

# Cooking Up Resistance: Exploring Czech Identity in Cook County Through Co-Culinary Oral Histories

By  
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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the bonds and identities made possible through the culinary labor of Czech women in Cook County, Illinois. Through co-culinary oral histories, which combines the process of feminist oral histories with the work of cooking and/or eating with my participants, I explore the significance of culinary labor as it relates to Czech identity. Food-based traditions are powerful cultural anchors that can communicate membership, commemorate important shared events, and perform radical resistance against threats of erasure. In this project, I explore the radical potential for resistance that is transferred through the work of my participants showing me how to cook and bake important Czech dishes. In this project, resistance manifests in multiple, shifting forms and locations. I advance a culinary ecology of memory in order to gesture toward the interanimating forces of food, memory, and identity. The culinary labor that my participants are engaged in extends beyond the physical work that occurs in the kitchen. Indeed, the memory work required to successfully preserve and transfer heirloom recipes is a form of gendered care work that requires additional exploration. This dissertation combines extensive oral history excerpts, recipes, and textual analysis in its expansion of current conversations on gender, memory, and food studies.

## Acknowledgments

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## Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Culinary Zones.....	5
Race and Ethnicity .....	9
Czechs in Cook County .....	12
Co-Culinary Oral History .....	15
Chapter Summaries.....	17
Chapter 1- Culinary Ecologies of Memory.....	18
Chapter 2-The Political Life of Mushroom Hunting .....	19
Chapter 3-Culinary Knowledge Transference and Resistance .....	19
Interlude #1 .....	22
Chapter 1 Culinary Ecologies of Memory .....	24
Memory Ecology and Recipes.....	30
Anna Ramirez .....	33
Sandy Cervenka .....	37
Carol Kala.....	39
Toward a Culinary Ecology of Memory.....	41
Interlude #2 .....	47
Chapter 2 The Politics of Mushroom Hunting.....	49
Microbiopolitics.....	51
Regulating Mushrooms.....	54
Cook County and Legal Intervention.....	57

Mushroom Hunters .....	62
Conclusion .....	73
Interlude #3 .....	76
Ch. 3 Culinary Resistance.....	78
Culinary Capital.....	82
The Work of Resistance.....	86
Interlude #4 .....	98
Conclusion- On the Continuation of Czech Foodways.....	101
Bibliography .....	105

## Preface

“Well your grandpa’s mother, she didn’t cook.” This is how my grandmother begins almost any story about my late grandfather’s late mother. “Grandpa’s father, he did all the cookin. What she did, I’ll never know.” My grandmother sighs and shakes her head, clearly communicating her disapproval at the domestic situation of a long-dead married couple. She continues, “So this one time, your grandpa and I go over there for dinner and my mother and dad come too. And my mother’s sittin in the kitchen watchin grandpa’s mother make dinner. She’s makin pork, dumplings, and sauerkraut. But she keeps liftin the lid off to check the dumplings and finally my mother says to her, “Ida, don’tchu keep liftin the lid like that. You better just leave it.” She didn’t know how to cook dumplings, for goodness sake.” My grandmother barely gets this last sentence out between fits of laughter.

No matter how many times she tells me the story of Ida and her lackluster culinary skills she still finds it worthy of a good laugh. But it is only funny if you get the joke, which in this case is a Czech woman not knowing the most basic rule of dumpling preparation; do not lift the lid. Bread dumplings are made from egg, white bread, and a little salt combined into the shape of loaf and then placed in a large pot of boiling water. Lifting the lid during the cooking process will cause your dumplings to deflate and dry out, and there is nothing worse than heavy, dry dumplings. My Czech grandmother knows this, and I know this because she and my other female identified Czech relatives impressed this lesson into my conscious mind long before I could make dumplings on my own.

In some ways, this project is a result of nearly three decades living, eating, and cooking Czech food with and for my Czech family right outside of Chicago. In moving from amateur Czech cook to professional Czech food researcher, I knew my primary responsibility was to the cooks

and their recipes. I have an obligation to the women who generously opened their homes and kitchens to me for this project, as well as the women who taught me to cook years before any thought of research crossed my mind. I wanted to capture the affective power of being in a kitchen smelling the *guláš* bubbling on the stove, or the *houska* rising in the oven; tasting the velvety melting butter on a *rohlik* hot from the oven; watching the butter brown for fruit dumplings; and feeling the sticky poppyseeds on your fingers while filling *koláčky*.<sup>1</sup> The best way to do that was to bring you, to bring this project, into those kitchens and restaurants.

As an interdisciplinary scholar, I am invested in interrogating the factors that coalesce in the construction and maintenance of identities. The ubiquity and necessity of food make it at once a primary location for identity work and the ambient backdrop for supporting human life. This project attempts to capture the political, social, interpersonal, cultural, and historical life of Czech food and identity in the Chicagoland area. It moves between academic analysis and narrative reflection as easily as you move from the kitchen to the living room of your home. These are the ingredients for the project that follows; *doubrou chut* (eat well).

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<sup>1</sup> Guláš is a tomato-based stew made with all manner of meat and vegetables, houska is a raised yeast bread made with dried fruits and lemon zest, and rohliky are made from buttery triangles of dough rolled into oblong tubes.



## Introduction

At the 2013 Czech American Congress Picnic a woman approached the food ticket table with a friend and inquired about what kinds of foods were available. Bill Hosna, one of the directors of the Czech and Slovak American Genealogical Society of Illinois, was running the ticket table and rattled off a number of meat dishes, potato pancakes, cookies and *koláče*. The woman proceeded to ask Bill, “what is a koláče?” and Bill sort of sat back in his chair and, without making direct eye contact with her, wryly replied “Lady, if you don’t know what koláče is, you’re not Czech.” Upon overhearing this exchange, I laughed and nodded to myself, agreeing with Bill that koláče is the foundation upon which Czech identity is built (a delicious, fruit filled foundation). As I have continued to work on this project, that story has retained a prominent place in my mind. The authoritative, and slightly condescending, way in which Bill dismissed this woman, as though koláče are as much a part of childhood education as learning how to spell. He had clearly delineated the border between Czechness and non-Czechness, and it was koláče. To be fair, Bill is not a condescending nor mean-spirited person, his sense of humor is a dry one and his tolerance for koláče amateurs is obviously very low.<sup>2</sup> But this exchange brings up a larger question; how could one small pastry anchor such a complex ethnic, political, historical, and ideological identity? And, to the larger point of this project, why does koláče identification matter?

Certain foods are so important and loom so large in the narrative of Czech American identity that knowing about them, eating them, and being able to reproduce them is an indicator of membership in this specific identity. Koláče is not only a staple of Czech American identity but it has a rich political life that can reveal important details about the baker. Most Czech families have

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<sup>2</sup> During the last month of dissertation writing, Bill Hosna unexpectedly passed away; this sentence, then, should be in the past tense. Since Bill remains an active influence in my work, I have chosen to keep it in the present tense as a tribute to his love of koláče and lifelong commitment to the Czech community in Cook County.

a koláče recipe that is specific to them (“our koláče recipe”) and if there are two bakers in the family there is probably animosity over who makes the better koláče. And there is even further discussion over the acceptable/desirable types of filling; some traditionalists argue that apricot, prune, poppyseed, and almond are the true flavors, while others insist that cherry, strawberry, cheese and blueberry are just as legitimate. However, all these details and arguments are meaningless if you do not have a fundamental understanding of koláče. In this case, fundamental understanding means that you have strong sense memories regarding koláče, you know the taste, smell, and appearance of koláče. That fundamental understanding is a presupposition for membership in Czech identity.

For Czech bakers, the koláče they make will depend largely on who taught them to make it and from where their ancestral koláče recipe originated.<sup>3</sup> Though a substantial number of koláče were consumed throughout this project, koláče alone is not the primary focus of this dissertation. This project explores the bonds and identities made possible through the culinary labor of Czech women in the Chicagoland area. Czech food is one of the most coherent ways that Czechs perform ethnic identity, as demonstrated by the intimate association of specific foods with holidays, festivals, and feast days. Koláče, among other Czech foods, requires a substantial investment of time along with culinary knowledge and skill. How culinary knowledge and skill are transferred—whether through written instruction, hands-on experiential learning, or a combination—is as important as the skills themselves. Through co-culinary oral histories, which combines the process of feminist oral histories with the work of cooking and/or eating with my participants, I explore the significance of culinary labor as it relates to Czech identity.

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<sup>3</sup> The geographic origin of a recipe often accounts for differences in types of dough, size, shape, and fillings.

Food-based traditions are powerful cultural anchors that can communicate membership, commemorate important shared events, and perform radical resistance against threats of erasure.<sup>4</sup> In this project, I explore the radical potential for resistance that is transferred through the work of my participants showing me how to cook and bake important Czech dishes. I explore how my participants engage in the work of maintaining Czech ancestral foodways in the face of multiple types of loss and erasure. As this work demonstrates, Czech foodways in Cook County are an intimate network of geographical, memory, communal, and familial assemblages.

### Culinary Zones

Food based traditions are shaped by a variety of influences. While ethnic heritage can be a major component, other factors like geographic location can also significantly impact the development and reproduction of food based traditions. In her study of Italian, Irish, and Jewish foodways at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historian Hasia R. Diner presents three compelling case studies that compare European and American food-based traditions, rituals, methods of preparation, and availability. Her discussion of the importance of place for Jewish foodways parallels the importance of place in European, and specifically Czech, foodways. In her description of the various types of Jewish food prepared across Eastern Europe Diner states, “The Jews of Rumania, for example, cooked with spices exotic to the palates of Polish Jews... Sometimes Jews

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Psyche A. Williams-Forsion, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Warren J. Belasco, *Food: the Key Concepts* (New York, NY: Berg, 2010); Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato eds, *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2012); Samuel Yamashita, “The Significance of Hawai’i Regional Cuisine in Post-colonial Hawai’i” in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds., Robert Ku, Anita Mannur, and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013); Ted Merwin, *Pastrami on Rye: An Overstuffed of the Jewish Deli* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015).

used the same food word for different items.”<sup>5</sup> This suggests that geographic boundaries have a strong influence on ethnic culinary traditions. While there are groups of people who identify as Jewish in both Romania and Poland, Diner states, “Jewish cooking” varies depending on geographic location and regional availability.

While certain ethnic foods may be available trans-regionally, the ingredients and/or method of preparation may vary drastically. Diner continues on to say, “[F]amilies or individuals picked up and moved across borders, and traversed culinary zones in pursuit of better lives.”<sup>6</sup> Diner’s concept of ‘culinary zones’ clearly yokes foodways to a geographical location and suggests that moving through a geographical space—a country, state, or even a city—also means moving through geographically situated foodways. While zoning is used to delineate boundaries—especially within local legislation—it is also accompanied by a specific set of ordinances that govern what that land can be used for. If this same logic is applied to Diner’s culinary zones then not only are certain zones recognized for specific culinary traditions, but, I suggest, certain culinary traditions govern the foodways for that area and act as an essential part of its civic identity. In the same way that a developer cannot erect a factory in a residential zone, so too exist culinary zoning ordinances that—less formally—dictate the foodways for specific ethnicities in specific areas.

While present day Czech Republic has geographic borders that distinguish it from Slovakia and Moravia, culinary zones, as Diner would call them, do not always coincide with the geographical ones. Returning to the example of koláče that I discussed in the introduction, the type of dough can indicate which culinary zone the recipe originated from. For example, my ancestral koláče recipe is from Prague, as illustrated by the fact that the dough is made with cream cheese

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<sup>5</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 148.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 149

and produces a denser, almost biscuit like, small circle of dough. Other types of koláče dough that originate elsewhere in the Czech lands produce a dough that is fluffier, more like a danish, and much larger than the ones I make. Additionally, some koláče recipes call for the dough to be cut into squares then pinched long-ways to produce a long, thin piece of dough with filling on each end. Still other types of koláče call for filling to be inside a large, dough ball, creating something like a jelly donut. While the dough can indicate the recipe's location of origin, the choice of filling can indicate whether the baker is interested in traditional or modern koláče. In their work on food and rhetorical identity construction, Wendy Atkins-Sayre and Ashli Quesinberry Stokes claim that, "Food... is an important rhetorical symbol of the area and the people, even when that space and its people are fluid."<sup>7</sup> Koláče, then, is able to function as an identity marker, even through its regional variance. Indeed, koláče, in all its iterations, is referred to as the National sweet bread.<sup>8</sup> This designation, albeit an informal one, clearly yokes the production and consumption of koláče to Czech and Slovak citizenship projects. The significance of koláče for Czech citizens does not stop at the borders of the Czech Republic.

A recent *New York Times* article detailed the strong lineage of Czech migration and heritage in Texas and the importance of koláče for communities there.<sup>9</sup> The story spoke of some bakeries producing koláče with savory meat filling, "Christy's Donuts, Kolaches and Croissants in the Montrose neighborhood [in Houston] serves square biscuit-style kolaches, cut open along the side, stuffed with sausage patties, layered with cheese and microwaved. On Saturday mornings,

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<sup>7</sup> Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2016) 138.

<sup>8</sup> Czech heritage dictionary

<sup>9</sup> Czech Stop and Little Czech Bakery in West Texas are nationally well known for their Czech bakery and enticing signs along the interstate. Whenever someone from the South found out about my project they inevitably asked me if I'd been to Czech Stop.

[Shipley Do-Nuts](#) on North Main Street serves stubby savory kolaches gorged with boudin, the Cajun sausage of pork, rice and spices.”<sup>10</sup> For these two bakeries in Houston, it appears that the inventive and lengthy list of hearty fillings are the focal point of their respective koláče. Unlike sausage, cheese, or egg, traditional koláče filling flavors include poppyseed, prune, cherry, and apricot. Despite the obvious differences in both the dough and the filling, all of these recipes produce what is recognized and referred to as koláče (or kolache, as the *New York Times* article states). But depending upon who recognizes which recipe can indicate their place of origin within the Czech lands as well as their position in relation to traditional versus modern culinary innovation.

When that *New York Times* article came out, no fewer than five people sent me a copy or phoned me to make sure I had read it. Kathy Wittenberg—my aunt who is a participant in this project and accomplished koláče baker—rolled her eyes and said something like “well I’ve never seen a koláče double as a breakfast sandwich, okay?” The significance of koláče as an identity marker and citizenship project means that there are limits to its culinary elasticity. While it is possible to have koláče that extends beyond its geographical location of origin, it would seem that it must retain a significant percentage of recognizable elements—authenticating elements—to be considered legitimate koláče. For example, Christy’s Donuts, Kolaches, and Croissants—whose koláče is in biscuit form and stuffed with eggs, sausage, and cheese—applies the term ‘koláče’ loosely, and only to the type and structure of the dough. For some koláče purists, this biscuit-koláče-sandwich stretches the idea of kolacky too far, and does not accurately reflect the National sweet bread and, consequently, its people and ideologies.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/dining/the-kolache-czech-texan-or-all-american-all-three.html>

The koláče debate brings up interesting questions about authenticity and consequently, authority. Authenticity is, in and of itself, a loaded concept that is only ever used in a positive sense and can only emerge through a comparative process that devalues the inauthentic.<sup>11</sup> As such, the designation of something, in this case a koláče, as authentic carries significant cultural weight and power; both for the producer, who is lauded for her ability to create a legitimate product, and the consumer, who is wise enough to seek out the “real deal.” Discussions about food and authenticity are often mired in gender politics where authenticity stems from the labor of grandmas and great grandmas passed down through contemporary mothers, aunts, and daughters. There is a sense of pride in preserving authentic recipes, dishes, and cooking tools. While it is a contentious topic, the boundaries of authenticity and its construction are much more difficult to map out.

Authenticity as it relates to acts of culinary colonization and food gentrification are important themes throughout this dissertation. The irritation that participants like Kathy express around koláče dough and filling, speak to larger issues of ethnic culinary authority and ancestral foodways. At issue is not that bakeries in Texas are stuffing koláče with innovative fillings, but rather, that those bakeries are featured in the *New York Times*, while Klas—the oldest Czech restaurant in America—was forced to declare bankruptcy and close its doors.<sup>12</sup> At stake in the koláče debate is not merely who is “right” or “wrong,” but whose voice is heard at all, and how that culinary narrative shapes and influences Czech ethnic foodways and heirloom recipes.

## Race and Ethnicity

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Potter, *The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing, 2010)

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1922, Klas restaurant in Cicero, Illinois could not afford to remain in business and closed in 2015. Traditional fruit filled koláče baked in-house daily were a staple of their menu.

Issues of culinary colonization and food gentrification have lengthy and problematic histories and associations with whiteness. Specifically, culinary colonization has historically been initiated by white people violently appropriating non-white foodways. One of the central issues which I have had to contend with in the process of writing this dissertation is the evolution of race and, more specifically, whiteness in America since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As whiteness studies authors David Roediger and Robert Zemekas argue, whiteness is a social construct that is associated with specific values, meanings, social locatedness and history. While we contemporarily understand ‘whiteness’ to encompass nearly all people of European descent, there is a long and complicated history preceding that understanding. While southern and eastern European immigrants were naturalized as white, Roediger reminds us, “The same federal government that in its naturalization policy made southern and eastern Europeans white generated a protracted debate over immigration restriction which called their racial fitness for American citizenship into question.”<sup>13</sup> He continues on to say that conflicting political discourse “left southern and eastern Europeans as objects of debate, their racial status on trial as they lived, poised in between nonwhiteness and a white Americanism that was seen as a racial as well as a national category.”<sup>14</sup> This in-between subject position meant that Czechs and other southern and eastern European immigrants were evaluated on their cultural competency to become white Americans, as demonstrated by the jobs they took, the foods they ate, the language they spoke, among other things.

The largest migration of people from Bohemia to the United States occurred in 1891 and comprised part of the “second wave” of immigrants from Europe. Upon arrival in the United

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<sup>13</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005), 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



States, many Bohemians settled in New York or Chicago and some continued to move west to Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. A fraction of Bohemian people moved south to Texas where there is still a large population of Czech people. Illinois, and specifically Chicago, was home to one of the largest Czech diasporas in the United States for more than half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All of the participants in this project have lived in the Chicagoland area for at least ten years—most for more than thirty years. Additionally, many of my participants are descended from Czech families with long lineages in Cook County that began in the historic Czech neighborhoods of Pilsen or Český Kalifornie.

Within Czech and Slovak immigrant communities, there was further racial divisiveness as Czechs and Slovaks brought with them their own racially charged perceptions of other southern and eastern European groups. Eager to distance themselves from “undesirable” ethnic groups, Czechs and Slovaks quickly began working together in a quest to become American. Zecker points out, “Among Slovak, immigrants, creating an imagined community was first a matter of conceptualizing a common Slovak nationhood, and second fitting that identity within a “Caucasian” polity.”<sup>15</sup> Zecker contends that Czech and Slovak newspapers and journals were essential in the “whitening” of Czech and Slovak immigrants.

