 costs \$395. It is not a disposable technology, which the reader can use and then throw or give away with little thought, as with a paperback book. By choosing the Kindle as the reading interface, the reader is plugging into a whole infrastructure of technology and legality, never before considered by the normal printed book owner. The monetary investment alone represents a shift in attention: the content now has to share the stage with the sleek device. As several ebook owners and commentators on the publishing business have pointed out, investing a sizeable chunk of money into an electronic technology to engage in an activity which does not inherently require any monetary investment signifies a greater commitment to... to what exactly? For Sara Nelson, former editor of Publishers weekly, the commitment is to literature (Kaufman, 2009). Conversely, the

commitment could be to the technology itself, as in the opinion of author David Boles; “‘I want it to work, here’s my money’ is much more powerful for you as a discerning reader than ‘maybe I’ll like it or not—impress me for free.’” (Boles, 2007) But... don’t books already “work”? What does this attitude, increasingly prevalent in our quick-to-update digital culture, say about how our relationship to literature is changing? From Nelson’s and Boles’ comments, it appears that we as readers might be developing new priorities for our entertainment experiences, as reading comes to be held up against other digital media. Our relationship to reading is not being judged solely on what we choose to read, but on how we choose to read—where the latest, most expensive technology takes center stage.

Buying a book, the purpose for buying the Kindle, has also changed. Darrell, who bought the Kindle when it first came out, says his favorite feature of the Kindle is the convenience of downloading and owning a book only seconds after you think to want it (Gold, email correspondence, May 3, 2009). But what else, besides increased convenience, does this new way of buying change about the experience of buying a book? I began to consider this question the other day, while walking to the grocery store. I happened upon a man with a folding table set up on the sidewalk, selling books for a dollar. One titled *The Devil’s Larder* caught my eye; it brought to mind my roommate, whose academic interest is religious studies, and whose passion is for food and upscale restaurants. The jacket-flap description of short stories on the topics of “food, sex, desire and its death” sealed the deal—I had to buy it for her. This chance encounter and spontaneity, a ten second relationship between the man who no longer wanted the book and my roommate soon to acquire it, could not have happened online. This is a truth not unique to ebooks, it is applicable to any kind of online shopping. If physical books lose their dominance over ebooks, the relationship between bookseller and reader, and between reader and reader, will be fundamentally changed because ebooks represent another channel through which the digital world obsolesces human interaction. This reveals one of the most heavily debated aspects of digital technology and our new interconnectedness through the internet: the internet creates new constellations of possible relationships with people around the globe who share common interests, while at the same time disconnecting us from those in our immediate vicinity and the chance encounters of walking around in the physical world.

Once you have browsed the online store and have bought a new book you are faced with the question, what is it exactly that I now own? For reasons of intellectual property protection, ebooks sold by trade publishers are encrypted with Digital Rights Management (DRM) technology. While a

physical object such as a printed book is relatively simple to keep track of and control—only one copy can be owned at a time, and it can be withheld until a satisfactory price is agreed upon—insubstantial digital books make things much more complicated. A digital book can be copied scores of times at almost no cost by pirates, putting both authors and publishers at risk of losing their investment when their expensively produced book is made available for free somewhere else. DRM is used to ensure that you will only ever have one copy of the ebook and only on your registered reader device. And so, in a sense, what you own is not an actual book, but rather a license to read that book (Buchanan, 2008). As explained in a study by the Columbia Law Science and Technology Review, what this subtle difference in ownership calls into question is something called the right of first sale. This right ensures that once you have bought a book from a bookseller, once they have made the first sale, you have the right to do whatever you want with that book; you can lend it to friends, you can give it away, you can even sell it at profit. How this translates into the world of DRM is that you can give away the physical manifestation of your book—in this case, your hard drive or reader—but you can't give someone the ebook by itself, because the only way to do that is by making a copy, which is illegal under the Kindle's use license. In this way, ebooks as manifested by the Kindle and similar ebook reader devices override the right of first sale (Buchanan, 2008). The legality of this override is heavily debated; those in the debate question if something is being subtly taken from us.

Even if you agree not to give away the book or try to sell it, this is not the last you have seen of DRM. Because of the practices of competitive companies, none of the various reader devices on the market use the same ebook format. Mr. Vaskevitch laid out a scenario to explain the issues this can cause. Say you buy a Sony Reader and buy 150 books, and then switch to an Amazon Kindle 2, (as is commonly done—people generally want the newest version of any given technology), those 150 books are lost to you. You either have to retain both reader devices or you have to buy again all 150 of those books in the Kindle format. What does this mean about what exactly it is you own when you buy an ebook? And if you know something about programming and are able to strip the DRM from your Sony Reader ebooks so that you can read them on your Kindle 2, is what you have done illegal? You did pay for the books, so legally you own them and can do whatever you want with them. But technically, under the user license of the Sony Reader, what you have done is illegal: you have committed piracy (Vaskevitch, personal communication, April 30, 2009). As laid out in a report by the Association of American Publishers, this is an issue of interoperability. As stated in the report, “why should a technology provider push for DRM interoperability when it could mean

that other technology providers might benefit?” (Mooney, 2001) It is the reason why iPods can only use their own proprietary USB cords, and why no two digital camera batteries are the same. And now, with books entering the fast-paced and competitive world of digital technology, readers will have to overcome both hardware and legal issues before they can read their books.

