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Food as a Paradigm of Acculturation

Abstract

The article focuses on issues of acculturation and identity in the host society of Canada. It outlines some changes that have taken place in the foodways and food patterns of new Canadians and targets the representation of food and meals as a signifier of Canadian identity – for the ‘old’ Canadians and for the ‘new’ Canadians. Though integrated with the exigencies of human existence, like language, food as a communicative code is of crucial importance in the context of fluid identity theory, for example in terms of holiday food reversals.

Résumé

L'article porte sur les problèmes d'acculturation et d'identité dans la société d'accueil du Canada et met en valeur un certain nombre de changements qui ont influencé les habitudes et les modèles alimentaires de nouveaux Canadiens. On accentue sur la spécificité de la représentation de la nourriture et des repas comme un signifiant de l'identité canadienne pour les "anciens" ainsi que pour les "nouveaux" Canadiens. La nourriture, intégrée aux exigences de l'existence humaine comme c'est le cas de la langue, est d'une importance décisive avec sa fonction de code de communication dans le contexte de la théorie d'identité multiple, surtout en ce qui concerne le renversement des modèles d'alimentation pendant les fêtes.

I am Hungarian-Canadian. I am Tokaji aszu and maple syrup; I am the Himnusz and Oh Canada! I am Karinthy and Stephen Leacock; I am Kossuth, the revolutionary, and Mike Pearson, the peace-keeper; I am a kavehaz and Tim Hortons ... I am beautiful, old, resourceful, proud and longsuffering. I am beautiful, new, prosperous, awkward and full of hope. They all live within me ...

(K. Millard in *Albu* 142)

Though integrated with the exigencies of human existence, food is undoubtedly a communicative code, and the changing food discourse echoes migratory processes. Food and eating relate to the constructing of social, psychological and linguistic reality and are projected as extremely important culture-specific social patterns. Cultures can almost be identified by what they eat and how they eat it. As Margaret Visser writes, “We are eating cultural history and value as well as family memories”(43). This statement is borne out by the claims of many new Cana-

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dians quoted in the volume *Migrating Memories: Central Europe in Canada* edited by Rodica Albu (2010). See, for example:

There are two things which I think a Hungarian keeps from the mother country: the poetry and the food. I think those are extraordinarily strong ties with the country of origin and I never lost those. (Peter Hay in Albu 140)

This statement is echoed by many other interviewees of the oral history volume who claim that what makes them Hungarian, Bulgarian, Croatian, etc. is language and food. Some new Canadians express disbelief that it would be possible for them to change their food preferences and become Canadians. In a short documentary directed by Albert Kish in 1977 a Portuguese immigrant says: “We can dress like a Canadian but we can never eat like a Canadian.” However, as globalization becomes an increasingly important factor such concerns appear to be on the wane (Perianova 108).

At the same time, whereas the habits of eating and the patterns of meals may indicate the background of an individual, his/her self-image and place within a certain group or community, food discourse is apt to change, sometimes subtly and sometimes saliently, when the individual emigrates. Consequently, it is not surprising that food formatting and sequencing observations are the first ones new Canadians make when describing differences between Canada and their home countries as pointed out by Eva Hoffman:

I think every immigrant becomes a kind of amateur anthropologist – you do notice things about the culture of the world that you come into that people ... who are very embedded in it simply don't notice. (Interview)

Eva Hoffman's own food-related observations as a teenager during her first years in North America where she arrived from Poland make “funny reading” in the light of present-day globalization:

It's Saturday night, or rather Saturday Night, and party spirits are obligatory. We're on our way to the local White Spot, an early Canadian version of McDonald's, where we'll engage in the barbarous – as far as I'm concerned – rite of the 'drive-in'. This activity of sitting in your car in a large parking lot, and having sloppy, big hamburgers brought to you on a tray, accompanied by greasy French fries bounding out of their cardboard containers, mustard, spilly catsup, and sickly smelling relish, seems to fill these peers of mine with warm, monkeyish groupy comfort. It fills me with a finicky distaste. I feel my lips tighten into an unaccustomed thinness – which, in turn, fills me with a small dislike for myself. (*Lost* 117)