To further complicate this issue, the countries contemporarily known as the Czech Republic and Slovakia began the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Bohemia and underwent significant political, geographical, and social upheaval.<sup>16</sup> This dissertation focuses on Czech people, which is to say, people who have roots in or identify as Czech or Czech Americans. Because of the significant and complicated

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<sup>15</sup> Robert M. Zecker, *Race and America's Immigrant Press: How the Slovaks Were Taught to Think Like White People* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Groups, 2011), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Čornej and Jiří Pokorný, *A Brief History of the Czech Lands to 2004*, trans. Anna Bryson (Prague, CZ: Práh Press, 2003); Jan Bažant, Nina Bažantová, and Frances Starn eds., *The Czech Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

overlaps in history, politics, and culture, most academic works on this part of the world lump Slovakia, Moravia, and the Czech Republic—and sometimes Slovenia—into one group frequently referred to as Slavs, Slavic, or Czecho-Slovak. The twentieth century alone has seen multiple geographic shifts in the boundaries between these countries, to say nothing of the lands evolution from its earliest existence as the Bohemian lands.<sup>17</sup>

### Czechs in Cook County

In 1852, the first Czech immigrants to Chicago settled in what is currently known as Lincoln Park moving to the lower west side after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. This new area of the city became known as Pilsen, owing to its substantial Czech population. Czech immigrants in Chicago were very insular and quickly took to establishing their own churches, unions, community centers, and businesses. Due to the self-sustaining nature of Pilsen, Czech immigrants rarely ventured outside their own neighborhood and thus Pilsen became a destination for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century flood of Czech and Slovak immigrants. As the Czech population continued to expand, they moved west to what became known as Český Kalifornie (Czech California) a name which refers to its location at 26<sup>th</sup> street and California Avenue.<sup>18</sup>

Czechs continued to immigrate to Chicago in greater numbers through the 1910s, eventually reaching 200,000 in 1920. When transatlantic immigrant slowed, Czechs in Chicago began to migrate further west from Chicago into the developing cities of Cicero and Berwyn. The sprawling Western Electric Hawthorn Works factory complex in Cicero employed thousands of

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<sup>17</sup>For detailed maps visit this guide provided by the National Archives of the UK <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/documents/maps-in-time.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> This area is alternately referred to as Lawndale-Crawford.

Czech and Slovak workers and facilitated the transition of many families from the city of Chicago to Cicero and Berwyn. Cicero and Berwyn continued to thrive as Bohemian communities well into the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporarily, the Czech and Slovak population in Berwyn and Cicero has been declining steadily for the past twenty years. According to the 2010 census, there were 2,793,500 “non-Hispanic whites” living in Cook County and 1% of that number self-identified as Czech, which translates to approximately 30,000 Czechs.<sup>20</sup> Cook County encompasses all of Chicago proper as well as its closest suburbs, making it difficult to identify how many of those people live in Chicago as opposed to Berwyn and Cicero, cities which once had extremely high rates of Czech citizens. Despite the fact that Illinois remains among the top five most populous Czech cities in the United States, the number has been on the decline since the 1980s. This decline is also reflected in the reduction of Czech restaurants, banks, and bakeries that permeated Berwyn and Cicero for more than half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the aims of this project was to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which contemporary Czechs living in and around Berwyn and Cicero are preserving their ethnic heritage and cultural knowledge in the face of population and business decline. The importance of food and cooking amongst ethnic diasporas has been well documented, largely by anthropologists and recently by food studies scholars as well. In a 2008 special issue of *Food, Culture, and Society* devoted to Food and Diaspora, noted anthropologist Sidney Mintz posed the question, “What can happen with food behavior when people have to move?”<sup>21</sup> The movement of people almost

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<sup>19</sup> (Carlson Kay 2000, Magallon 2010, Lawndale-Crawford Historical Association Records 1929-1984)

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts, Cook County, Illinois.” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cookcountyillinois/PST120216> (accessed August 09, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Sidney Mintz, *Food and Diaspora*, 511.

certainly ensures that their food-based behavior will change or be impacted in some way. Mintz continues on to specifically address the great waves of people coming from Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saying, “Indeed my first comment on these European migrants would be that their foods mostly took on their ethnic character only after they arrived where they were going, and found out that they were ethnic.”<sup>22</sup> Mintz's observation illustrates the social construction of whiteness and, by extension, the construction of “white” food.

Indeed, there would have been no reason for Czech people to refer to their food as “Czech food” until Czech identity became a marker of outsider status. For Czech people as well as other immigrants, the work of becoming white often centered on food-based behavior. This whitening of ethnic food is frequently nuanced and is situated amidst ongoing consistent ethnic food-based behavior. A 1901 issue of *Česka Žena*, a monthly woman's Czech-language journal distributed nationally through the 1940s, included a recipe for *cukrové kukesy*.<sup>23</sup> This literally translates as “sugar cookies” but the word *kukesy* is not a word of Czech origin, it is a phoentic translation of the English word “cookies.” Contemporarily, most Czechs bake intricate Christmas cookie plates with more than a dozen different varieties of cookies demonstrating the ways in which the cookie has been absorbed into Czech culinary traditions over the past hundred years.

Further, many of my oral history participants identify as belonging to more than one ethnic group and thus their cooking and baking reflects this multi-ethnic heritage. For example, one of my participants is Czech and Mexican and referred to her style of cooking as “Czechxican.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Chicagoland regional cooking influences and availability impact my participants

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>23</sup> “Kuchyně” *Česka Žena*: Časopis Věnovaný Česko-Katolickým Ženám a Dívčám v Americe. Dec. 1 1917. Vol. 10 number 157. St. Louis, MO.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 30 2016.

means and ways of cooking; Chateau Dumplings are a staple in the freezer section in this area—and many of my participants mention their convenience and frequent appearance in their kitchens—but Chateau does not have national distribution.<sup>25</sup> This project, then, is attuned to the many personal, regional, and ethnic factors that influence the trajectory and performance of culinary labor and food-based acts of distinction. In order to more fully address the complex assemblage of labor, memory, resistance, and identity that I wanted to explore, I designed a method that emphasized both labor and space.

### Co-Culinary Oral History

For this project I developed and implemented a method I refer to as ‘co-culinary oral history’ which combines the process of feminist oral history with the act of cooking and/or eating with my participants. I conducted oral histories with 15 Czech women ranging in age from their early 30s to their early 70s, all of whom have been living in the Chicagoland area for at least 10 years, some for as many as 60. My oral histories were conducted between August and December of 2016, with most ranging in length from 60 minutes to 120 minutes. The location for these oral histories varied; sometimes participants came to my home, other times I went to theirs, still others I shared a meal with at local Czech restaurants. I designed this method because I was trying to figure out a way to effectively capture the presence and affective power of sharing a cooking or eating space. While talking about food and food based memories is informative and can result in fruitful conversations, I felt that removing the work of cooking and/or eating from the space of the kitchen or dining room was losing an important part of the narrative. I was lucky enough to find

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<sup>25</sup> The Chateau brand of frozen dumplings includes: bread and potato dumplings that are precooked and need only to be warmed up prior to serving. This convenience product eliminates the delicate, multi-hour process involved in making dumplings from scratch.

participants who not only welcomed me into their dining rooms and kitchens to talk about food, but showed me how to cook and bake.

In addition to audio recordings of these co-culinary oral histories, I have documented the cooking and baking process with as many photographs as possible.<sup>26</sup> As with any new method there is a learning curve and mine included working on positioning the recorder close enough to capture our conversation but far enough away from the noises of clanking bowls and whirring of mixers. I also discovered fairly early on in the process that it is challenging to take field notes while peeling potatoes or eating roast pork, so in most instances, I scribbled down my notes immediately after the oral history while I sat in my car. An unexpected side effect, and one that I cannot accurately capture here, is the way in which smells from my co-culinary oral history clung to my clothing and hair for hours after the conversation had ended. These scents (sense) memories transcended the boundaries of the interaction and, as smells waft through a home, so too did they permeate the spaces I moved through, reminding me of the experience I had shared earlier in the day. Because these scents had cleaved to the fabric of my clothing and hair, they became participants in this project—just as the space of the kitchen had also done. My participants and I became partners, co-creators, of a sense memory that we now share. Some of the women I spoke with invited me into their well-worn culinary traditions and sense memories, transferring their culinary knowledge to me and weaving me into the legacy of that recipe.

It was only through cooking and eating together that this kind of connection was able to be forged, and indeed, while I describe the experiences in the pages that follow, my descriptions fall short of effectively transferring the culinary knowledge I gained throughout the research process. A transference of what I have learned can only be fully realized by actively sharing the cooking

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<sup>26</sup> A selection of these images are included in the image appendix

and baking process with those who might be interested in it. What follows, then, is as complete a textual exploration of the themes of ethnic foodways, memory, and identity as I can offer, but with the caveat that it is missing the critical multi-sensory experience that can only be captured in a kitchen or dining room. An important part of co-culinary oral histories is the ‘co’ prefix, of which I am an essential part. My own identity, traditions, and knowledge as a Czech woman, raised by Czech parents in Cook County permeates this project. Indeed, my own position as a student of the Czech language, a director of the Czech and Slovak American Genealogy Society of Illinois, and a member of a Czech family mobilized certain networks that made this research possible.

As previously mentioned, the women I spoke with for this project have all lived in the Chicagoland area for at least ten years. Each of my participants had varying levels of familiarity with the Czech language ranging from: Czech as their primary language to absolutely no knowledge of it beyond basic words for foods and pastries. I conducted the oral histories in English owing largely to the fact that my own Czech is not proficient enough to carry on a complicated conversation. However, throughout this written account I have chosen to faithfully reproduce the grammar and syntax of my participants to reflect the way they speak.<sup>27</sup> This means that some excerpts contain sentences with grammatically incorrect pronoun placement, slang, and incomplete sentences. It was important to the integrity of this project to retain not just the meaning of what my participants shared with me, but the way in which they shared it, which is messy, tangential, and not always fully formed. Czech words and phrases have been italicized and their definitions can be found in the glossary of Czech words in appendix B.

## Chapter Summaries

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<sup>27</sup> Any edits were made in the interest of increased clarity and ease of reading.

The chapters in this dissertation take up themes of resistance, memory, ancestral foodways and Czech ethnic identity in Cook County. Each chapter is punctuated by interludes that include recipes and short reflections from my participants and myself about our relationships to Czech food and cooking.

### **Chapter 1- Culinary Ecologies of Memory**

The first chapter takes up resistance as explored through food-based memories, in particular, those memories that cannot be fully accessed due to recipe loss. I advance a culinary ecology of memory that recognizes the inextricable influence of senses, ritual, and affect on the creation and maintenance of food based memories. This chapter builds on the recent turn in memory studies towards a connective understanding of how memories are made and re(remembered) to explore the significance of food-based memories for personal and communal identity.

The oral history excerpts in this chapter are each focused on specific heirloom recipes that, for various reasons, are no longer fully accessible to my participants. These recipes have each been rendered inaccessible due to the death of the recipe holder and their lack of written instruction. Interestingly, these inaccessible recipes are situated amongst recipes that are reproducible and that my participants can and do recreate. It is the combination of access and barrier that creates a frustrating tension for my participants. In their attempts to successfully reproduce their specific recipes, my participants perform the work of culinary resistance against loss and erasure. While the ability to successfully reproduce a recipe is a significant part of perpetuating individual and communal ethnic identity, it is the persistent work towards remembering that demonstrates resistance.



## **Chapter 2-The Political Life of Mushroom Hunting**

Shifting the focus from ecologies of memory to ecologies of human/nonhuman intimacies, the second chapter explores the Bohemian tradition of mushroom hunting and its tenuous legal status in Cook County. My participants discuss their various personal encounters with mushroom hunting either prior to its ban in Cook County, or in locations where it is still permitted. Because of the centrality of mushrooms and mushroom hunting to Czech identity, its legal prohibition presents a tangle of questions relating to ethnic identity and the preservation or erasure of ancestral foodways. Using the theoretical lens of microbiopolitics to analyze the human/nonhuman nature connection, I suggest that state sponsored legislation seeks to restrict human/nonhuman nature contact in order to maintain a capitalist system. Through maintaining their relationship to mushroom hunting, even at great personal cost to themselves, my participants resist regulating forces that seek to sever their ancestral knowledge and connection to mushrooms.

While resistance in the first chapter is deeply personal and often solitary work, this chapter moves the location of resistance to very public spaces with higher risk factors. The extended oral history excerpts in this chapter demonstrate the wide and varied important relationships that my participants cultivate with nonhuman nature in the form of mushrooms. Many of my participants discuss their multi-decade connection to mushroom hunting and their unwillingness to capitulate to blanket legislation that would criminalize that relationship. I also offer an alternative temporality that is driven by fungal assemblages and their nonlinear types of movement.

## **Chapter 3-Culinary Knowledge Transference and Resistance**

The third and final chapter celebrates the transference of culinary knowledge and method as an act of culinary resistance. I explore the radical potential that accompanies teaching others to cook traditional Czech recipes as well as the ways in which such food serves as an identity anchor

for the Czech community in the Chicagoland area. As in the previous chapter on mushrooms, certain Czech dishes are a vehicle for reinforcing Czech identity in private or public spaces. This chapter explores the threat of culinary colonization and food gentrification as it relates to ethnic foodways. One of the strategies deployed to resist culinary colonization is ensuring that ancestral food-based knowledge and methods of preparation are transferred laterally and between generations. The participants in this chapter are keenly aware of the high-stakes relationship between ethnic identity and foodways and stress the importance of culinary knowledge transference as an act of resistance against loss or erasure.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, the conclusion provides closing thoughts on the ever-evolving landscape of Czech food and community in Cook County. This project attends to some of the forces and influences that shape Czech ethnic identity, particularly, the impact of food-based memories and labor on ancestral foodways. However, it is by no means a comprehensive analysis of Czech identity or of the entire history of Czech cooking and eating. The themes explored in this dissertation are particularly salient for exploring the connections between ancestral foodways, labor, and ethnic identity as well as strengthening connections between the fields of women, gender, and sexuality studies, food studies, and memory studies.

While food is only one entry point into personal and cultural identity, this project argues for an extended examination of the bonds and identities that are animated by gendered culinary labor and mobilized through acts of culinary resistance. There is significant work suggesting that cultural, regional, and national identities are literally consumed through the process of eating foods that are significant for the members of those groups. However, this project suggests that it is not

only the literal consumption, but the multi sensory experience of culinary labor that creates food-based memories and reaffirms ethnic identities. This project continues on to explore the political life of food-based memories, human/nonhuman nature relationships, and modes of culinary knowledge transference to ultimately posit a theory of culinary resistance that is interdisciplinary and multi sensory. Importantly, this project is anchored in the stories of the women who generously opened their kitchens and their lives to me. It is the combination of their recipes and my research that peppers the following chapters.

**Interlude #1**

Kathy Wittenberg on her koláče recipe: “So this was a little after babi had died and I thought, I’m gonna make koláče for dad. So I spent a long time figuring out the recipe. And dad came over one day and I said, ‘Oh here dad, I made these koláče just like babi’s for you’. And he ate them and he said, ‘yeah, these are good, but these aren’t babi’s recipe’. And I was sure they were, I was so sure. I knew I had eaten these koláče before. So then I started wondering, ‘whose recipe is this’? And I asked Mike and he said ‘oh yeah, those are the Sokol koláče’. Because when we were growing up, Mike lived right behind the Sokol hall, so we would go over there a lot for stuff and they’d always have koláče. So I was making the Sokol recipe thinking it was babi’s koláče.”

**Prague (or Sokol) Koláče****Oven 375**

1 lb butter	1 pkg. yeast
2 egg yolks beaten	¼ cup warm water
4 cups of flour, sifted	½ cup sugar
1 large pkg. cream cheese	dash of salt
1 teaspoon baking powder	2 can SOLO Pastry Filling

1. Dissolve yeast in barely warm water
2. Mix all other ingredients well and add yeast mixture. Mix well. Chill overnight.
3. Roll out 1/3 inch thick on floured surface.
4. Cut with the lip of a small glass or 2.5 inch round cutter. Place on lightly greased cookie sheet.
5. Press thumbprint in the center and put ½ level teaspoon of the filling in the center.

6. Bake 10-12 minutes or until barely brown on the edges.
7. Cool on wire rack.
8. When totally cool, cover with powdered sugar put through a sieve.

## Chapter 1 Culinary Ecologies of Memory

On a warm September day in 2016, Jean Hruby and I sat at my dining room table casually chatting about my project as I set up the recorder and organized the paperwork she brought for me. Jean is a third-generation Czech American and the president of American Sokol Association, as well as a longtime Chicagoland area resident. Over koláče that I had freshly baked for our meeting, she told me about how she learned to cook and her grandmother's prolific reputation as a baker.<sup>28</sup> When I asked Jean about whether or not her grandmother used measuring tools she told me, "[She] made everything by sight, and taste. So it was really hard when...when my grandmother started to...get older, and fail with her—we, we knew, something was wrong with her, because the, the apple squares didn't taste right. Or the chocolate chip cookies, there was something wrong in the chocolate chip cookies...and, uh...that's when we said, 'Something's wrong with grandma.' So...um...and true enough, she was having mini strokes."<sup>29</sup> In telling me this story, Jean, perhaps unconsciously, set up a direct connection between culinary ritual and memory. Because Jean and her family members had become so accustomed to the particular taste of their grandmother's baked goods it was alarmingly apparent that something was "wrong with her" when the familiar taste of those baked goods was altered. The taste memory of grandma's apple squares was so strong and burned so brightly in the memories of those who had experienced the flavor that any change was significant enough to cause concern.

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<sup>28</sup> Sokol is the Czech word for 'falcon' and is a physical fitness organization started in Czechoslovakia in 1862 under the ideology that a sound body produces a sound mind and thus a more capable national citizenry. In the United States, Sokol chapters sprung up in Illinois, New York, Texas, Nebraska, and Iowa and evolved to include adult education classes, language classes, and community meeting spaces.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Hruby, Sept 2016

Jean's grandma's apple squares highlight the connection between memory and identity, and the ways in which they are inextricably enmeshed. The link between culinary memory and identity is further emphasized by Jean's apparent frustration at her and her sister's inability to successfully reproduce her grandmother's apple squares, despite years of concerted effort to do so. Jean's relationship to her grandma's apple squares continued to color our conversation when she later admitted to me that reproducing those apple squares is a continued source of culinary frustration, "There's something about...the...mixture. And we can't...I mean, we get it close...and Vesecky's does have an apple slice, that tastes a lot like my grandmother's. It just has a little extra dough, but they put too much icing on it."<sup>30</sup> Jean has an experienced memory of the apple squares that she can share with those who have shared that same taste, but to those who had not been able to taste the apple squares, Jean can only describe them in words; a mode of communication that falls flat of effectively transferring the full multi-sensory, culinary experience.

As Jean spoke to me about the famed apple squares it was evident that she was reaching for descriptors to explain their exact qualities to me, someone wholly unfamiliar with them. When she mentioned that Vesecky's, a local Czech bakery, has apple squares but with too much icing, she continued on to say that her grandmother's had just a light drizzle of icing which she demonstrated by miming a drizzling gesture over the table. While much has been written about cookbooks as

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Hruby, Sept 2016

vehicles for transmission of identity, there is a dearth of work on recipes that cannot be reproduced; recipes that are inaccessible for one reason or another.<sup>31</sup>

This chapter explores the multiple dynamic factors that influence the creation of memories specifically surrounding food and food-based acts. Additionally, it takes up questions around the impact of being unable to successfully access recipes that hold a significant place in one's memory and, by extension, identity. The importance of memory in shaping identity is well-researched but Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre advance those arguments by claiming that the materiality of food functions in a way similar to photographs to stimulate certain memories, they continue, "Recreating a dish—from a family recipe or a collection of recipes representing a particular past—is recreating a memory."<sup>32</sup> While conducting my oral histories, I discovered that most of my participants have one or two recipes that they struggle to successfully reproduce. The uniting factor between all of these participants is that the death of the recipe keeper rendered that recipe inaccessible. This inaccessibility is compounded by the fact that my participants are actively engaged in the work of trying to recreate these recipes and they have such vivid memories of the original dish.