These questions have implications for the companies serving as the digital repository for purchased ebook content, (e.g. Amazon), as well. In the case of lost or destroyed ebooks, what obligation do they have to protect or preserve property that was legally bought from them? Similarly, as to the supposed piracy described above, what is Amazon’s right to pursue a user as a pirate—of content they legally bought? In Mr. Vaskevitch’s words, it forces companies to ask the question “but do we really want to sue [ebook owners] for something that probably shouldn’t be illegal?” This complex legality makes criminals of anybody who simply wants to retain their purchased content across a hardware upgrade, and causes some commentators to worry that the increasing digitization of our entertainment media is allowing a gradual transfer of private property into the hands of media conglomerates (Striphas, 2006).

Hopefully, most people will be fortunate enough to be preserved from any of these legal nightmares, and they will be able to just curl up with their new downloads and enjoy a good book. Or will they? Ebooks change the fundamental process of reading itself. First of all, there are the plain physical differences explored above. The weight of the book, the size—is it a paperback or a first edition hardcover? Knowing where you are in the book—have you just started and are rolling back the front cover to hold the book comfortably in one hand, or are you nearing the end, with only a slim remainder held down by your thumb? Did you buy this book new, with the sharp almost-citrus smell coming from between the pages, or is this a well-worn and dog-eared book, passed down by a parent or a friend?

Different readers feel differently about the Kindle and the act of reading. If the Kindle designers were successful, then the personal switch from paper to digital interface would be barely noticed. They were successful with Geoff, who took to the Kindle immediately and notices no differences in his reading habits. But to Arlene, the difference was much more palpable. She felt frustrated by the new interface, and she told me “I never got to the point of losing myself in the book, the technology was so in my face.” Arlene has hit upon one of the biggest differences between digital interfaces and paper ones. Linear stories presented in a medium that allows you to forget about the interface—forget about the entire world around you, even—enables an act called “deep reading”. Some critics of ebook technology worry that reading digitally, which lends itself to

hypertexting and networked, rather than linear, informational layout, will “atrophy the human capacity for deep reading.” (Striphas, 2006) Ebooks would have to displace print books by a much larger margin than they do today for full-scale atrophy to occur, but undoubtedly the new medium will change how we take in information as content comes to share the stage with the device it is delivered upon.

The physical identifiers presented by a book also provide a historical, emotional and intellectual context, which play a broader social role as well as a personal one. Books collected on a shelf behind a desk or over a bed, in an office or a living room, say something about the reader who collected them there. In the words of one publisher, they are an identifier of “what kind of intellectual you are,” whether you read sci-fi or poetry or philosophy or strictly Dostoevsky. The uniformity and singularity of a small Kindle stored in a bag or a drawer eliminates the social connection between readers, makes the possibility of recognizing the book of the person sitting next to you on the subway impossible. One author worries about “what will happen to the ineffable kinship among book lovers,” as the relationship shifts from reader-reader to reader-technology provider-cum-bookseller (Kaufman, 2009).

This author’s worries reveal how books are part of a complex and ages-old social practice of reading; as a society and as individuals we have emotional ties to printed books. Mr. Vaskevitch conferred to me that one of the biggest questions he ponders when he thinks about ebooks and their future role in our lives is why do we have this emotional connection? No other entertainment medium is quite like it, as is demonstrated by the relatively rapid transitions from VHS to DVD to blueray, and from Vinyl to CDs to MP3. So what is it about books? Perhaps it is because reading books is an innately more personal action than listening to music or watching a movie, if only for the practical reason that is most often done alone. When it is done with others, it is usually in very intimate settings: reading a story to a young son or daughter, or reading a poem to a lover. Writing is also very personal; submitting something you have set on paper can feel like revealing your innermost self, exposing the very way you think. Stories and memoirs on paper are passed down through generations, first editions sought out and treasured. So transforming this medium which is so personal and so comfortable, and formatting it into something impersonal and digital, something uniform and somewhat alien, is hard to accept for many readers.

All of these complications should make clear that ebooks are in no way an inevitable technology. There are many very long-standing structures that will have to go through enormous changes before ebooks become dominant over paper books. When considering any new



technology, to paraphrase Dr. Ensmenger, what it comes down to is what do you want out of the technology? What about the old way of doing things are you looking to fix or improve? To some, like Dr. Ensmenger, the opinion that “we already have books, it’s not entirely clear what an electronic book gets you” will make ebooks slow to be adopted. Others, like technologist and author David Boles, confidently claim that the “Kindle is the future of publishing because it makes reading fun again.” And there are those in the middle, like Mr. Vaskevitch, who are excited about the technology and what it could do for reading but are also aware of the huge technological and social changes that will have to come before ebooks are widely adopted, if they ever are. But the technology is here, and the companies with their foot in the door are going to fight to open the market ever wider until ebooks are a regular part of our lives. What changes will this bring? It will certainly change how we relate to the written word and how it is distributed and presented to us, and it will almost just as certainly change how we process information, how we relate to information, and how we relate to each other as well, as one of the longest standing forms of communication and inter-relation experiences a transformation from solid physicality to a new, ephemeral and digital existence.

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