Even though McDonald's and other fast food outlets originating from North America have now become fixtures in most European countries, certain meals, such as breakfast, have not globalized to the same degree. In one of the oral history interviews a young Czech woman describes how she was taken aback by her first Canadian breakfast – cereals instead of bread, butter, ham and cheese sandwiches, which had been her usual Czech breakfast:



I realized that things were very different in Canada and that I would have to adjust majorly ... when I had my first breakfast in Canada ... The first morning my uncle gave me a bowl of milk with this cereal called “Bran Shreddies,” it tasted like an ashtray so I gave it to my dad. This affected my entire life negatively in the sense that I don’t really like to eat cereal, but in the positive sense that it made me realize I will have to find a way to adjust. (Albu 116)

The interviewee’s first breakfast in Canada is noted as the one particular event that deeply affected a young woman’s entire life and alerted her to the necessity to adapt. The statement clearly illustrates how food reflects the need to accommodate to master culture and perhaps transcend or integrate a former identity.

Interestingly, as early as 1972 David Schneider noted that the genealogies of many North Americans who most vehemently and affirmatively claimed they were Italian revealed the existence of Irish and Polish mothers and grandmothers. Yet despite this intermarriage the affirmation of Italian identity was quite clear and positive even on the part of the Irish and Polish mothers and grandmothers “who had ‘become’ Italian and proved it by cooking according to the Italian style, eating according to distinct Italian traditions (elbows on tables, eat, eat)” (qtd. in Parsons 64).

The food of the home country binds people together in the same manner as language. It was noted in many interviews with new Canadians of different ethnicities – Hungarians, Bulgarians, Croats – who mention food, especially the traditional holiday meals, as a factor which separates them from “real” Canadians. As cultural objects, different foods are fleshed out because of the stories people read into them, turning them in this fashion into signifiers of collective and family history. Sometimes memory takes on a material expression. In Glendon, Alberta, which has a sizeable population of Ukrainian descent, citizens have erected the world’s largest tribute to their iconic food known as *pierogy*, *perogy*, *pirohy* or *pyrogy*. Standing 25 feet high and weighing 6,000 pounds, the Garden Perogy is the central feature in Glendon’s Pyrogy Park.

The so-called Canadian mosaic, a metaphor for the official Canadian policy of multiculturalism is reflected in food and meals resulting in the emergence of numerous ethnic culinary enclaves, e.g. pockets of *borscht*; or areas of *baba ghanoush* and *houmas*. Numerous Internet sites, such as the Bulgarian Malincho.com, which advertises imported European products with a focus on Bulgarian foods, such as *liutenitsa*, bean soup, Bulgarian feta cheese, as well as frozen *banitsa* – layered phyllo pastry with different fillings, popular in Bulgaria, are a source of culinary satisfaction for nostalgic new Canadians. The same goes for ethnic restaurants, such as a Croatian fish restaurant in Toronto which gets fish from the Adriatic Sea or stores which import Croatian or Serb specialties. Perhaps the most numerous and popular of those outlets, imbued with memories and nostalgia, are the Russian shops, which have mushroomed after the collapse of the USSR in places as geographically removed from one another as Sofia and Vancouver. They have now been renamed as European delis (delicatessen) and advertise as providing a wide selection of European imports at fair prices.

The function of these shops is tantamount to translation in its original meaning, i.e. transportation from one place to another. Such transportation takes place via collective or social memory for the Russians and their next-door neighbours, and is perceived as exotic culinary



travel for others, the uninitiated. Memory, especially collective or social memory, is also a form of translation “marked by a boundary crossing and by a realignment of what has become different” (Iser qtd. in Apostolova 103). The uninitiated, interested in the new culinary experience, often regard a visit to a European deli as a package, coming together with the ex-socialist smile-less approach to customers. According to the numerous online reviews of both satisfied and dissatisfied customers of Russian delis in North America, for people of a different origin such a visit is indeed nothing short of time and space travel – a translation, complete with its exoticism or its disappointments.