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<sup>31</sup> Cara DeSilva ed, *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy of the Women From Terezin*, Bianca Steiner Brown trans (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc, 1996); Anne L. Bower ed, *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002); Tracey Deutsch, "Memories of Mothers in the Kitchen: Local Foods, History, and Women's Work" *Radical History Review* (May 01 2011) 167-177

<sup>32</sup>On memory and identity: Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser trans, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Kendall R. Phillips ed, *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004); Jon D. Holtzman, "Food and Memory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006) 361-378. Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre, *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016) 30



My use of the term inaccessibility is intended to describe the ways in which specific culinary memories are both present and absent in the minds of my participants—not entirely gone but also not situated in an easily accessible location. Given that culinary cultural knowledge is one of the most cogent ways that Czech people perform their ethnic identity, this dislocated memory extends to a dislocation of ethnic identity. Since my participants cannot successfully transfer particular components of Czech ancestral foodways, there is an erosion of Czech identity, both on a personal-familial level and communally. I refer to recipes that are irreproducible as 'inaccessible' specifically because 'remembering' or 'forgetting' are not precise enough terms to describe the phenomenon that I am exploring. As memory studies scholars have pointed out, remembering and forgetting are not diametrically opposed but rather are enmeshed together in processes of memory (re)creation.<sup>33</sup>

However, even as the interplay of remembering and forgetting is acknowledged, these terms are still too blunt to capture the nuances illustrated by my participants' experiences. My participants have not forgotten the multi-sensory culinary experience animated by their specific family recipes, they are able to call upon it at a moment's notice, most often in vivid detail. Additionally, Jean is not alone in her quest to reproduce the inaccessible recipe, indeed, my participants expressed a concerted, multi-year effort to get it "right." My use of inaccessibility is intended to capture the frustration that my participants feel at their inability to successfully reproduce a specific recipe despite their distinct memory of that dish. The recipe—or more broadly,

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Hoskins, "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 19-31; Leideke Plate, "Amnesiology: Towards the Study of Cultural Oblivion," *Memory Studies* 9, no.2 (2015): 143-155; James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016);

the culinary experience—is not forgotten, they can clearly remember the process of helping the cook make the dish, the smells as it simmered stewed or baked, and the sweet or savory taste profile. Frequently, their recollections are strengthened by other family members who also experienced the original dish and can corroborate specific smells or tastes. Despite these rich and vivid memories, there are parts of the recipe—or sometimes, whole recipes—that my participants cannot accurately call upon. Inaccessibility, then, represents the frustration my participants feel at having only partial access to the culinary memory surrounding their specific recipes.

Access and accessibility are key terms in the field of disability studies where access is a political, theoretical, and architectural project. In that context, access is specifically tied to the social and political conditions that render a space, experience, and/or event accessible or inaccessible. The barriers to accessibility facing my participants are internal and directly related to their ability to fully access specific culinary memories in the form of recipes. For this project, the death of the recipe holder restricted the access that my participants have to certain recipes, rendering parts of it inaccessible. This frustration often leads to intense yearning and—sometimes—sadness at the inability to reproduce a specific memory, which illustrates why affect and loss are integral to a culinary ecology of memory. While my participants have full access to the culinary experience in their individual memories, they are unable to fully transfer that memory, to bring it from the text to the textured. The following sections advance a culinary ecology of memory and explore its contours through extended excerpts from my oral history participants.

In order to effectively attend to the multiple connections between food and memory, I advance a *culinary ecology of memory* that emerges from recently developed theories of memory

ecology.<sup>34</sup> Andrew Hoskins, in “Terrorism in the New Memory Ecology,” cites the connective turn in memory studies that shifts the focus from compartmentalizing types of memory (individual, familial, social) to a system that recognizes the dynamic ways in which memory formation is connected to and influenced by a host of factors. Hoskins states, “For us, the study of the new memory ecology is founded upon...seeing the material and cultural environment in consort with cognition and emotion availed through it to illuminate the emergence of remembering and forgetting.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than delineate the boundaries around memory making as an internal, individual act, an ecology of memory demands the inclusion of exterior, environmental factors as essential parts of memory making. Drawing on Hoskins’ acknowledgement of the multiple factors and influences on the creation of memory, I establish an ecological landscape of specific nodes of feeling and being that are animated by culinary experiences that enable a network of memory. Conversely, I am interested in the factors that limit or fracture certain parts of that network; namely, the impact of dislocated culinary memories on the larger culinary ecology of memory.

In order to advance a culinary ecology of memory, this chapter explores the inextricable connection between ritual, affect, and sense memory in service of a culinary ecology of memory. Speaking specifically about Jewish recipes and their legacy, Rona Kaufman says, “They’re about direction. They’re about creation. They’re about assemblage and alchemy, about physicality and presence. They lead from the *text* to the *textured*. Recipes are about coming into space” (emphasis

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<sup>34</sup> Robyn Fivush and Natalie Merrill, “An Ecological Systems Approach to Family Narratives” *Memory Studies* 9, no 3. (2016) 305-314; Andrew Hoskins, “Memory Ecologies,” *Memory Studies* 9, no 3. (2016): 348-357; Dave Tell *Remembering Emmett Till* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Hoskins, “Memory Ecologies,” *Memory Studies* 9, no 3. (2016): 354.

mine).<sup>36</sup> Assuming that recipes bring forth memories into a physical realm, what are the ramifications for a culinary memory that cannot be brought forth, that is essentially trapped in the ephemeral? The inaccessible culinary memory does not lead from the text to the textured, it does not come into a space, it is locationless and disconnected from its full articulation and, by extension, its ability to be transferred.

However, inaccessible recipes exist in conjunction with accessible ones, both of which shape and influence personal culinary ecologies of memory. Though certain dishes continue to allude my participants, they remain engaged in the ritual of trying to reproduce them. Their continued attempts at recipe reproduction illustrate a form of resistance that is not dependent upon the successful reproduction of a recipe, but rather, on the refusal to relegate that culinary memory to oblivion. Through the interanimating forces of affect and ritual, specific culinary memories are articulated to individual identity and ancestral foodways.

### Memory Ecology and Recipes

Thinking ecologically about memory allows for a more direct focus on the connective tissue that links factors previously believed to be independent of each other and illuminates the ways in which those factors work in the creation of memory. In his forthcoming book on the commemoration of Emmett Till, communication studies scholar Dave Tell states, “At least in the Delta, commemoration works in and through the domains of race and place. I refer to the interanimating force of race, place, and commemoration as the *ecology of memory*” (emphasis

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<sup>36</sup> Rona Kaufman, “Testifying, Silencing, Monumentalizing, Swallowing: Coming to Terms With ‘In Memory’s Kitchen,’” JAC 24, no 2. (2004) 434.

original).<sup>37</sup> For Tell, an ecology of memory is about the kinds of networks and affiliations that are enabled through the dynamic interaction of race, place, and commemoration. Additionally, these forces are inextricably tied to each other and are woven throughout official and unofficial forms of memory and memorial.

Perhaps it is important to consider the work that ecology in conjunction with memory allows us to do. In the most basic sense of the word, ecology is the biological science of the relationships between organisms and their environments. More recently, the fields of science studies and sexuality studies have turned their attention to a concerted study of queer ecologies.<sup>38</sup> Leading ecofeminist theorist Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands states that queer ecology, “highlights the complexity of contemporary bio politics, draws important connections between the material and cultural dimensions of environmental issues, and insists on an articulatory practice in which sex and nature are understood in light of multiple trajectories of power and matter.”<sup>39</sup> Queer ecology gestures to the multiple factors, material and non, that comprise ecological networks and enable a deeper understanding of those same networks.

One of the reasons that food plays such a large role in memory creation and identity making is because food-based experiences engage multiple senses so there are several types of memory to draw upon. In their work on Southern food and regional identity, Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and

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<sup>37</sup> Dave Tell, *Remembering Emmett Till* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming)

<sup>38</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson eds, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2011); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Introduction” *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson eds (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010) 15.

Wendy Atkins-Sayre discuss the importance of food experiences as they relate to memory saying, “The memory of food can be a significant part of the overall experience, making the meaning of the food more explicit.”<sup>40</sup> As previously mentioned, recipes are designed to bring the text into the textured which creates an additional connective element that further strengthens the importance of recipes for memory creation.

The role of recipes as family heirloom and cookbook-manuscript has been well-researched by contemporary scholars in the fields of: English, Women’s Studies, and Food Studies, to name a few.<sup>41</sup> As recipes are passed from generation to generation their centrality to the legacy of a certain family or community grows stronger as it is transferred to more people. Indeed, written recipes that have survived for several generations are often treated as artifacts and handled with care so as not to destroy the fragile (and oily) paper. Perhaps obviously, these recipes are not only directions for preparing a certain dish or desert but rather, they are inextricably enmeshed with a multi-sensory, emotional response that communes a special status to legacy recipes.

While it is impossible to create exact replicas of older recipes—owing largely to changes in geographical location, cooking tools, and ingredient availability—possessing the recipe from whence a dish came and being able to recreate that same dish as exactly as possible offers a

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<sup>40</sup> Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre, *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016) 30.

<sup>41</sup> Marjorie L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Linda Murray Berzok, *American Indian Food* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005); Janet Theopano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002); Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber eds, *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Marie L. Drews, “Cooking In Memory’s Kitchen: Re-Presenting Recipes, Remembering the Holocaust” *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning*, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarto eds (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) 53-78.

physical reminder of family identity and legacy. I am doubtful that a family recipe can be cooked and served without ensuing conversation about that recipe's originator and how and when it was served throughout the previous years. The sense memory is stimulated by the physical presence of an approximate recreation of the original dish and facilitates shared memories. The ability to recreate a dish strengthens the grooves of its memory in the same way that performing a specific set of exercises strengthens muscle groups. Being unable to recreate a dish, then, weakens the grooves of its memory because of the loss of communal reaffirmation that accompanies a successful recreation. The initial memory of a dish that is irreproducible is not weakened in those who have experienced it, but the ability to share that dish and successfully transfer that recipe is weakened. As demonstrated by the following excerpts from my oral history participants, the inaccessible recipe is as important and as powerful as the accessible one.

#### Anna Ramirez

I met Anna Ramirez for dinner at Bohemian Crystal, one of the last remaining Czech restaurants in Chicago's western suburbs, where she shared with me her experiences growing up in Pilsen and her love of *svíčková*.<sup>42</sup> Anna's father survived imprisonment in a German labor camp after which he immigrated to the United States around 1950 and met Anna's mother, "he only spoke Czech in the household. Where my mother was somewhat Americanized, since she already was born here...I'm thankful that he was the way he [was] now."<sup>43</sup> As mentioned in the previous

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<sup>42</sup> *svíčková* is a Czech dish comprised of pickled beef and cream gravy made from blending together root vegetables and cream.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 30 2016, 5:30.

chapter, Anna's father was invested in a certain kind of Bohemian family life, "My dad was very old and traditional, uh, we went every day, my mother had to go to the Bohemian butcher which was a block away from our house, on 27th and Spaulding... So every morning my mom would go to the butcher, and she would buy the meat for the day, and uh, cook fresh food cuz my dad was really not one for any sort of canned goods."<sup>44</sup> Since her mother cooked practically every day, Anna has vivid memories of her mother's *prasky*,<sup>45</sup> fish, and pork dishes. Anna described the Czech bakeries and grocery stores that she frequented with her mother, recalling a cream sausage that she has never seen as an adult and that I have never seen at all.<sup>46</sup>

Of all my participants, Anna had the most vivid and expansive recollections of the food of her childhood; not only the actual food items and methods of preparation but the stores and their proprietors as well. Anna's memory is perhaps owing to the fact that her mother frequently involved Anna and Anna's sister in cooking, "since my mom was cooking fresh every day before we went to school, I mean, we were always helping, and on the weekends we'd help too."<sup>47</sup> Despite Anna's expansive culinary recall, she admits she has had a difficult time recreating the foods she describes so well:

ES: Did your mother use recipes or cookbooks, or did she cook all from memory?

AR: Mostly memory. And that was hard, when then, she died, and I tried to duplicate the recipes, and I could never get anything right. Um... So then I took all her pots, when we cleaned out her house, I took her pots and I go, "That has to be in these pots!" and so I try

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 10:03.

<sup>45</sup> *prasky* is a Czech pork sausage that can be served cold or hot and is very affordable.

<sup>46</sup> Both Anna Ramirez and Sandy Cervenka spoke of a cream sausage that they can remember seeing at the Czech butcher when they were young. I have not been successful in locating any additional information on what this sausage looked like or who made it.

<sup>47</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 30 2016.



to cook it again in the pots, and, it didn't work either. Most of them. I mean, some things I've cooked that... I would say, it's still not as good as my mom's, I think maybe the food was just fresher and better, too.<sup>48</sup>

Anna makes an interesting connection between the physical instruments and vessels her mother used for cooking and her own ability to successfully recreate those same recipes. Anna's insistence that her mother's pots are an essential part of her recipes demonstrates a grounding of memory in a physical space. If, as Rona Kaufman argues, recipes bring memory from the text to the textured, these pots are a clear, tangible representation of that textured space.

Using her mother's pot to make her mother's recipes is one of the ways that Anna tries to make those recipe memories accessible; those pots are a physical anchor to an otherwise ephemeral network of culinary memories. In her exploration of foodways in New York's Historic Tenement Museum, historian Megan J. Elias argues that past cooking utensils and vessels contain "food ghosts", which she defines as the microbial particles of food stuffs that, through continued use, embed themselves in the structural composition of those utensils: the woodgrain, the aluminum, the cast iron.<sup>49</sup> For Elias these food ghosts influence not only the actual taste profile of anything cooked in them/with them, but they also serve as a clear linkage between the cooks of the past and those of the present.

While Elias is specifically interested in using food ghosts in museum education, I argue that Anna is channeling her own personal food ghosts in her insistence that there is something unseen but critically important in her mother's pots. Elias says of "food ghosts," "Although very

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 30 2016, 53:00

<sup>49</sup> Megan J. Elias, "Summoning the Food Ghosts: Food History as Public History" *The Public Historian* 34, no 2. (2012)13-29.

few places we encounter in the course of our ordinary lives really are imbued with the ghosts of high drama, all are haunted in a more banal but also more meaningful way by the lives lived in them before ours.”<sup>50</sup> The banality of food ghosts is what draws Anna to her mother’s pots, sure that there is something there for her to connect to, some little bits of matter that when accessed will make the recipes “right.” Anna’s investment in her mother’s pots speaks directly to Elias’ assertion about the “lives lived in them before ours” where the lives lived are specifically linked to Anna’s memories of her mother and her mother’s cooking.

Anna’s story demonstrates the knot of place, affect, and ritual that structure her culinary ecology of memory. For Anna, the importance of place is communicated not only in her ability to recall the names of every Czech business, neighbor, and street of her childhood but also the more intimate importance of her mother’s kitchen, her own place in that kitchen and the utensils used in that space. Despite this strong memory, Anna is visibly frustrated at her inability to recreate the recipes that she tasted so many times before. Her insistence that “it must be in these pots,” while said with a jovial tone, belies her frustration and perhaps a deeper sadness at the fact that she cannot quite recreate these recipes. And ritual, for Anna, is in her continued attempts to recreate those recipes as well as the ritual of remembering cooking and eating together with her mother and family. These forces cannot be untangled and relegated into individual compartments where affect can be understood separately from place, any more than those pots can be removed of their food ghosts and emotional connection and be seen as just cooking vessels.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 15.

## Sandy Cervenka

Sandy Cervenka is the oldest of three children from a Mexican-Bohemian family that, like so many others, moved from Pilsen, to the Little Village, and then to Berwyn. She currently teaches at St. Procopius school in Pilsen. As we sat in my dining room in early September 2016, she told me about baking koláče from her grandma's recipe with a dough that is mostly butter and that is cut into a square and pinched inward, which she admitted, "No one else I've ever seen makes them the way I do."<sup>51</sup> When I asked her if there were any recipes she could not recreate she responded without hesitation, "no, no not really." However, a few minutes later when I asked if her grandma wrote many recipes down, Sandy told me, "She did but at some point they got lost." Sandy went on to elaborate:

SC:I made copies of some of em, and my sister still makes her um, cause I hated cracker dumplings, she still makes her cracker dumplings, and her veal paprikaš again something I just never liked. So I never made it uhm but so we have a coupla of em that I actually copied at one point before she lost the before the book went missing.

ES: oh okay, oh jeez

SC: yeah but the book just it just disappeared...we don't know what happened to it.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sandy Cervenka, Sept 2016, 3:56.

<sup>52</sup> Sandy Cervenka, Sept 2016.

In a rare situation where many recipes actually were written down, the literal loss of the record has rendered those recipes inaccessible. Beyond the few that Sandy had made copies of, she could not (or chose not) to elaborate further on what these lost recipes may have been. Although she did say that she has a vague recollection of her grandmother making sauerkraut cookies, she has no idea what may have been in that recipe.<sup>53</sup> Sandy's missing recipe book is the most literal act of recipe loss experienced by my participants. While, as I argue, the death of the recipe keeper has rendered many recipes inaccessible, this loss of a tangible document is the only one of its kind that I encountered in my research. This is not to say that other people do not lose recipe books, however, it is much more common among my participants for recipes never to have been written down at all.

Sandy went on to say that she has a collection of her best friend's grandmother's recipes that, while in her physical possession, are inaccessible to her because they are written in Czech. Sandy said, "so I need to get over to Miss Irena's house and go over it and try to figure these out. Because my best friend and I both want to figure these out."<sup>54</sup> This is quite a different type of inaccessibility that is perhaps more frustrating because the recipes are literally in Sandy's possession but are unable to be utilized or even understood, so the barrier preventing the recipes from being brought into the textured is a language one and not necessarily solely an issue of memory.

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<sup>53</sup> Contrary to its name, sauerkraut cookies and sauerkraut cakes are not tart as the sauerkraut is used to add moisture and depth. The other ingredients like chocolate, nuts, and cocoa powder feature more prominently in the taste profile of these deserts.

<sup>54</sup> Sandy is referring to Irena Polashek who is called 'Miss Irena' by her Sokol students and colleagues.

Carol Kala

When Carol invited me to her home I realized she lived just a few blocks away from my own apartment; so in early September 2016 I made the short pleasant walk north to her house. Carol was born in Berwyn at the same hospital where I was born, although many decades earlier than I, and currently lives in the home that used to belong to her grandmother. Carol is the president of the Czechoslovak Garden Club and proudly displays her own beautifully tended garden along the side of her home. While we sat in her kitchen—whose walls are adorned with Czech folk art and copper baking molds—Carol told me about learning to cook from watching her grandmother in the very same space where we now sat, even gesturing to the corner that used to house a large wood-burning stove. When I asked whether her mother or grandmother ever used cookbooks, Carol told me, “No. My grandmother didn’t own a cookbook. And my mom, she had one, I think it was *The Joy of Cooking* and it’s all raggedy, I have it here somewhere, and then she had a little—kind of—spiral notebook that she would put some recipes in and actually through the years I did write down some of her stuff, or she would tell me how to do it. That’s how I cook now too, a lot from memory.”<sup>55</sup> Though she admitted that she does not cook as often as she used to, Carol is a proficient cook whose adult children and grandchildren rely on her to help them make dishes like chicken *paprikaš*, and veal hearts as well as bake cookies and koláče. Carol spent a lot of time watching and helping her mother and grandmother in the kitchen and, by her own admission, that’s

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<sup>55</sup> Carol Kala, Sept 2016, 31:51

how she learned to cook. When I asked her whether there was any dish she has been unable to reproduce she said:

Well [my grandma] used to make these things and I don't even know what they're called, but they were like pancakes that you cooked—I guess like on a griddle pan— we used to eat them with sugar and cinnamon. Roll em up and cover em with sugar and cinnamon. They weren't like pancakes you'd put syrup, or fruit or anything on. And I think they were made out of potato dough. But I don't know what the ingredients are, and I wish I did cause I'd like to make em.<sup>56</sup>

Later in the conversation, Carol brought up these mysterious pancakes again and added, “It could be a German thing too because, you know, like my grandparents had a lot of German words in their vocabulary, so it could have even been a German recipe. You know, cause those borders [between Czechoslovakia and Germany] kind of fluctuated years ago.”<sup>57</sup>

As Carol described the pancakes to me she was careful to make sure I understood that these were not flapjacks or otherwise breakfast pancakes and her voice got a little more serious when she told me that these were not to be covered with syrup or fruit. Additionally, she seemed to be searching for the right words to explain the dough and its ingredients, as evidenced by her statement that she thinks they were potato dough but she can't be sure.

As Carol brought up these pancakes twice it is clear that they occupy a significant and frustrating place in her mind. Her desire to locate a recipe and reproduce these pancakes has lead her to ask a number of other Czech cooks and bakers if they have ever heard of anything resembling this food. This presents an interesting tangle of there never having been a formal written recipe compounded by the fact that these pancakes may have just been something Carol's grandmother

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<sup>56</sup> Carol Kala, Sept 2016, 6:02

<sup>57</sup> Carol Kala, Sept 2016, 32:00

came up with, which would explain Carol's unsuccessful attempts at trying to locate others with knowledge of this recipe. Unlike Jean's apple squares, for which many recipes are available and the problem is correctly adjusting the variables, Carol is faced with a total lack of guide posts or information on these pancakes. Her frustration is evidenced in her description of the pancakes which, while I am imaging as a sort of crepe-like dough covered in cinnamon and sugar, is challenging for me to conceptualize as I also have no point of reference for the appearance or taste of this dish.

#### Toward a Culinary Ecology of Memory

The participants' stories that I have shared in this chapter have two things in common: they all have at least one irreproducible recipe, and they all have recipes that they can—and do—reproduce. Having recipes that are reproducible perhaps intensifies the longing for the irreproducible recipe because it is an obvious gap or hole in otherwise transferable culinary memories. The relationship between recipes that are accessible and those that are not, is an essential part of culinary ecologies of memory, just as remembering and forgetting are not juxtaposed but rather parts of the same whole. The yearning my participants demonstrated in discussing their own inaccessible recipes hints at the larger affective power of reproducible and irreproducible recipes. There is an affective response triggered by culinary memories and made frustrating when those memories cannot be brought from the text to the textured.

Returning to Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre's discussion of the connection between food and memory, they state, "The senses reinforce the experience, making the memory stronger,

more powerful.”<sup>58</sup> However, I would contend that the senses do not make the memory stronger but rather the senses *are* the memory, and are an inextricable part of a culinary ecology of memory. The multi-sensory stimuli surrounding a culinary experience are what define the memory as distinctly food-based and are also what distinguish it from mono-sensory experiences and memories. Indeed, it is impossible to sever those senses from a food-based memory—even if the (re)membering of the experience is solely being brought forth through speech, the sense memories animate that speech and color it with language that aims to accurately capture those senses.

In addition to the centrality of multiple senses, affect and ritual are the other key components that animate a culinary ecology of memory. Including affect as a key component of a culinary ecology of memory allows for a direct examination not only of the multiple kinds of feelings associated with a food-based memory, but of the relationship between desire and loss that characterizes experiences like those shared by my participants. The richness of the sense memories that my participants possess relating to specific food-based memories is evident not only in their descriptions of those memories, but in the yearning they have to successfully reproduce the food that lives in their memories. Because these dishes are irreproducible, for different reasons, the yearning to reproduce them is intensified and impacts the way in which the dish is spoken about.

During my hour-long conversation with Carol she brought up her grandmother’s pancakes twice and tried to reason out why she has not been able to locate anything like them (maybe they are German, maybe they were just invented by her grandma). Were Carol able to reproduce these pancakes would they still occupy such a prominent place in her mind? Or would they be a fondly

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<sup>58</sup> Quesinberry Stokes, Ashli and Tracey Atkins-Sayre. *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2016. 30.



remembered dish that she makes, shares, and enjoys with her friends and family? The affective power of being unable to reproduce a specific dish amplifies the memory of it because the memory as it exists solely in the mind of the rememberer is the only trace of it. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, being able to reproduce a recipe strengthens its memory and allows for a successful transference and thus a continuation of that ethnic and/or familial foodway.

The ritual of trying—and failing—to reproduce heirloom recipes is another essential part of a culinary ecology of memory. Anna's admission that she tried to cook all her mother's recipes and then tried again with her mother's pots and pans is her personal enactment of this culinary ritual. Baking or cooking from a well-worn recipe is its own ritual as you become familiar with the steps and identify the best way to produce the tastiest end product. For my participants without reproducible recipes, they can vividly recall the ritual of watching, or helping, their mother or grandmother make a particular dish, but the specificity of the steps involved in that ritual is lost to them. Their own ritual, as illustrated by both Jean and Anna, is the continued, unsuccessful quest to restore full access to the inaccessible culinary memory. Despite years of "not getting it quite right," my participants are still engaged in this work. This unsuccessful part of the culinary ritual is accompanied by all the recipes that they can and do successfully reproduce, which perhaps further exacerbates the acuteness of the recipe(s) that they cannot. Success, however, is not as fundamental to a culinary ecology of memory as is the repeated ritual of trying to reproduce a recipe.

For many of my participants, it seems as that, despite their best efforts, they may not ever be able to successfully reproduce a specific heirloom recipe from their own culinary history. As

Anna commented of her mother's recipes, "maybe the food was just fresher and better too."<sup>59</sup> This brings up an interesting line of inquiry around heirloom recipes, namely: are we ever truly able to reproduce a specific dish? Given that food, even when faithfully created from a recipe, is never exactly the same way twice, I'm inclined to say 'no.' If that is the case, it would appear that there is a certain amount of deviation that is tolerated, or rather, that goes undetected in our sense memories. Inaccessible recipes, then, are those whose deviation from the original dish is too far afield of the taste, look, smell, or feel of the original dish. There is also the possibility that, through years of attempting to recreate a specific recipe, the mounting frustration of being unable to do so has inflated the experience of the original dish in a way that renders it impossible to actually satisfy the devoted cook. And the continued inability to reproduce a dish thus spurs the cook on to keep trying, and the cycle repeats.

Despite the persistent disappointment my participants experience at their inability to successfully reproduce specific dishes, they refuse to cease their attempts at recipe recreation. While forgetting as a radical strategy of resistance has been explored by memory studies scholars for my participants, their continued attempts at recipe reproduction are acts of culinary resistance against the erasure of both their memories and larger ancestral foodways. As previously stated, the recipes that they seek to recreate were rendered inaccessible to them as a direct result of the death of the recipe holder. Despite being unable to fully access that culinary memory—or transfer that knowledge—my participants work to maintain the vibrancy of the parts of the memory that they have access to, as illustrated by their vivid descriptions of specific sensory cues. When my

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<sup>59</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 30 2016.

participants work to recreate inaccessible dishes they are engaging in a ritual that both pays homage to their departed family member and resists the erosion of a specific ethnic foodway.

Just as recreating a recipe that is accessible requires the completion of a certain ritual, attempting an inaccessible recipe create a ritual of its own. Jean and her sister's hundreds of attempts at producing their grandma's apple squares becomes its own ritual of going through the work of producing apple squares while remembering the way grandma used to make them. The fact that Jean and her sister cannot accurately reproduce the exact taste of grandma's apple squares does not deter them from attempting, individually and collectively, to "get it right," and the consistent work of trying resists the erasure of that culinary memory.

Over time, their failed attempts become an essential part of their personal culinary ecologies of memory, making it impossible to separate the initial memory of grandma's apple squares from the repeated attempts to successfully reproduce them, and the affect generated by both experiences. Though unable to fully access their grandmother's recipe for apple squares, Jean's continued engagement with the work of trying to reproduce this dish and actively talking about its existence are a form of culinary resistance that emphasizes the importance of ritual and ancestral foodways.

Throughout this chapter, I have established an ecological landscape of feeling and being that is animated by culinary experiences which enable the formation and (re)creation of certain kinds of memory. Using extended excerpts from several oral history participants, I explored the affective response to recipes that have been rendered inaccessible and thus nontransferable. Since recipes and recipe sharing are in integral part of maintaining both familial and ethnic foodways,

the inability to successfully transfer a recipe has a significant impact on those for whom that culinary memory is fractured. The fractured culinary memory exists alongside many culinary memories that my participants are able to reproduce, which demonstrates the complex and interanimating affective power of recipes and cooking. While my participants have been unsuccessful in their efforts to reproduce specific dishes from their past, they maintain the ritual of trying and failing to do so. A culinary ecology of memory moves discussions about food from its current role as an additive in the process of memory making, to an interanimating combination of forces that together comprise the actual sense memory. Rather than considering food as something that strengthens the impact of the memory, a culinary ecology of memory suggests that food—and its accompanying sensory experiences—are the memory. The multisensory experience that comprises a food based memory gestures to the larger ecological landscape of memory as animated by culinary forces and situates food and recipes as central to individual and communal identities.

## **Interlude #2**

In the fall of 2017, I gave a talk at the National Czech and Slovak Museum about mushroom hunting in Cook County, Illinois. As I was mingling after the talk, I stumbled upon a conversation between two men—one in his twenties, the other in his forties—about morels. I gathered that they were both seasoned mushroom hunters from the area and both possessed equally strong views about morel season. As their conversation continued it became clear that there was a debate going about the best way to prepare morels—namely: sauteed or fried. I present both options here so that when and if you find a morel, you can stage a test of your own and settle the debate.

### **Sauteed Morels**

Morel mushrooms

4 or more TBLS butter

1 TBLS garlic powder

1/2 tsp pepper

salt to taste

1. Clean the morels and cut in half lengthwise.

2. Season with garlic powder and pepper.
3. Melt butter in a skillet.
4. Add morels and saute until brown and tender.
5. Add salt to taste.

### **Fried Morels**

Large morels (1lb or more)

1 cup flour

1 beaten egg

1/2 tsp salt

1/2 cup milk

1/8 tsp pepper

3 TBLS oil or butter

1. Clean and trim morels, then cut in half lengthwise.
2. In a shallow bowl, make a batter of the flour, egg, seasonings, and milk.
3. Dip morels into the batter, ensuring excess batter has dripped off.
4. Heat oil or butter in large skillet or wok till hot.
5. Drop morels into hot fat and fry until tender.

## Chapter 2 The Politics of Mushroom Hunting

“All mushrooms are edible, but some only once.” –Czech proverb

At the beginning of this project, while I was compiling a list of potential questions to ask my oral history participants, I included only one question about mushrooms. At that time, I believed the project would focus more on recipes, cooking, and the space of the kitchen. It was not until after my conversation with Vera Wilt—whose incredible mushroom story is featured in this chapter—that I realized mushrooms were to be an essential part of this project. Mushrooms are a significant part of Czech culture; they feature prominently in folk art, on clothing and table linens, as ornaments and figurines and, of course, on the dinner table. The reason for this popularity is both practical and symbolic.

In the Czech lands, mushrooms have always been both abundant and free for the gathering. When the area was in dire straits either due to extreme poverty, war, or communist occupation, mushrooms were a vital lifesource for Czech people. Symbolically, the “mushroom origin” story claims that mushrooms were given to the Bohemian people by Jesus Christ as an expression of gratitude for the kindness they had shown him and his companion, Peter, “Because the mushrooms had sprung from the food of poor people, Jesus bestowed them on the poor, and he taught the poor woman where to seek them. And because poor people need help, mushrooms multiply and abound.”<sup>60</sup> While the religious connotations are not as prominent as they once were, cities in the United States and the Czech Republic continue to hold annual festivals celebrating mushrooms.

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017 marked the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City of Berwyn’s *Houby* Festival complete with a parade, music, food, and the crowning of a Houby Queen.<sup>61</sup> Berwyn’s Houby

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<sup>60</sup> Wasson, Gordon R and Valentina Pavlova Wasson. *Mushrooms Russia and History Vol 1*. New York City, NY; Pantheon Books. 1957.

<sup>61</sup> houby is the Czech word for mushroom.

Festival celebrates not only fall houby hunting season, but the long tradition of Czech and Slovak people living in Berwyn and its neighboring city of Cicero.<sup>62</sup> Houby hunting is so ubiquitous in the Czech Republic that it has been referred to as the “national sport.” Beginning in May and continuing through October, it is exceedingly common to see groups of families, friends, couples, or individuals heading into the forest with baskets or bags on their arms.

Mushroom hunters in Cook County, however, encounter a set of circumstances that complicate their ability to successfully embark on a hunt, namely; it is illegal to hunt mushrooms on the grounds and lands governed by the Cook County Forest Preserve. Martina, one of my participants, told me about some of her friends who were recently mushroom hunting in Cook County. While they were in the forest preserve their car was broken into, “So they called the cops, you know, and they’re getting help because somebody robbed their car, you know. [When the cops came] they got a ticket, 500 dollars for [mushroom hunting].”<sup>63</sup> Despite being the victims of a crime who called the police for assistance, Martina’s friends become criminals because of their decision to engage in the time-honored Czech tradition of mushroom hunting.

Building on a culinary ecology of memory as advanced in the previous chapter, this chapter explores resistance through a queer ecological relationship between nonhuman-nature and human Czech mushroom hunters. The Cook County Forest Preserve municipal code utilizes the language of safety and risk management to dictate proper modes of human engagement with nonhuman-nature. These policies reflect larger historic and contemporary attempts by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate human/microbial interaction and drive traffic to capitalist

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<sup>62</sup> The cities of Berwyn and Cicero became Bohemian enclaves around 1930 when the Hawthorne Electric Plant opened. Many Bohemian families moved from Pilsen or Ceske California in Chicago to the Berwyn/Cicero area. Though now separate cities, Berwyn was originally the last stop on the Cermak Avenue streetcar and was considered part of Chicago.

<sup>63</sup> Martina Havlickova, personal correspondence.



channels of industrial food production. I argue that restrictive legislation governs not only the human/nonhuman-mushroom relationship, but a human/human one where ethnic foodways and, by extension, identity is systematically devalued and subject to erasure.

Through extended oral history excerpts, I demonstrate how my participants resist these attempts at erasure through their sustained relationship to mushrooms. I explore the intense human/nonhuman biophilic connection that Czech mushroom hunters develop with their mushroom hunting ground and, more broadly, with nonhuman-nature.<sup>64</sup> Owing to the legal constraints articulated by the Cook County Forest Preserve, Czech mushroom hunters are forced to occupy a civically queer subject position where both the relationship to nonhuman nature and human legislation is improper. I conclude that Cook County Forest Preserve legislation that criminalizes the act of mushroom hunting is a state-sponsored act of ethnic erasure that reflects a larger disregard for ancestral foodways.

### Microbiopolitics

Understanding the larger impact of mushroom hunting requires reevaluating the human relationship to nature, broadly, and to fungus more specifically. In her work on raw-milk cheese production in the United States, anthropologist Heather Paxson advances the theory of microbiopolitics stating, “I introduce the notion of *microbiopolitics* to call attention to the fact that dissent over how to live with microorganisms reflects disagreement about how humans ought to live with one another. Microbiopolitics is one way to frame questions of food ethics and

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<sup>64</sup> The ‘biophilia hypothesis’ was advanced by American biologist Edward O. Wilson and suggests that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature.

governance.”<sup>65</sup> Paxson’s concept is influenced by Michel Foucault’s biopolitics and Bruno Latour’s work on pasteurization and microbial interaction.<sup>66</sup> In *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour investigates the ways governments and scientists have attempted to control microorganisms and the rhetoric used to do so. He states, “If we wish to realize the dream of the sociologists, the economists, the psychologists—that is, to obtain relations that nothing will divert—we must divert the microbes so that they will no longer intervene in relations everywhere.”<sup>67</sup> The process of pasteurization positions microbes and fungus as a direct threat to health and states that only their elimination can ensure societal safety. This rhetoric conceals the more political aim of microbial elimination, which is to grant governing structures total control over all bodies and social relations.

Stringent Food and Drug Administration (FDA) policies regarding commercial food safety (proper food storage and transport procedure, temperature maintenance, and expiration dates) are designed to signal to consumers that food purchased from a grocery store is free of harmful microbes and thus safe for consumption.<sup>68</sup> I do not mean to undervalue the positive influence of the FDA, but rather to suggest that its standards are not neutral or devoid of political motivation. Not only the policies, but the physical space of the grocery store is engineered to communicate hygiene, safety, and progress. It is no coincidence that contemporary supermarkets began to replace small corner and general stores in the mid to late 1940s.

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<sup>65</sup> Heather Paxson, *The Secret Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 16. Emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, Michel Senellart ed, Graham Burchell trans. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Alan Sheridan and John Law trans. (Amherst, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Alan Sheridan and John Law trans. (Amherst, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 39.

<sup>68</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, “Food Code” (public report, College Park, MD, 2013).

In her work on post-war cooking in America, historian Laura Shapiro writes, “Back in the mid-1940s, as the World War II was ending, the food industry found itself confronted with the most daunting challenge in its history: to create a peacetime market for wartime foods... What the industry had to do was persuade millions of Americans to develop a lasting taste for meals that were a lot like field rations.”<sup>69</sup> The dramatic surge in canned, frozen, dehydrated, and powdered foods were a direct result of the food industry capitalizing on products they had engineered specifically for the war. These foods, especially frozen foods, were aggressively marketed as not only convenient but able to fulfill all nutritional requirements in one package. In order to better communicate the convenience and modernity of new food items like frozen dinners, instant coffee, and boxed cake mixes, supermarkets featured a wealth of gleaming stainless steel, white tile floors, and white refrigerated cases.<sup>70</sup> These design choices had been employed much earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when industrial bread bakeries were eager to demonstrate to consumers that their modern facilities were safe and compliant with the then new Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.<sup>71</sup> Both the industrial bakeries and the industrial supermarket actively advertised that their spaces were safe from microbial interruption.

This advertised safety is reflected in the Cook County Forest Preserve’s policy outlawing the removal of mushrooms. Imposing a legal restriction on mushroom hunting drives traffic towards industrial foodways and capitalist modes of engagement. Rather than being able to engage with mushrooms in their organic space, the human mushroom interaction is dictated by Big Food

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<sup>69</sup> Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2004)8.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: a Social History of the Store Bought Loaf* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012); Marion Nestle *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010)

and FDA regulations.<sup>72</sup> The same mushroom you would hunt on Cook County Forest Preserve land is processed, packaged, and branded for resale at local grocery stores at exorbitant prices. Microbiopolitics is operating in the regulation of human/mushroom interaction here as well as in the regulation of human/human interaction by dictating the proper mode of engagement to and with capitalist systems of industrial food production.

### Regulating Mushrooms

Chicago and its surrounding suburbs, like Berwyn and Cicero, used to have a rich houby hunting tradition due to the large amount of forest preserves in the area. However, in recent decades, Cook County passed an ordinance that made mushroom hunting illegal and punishable by fines beginning at 100 dollars and increasing for multiple offenses.<sup>73</sup> The Cook County Forest Preserve Police Department in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources classifies mushroom hunting as poaching of natural resources. According to Chris Merenowicz, Assistant Director of resource management for the Cook County Forest Preserve Police, one of the main concerns is the conservation of rare plants and animals.<sup>74</sup> Criminalizing poaching, hunting, and trapping is designed to preserve Illinois wildlife and ensure that generations of visitors can enjoy the Forest Preserves and all they offer. Additionally, there has purportedly been a

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<sup>72</sup> Big Food refers to the multinational food and beverage industry that developed in the late 20th century and has gained considerable power and influence.