In point of fact, however, European delis offer Russian *favourites*, rather than Russian-produced foods. Indeed, melding traditions together is very typical of immigrant groups whereas food substitution is one of the ways to negotiate multiple identities. Thus, whey came to be used instead of kvass in kvass-based dishes by many North Americans of Russian descent; polenta and pizza are described simply as Italian in Canada and their regional nature is ignored. By the same token, Bulgarian restaurants may serve Macedonian and Serbian dishes emphasizing the common Balkan identity. The further away in space they are removed, the less distinguishable are neighbourhood divisions. When diaspora Bulgarians feel nostalgic and eager to bond with their past they may go to a Serbian, Romanian or Greek restaurant, especially when there are no Bulgarian restaurants in the area.

Conversely, new holidays go hand in hand with new festive foods. For Thanksgiving, an all-American holiday which Philip Roth called “a dereligionized common ground” (402) for all Canadians, both old and new alike, apart from vegetarians, such food is turkey with all the trimmings, and the seminal pumpkin pie. Another Canadian icon food is maple syrup. During certain months sap shacks (sugar houses or cabins), where sap collected from Sugar Maple trees is boiled down into delicious syrup, offer hospitality and a range of leisure-related activities to numerous visitors. Especially prominent in eastern Canada, the shacks are now frequently complete with reception halls which serve varied breakfast-type dishes complemented by maple syrup. There are also specialties like homemade pickles, homemade breads, followed by desserts like sugar pie and maple taffy on the snow, and in fact it is a Canadian tradition, especially in Quebec, that newcomers are quite willing to embrace.

As a whole, Canadian cuisine is unique for two main reasons – it reflects the ethnic diversity of the country and it makes use of certain original products, some of which are typical of Native Americans. And of course, the cookery books published in Canada reflect the official multiculturalism. Even the titles are revealing:

A Taste of Canada: A Culinary Journey by Rose Murray, Whitecap Books 2008

Food that Really Schmecks by Edna Staebler, Wilfrid Laurier UP 2007

The Great Canadian Feast. A Celebration of Family Traditions from Canadian Kitchens by Canadian Geographic, Key Porter Books 2002

As evidenced by their titles, the books are redolent of the echoes of the culinary and linguistic history and travels of individual Canadians of different descent.

The difficulty of unambiguously identifying Canadian cuisine came to the fore in my 2007 interviews in Canada because most interviewees came up with Mexican food or hamburgers



when they had been called upon to represent Canadian cooking for ethnic dinners in other countries. Not surprisingly, Ardele Lister, whose 1998 Canadian Cuisine Project is described as a metaphor for the struggling Canadian identity, links Canadians' inability to clearly define Canadian food to their inability to define themselves as a nation. In her multi-media installation Lister combined stills, photographs, archival material, video and an interactive diner counter with such items as multi-grain mosaic to make that point. What follows is Tami Friesen's review of the project in FFWD Weekly, July 2, 1998:

In 30 minutes I went from being hungry to suddenly being aware of how the food I eat might represent my relationship to my country to being really, really hungry. Lister gave me an apple. Perfect. But what I really wanted was a half dozen Tim Horton's doughnuts, pancakes, some bannock, a bowl of Kellogg's Just Right cereal, curry made from Canadian-grown lentils and some poutine, please. With maple syrup on the side.

The reviewer mentions some supposedly Canadian foods. Some of them, such as *poutine*, a French Canadian concoction, made with French fries, topped with brown gravy and smothered in curd cheese, are Canadian icons. Others refer to household names in Canada, e.g. Tim Horton's, and their regular offers. Even though curry, which is also mentioned in the review, is not Canadian it is made from "Canadian-grown lentils." Amongst other Canadian icons are salmon early in summer, especially for First Food Feast early in summer, Alberta beef (If it ain't Alberta it ain't beef, as the saying goes); maple syrup, especially as a sauce for what is often described as a sweet and sour decadent dish with ham and eggs. And, of course, it is important to mention a new cadre of chefs, such as Jamie Kennedy, who was awarded the Order of Canada for his promotion of Canadian cuisine and the use of organic, sustainable and locally-sourced foods in December 2010. Thus, a case has been made for Canadian cooking using some essential indigenous ingredients, such as fiddleheads, corn, wild rice, cattail heart.