<sup>73</sup> Cook County, which includes the entire city of Chicago, is the second most populous county in the United States after Los Angeles County. It boasts a population of 5.24 million people. For a visual representation of Cook County see the following: [http://www.cookcountyclerk.com/aboutus/map\\_room/Pages/MunicipalityMaps.aspx](http://www.cookcountyclerk.com/aboutus/map_room/Pages/MunicipalityMaps.aspx);

Board of Cook County, "Chapter 30: Environment" *Code of Ordinances, Cook County Illinois*, public code book, (Cook County, IL: recodified Jan. 16, 2018) [https://www.municode.com/library/il/cook\\_county/codes/forest\\_preserve](https://www.municode.com/library/il/cook_county/codes/forest_preserve)

<sup>74</sup> Dan Gibbard, "Forest Districts Targeting Poachers: Officials on Lookout for Game Hunters and Collectors of Rare Plants and Insects," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL) July 22, 2007.

problem with people poaching, trapping, or hunting animals or plants with the intent to sell them for a very high price because of their rarity.

In a June 2007 interview with the Chicago Tribune, Merenowicz singles out the high price fetched by morel mushrooms, nearly \$15 per pound at the time of this writing.<sup>75</sup> In addition to the potential legal ramifications faced by mushroom hunters, the unexperienced hunter faces the risk of selecting the wrong mushrooms which could result in illness or even death. While there are many published resources with visual aids to help the novice mushroom hunter, it is more common for a novice to be taught by a more experienced hunter, and even then many mushroom hunting circles or groups are wary of accepting new members.<sup>76</sup> The knowledge transferred from experienced hunter to novice is done while on the hunt and it is up to the novice to memorize the information being presented to them. This type of mushroom apprenticeship is not limited only to Czech mushroom hunters, the Illinois Mycological Society provides seminars for novice hunters that are supervised by more experienced hunters and occur in the field.<sup>77</sup>

The health risk posed by picking and eating “the wrong” mushroom is mirrored in language from the Cook County Forest Preserve Police as well as the Illinois Mycological Society, both of which stress safety. While the vast majority of wild mushrooms are not lethal, many of them can cause intense and violent illness. Rhetorically situating anti-mushroom-removal legislation as risk management positions the Cook County Forest Preserve as a governing body that is invested in protecting its visitors. As noted by Merenowicz’s comments, the primary goal of this legislation

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<sup>75</sup> Morel mushrooms are highly prized not just among Czech people. It is common for Michelin starred restaurants to serve dishes containing morels. This number reflects the price per fresh pound. For dried morels the price is closer to 16 dollars per ounce.

<sup>76</sup> I reached out to the Illinois Mycological Society for further information on the demographics of their mushroom hunters but they declined to provide such information. However, they do offer ‘forays’, or day long mushroom hunting trips, which appear to be for members only.

<sup>77</sup> Mushroom hunting is only illegal in Cook County, not the other 101 counties in Illinois.

is, purportedly, conservation and preservation. However, his emphasis on the high price of morel mushrooms moves mushrooms from a protected species, to a commodity that becomes legible in a capitalist system of exchange. Criminalizing mushroom hunting then becomes not solely about preserving the flora and fauna for generations to come, but about protecting the valuable “inventory” contained in the forest preserves. This act of distinction further regulates “proper” human interaction with nature by clearly delineating the forest preserve as a space only for visual engagement and the supermarket as the space where food is to be obtained.

There is an additional issue of authority, where the Cook County Forest Preserve Police have imposed legislation that does not acknowledge the mutual respect that human mushroom hunters have for nonhuman mushrooms. The language and logic in the Forest Preserve code is demonstrative of paternalistic, state-imposed safety—where a universal policy is applied to deer and mushroom hunters alike. This logic does not acknowledge the multi-generational relationship that many mushroom hunters have cultivated with their favorite hunting grounds. There is also a specific geographical relationship that mushroom hunters develop with their environment because not all mushrooms grow in all places. The mushrooms one might find in the forest preserves of Cook County will differ in species and size from the ones found in Wisconsin, which will differ from the ones in Washington state, etc. The intimate connection and knowledge that Czech mushroom hunters develop with their mushroom hunting ground reflects the larger significance of mushrooms in Czech culture, broadly.

## Cook County and Legal Intervention

The Cook County Forest Preserve website contains an abbreviated list of rules and regulations, a sort of short hand reference for those who do not want to sort through the municipal code. The website includes the following Rules and Regulations under the Plant and Wildlife section, “Collection of plants and animals is strictly prohibited. This includes: harvesting firewood, *collecting mushrooms*, wildflowers or other wild plants and their seeds; and otherwise removing or damaging any plants or trees.”(emphasis added)<sup>78</sup> However, the actual municipal code has language that differs. The Cook County Forest Preserve Municipal Code includes the following section from Ch. 2 ‘Protection of Natural Features and Wildlife’ Section 2-1, A. Destruction of Native Landscape:

“No person shall, within the property of the Forest Preserve District:

1. Cut, remove or wantonly destroy any tree, sapling, seedling, bush or shrub, whether alive or dead, or chip, blaze, box, girdle, trim, or otherwise deface or injure any tree or shrub, or break or remove any branch, foliage, flower on any tree or shrub, or pick, gather, uproot, remove or destroy any flower, plant or grass.

Mushrooms are not specifically mentioned in this section of the municipal code. When mushrooms are mentioned they are subsumed under a broader definition of ‘mold.’ In the Forest Preserve Lands and Supplemental History Table (updated Sept. 2016) Sec. 38-52, under the ‘Definitions’ section Mold is defined as the following, “Any microscopic fungi, including mushrooms.” The only specific mention of mold outside of the Definitions

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<sup>78</sup> Board of Cook County, “Chapter 2: Protection of Natural Features and Wildlife Section 2-2-1” *Code of Ordinances, Cook County Illinois*, public code book, (Cook County, IL: recodified Jan. 16, 2018)  
[https://library.municode.com/il/cook\\_county/codes/forest\\_preserve?nodeId=TIT2FOPRLAPR\\_CH2PRNAFEWI](https://library.municode.com/il/cook_county/codes/forest_preserve?nodeId=TIT2FOPRLAPR_CH2PRNAFEWI)

section is in Sec. 38-52 under ‘Declared Nuisances’ which states, “To own or maintain rental property that contains excessive moisture or water that has or may result in indoor mold growth.”<sup>79</sup>

According to the municipal code, mushrooms are viewed as interchangeable with mold where mold is only ever referred to in a negative light, as something that is deemed a public inconvenience. The official code does not contain any specific acknowledgement of mold, fungi, or mushrooms as part of the organic matter of the forest preserves. The unofficial, or rather informal, Cook County Forest Preserve website is the only place where mushrooms are specifically mentioned as protected wildlife.

This code contains multiple contradictory messages where mushrooms are considered both as wildlife—according to Chris Merenowicz, very valuable wildlife—and as a nuisance which is a direct result of neglect and poor property management. This dual status might be owing to the fact that there are so many different types of mushrooms, many of which are inedible or even toxic, and only a few varieties of which are not only edible but highly desirable. Further, as I mentioned above, the penalty for violation of any of the articles presented in the Municipal Code includes a citation and a fine of upwards of \$100 and potentially as high as \$1000. for the first offense (the rates increase if the offense is a second or third time offense). Theoretically, if one owned or maintained a rental property that managed to produce morel mushrooms, one could be cited and fined both for allowing those mushrooms to bloom and, if one cleaned up the property, also for destroying them.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.,

[https://library.municode.com/il/cook\\_county/codes/forest\\_preserve?nodeId=TIT2FOPRLAPR\\_CH2PRNAFEWI](https://library.municode.com/il/cook_county/codes/forest_preserve?nodeId=TIT2FOPRLAPR_CH2PRNAFEWI)

<sup>80</sup> The Cook County Forest Preserve does not publicly offer any data on the number of tickets that are issued annually to patrons violating the umbrella policy that protects all wildlife from removal, making it impossible to know how many people have been cited for mushroom hunting. However, 10 of my 14 oral history participants made specific mention of the legal status of mushroom hunting in Cook County.



Human mastery over nature is a hallmark of mainstream post-Industrial American ideology. In her book on matsutake mushroom foragers, anthropologist Anna Tsing states, “For humanists, assumptions of progressive human mastery have encouraged a view of nature as a romantic space of antimodernity.”<sup>81</sup> This perspective is visible in clearly demarcated boundaries that indicate the beginning of a park, forest preserve, or other greenspace and separate it from the decidedly unromantic concrete, asphalt, and gravel streets and sidewalks of the city. Parks and other greenspaces were, and perhaps are, designed for a very specific kind of commune with nature, as indicated by the lengthy list of rules and regulations that most park districts strictly enforce. Maintaining a visible boundary between the park (aka nature) and not the park (aka culture) is an essential component in the ideological scaffolding that situates humans at the top of the hierarchy and therefore masters of nature.

Forest preserves, like parks, fall under the jurisdiction of the local County (this excludes America's National Parks which are governed by the Department of Natural Resources). The governing of forest preserves, like the ones discussed in this chapter, are covered under a stewardship clause, where the land technically belongs to the public but is governed by the Forest Preserve Police who are presumed to be acting as public stewards in the best interest of the land and the public. Essentially, the Forest Preserve Police dictate and enforce specific state-approved modes of engagement with nature and construct any and all other modes of engagement as deviant, criminal behavior punishable by fines and potential jail time.

Approved modes of engagement are primarily visual, visitors are instructed to look at the flora, fauna, and wildlife while staying on the path and not touching anything. This mode of

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<sup>81</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2015. 5.

engagement is presented as a safe, civically responsible one which leaves the boundaries between human and nonhuman firmly intact. Mushroom hunters, however, disturb this boundary by cultivating a sensorially-intimate relationship with nonhuman nature that relies on direct, affective connections. Mushroom hunters build connections to their hunting grounds that can span decades and require intimate knowledge of the weather patterns, soil, and geographical location. Mushroom hunters are also very protective of their hunting ground to prevent it from being overrun with other hunters who might damage the root structure and render it incapable of producing mushrooms. This is a key component of successful mushroom hunting, maintaining a balance with the fungus. In addition to correctly removing a mushroom from its mycelium—slicing not picking—it is important to leave a certain amount of mushrooms so that the fungus can continue to regenerate. If you slice off all the visible mushrooms the mycelium may experience severe shock and never recover.<sup>82</sup>

Queerness might provide a lens through which to understand the relationship between mushrooms and mushroom hunters and can provide a helpful framework for this analysis. In their work on queer animality, queer theorist Mel Chen explains their use of queer as follows, “I do not imagine *queer* or *queerness* to merely indicate embodied sexual contact among objects identified as gay and lesbian...Rather, I think more in terms of the social and cultural formations of “improper affiliation” so that queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of heteronormativity.”<sup>83</sup> Applying Chen’s understanding of queerness as an improper affiliation, I would suggest that the Cook County Forest Preserve

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<sup>82</sup> Refer to YellowEleanor for a detailed drawing of mushroom life cycles <http://www.yelloweleanor.com/mushroom-life-cycle/>

<sup>83</sup> Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2012. 104. Emphasis in original.

Municipal code criminalizes a mushroom hunter's kinship with mushrooms in a way that makes that kinship a queer one. If, according to the Municipal Code, mushrooms are both protected and a nuisance, both an undesirable health hazard and a highly sought after gastronomic commodity, the mushroom hunter embodies a conflicted subjectivity where they are at once both poacher and responsible property manager. Since mushroom hunting, cooking, and eating are such an important part of traditional Czech foodways, to be properly Czech in Cook County is to be municipally queer.

The nonhuman kinship which mushroom hunters have cultivated is, under the current ordinances, an improper legal and civic affiliation. The Cook County Forest Preserve is largely uninterested in the importance of mushrooms for Czech-American foodways and views mushroom hunters through the same lens as someone wantonly cutting down trees, bushes, or shrubs. Dianne Chisholm—analyzing Ellen Meloy's use of Edward Wilson's work on biophilia—states that Meloy's biophilia is a queer desire because, “[she] desires to know what nature desires.”<sup>84</sup> Meloy's nonhuman kinship with nature and the natural environment is a queer one because she is intimately invested in exploring the motivations of all manner of species. This level of investment in nonhuman species is mirrored amongst mushroom hunters and their place in the fungal assemblages that produce mushrooms.

The types of mushrooms found in and around Chicago, and the midwest more broadly, thrive on a relative level of darkness and moisture, meaning they are often covered or hidden by branches, decaying tree stumps, dirt etc. The ability to correctly locate mushrooms is a skill cultivated through years of sustained engagement with the land, as well as proper training by a

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<sup>84</sup> Dianne Chisholm, “Biophilia, Creative Involvement, and the Ecological Future of Queer Desire.” Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson eds, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010). 361.

more experienced hunter. It requires an intimate level of familiarity with the soil and the fungus that transcends the state-sponsored boundaries that dictate the proper modes of human-nonhuman nature modes of engagement. It is a queer affinity that characterizes the relationship of Czech mushroom hunters to mushrooms. As Czech mushroom hunters in Cook County are breaking the law, and refusing to engage with capitalist modes of exchange, they represent a queer subject position, which I detail in the proceeding sections.

## Mushroom Hunters

### Vera Wilt

Vera Wilt is a fixture of the Czech American community in Chicago and, arguably, the larger midwest. I heard Vera's name many times before I met her, owing to the famous Czech cookbook her mother penned in 1954. Nearly everyone I spoke to about my project inquired, "did you talk to Vera?" Vera and her siblings have been involved in the Czech American community in Cook County for decades, participating in Sokol, the Czech American council and working as Czech language interpreters and teachers. Vera's relationship to mushrooms and mushroom hunting is an extraordinary one. When sharing the story of her mother and sibling's successful escape from Communist Czechoslovakia she said:

They actually escaped Czechoslovakia under the pretense of mushroom hunting. They went with the clothes on their backs. They were uh helped by a border guard who showed them the way and gave them some landmarks to know you know which way to go and where, where they were crossing into Germany. But they went with baskets over their arms and the clothes on their backs and as a matter of fact the youngest brother who was only 7 at the time tells the story, he's told the immigration story in his own words and says that um he didn't understand, they kept dumping the mushrooms cause they'd find them and then their basket was full so they had to have an excuse to keep going and so a coupla times they dumped those baskets and he said "why are we dumping perfectly good mushrooms?" "Oh cause there's better ones up ahead."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Vera Wilt, Sept 29 2016, 35:30

The ‘they’ Vera is referring to are her mother and three siblings who successfully escaped post-war Czechoslovakia in 1948 just as the Communist party was coming to power. Vera continued:

I was born here to a family who were recent immigrants. My family left Czechoslovakia in 1948, um out of necessity. My dad was a journalist uhh very pro-American uh told it like It was and when the Communists took over in February of 48 he was warned he’d better get out. And so he did very early in March but couldn’t take the rest of the family with so I have 3 siblings who were born in Czechoslovakia and wound up stuck there with my mom for several months until they could get an opportunity to get out because my my oldest brother was away on a school trip to call him home would have aroused suspicion so it was all cloak and dagger and so dad left beginning of March, mom and the kids didn’t leave until umm late September or mid September so by the time they got out to the refugee camps in Germany. My dad was already in the states and uh long story short after a lot of uh lot of hiccups in their immigration process they were reunited here in Chicago in umm Christmas of 1950.<sup>86</sup>

Elsewhere, Vera has attributed her existence to mushroom hunting as it allowed her mother to be reunited with her father, a reunion of which Vera is the outcome.<sup>87</sup> Vera’s relationship to mushrooms is, arguably, a queer affiliation because of its intimate emotional connection and the use of mushroom hunting as a guise for illegal action. Vera’s mother was able to rely on the ubiquity of mushroom hunting to ensure that a woman out in the woods with three children would not arouse suspicion. Mushrooms, like their root structure, continue to weave their way in and out of Vera’s narrative of her life.

Her father was an avid mushroom hunter and Vera vividly recalled the image of him drying mushrooms in the backyard of their Cicero home. She recalls, “So I can remember him being in the backyard after, when he hunted mushrooms it was phenomenal the catch that he would come home with. The whole back, ahh you know, the, except for the front seat, the whole station wagon would be folded down and full of like the old tomato baskets full of mushrooms. And so certain

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Riverside Brookfield Landmark, “Interview with Vera Wilt” Sept. 28, 2007

ones you dried, certain ones you pickled, certain ones you uh you cooked you breaded and fried ah or cooked other ways but the dried ones I would see him out there, he would set up a little makeshift table outside and slice all the mushrooms and put them out on all those screens to dry.” Vera’s father received local notoriety for his mushrooming hunting abilities, “he would have his picture in the paper having brought the got the biggest one as a matter of fact I recently posted on my facebook post my niece uh had been going through her mom’s uh stuff and uh found a clipping from the Cicero life of my dad with this 36 pound *koterč*.”<sup>88</sup>

Vera’s sister and brother also hunted mushrooms and her brother in particular took an extreme interest in them, “But my brother also became quite the expert at mushrooming and he took it to a scientific level so that he actually was a consultant on call at hospitals if people came in with uh apparent mushroom poisoning. He, ya know, if they could bring what they had he could identify whether this was something that was just going to make them sick, whether this was lethal uhh ya know things like that. So yeah, he could tell you, he liked to say he could tell you if it was gonna kill you or if you wish it did.”<sup>89</sup> The prominent place that mushrooms occupied in the Wilt household illustrates the cultural significance and connection to mushroom hunting and preparation. As Vera mentions, certain mushrooms are prepared in different ways, owing to the diversity of their flavor profile and texture. Vera’s father continued on mushroom hunting and taught it to his children because it was, and is, such an important piece of Czech cultural and ethnic foodways.

However, Vera herself is not an avid hunter, claiming she doesn’t have the eye for it and that her children have limited knowledge as well:

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<sup>88</sup> A *koterč* is a type of mushroom known as a ‘hen of the woods’. It is commonly found in the Midwest. Vera Wilt, Sept. 29, 2016.

<sup>89</sup>Vera Wilt, Sept 29, 2016. 33:00

VW: They'll eat em if I find em but they wouldn't they yeah the part of it is here we live right across from the woods but it's illegal for us to pick them here.

ES: yeah I know

VW: I won't say that I've never had a puffball from across the street"<sup>90</sup>

Vera points out the contradiction in the fact that she lives so close to a wooded area where there are in growing and yet she cannot sharpen her own skills nor teach her children how to develop theirs for fear of legal ramifications. Her acknowledgement that she has availed herself of mushrooms growing "across the street" raises an interesting point about the arbitrariness of boundaries. By simply walking across the street and gathering mushrooms that are in plain view from the road Vera is technically in violation of the Cook County Forest Preserve Municipal Code, though she does not seem bothered by this legal transgression. Even her word choice and jovial tone, "I won't say that I've never had a puffball" suggest that she does not perceive her violation of this code as a serious offense.

For Vera, her position as municipally queer is demonstrated not only by her decision to collect the mushrooms right across the street, but also by her dismissal of the law she is breaking while doing so. By collecting and eating the wild mushrooms from across the street, Vera is insisting on Czech cultural knowledge as hierarchically more important than seemingly arbitrary boundary laws as dictated by local legislation. Her engagement with mushrooms is one that exists outside of the civically proper, industrial system that demands she purchase mushrooms at a supermarket or other legible capitalist institution.

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<sup>90</sup> A puffball is another type of mushroom which, when tapped on the cap, produces a visible "puff" of what appears to be smoke but is actually mushroom spores.

Kathy Wittenberg

Kathy Wittenberg grew up in a large Czech family in Berwyn. Though she has lived outside of Cook County for nearly thirty years, she still maintains strong ties to Berwyn and the Czech community, conducting genealogical research on her ancestors as well as other families.

When I asked Kathy whether her father or uncle ever went houby hunting she stated, “No Dad never did, Uncle Bud never did, but Mike’s father was a champion.”<sup>91</sup> She is referring to a very close friend of hers whose father was an extremely talented mushroom hunter. When I asked if she ever accompanied them she emphatically replied, “You did not go WITH them, okay...That was invitation only.” She elaborated:

KW: Now if you would go in with your bag and try not and watch to see nobody followed you cause this was serious and um they would go into uhh certain places and wouldn’t tell anybo... now if you were walking out of the forest preserve and somebody mentioned it who knew what was going on and a lot of Bohemians knew what was going on in the forest preserves because a lot of em cooked and Italians. Italians also went after the mushrooms.

ES: okay

KW: umm and they would see you with a bag they’d go “wow where’d you find those?” or somein like that. The novices would.

ES: sure

KW: and the guys would always say “in the woods.” They weren’t gonna tell you their favorite trees

As Kathy explains, a good mushroom hunting spot was a serious thing that was only shared with trusted members of the group. While the act of mushroom hunting itself was not secret, the particulars of the location were something only the members of the group would know. Therefore,

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<sup>91</sup> Kathy Wittenberg is my aunt, thus her dad was my grandfather. Throughout the oral history she alternated between calling him Dad or Grandpa and I followed suit for continuity’s sake. Kathy Wittenberg, Sept 13, 2016. 57:30



there was necessarily a high level of trust between group members that facilitated a bond over their prized mushroom hunting ground. The tenacity with which mushroom hunters guard their hunting grounds has been described as borderline obsessive, and I would argue, queer in its level of affiliation. Keeping the location of the hunting ground a secret contributes to the intimate kinship that develops between the nonhuman mushrooms and their human hunters and locations are often passed down from one generation to another.<sup>92</sup> The kinship, then, is not just between the local environment and human actors, but it becomes a chronological kinship that is ritualistically visited at certain intervals throughout each year.

The criminalization of mushroom hunting disrupts this kinship and institutes arbitrary legislation that is purportedly designed to protect and preserve the natural environment. However, this type of protection undervalues the importance of wild mushrooms in ethnic foodways and the folk knowledge that Czech-American mushroom hunters possess upon which their nonhuman/human kinship is built. As Kathy said, “you come back every year it’s always there. Unless some moron came and pulled it instead of cutting it.”<sup>93</sup> Kathy’s exasperation at a “moron” who would make the obvious mistake of pulling a mushroom from the ground can be read as a criticism of inexperienced and/or ignorant mushroom hunters. Her strong language communicates the importance of being trained in the correct way to remove a mushroom so that the fungal assemblage is preserved for years to come.

Czech mushroom hunters demonstrate an intimate, biophilic connection to mushrooms by being attentive to nurturing their mushroom hunting grounds and teaching others to do the same.

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<sup>92</sup> David Murphy “Jejich Antoine: Czechs, the Land, Cather, and the Pavelka Farmstand,” *Great Plains Quarterly*, Spring, 1997. 86-106.

<sup>93</sup> The proper way to remove a mushroom top from the mycelium root structure is to slice it off close to the cap. If a mushroom is pulled from the ground it will destroy the fragile mycelium and prevent the assemblage from blooming.

Anna Tsing states, “No one can find a mushroom by hurrying through the forest...Inexperienced pickers miss most of the mushrooms by moving too fast.”<sup>94</sup> Experienced mushroom hunters must be attentive to a variety of conditions that factor into a successful hunt, not least of which is time. I am referring not only to the pace at which they conduct their hunt, but also the temporal cycles and patterns of the forest which create a kind of fungal time. Fungal time includes the changing of the seasons, the life cycle of organic matter that impact the growth potential for fungal assemblages (like mushrooms), and the effect of weather patterns on fungi. Fungal time does not necessarily proceed in a linear way as it is influenced by so many other factors. A good mushroom hunter devotes a significant amount of labor to the process of becoming attuned to fungal time and consequently develops an intimate relationship to their mushroom hunting ground. Becoming attuned to fungal time, the best pace for mushroom hunting, and proper removal are skills that are passed from an experienced hunter to a novice through careful observation and hands-on training.

However, for many Czech mushroom hunters, being welcomed into the fold of a mushroom group is not an easy task. Kathy shared with me the difficult her husband faced when he first started mushroom hunting:

KW: Craig tried for the longest time to get invited to the mushroom fest

ES: right right

KW: ya know the mushroom hunt for these guys. Especially when he heard that one of the places was right out here in Sugar Grove.

ES: ohhh okay

KW: So he umm he wou he kept askin Mike, “Well you know I’d love to go” and Craig was studying it we were studying spores and we were studying this and that...So we would and we started goin to the forest preserves, doin it ourselves and the person who spotted the best ones was Lora<sup>95</sup>. Lora always spotted the mushrooms and Craig an me are wanderin around but Lora always

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<sup>94</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2015. 242.

<sup>95</sup> Lora is Kathy and Craig’s daughter.

found the mushrooms. So so one year we were lookin around and lookin around and Craig found this award winning mushroom<sup>96</sup>  
(produces picture, see Appendix for image)

ES: oh my gosh

KW: Usually they're about this big [**makes small circle with hands**]

ES: yeaah that's incredible. Oh my gosh. Look at that. Oh my goodness!

KW: Okay so as soon as we came home. We cut it into thirds.

(By this point Craig has joined in the conversation)

CW: more than that, fourths

KW: I remember you gave away three, and one of em we kept, a third we kept and a third went to Mike and a third went to Mike's dad. Okay we have a picture of the original mushroom. Craig got invited the next time. yeah, yeah he finally made the cut.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the fact that Craig and Kathy spent time studying spores and mushrooms, Craig's mushroom hunting skills in the field clearly had to be vetted before he was allowed to join in the group. In this instance it is not necessarily how well educated you are about the scientific process and make-up of the mushroom but rather, how strong your field skills are that determine whether or not you "make the cut."

While most of the men in that mushroom hunting group have since died, Craig and Kathy still go mushroom hunting, though it is becoming more difficult to find good spots. Kathy explained:

okay what happened was people who were into ya know umm changing the environment for the better unfortunately many of the forest preserves including the one that we got this one from **points to picture** which was Lawton Grove right over there. Mike's dad's favorite spot for like 30, 40 years. they came by and cleared off all the undergrowth of trees

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<sup>96</sup> Kathy and Craig live in Elburn, Illinois which is located approximately 90 minutes west of Chicago in Kane County. Mushroom hunting is not illegal in Kane County.

<sup>97</sup> Kathy Wittneberg, Sept 13, 2016.

of little saplings and, and stuff and what they did was they opened it up to sunlight and they opened it up to wild brambles, which are just a pain in the ass. so there are hardly any mushrooms left and around Berwyn and Cicero all those forest preserves had areas that were cause you'd see em, you'd see these these Bohunkscomin out with their little with their little bags, ya know.<sup>98</sup> and but now they've cleared em out so much in an effort to restore I dunno what umm that they've ended up killing off a lot of the wild mushrooms that were there<sup>99</sup>

Kathy identifies an interesting tension between “people who were into changing the environment for the better” and the elimination of wild mushrooms. The forest preserve restoration or renewal projects to which she is referring are initiatives sponsored by the local Forest Preserve or sometimes the state’s Department of Natural Resources. These are the same organizations who have made mushroom hunting illegal in Cook County. Renewal projects and the Cook County municipal code purportedly preserve the woods and ensure their survival for generations to come. However, as Kathy pointed out, one of these projects destroyed a mushroom grove that had been fruitful and thriving for more than thirty years. This might be owing to the fact that mushrooms thrive off decay, underbrush, and pockets of moisture. Essentially, a good mushroom hunting ground does not reflect Romantic notions of pristine woodlands or green spaces.

Renewal projects are rhetorically constructed using the same language of preservation and civic responsibility that is employed in the prohibition of mushroom hunting. One of the most dramatic results of a renewal project is the aesthetic difference, which is often touted via ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures that eerily resemble images from primetime makeover television. Renewal projects like the one that destroyed the hunting ground that Kathy mentioned do not see mushrooms and other fungal assemblages as beneficial or in need of preservation, as evidenced by

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<sup>98</sup> Bohunk was originally a derogatory term for Bohemian people that has since been reclaimed by the Czech and Slovak community in the same way that some Polish people affectionately refer to their country people as Polaks.

<sup>99</sup>Kathy Wittenberg, Sept 13 2016.

their destruction of the conditions necessary to produce such mushrooms. In this instance, fungal time and cultural knowledge are systematically devalued as unattractive and unimportant, which by extension, means Czech identity is also unimportant. Fungal time and Czech identity as represented by mushroom hunting stand in direct opposition to capitalist structures that seek to measure progress in linear, quantifiable increments.

Anna Ramirez

When the topic of mushrooms came up during my conversation with Anna she enthusiastically said, “I have a mushroom tattoo!” and proceeded to show me a colorful, if slightly faded, mushroom tattoo. Anna grew up in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s, and though she now lives in a far western suburb of the city, she maintains strong memories of growing up in Pilsen. Anna’s experience with mushroom hunting echoes themes of cultural knowledge and intimate connection to nature:

AR: I went houby hunting. My dad actually, uh, knew how to pick mushrooms.

ES: Okay.

AR. My mom didn’t too much. So, my dad would have a secret spot in Michigan that he would go, and he would bring back the mushrooms. So, when I was about 21 I had already moved out of the house, and I was living on my own. Uh, but I was interested in learning more about mushrooms and learning more about my dad, because I was, you know, trying to have those deeper conversations with him because, you know, he was getting older.

ES: Sure.

AR: And, so I said, “take me mushroom hunting, show me how to pick mushrooms.” So, uh, I convinced him to go, I drove, and we drove to some secret place in Michigan, I have no idea where it was, he would just tell me, “Turn here, turn here, turn here.” We then turned down some dirt road somewhere, and there was like, a little house, somebody’s like, summer cottage-type house, and there was a man in there, I remember the man sitting there, and there was some strong coffee smell. And, he came in there, he introduced me to this man, and it was like a secret... a secret society, that, uh... you had to, you know, you didn’t wanna reveal where you were gonna go for

the mushrooms. And so this must have been his friend, and his friend would allow him to go on his land to look for the mushrooms.

ES: That's awesome.

AR: But he didn't even want his – to see – he didn't want his friend to see where he went into the woods. So he would talk to him for a while, and then my dad and I, you know, he led me into the woods, and, he showed me the kind to get. It didn't have like, gills, it had like a spongy underneath-side to it.

ES: Okay.

AR: But we were very careful to cut it at the base, not rip it out, because if you ripped it out it may not grow again. But if you cut it at the base, you're leaving – leaving the root structure to then grow again the next year. So... uh, he taught me how to cut at the base. And it was a wonderful, wonderful day, I always remember that because, as I said, I think, uh, he and I had some clashes growing up –

ES: Sure, sure.

AR: - and, so this was kindof a way for us to find common ground. And so, it was always a day that I'll remember, that I went mushroom picking with my dad.<sup>100</sup>

Elsewhere in our conversation, Anna elaborated that she and her father often butted heads when she was growing up. She attributed this friction largely to the fact that she wanted to be “an American teenager” and her father was a traditional Czech man, who wanted to raise Czech daughters. As Anna states, her motivation for inquiring about mushroom hunting came after she had moved out of the house and became concerned about her relationship with her father as he aged. Anna's father's instruction about the proper way to remove the mushroom cap echoes Kathy's declaration about the importance of maintaining the root-like-structure. Despite the fact that Anna and her father only went mushroom hunting once more than twenty years ago, she was still able to recall the day in vivid detail. The connection to one's mushroom hunting spot is evidenced by Anna's father driving from the city of Chicago into Michigan to collect mushrooms.

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<sup>100</sup> Anna Ramirez, Aug 29, 2016.

There were undoubtedly places to hunt mushrooms much closer to their apartment in Pilsen, but he felt an intimate connection with and to that particular place in Michigan.

## Conclusion

Returning in more detail to the mushroom origin story from the beginning of the chapter; mushrooms purportedly grew from chewed up, spit out food. The story goes that Jesus and Peter were received in Bohemia with a celebration in a local home. Prior to their arrival, Jesus instructed Peter that there would be some small cakes at this celebration but he was not to eat them because these were poor people who needed to conserve their resources. Peter ignored these instructions and smuggled some cakes into his satchel. After they had left the celebration, Peter tried to covertly eat the cakes as they continued walking down the road. Every time Peter took a bite, Jesus turned around and Peter, in an attempt to hide his actions, spit out his bite of cake into the grass. After Peter had chewed up and spat out all of the cakes Jesus instructed him to go pick up all that he had spat out, but upon attempting to do so Peter discovered that the chewed up cake was transformed into something sprouting from the ground. It was from that chewed up food that Jesus made mushrooms grow.<sup>101</sup>

I want to focus here on the microbiopolitical origin of mushrooms as being made from partially consumed food and saliva. This part of the story situates mushrooms as occurring as the result of a transgression and an intimate connection between food and bodily fluid; a fungal penance for Peter's wrongs. Mushrooms, then, are inherently improper because of their origin as second-hand food product and human bodily fluid. Situating mushrooms as a gift given

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<sup>101</sup> Wasson, Gordon R and Valentina Pavlova Wasson. *Mushrooms Russia and History Vol 1*. New York City, NY; Pantheon Books. 1957.

specifically to Bohemian people forges a direct connection between two and, given the established improper origin of mushrooms, casts that relationship as a queer one. The impropriety of the initial blooming of mushrooms casts a queer affiliation to all fungal assemblages that spur forth from it.

If mushrooms are inherently improper in their existence, the devoted multi-year acts of mushroom seeking as described by Vera, Kathy, and Anna contribute to a fungal assemblage that is queer in its biophilic affiliation. To be a successful mushroom hunter requires being attuned to the contours of the fungal assemblage in which mycological interactions are centrally located and humans are secondary participants. This affiliation in which nonhuman fungi and humans collaborate is a queer one because it stands in opposition to Western constructions of progress and order where humans are expected to demonstrate their mastery over nature. These expectations are mirrored in the ordinances that criminalize mushroom hunting in Cook County, where proper engagement with nature is enforced via legislation that criminalizes behavior that is thought to pose a risk to nature, broadly. The Cook County Forest Preserve deploys the rhetoric of protection and preservation from a standpoint that situates humans as the only living agents presiding over the object of the forest preserves and their contents. In this scenario, the human Forest Preserve employees are the only line of defense the nonhuman-object-nature has against destruction and thus it is the responsibility of those humans to enforce civically proper modes of engagement with nature. It is from this anthropocentric view of nature that the criminalization of mushroom hunting occurs. In this view, fungal assemblages and affiliations are devalued because they insist on the primacy of microbial life as an active agent and not an object. The reduction of fungal assemblages to object status is further evidenced by my previous examples of Chris Mereonwicz directly referencing the price of mushrooms.



At the time of this writing, a one-ounce package of hen of the woods mushrooms retailed for \$3.99 at a local, Cook County grocery store. This price reflects the cost of the plastic and cellophane packaging that the mushrooms come in, as well as the labor required to process it through proper FDA channels. The high cost of these mushrooms makes them prohibitively expensive for many shoppers, particularly when they can be gathered for free in the forest preserve located 500 feet from this same grocery store. The implication here is that removing mushrooms from the Forest Preserve is somehow stealing an expensive piece of inventory that will negatively affect the value of that land. The direct mention of the market-value of morels also implies that those who cannot afford the exorbitant price point set by Big Food should not have access to those mushrooms. This capitalist ideology is in stark contrast to the mushroom origin story which specifically mentions that mushrooms were created as a food source for the poor people of Bohemia.

Mushroom hunting, then, poses a threat to established Western human/nature hierarchies and capitalist modes of exchange. Regulating human interaction with nonhuman mushrooms reflects the microbiopolitical desire to devalue fungal assemblages while commodifying the tangible fruit of those assemblages. Because of its centrality to Czech history and folklore, the criminalization of mushroom hunting, by extension, criminalizes Czech ethnic identity. While the fungal affiliation with mushrooms is already a queer one, the prohibition of mushroom hunting forces Czech hunters to occupy a civically queer subject position where performing a central part of their heritage means becoming improperly aligned with the law. Czech people are faced with actively disconnecting from a significant component of their ethnic identity, or risking significant legal and financial ramifications.

**Interlude #3**

We've all heard that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and Misa Polashek proves that old saying to be incredibly true:

“My husband, he told me, ‘I’ll marry you if you can make koprová.’ And I never made koprová before in my life. The first time I made koprová was for my fiancée, or... I don’t know if he was my boyfriend...oh, I think he was my boyfriend and he proposed to me after that. He loves it. He loves koprová. It’s easy actually, to make...you just boil the meat and then you add milk to it. You have to get the, the flavor like, right, because there’s the right amount of sugar, and dill, and

vinegar...it's the vinegar, so you get the right taste. That's the only part that always scares me, if I'm gonna get it right, if it's too sweet, or too... you know."

### **Koprová Omáčka (dill sauce)**

**Adapted from the Cesko Americka Kuchařka (1911)**

1/3 cup fresh, chopped dill

1/4 cup butter

1/3 cup flour

4.5 cups milk

1 tsp salt

1 tsp sugar

1 tsp vinegar

boiled beef (on the side)

1. Combine the butter and flour together in a sauce pan over medium heat, stirring constantly.
2. Add the milk, stirring continuously to avoid burning.
3. Add salt and sugar and raise the heat slightly to bring the mixture to a boil.
4. Thicken
5. Once mixture has thickened, add dill and stir for about two minutes.
6. Remove from heat and allow to cool.
7. Add vinegar and stir till combined.
8. Serve over boiled beef.

### Ch. 3 Culinary Resistance

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, I walked from my apartment towards the sounds of marching bands and the smells of freshly fried street food to join in the celebration of Berwyn's 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Houby Day Festival. The Festival begins with a parade down Cermak road—once colloquially called Bohemian Wallstreet owing to the sheer number of Bohemian-owned banks that lined each side—where the newly crowned Houby Queen and her court wave to the groups of parents and kids camped out on the sidewalks. After the parade concludes, vendors of all kinds offer up food, sundries, and carnival games while various bands and live musicians compete for an audience.

While the festival originated as a celebration of Czech mushroom hunting, that ethnic influence could be easily missed in contemporary iterations of this festival, which now resembles any one of the hundreds of street festivals that populate Chicago and its suburbs during the summer and fall. As the demographics of the Berwyn/Cicero area began shift to include increasingly larger populations of Italian and Hispanic people, festivals like Houby Day shifted too. Those who are still invested in the Czech aspect of the festival know that the Czech American Community Center's food and music tent is the place to be.

I was to be introduced to a potential oral history participant at this tent and planned on enjoying some potato pancakes and *klobasy* after the meeting. Miša Polashek, whom I had talked with a week prior, hurriedly ushered me over to her mother-in-law and said “you talk to her,” before disappearing into the crowd.<sup>102</sup> I introduced myself to Irena Polashek and she began by saying, “Every year I make gulaš, but not this year.”<sup>103</sup> People count on it, and people coming up

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<sup>102</sup> *klobasy* is the Czech word for ‘sausages’

<sup>103</sup> *Gulaš* is a very popular Eastern European stew that can be made with combinations of meat and vegetables. Irena's *goulaš* is made from a tomato, onion, green pepper and beef broth base, with beef and root vegetables. *Goulaš* is versatile, hearty, and very inexpensive to make.

to me, “Irena, why no gulaš?” I was told ‘no’, that is why.” Irena was referring to the fact that in previous years she had prepared and sold gulaš at this tent. Apparently, since Irena prepares her gulaš at her home and not in a space licensed for commercial food preparation, offering it for sale at a public event violates certain city ordinances.<sup>104</sup> After I finished speaking with Irena and was waiting in the food line, I overheard a woman ahead of me tell her male companion, “You know there’s no gulaš this year.” Clearly, festival-goers did anticipate the presence of Irena’s gulaš, whether or not they knew it to be hers. While the presence or absence of one type of food does not ensure the success or failure of any event, the exclusion of yet another Czech food at purportedly Czech festival raises some questions. As I later learned, Irena has a level of pride in her cooking that spurs from her talent and years of neighborhood notoriety as both a cook and a teacher.

This chapter explores the ways in which my participants are actively engaged in the work of transferring Czech foodways and, by extension ethnic identity, to others in their families and communities. Their experiences range from informally showing their children how to cook, to attending baking classes held in their neighbor’s kitchen, to teaching formal cooking classes at the local Berwyn Sokol hall. Each of their experiences is an act of culinary resistance that simultaneously strengthens individual and communal relationships to Czech ethnic heritage while combatting erasure and loss of ethnic identity as discussed in the previous chapters. The act of transference—learning to cook or bake specific Czech foods—is just as important as the actual knowledge that is being communicated. The process of learning to cook or bake certain dishes is a multi-sensory experience that, as previously discussed in the second chapter, strongly impacts the way in which certain memories are formed and (re)remembered across memory networks. The

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<sup>104</sup> It is unclear why Irena was allowed to offer her gulaš for prior Houby Festivals but not for the 2016 celebration.

space of the kitchen, then, becomes as active a participant in this project as the individuals that I spoke with because of its centrality to projects of culinary resistance and memory.<sup>105</sup>

Ethnic foodways, in this instance Czech foodways, have historically faced the challenge of culinary colonization, which historian Andrew Haley explains as, “[white, middle-class diners, who] like contemporary imperialists, occupied, appropriated, and transformed the restaurants they patronized.”<sup>106</sup> The exoticization of ethnic cuisine in the public sphere combined with the influence of assimilation in the private sphere posed a serious threat of erasure to ancestral ethnic foodways. As noted by culinary historians as ethnic restaurants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to gain favor with white middle-class diners, their menus began to reflect a hybrid style of cooking that quietly jettisoned the more authentic dishes and methods of preparation inserting in its place familiar American flavors and dishes.<sup>107</sup> Along with a more Americanized menu, Haley claims that ethnic restaurants were ultimately “gentrified” by the increasing patronage of white middle-class diners.<sup>108</sup> White middle-class diners, then, both contributed to the success of ethnic restaurants and ethnic cuisines, but also, violently altered—and arguably, erased—important ancestral foodways.

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<sup>105</sup> Angela Meah and Peter Jackson, “Re-imagining the Kitchen as a Site of Memory” *Social and Cultural Geography* 17, no.4, (2016) 511-532.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). 105.

<sup>107</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering For America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); David Beriss and David Sutton eds, *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat* (New York, NY: Berg, 2007); Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2009); Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipino/a American Community in Stockton, CA* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>108</sup> Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). 108.

Culinary gentrification continues to be a source of contention across contemporary American foodscapes. In 2014, the upscale grocery chain Whole Foods launched its now infamous “collards are the new kale” campaign.<sup>109</sup> Almost immediately, food activists penned their responses to this marketing strategy and accused Whole Foods of furthering its already reprehensible reputation of culinary gentrification. In a 2014 Chicago Tribune article, Pulitzer Prize winner Clarence Page stated, “Little did I expect that, as a young reporter in the 1970s, collard greens, chitterlings (properly pronounced "chit'lins," y'all,) and other "soul food" from which I had liberated myself would become all the rage in mainstream America, which, to me, was what the media called white folks.”<sup>110</sup> For Page, the sudden clamor to collard greens was preceded by the appropriation of other “soul food” items like corn bread and black eyed peas.

Prior to Page’s article, black feminist writer Mikki Kendall had coined the hashtag #foodgentrification as a response to violent, white, gastronomic trends, “Food is facing gentrification that may well put traditional meals out of reach for those who created the recipes.”<sup>111</sup> Kendall specifically mentions not only kale, but oxtail and hamhocks as well, both staples of Czech dishes like gulaš and other hearty stews.

Despite the nearly 100-year gap between the gastronomic trends that Haley writes about and those referred to by Kendall and Page, the same issues of culinary colonization abound. Whether through fundamentally altering the taste profile of ethnic cuisine, or raising the price of certain ingredients to a point that renders them inaccessible, culinary colonization violently alters ethnic foodways. While this type of colonization may not seem as outwardly violent as military

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<sup>109</sup>Alana Sugar, “Collards Are the New Kale” Whole Foods, Jan 13 2014, <http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/blog/collards-are-new-kale>

<sup>110</sup> Clarence Page, “Collards are Kicking Kale Off the Table,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL) Oct. 14, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Goldie Taylor interview with Mikki Kendall, “#BreakingBlack: 1 in 5 Children Face Food Insecurity” *The Grio*, Jan. 20 2014, <https://thegrio.com/2014/01/20/breaking-black-1-in-5-children-face-food-insecurity/>

campaigns, it is a form of violence that insidiously undermines and attempts to erase ancestral knowledge and identities that are embodied in specific foodways.

In the midst of food gentrification and colonization, acts of culinary resistance are utilized as strategies for preserving and transferring ancestral foodways. Culinary resistance projects can be taken up individually or communally and can act to preserve ethnic foodways and/or reject cultural norms about acceptable dietary practices.<sup>112</sup> The acts of culinary resistance discussed in this chapter require a reorientation toward perceptions of resistance to include more subtle, sometimes private acts.<sup>113</sup> While my participants do not specifically identify themselves as being engaged with resistance or transferring their knowledge as a conscious, political act; this chapter will demonstrate how they are very much actively engaged in culinary resistance and its implications for future Czech foodways.

### Culinary Capital

While being able to cook has deep practical value, it can also carry symbolic value that can elevate a person's reputation—or de-elevate it if one is a particularly bad cook. Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco discuss the ways in which people employ certain food-based practices to distinguish themselves from others. They coin the term “culinary capital” to refer to the various food-based acts of distinction that people take on, for example: a strict adherence to locally sourced, organic produce is an act of distinction that can result in the acquisition of culinary

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<sup>112</sup> Alice Julier and Laura Lindenfeld, “Mapping Men Onto the Menu: Masculinities and Food,” *Food and Foodways* 13 (2005) 1-16; Jean P. Retzinger, “The Embodied Rhetoric of ‘Health’ From Farm Field to Salad Bowls,” Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato eds. *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); Frederick Douglass Opie *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food From Africa to America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010); Brenda L. Beagan and Andrea D’Sylva “Occupational Meanings of Food Preparation for Goan Canadian Women,” *Journal of Occupational Science* 18, no.3 (2011)210-222, Arlene Avakian, “Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs” *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014)277-303;

<sup>113</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).



capital.<sup>114</sup> Culinary capital, like cultural capital, differs across a variety of demographic categories and is not a permanent status but rather a constantly shifting and evolving subject position. Additionally, culinary capital is accompanied by a level of prestige that is culturally specific and not necessarily discernible to those uninterested in its contours.

I supplement Naccarato and Lebesco's concept of culinary capital with Wendy Atkins-Sayre and Ashli Quesinberry Stokes' work on regional food production and socio-ethno-cultural capital. Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes explore the importance of Southern heritage baking as more than a genteel, ladylike hobby.<sup>115</sup> For the communities of color that they study, being a proficient baker is more like being a community archivist or record keeper, where the history, traditions, and identity of that group is stored and (re)membered through cakes, pies, and sweet breads. Rather than re-enacting tropes of gendered and raced labor as expected, non-commercial care work performed to ensure the perpetuation of hegemonic, patriarchal systems of order, Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre suggest that the women they interviewed are using the vehicle of baking to resist the very tropes from which expectations of baking emerged – the women they interviewed, “participate in forms of nostalgia and ritual that resist repressive hegemony and carry surprising emancipatory potential.”<sup>116</sup> The authors also identify that a good cook, someone who can master certain deserts, garners a special kind of respect and socio-cultural aplomb which they call “cultural power and with-it-ness.”

Though culinary capital is only one component of social identity, its acquisition can lend authority and social prestige. In the case of Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes' interview

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<sup>114</sup> Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco, *Culinary Capital* (New York, NY: Berg, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre. *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

<sup>116</sup> Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre. *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).160.

participants, those who are proficient bakers possess a very high level of culinary capital. In my own work, I saw culinary capital function in a variety of ways, many of which are similar to that identified by Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes. The work of Naccarato and LeBesco help to flesh out this notion of culinary capital, as they argue that it is the “sense of distinction offered by certain food practices.”<sup>117</sup> Naccarato and LeBesco work to understand how various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural—circulate across the social field. There is no inherent relationship between cost and/or social standing and the acquisition of culinary capital, and there is no universal form of culinary capital (for instance, a Michelin starred restaurant might represent the height of culinary capital for one person but mean absolutely nothing to someone without an interest or investment in that type of social sphere).

Because of the unstable and contextual nature of culinary capital, Naccarato and LeBesco are interested in attending to the processes by which value is conferred and transferred, “We focus on the multiple and potentially contradictory ways in which [culinary capital] may function.”<sup>118</sup> Naccarato and LeBesco claim that, “...attempts to acquire culinary capital can be read as efforts to participate in projects of citizenship as individuals use their food practices to create and sustain identities that align with their societies norms and expectations.”<sup>119</sup> Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre are specifically engaging with the troubled and troubling history of slavery and racism that permeates the South and contemporary communities of color. While I cannot and do not intend to draw exact parallels, I do think some of their rhetorical arguments can be applied to the communities that I am studying and to broader ethnic foodways.

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco, *Culinary Capital* (New York, NY: Berg, 2012).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.* 3

The explicit fusion of food based practices with citizenship is a feature of many explorations of whiteness and ethnicity about late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America.<sup>120</sup> In his thorough history of the restaurants and the rise of the middle class, historian Andrew Haley chronicles how late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century sentiment toward foreign food reflected larger xenophobic attitudes citing a *New York Times* reported who convincingly claimed that, “foreign dishes...are all seasoned so highly and are so rich in oils and fats that our plain American digestive apparatus loudly rebels against them.”<sup>121</sup> Similarly, historian Donna Gabaccia includes a brief mention of an encounter between an Italian family and an American visitor to their home who noted about the family, “still eating spaghetti, not yet assimilated.”<sup>122</sup> This continued engagement with ancestral foodways was interpreted as evidence that this family was not yet prepared or able to fully participate in American society. While Naccarato and LeBesco are more invested in food and its relationship to citizenship projects on an individual level, food practices should be considered within larger historical contexts of race, class, and gender.

The notion of culinary capital provides a compelling framework with which to consider the ability of food, specifically deserts, to tie us to our past but also provide space for narratives about race, gender, and community to be changed.<sup>123</sup> In their project, nostalgia and heritage are not encased in amber as a thing to be passively gazed upon, but rather, they are tied to acts of engaged

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<sup>120</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2012); Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014)

<sup>121</sup> Haley, Andrew P, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 97.

<sup>122</sup> Gabaccia is citing Erik Amfitheatr of *The Children of Columbus: an Informal History of Italians in the New World* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1973) 253.

<sup>123</sup> Atkins-Sayre, Wendy Stokes and Ashli Quesinberry. *Consuming Identity*: University of Mississippi Press, 2016. 161.

community building and maintenance. I see my own participants as occupying a role similar to those occupied by Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre's participants. Through the continued cooking and baking of Czech recipes, my participants use their culinary capital to engage in culinary resistance that reaffirms ethnic foodways and Czech identity.

### The Work of Resistance

Culinary resistance can be deployed in a variety of ways, for example: to combat ethnic erasure and/or classism and reaffirm regional or national identity. In their rhetorical examination of Southern foodways, Ashli Quesinberry Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre devote the last chapter to an exploration of Southern desserts. They state, "Southern desserts are suspect in limiting women's subjectivities. They seem like time-consuming relics that worry modern health sensibilities with their sweetness. They carry the weight of troubling African American history. Our meal ends, however, by investigating how these traditions might offer a taste of connection and resilience along with satisfaction."<sup>124</sup> While cooking and specifically baking are tied to gendered forms of labor in raced and classed ways, Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre argue that "Southern dessert traditions...participate in forms of nostalgia and ritual that resist repressive hegemony and carry surprising emancipatory potential."<sup>125</sup>

The way in which Quesinberry Stokes and Atkins-Sayre activate "community" is in a much more active and engaged manner. The women who participate in their project actively discuss the ways in which their baking builds or strengthens community. For example, Jen and Carolee's small home-based baking business is known throughout the Charlotte, NC area and, according to them,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 160.

brings people together. Mava, who is retired but still hard at work, bakes for the community college band fundraiser, for local shut-ins, for Sober House, and for the annual desert reception she hosts for all the high school graduates in her small Virginia town. Both of these examples reflect the active labor of community building and maintenance. It is not an airy, theoretical reference to the ethereal feeling of community, but an actual sustained, engagement, a labor of community building. It is also done within a group of people. While, for Mava at least, the act of baking is a solitary one, sharing the fruits of that labor is a process that involves many people.

Similarly, in Arlene Voski Avakian's work on Armenian foodways in New York, she explores the significance of Armenian food as a vehicle for the reaffirmation of Armenian ethnic identity.<sup>126</sup> Contending, as do Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes, that while cooking, particularly ethnic cooking, has complicated connections to gendered oppression and women's labor, there is liberatory potential in contemporary ethnic foodways. Avakian states, "No longer compulsory in the lives of the women I interviewed, cooking has had its meaning subverted, and they cook to serve their own needs. For many of the women cooking becomes a vehicle to reclaim, proclaim, and enact a transformed Armenian American womanhood."<sup>127</sup> For both Avakian and Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes, the work of maintaining ethnic foodways is one of most consistent sites for reaffirming identity—communal and ethnic.

As has been made clear throughout this project and many before it, food is never "just" food; among other things, it approximates a type of communication that is very much like a code.

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<sup>126</sup> Arlene Voski Avakian "Shish Kebab Armenians?: Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identities among Armenian American Feminists," *Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. eds. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.)

<sup>127</sup> Arlene Voski Avakian "Shish Kebab Armenians?: Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identities among Armenian American Feminists," *Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. eds. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.) 261.

In her piece on recipe books and food writing, Lynn Z. Bloom states, “For the language of food is not the language of recipes but the language of cooks, communicated as surely and eloquently through their creations as the most sophisticated discourse emerging through scholarly articles.”<sup>128</sup>

Bloom suggests that there is a distinction between written recipes and what they communicate, and the food produced either from those same recipes or without the aid of any written directions at all.

The food “speaks” for itself in a way that transcends the written recipe; the text of the recipe becomes less important than its textured result. Bloom goes on to say of her mother and grandmother, “They never wrote down recipes, never tried to transform art into a science, in tacit acknowledgement of the fact that most good cooks regard recipes the way good writers regard dictionaries, as sources of inspiration, with license to improve.”<sup>129</sup> The absence of formal written recipes gestures to the importance of transferring cooking lessons through the work of cooking and baking together, as demonstrated by Bloom’s own discussion of her experience of learning to cook through hands-on experience.

While recipes can and often do occupy an important place in the continuation of ethnic or regional foodways, recipes alone are only one half of the equation. In historian Janet Theophano’s examination of women’s pre-20<sup>th</sup> century cookbooks, she references community and the ability of recipes and baking to evoke feelings of connectedness. However, Theophano fails to adequately address the complexities of race and racism within the dynamic of women’s recipe books and larger social circles. Her perspective on recipes is:

Whether the recipes are used as they are written or altered to suit contemporary tastes and fashions, many recipes and memories preserved in these texts are savored as mementos of

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<sup>128</sup> Lynn Z. Bloom, “Writing and Cooking, Cooking and Writing,” *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai American Women and Ethnic Food*, Sherrie Inness ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).73.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

the past and a way of life that may no longer exist. Whether they are used or not, they are not forgotten...Used or not, unchanged or transformed, these recipes and the rituals in which they are embedded continue to shape a group's current image of itself.<sup>130</sup>

Theophano does not see the actual act of baking as essential to community building or ancestral foodways. For her, simply having a written record of the recipe is enough to “shape a group's current image of itself.” I find it curious that a recipe alone, perhaps one that has not been produced for decades, still has the power to shape a group's image of itself. Theophano adopts a much more passive, individual stance on the role of recipes and baking for community building.

I argue that the work of producing these recipes and the results of the cooking process are the key to enacting emancipatory potential, according to Avakian and Atkins-Sayre and Quesinberry Stokes. Otherwise, just the written record of a recipe remains fixed in time, almost encased in an amber-like nostalgia that prevents it from becoming anything other than what it was. Theophano says it herself, “their existence in writing offers us a kind of permanence” which implies that a recipe's meaning, location, and identity are all fixed and unchangeable.<sup>131</sup> Culinary resistance, as deployed by my participants, is very different from culinary nostalgia, which is what Theophano seems to be fixated on. It is the work of culinary resistance—teaching, sharing, cooking and baking together—that contribute to culinary resistance.

The work of cooking and baking is essential to the perpetuation of ancestral foodways and culinary resistance. Like a language that is no longer spoken, when specific dishes can no longer be created the written record of their existence is not enough to ensure the transference of knowledge and identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the accessibility of certain dishes is critical for the preservation of ethnic and familial identity. My participants, then, are

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<sup>130</sup> Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). 51.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

participating in culinary resistance by continuing to engage in the work of cooking, baking, and transferring that knowledge to others in their community. Of the three participants with whom I engaged in the work of cooking, only one used a written recipe, and I suspect that recipe was mostly for my benefit as she did not refer to it at all throughout the cooking process.

### Irena Polashek

Recall the story with which I opened this chapter, that of Irena and her arguably famous gulaš. Miša Polashek, Irena's daughter-in-law, facilitated our introduction because she insisted that I must talk to Irena.

Before I met Irena, I knew she had previously attended culinary school and taught cooking classes at Sokol Tabor in Berwyn.

The first time I went to Irena's house it was the week before Thanksgiving and she took great pleasure in showing me all of her Thanksgiving decorations, though she was quick to insist that when I came back for Christmas I should see her Santa Claus decorations because "those were something to see." Irena lives on the top floor of the 2-flat she and her husband moved into in 1973. As she explained to me, "My husband already had this house. He lived here. He was Czech-American. He lived over aunt's address and I came straight here and that's it for me if it's moving. I don't care who is telling me, 'You have to move. It's not nice here.' No."<sup>132</sup> Irena's adult daughter, Irene, and Irene's husband live in the ground floor apartment. Irene frequently joined in on my conversation with Irena, contributing her own recollections of her mother's cooking, and switching to speaking in Czech when she didn't want me to know what was being said.

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<sup>132</sup> Irena is referring to the fact that her home is a two-flat and her husband's aunt originally lived on the bottom floor while they live above her.



Including the initial interview, I have been to Irena's home twice (and I can confirm that her Christmas decorations are spectacular), with the promise that I will return again so she can teach me more about cooking. When I arrived, Irena was sitting at her kitchen table opening a package that contained an English-language Czech cookbook, "I check this for Teddy."<sup>133</sup> People all the time sending him cookbook," she said scanning the pages, "If it good, I pass it along. This one...not good." Irena then shoved the cookbook into a corner and stacked some papers on top of it. She did not offer an explanation of her assessment, nor what a "good" cookbook might look like, the authority of her determination did not seem to be up for debate. When I began recording Irena told me, "I speak perfect Czech. I do not speak that well English" to which I replied "That's okay. I don't speak that well Czech, so we're a perfect pair."

Like many of my conversation partners, Irena learned how to cook from her mother:

IP: My mom was a very, very good cook. When she was young she went to the school where she learned lots about domestic work in the house and then she was working as a cook for the rich people in the [village]. One of her last family she worked for they were very good friends with Baron Šupček. He had little, [country house] and when that family was invited to go there for vacation my mom had to go with them because Mr. Baron Šupček loved my mother's cooking.

ES: Wow. That's really cool.

IP: She had to cook for the noble.

ES: So she taught you how to cook then?

IP: You were helping her. Because there were not that many recipes, measurements, what she only measured was when we baked cookies for Christmas and if we were making cake and, and stuff like that, that was measured. But when you are making dumplings, noodles and stuff like that, you put it in the bowl, 'it's enough, no, it needs little bit more.' If it's cooking level same thing, no measurements. I learned from her flavors because my mom knew ways to mix the spices and seasoning and I was lucky I learned it from her.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Teddy is Irena's son.

<sup>134</sup> Irena Polashek, Oct. 17, 2016. 6:05

Irena is clearly very proud of the fact that her mother's cooking was requested by Czech nobility, but she is equally proud of the fact that her mother could cook and season food without the aid of a recipe. Irena similarly possesses this talent, which made attempts at recording the recipe for the *gulaš* we made together incredibly challenging not least of all because she would add spices or ingredients as needed throughout the process.

In addition to cooking for her family, Irena spent many years cooking for lunches and dinners for executives at a local telephone book factory as well as cooking for annual Sokol Instructor trainings. Though her own children are grown and no longer involved with the Berwyn Sokol chapter, Irena still coaches gymnastics and teaches cooking classes there. In fact, during my second visit to her home while she was teaching me how to make *gulaš*, the phone rang and it was a group from the Sokol Hall a bit in a panic because they couldn't find anyone who had keys to the building to come lock it up for the night. Speaking mostly in Czech, Irena gathered her things and told me to stay in the kitchen and keep working while she went and locked up the building. Before leaving she handed me a knife and told me to peel the potatoes. She must have seen the confusion in my eyes and asked me, "You can peel with a knife?" to which I sheepishly replied, "no. I've never learned." While I silently chastised myself for not learning this basic skill prior to this research, Irena deftly pulled a vegetable peeler from her drawer and told me she would teach me to use a knife "next time," then she headed out the door. As I sat alone, quietly peeling potatoes in the kitchen of a woman I hardly knew, I wondered about all the meals quietly—or not so quietly—prepared in this kitchen since 1973.

When Irena returned from securing the Sokol Hall, the *gulaš* lesson continued. The key to a good *gulaš*, according to Irena, is a good base and tender meat. Her *gulaš*, like most Czech *gulaš*, has a tomato, vinegar base with just a little bit of sweetness. As Irena told me while we cooked,

the nice thing about gulaš is that you can add in whatever vegetables you have at that moment. The batch we made had green pepper, potato, and onion along with some crushed tomatoes. Irena trusted me to cut the vegetables and the meat, but when it came to cooking, stirring, and adding seasoning, I observed her and took some photos.

Gulaš requires a significant amount of time for the meat to break down, so while we were waiting for it to soften up, Irena told me about the other soups she likes to make, mostly from whatever vegetables are around. In the midst of telling me about a kale and broccoli soup she likes to make in the winter, Irena said, “We’ll have some” and retrieved a tupperware of soup from the back porch.<sup>135</sup> Before I could protest she had warmed us up two bowls of soup and brought out some crackers to share. While we sat eating soup, waiting for the gulaš to cook, Irena told me that her friends and family usually show up at her home around dinner time if they suspect she might be making something good and, though she performed an exasperation, I got the feeling that she secretly enjoys her reputation.

Irena’s reputation as a skilled professional and home cook have accrued a significant amount of culinary capital over time. As demonstrated by the disappointed diners at the 2016 Houby Festival, people are expecting Irena’s food to be present at local Czech events. Indeed, over the course of this project, I attended many Czech events and any time Irena would be present—which was often—she was also surrounded by a sea of people chatting with her in English and Czech. More than once, Irena was so swamped that I didn’t get a chance to say anything to her, just a friendly wave and her booming voice calling out “hello! Good to see you.” It is Irena’s unique status as an accomplished cook and baker as well as an active presence in the local Czech community that give her a particularly salient platform for engaging in culinary resistance. She is

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<sup>135</sup> Irena’s back porch, like many in the Chicagoland area, is uninsulated which makes it a good place to keep food cold in the winter.

respected as an authority on Czech cuisine, as demonstrated by her “screening out” the bad cookbooks people send to her son, and as an accomplished teacher. After our first conversation, before we settled on making gulaš for our next meeting, I asked Irena what she wanted to cook and she insisted that I choose saying, “It is your cooking. You pick.”

Carol Kala

During my conversation with Carol, she told me about learning to cook and bake primarily through watching her grandmother and mother and then, as she got older, participating in the process herself. She also shared with me her experience with expanding her baking capabilities as an adult:

CK: I have a friend, Mrs. Novak, she’s 91, and uhm she had a baking class at her house one time for like some of us who were interested. So, like, I use some of her recipes.

ES: Can you tell me more about this baking class at Mrs. Novak’s?

CK: It was just on a Saturday morning, and I dunno, maybe maximum 10 of us. She made the dough and showed us what to do and we wrote down the recipes. We made strudel, we made kolace, we made those linzer cookies. Uhm she made walnut cookies. I dunno, just a whole bunch of what we could fit in the time allotted.

ES: Sure and that was a sort of informal? She wanted to have people over?

CK: yeah well, the ones of us who were interested and then her daughter brought some of her friends, so it was kinda nice, you know?<sup>136</sup>

Carol’s experience at this informal, neighborhood baking class demonstrates one of the ways in which culinary knowledge is transferred laterally—as opposed to intergenerationally. Additionally, the pastries Mrs. Novak taught her students to bake are all staples in Czech, and Austrian, baking. While Mrs. Novak did not specifically state that she was going to offer a Czech

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<sup>136</sup> Carol Kala, Sept 6 2016

baking class, she taught these women how to bake the things she herself bakes well, which are all Czech deserts.<sup>137</sup> By Carol's own admission, she still uses some of the recipes she learned from Mrs. Novak's baking class and has gone on to teach her own grandchildren how to make linzer cookies.

While it has been said that recipe sharing is a "prototypical feminine activity," I have found that actually cooking together, doing the work of teaching each other how to cook or bake, is far less common—especially amongst grown women.<sup>138</sup>

Jean Hruby

During our conversation, Jean shared with me that she has two adult daughters, both of whom she has taught to cook both Czech foods and Italian foods as her ex-husband's family is primarily Italian. Explaining her motivation for teaching her daughters to cook, Jean said:

I sat them both down, maybe three years ago—when they had their own apartments—and I... I said, "you need to learn how to do this because... you know, if something ever happened to me, it's gone." You know, the memory—my memory of how to do it—you'd never know. You can write the ingredients down, but until someone shows you the methods, I mean...you know, even with, with gravies and sauces, you need to know if you should add a little more water, based on the look of it. You know it's just... something comes with practice.<sup>139</sup>

Jean's clear articulation of the importance of culinary knowledge for continuing on the "way to do it" demonstrates the power of putting culinary knowledge into practice as a way to ensure the continuation of ethnic traditions.

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<sup>137</sup> Carol shared with me that Mrs. Novak's koláče recipe was named the best in Chicago and featured in an article in the Chicago Tribune some years ago.

<sup>138</sup> Susan Leonardi, "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster a la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie," *PMLA* 104 (1989): 340-47.

<sup>139</sup> Jean Hruby, Sept 2016

Later in our conversation when I asked Jean why she has invested so much time and effort into learning both Czech and Italian cooking she said, “I don’t know why that was important to me...I have, I have a heart for tradition, and history. So I... I have a passion for that, and I believe in ethnicity, and keeping those, uh, traditions alive. If we don’t keep cooking, or keep doing that, it will... it’ll go away, and it’ll get lost.”<sup>140</sup> For Jean, there is a clear connection between ancestral ethnic foodways and the perpetuation of identity and communal heritage.

One of the reasons that maintaining Czech foodways through the work of transference is so important is because of the concerted efforts at assimilation and threats of ethnic erasure faced by Czechs in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his seminal work on whiteness, David Roediger reminds us, “Assimilation involved not just an embrace of American identity, but specifically of white American identity, while the national ties being jettisoned connected immigrant children to groups still considered in the 1920s and 1930s to be racial ones.”<sup>141</sup> The assimilation to which Roediger refers included a rejection of ethnic foodways in favor of American culinary experiences; the influence of which can be seen in the boom of convenience, pre-made foods and ingredients in post World War II.

Assessments of the relationship between foodways and assimilation provide insight in the the ways in which immigrants navigate the complex terrain of identity. Hasia Diner elaborates on the complexities of assimilation and foodways by saying, “The bifurcation of immigrants’ lives into spaces for being “American” and others for being Polish, Japanese, French-Canadians, or Dominicans has typified the construction of ethnic identity in America.”<sup>142</sup> One of the most salient

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<sup>140</sup> Jean Hruby, Sept 2016

<sup>141</sup> David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey From Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005). 178.

<sup>142</sup> Hasia R Diner, *Hungering For America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). 224.

places where ethnic identity could be and has been embraced is in the kitchen, where being “American” or being “other” is a multi sensory experience. For my participants, culinary resistance, then, seeks to ensure the continuation of the kitchen as a space for “being” Czech. While many of my participants do not speak or read the Czech language, nor are they particularly involved in Czech politics, their commitment to Czech ancestral foodways connects them to Czech culture and heritage. It is the work of cooking and baking, the work of transferring specific heirloom recipes and techniques that resists the erasure of ethnic identity—it resists the Americanization of ethnic foodways in its physical manifestation of foods to be consumed, ethnic identity that nourishes the physical body as it reaffirms its ethnic roots.

#### **Interlude #4**

Every year at Christmas I join thousands of other Czech bakers in making several loaves of vanočka (which means Christmas bread). This is an intricate blend of raised yeast dough, dried fruit, and delicate plaiting. Every year around October my mother-in-law begins to share her mounting anticipation around the vanočka that I will bake for her. However, since she knows that I am busy, she reminds me that I do not have to bake one for her if I have too much going on, that she would understand if I just can't this year...but also, that she really loves that bread. I always bake one for her and she always tells me it's the best one yet. I've refined my recipe over the years and I share it here with the caveat that you not be discouraged if your first vanočka is a big, yeasty mess. They get better over time, just ask my mother-in-law.

#### **Vanočka- Oven 350**

**Adapted from personal family recipe, “Czechoslovak Pastries” cookbook 1952, and “Czech Cookbook” 2017 by Kristyna Montano**

4 cups flour

1/2 cup butter

1.25 cups milk

3/4 cup granulated sugar (1tsp separate)

3 tsp yeast (or 1.5 packets active dry yeast)

2 egg yolks

Zest from one lemon

1/4 cup raisins 1/4 cup currants

sliced almonds

1 egg for glazing

Bamboo skewers



1. In a small bowl or glass measuring cup, warm 1.25 cups milk. Add 1 tsp of sugar and 3 tsp yeast. Mix and let rise until the yeast has doubled in size (about 10 minutes)
2. In a large bowl add 4 cups flour (sifted), the remainder of the sugar, 1/2 tsp salt and the lemon zest. Mix.
3. To the dry mixture add 2 egg yolks, 1/2 cup melted butter, and the yeast mixture after it has risen.
4. Add 1/4 cup raisins and 1/4 cup currants and mix together to create a dough. Note: this dough should be a little sticky but if it is too sticky to plait, add more flour.
5. Cover with a warm kitchen towel and let dough rise for 2 hours in a warm place.
6. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured pastry board. Using a pastry cutter or knife cut the dough into two pieces that are roughly 60% and 40% in proportion.
7. Shape these pieces into thick, oblong logs
8. From the larger log cut 5 even pieces, and from the smaller log cut 4 even pieces.
9. Take each piece individually and roll it out into long, thin, strips, each about 20 inches long.
10. Make 2 layers of plaits and one that is twisted.
11. To make the plaits, begin with the bottom one which requires 4 strips. Connect the strips together at the top and spread them out into a fan-type shape. Then cross the outer most left strand over the inner and the outer most right strand over the inner. Then cross the inner left strand over the inner right. Gently push the plait to the top and begin again until the strands have been fully plaited.
12. Using the side of your hand, make a crease in the center of the plait. (this helps the next two layers sit more evenly).

13. Transfer to parchment lined baking sheet and cover the creased area with an egg wash.
14. For the middle plait: take 3 strips and braid them. Then create a crease in the middle and transfer this braid to the top of the bottom layer. Cover its creased with egg wash.
15. To make the top twist: take the remaining 2 strips and twist them. They should be longer than the bottom 2 layers. So that when you lay the twist on top of the middle layer you are able to fold the ends of the twist under the bottom layer. Do not cover with egg wash.
16. Cover with a kitchen towel and let rest for 1 hour.
17. After the hour is up, generously brush the sides and top of the vanocka with egg wash. Then sprinkle sliced almonds on top.
18. Before baking, you need to secure the layers with bamboo skewers. Insert 4 skewers along the length of the bread trying to stick them into folds so as not to create noticeable holes in the bread once it is baked. The skewers should stick out about 3-4 inches from the top of the bread. Be sure your skewers are fully inserted through all layers of bread.
19. Drape the bread with aluminum foil creating a tent-like structure
20. Bake at 350 for 45-50 minutes.
21. Remove the foil and the skewers and let it cool.

### **Conclusion- On the Continuation of Czech Foodways**

On the August 28, 2016 edition of the *Czechoslovak Radio Hour*, hosts Ed Vodička and Vlasta Kucerová interviewed Jay Hsing, the new owner of Czech Plaza restaurant in Berwyn. Vodička began the interview by naming Czech Plaza as, “one of the cultural institutions around town” and noting that, “One might think you are the least likely of people to take over a Czech restaurant because you have come here from China since you were 11 years old.”<sup>143</sup> Acknowledging his unique position as a newcomer to Czech cuisine but proprietor of several other successful local restaurants, Hsing stated, “If you have a passion for something you’re going to learn it quick. Food is food...Food, any type of cuisine, we share the same type of ideologies.. ideas about how [to prepare dishes]...When you have a passion for something you uh you tend to do it so much more. Instead of in restaurants, sometimes at home now I [cook] Czech food.”<sup>144</sup> Later in the interview, Kucerová expressed her own concerns about the management change saying, “Even I was little bit skeptical in the beginning, you know if the food is gonna be the same, if it’s gonna taste the same. So I’ve tried couple of dishes and, oh boy, Jay’s svičková and koprová is the best. I really really like the food.”<sup>145</sup> Her endorsement of Hsing’s cooking was reflected on social media where members of the Czech community praised Hsing for his culinary accomplishments. Even several of my oral history participants mentioned their satisfaction with the management shift and the fact that this significant Czech restaurant would not be forced to close its doors, like so many in the area. Indeed, my initial draft of this conclusion gestured to the

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<sup>143</sup> Jay Hsing, interview on *Czechoslovak Radio Hour* Aug 28th 2016. Note: this transcription is exactly as spoken.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

evolving nature of the future of Chicagoland Czech foodways and the ability of ethnic cuisine to build community that extends from its original cultural base.

However, on January 5, 2018, Czech Plaza announced that they were “temporarily closed due to technical issues.”<sup>146</sup> No additional information or elaboration was provided, and their official social media accounts have remained silent post-announcement. It was quickly revealed that the restaurant had been closed since late December 2017 and, upon further inquiry, that Hsing had left the business for “unknown reasons.” At the time of its closure, Czech Plaza had only been under his management for 16 months, during which time it retained its clientele and even grew to accommodate the meeting needs of local Czech organizations. Due to the lack of information surrounding Hsing’s departure, one can only speculate about the forces that influenced his decision.<sup>147</sup> With its—potentially temporary—closure, there are currently no Czech restaurants operating within the city limits of Cicero or Berwyn.

However, the future of Czech Plaza may not be as grim as it seems. As of this writing, there appear to be plans for the restaurant to reopen under the direction of one of the original Czech waitresses, but any official communication regarding a projected reopening is yet to be released.<sup>148</sup> As articulated by Vodičká, Czech Plaza is more than just a restaurant, it is a cultural institution for the local Czech community. Indeed, it is the only remaining Czech restaurant on Cermak road, which—as recently as 1975—was home to at least seven Bohemian restaurants, all of which have

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<sup>146</sup> Czech Plaza official facebook account. <https://www.facebook.com/Czech-Plaza-Restaurant-111460268886580/>

<sup>147</sup> Hsing’s other restaurants remain in operation.

<sup>148</sup> This information was confirmed in my personal correspondence with two oral history participants.

since been destroyed, torn down, or shuttered.<sup>149</sup> The significance of this restaurant for the community may well be primary factor motivating its potential, projected reopening.

The unexpected closure of Czech Plaza represents and reflects many of the themes explored in this dissertation. As stated in my introduction, I intended to explore the bonds and identities enabled by the culinary labor of Czech women in Cook County. Specifically, I was interested in the ways in which acts of culinary resistance were deployed personally, publicly and in service

of the perpetuation of ancestral foodways in the face of myriad loss and/or erasure. The closure of Czech Plaza is a threat to ancestral foodways as well as local Czech heritage; which is perhaps why there has been such a swift and vocal response from local Czechs who are not keen to experience the loss of yet another iconic institution. Despite the lack of official comment, the community has rallied around the previous owners who have regained control of Czech Plaza and, as previously mentioned, are purportedly working with a former employee to help her reopen the restaurant. This act of culinary resistance demonstrates the power of Czech ethnic food to animate networks of community and identity against erasure.

Looking to the future of Czech foodways in Cook County, I would argue that acts of culinary resistance and cultural knowledge transference are going to remain essential to ethnic vitality, though their contours may necessarily shift. As noted by my participants, many of whom are influenced by their own multi-ethnic culinary background, the future of Czech foodways is likely the continuation of the hybrid cuisine. Before its closing in 2015, Klas Restaurant offered as an appetizer a “CzechMex Goulash Taco” served on “Klas’ homemade tortilla.” Though I was not fortunate enough to taste this dish, I have made variations on roast pork and sauerkraut filled buns and a guláš inspired shepherd’s pie. Exploring the culinary elasticity of Czech dishes is, perhaps,

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<sup>149</sup> Berwyn Historical Society <http://berwynhistoricalsociety.org/2016/02/digitizing-project-details/>

one of the ways to continue the transference of ethnic foodways and grow the network of community members touched by its influence.

Throughout this project, I have worked to articulate the importance of food and cooking as it relates to the formation of memory, identity, and narrative. Through the use of extended oral history excerpts, I demonstrated the multiple ways in which food-based acts of distinction impact personal, familial, and communal identity inter- and trans- generationally. I situated my participants as co-creators of this work as I cooked, baked, and ate alongside them in private and public spaces. Their willingness to transfer their culinary knowledge to me allowed me to explore the role of transference as critical to the continuation of Czech ethnic foodways. It is their stories that have animated this dissertation.

After I had finished my Christmas baking for the 2017 season, I sent out Christmas cards to update my participants on the status of my project. In response, I received a card from Irena wishing me a Happy Holiday season and reminding me to call her so we could continue our cooking lessons. While this project is coming to a close, it seems my own culinary training is still a work in progress.

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## Image Appendix



Lora and Craig Wittenberg with enormous hen of the woods mushroom, circa 1996. Reprinted with permission from the Wittenberg family.





Cookies sent to Carol Kala from her cousin in the Czech Republic. Note the intricate icing detail. Author's collection.