The multicultural policy of Canada is manifested in the functioning of many institutions. Perhaps a trifle unexpectedly, not least of them is the most popular and successful Canadian quick-service restaurant chain Tim Horton's, named after a popular hockey player. In their *True Stories* – a popular campaign of long-running ads – the chain exploits the stories people read into consumer objects. The *True Stories* ads insert Tim Horton's into customers' stories about travel, endurance and adventure, and authorize Tim Horton's itself as both the site and source of Canada's self-image. In their brilliant analysis of consumer behaviour Gabriel and Lang write of the "stories" which the individuals "read into" consumer objects; for them this is the particular nature of 'Western' consumption so that "identity becomes vitally and self-consciously enmeshed in stories which are read by consumers themselves into innumerable, relatively mundane, mass-produced objects which they buy, use, or own" (Gabriel and Lang 89). In my view, this quotation explains why the above-mentioned clever marketing strategy has made Tim Horton's even more popular.

It may be argued that the campaign tugs on heartstrings through capitalizing on the ambiguities of articulating Canadian national culture, especially within the context of an official multi-cultural project. (For an in-depth analysis of Tim Horton's brand see Cormack). In a 2010 marketing ploy, for example, the *True Stories* ad depicts an emotional airport reunion

between an immigrant, his wife and kids. The man gives his wife a Tim Horton's coffee and swaddles the whole gang dressed in what appears to be traditional garb in winter outerwear. Tim Horton's coffee thus becomes a symbol of Canadian welcome, and in this fashion the marketing myth equates Tim Horton's with Canada. As Benwell and Stokoe write, "We consume according to who we are or what we want to be" (167). Without doubt, Tim Horton's coffee and doughnuts target equality, which is a function of the desired identity in the new home country for new arrivals. Consequently, Tim Horton's is represented in the ad as a stepping-stone to the adoption of Canadian values.

According to Thomas H. Eriksen, empirically "social identities appear fluid, negotiable, situational, analogic (or gradualistic) and segmentary (174). Although during the first stages of acculturation the Canadian food may appear unusual and not very tasty to the immigrants, very soon they learn to differentiate between what they choose to eat at home and what they opt for at work. Even with regard to food, their identity undergoes a transition and is realigned as a layered hierarchy. Thus, with good reason we may talk about situated identities:

You project a different identity at a formal dinner party than you do at the family dinner table. And though these are both dinner, they are none the less different activities. (Gee 12)

Pierre Bourdieu's differentiation between inherited capital and acquired capital is also highly relevant for food and meals. The importance of cultural capital acquisition in the multicultural setting of Canada is two-fold: firstly, as a newly adopted tradition, an awareness of the ways of their host society, and secondly, as knowledge of the food of their neighbours of different origin. The foodways and the food patterns of new Canadians change slowly but surely. At the same time, the old traditions reign supreme during family dinners and holiday celebrations, typical of the old country. This holiday food reversal was made clear by many interviewees of the *Migrating Memories* volume edited by Rodica Albu and undoubtedly reflects the fluidity of their identity. According to Richard Sennett,

Fluid identity consists of innumerable defining characteristics that make up the whole of who we are in any given moment. These fragments of self include our sexuality, gender, and sense of belonging to a particular culture, nation, religion, family, or some other group. Our identity includes our looks, personality, beliefs and fears and is an unfolding story ... continually recast in the course of experience. (176–177)

The desire to adjust often applies to everyday food only, or to national holidays and celebrations of the host country. The everyday food of the host society may be described as unmarked, and in most cases, this unmarked food, say a breakfast of cereal, is similar for all Canadians, regardless of their ethnic background – given the variations dependent on religion, family or social background and values. Conversely, holiday food should be described as marked and constitutes a reversal to the previous identity of an immigrant. During holidays or family occasions, diaspora Bulgarians welcome the sight of *banitsa* and stuffed vine or cabbage leaves and *liutenitsa*, whereas diaspora Serbs have a craving for *kaimak*, *aivar* and *cevapcici* (Perianova 111). For the New Year Romanians eat the traditional *sarmale* (stuffed cabbage leaves or grape



leaves) and giblet soup. Traditional Slovak, Czech and Hungarian meals for Christmas and Easter are also mentioned by the respondents.

Significantly, the number of identity layers is sometimes subject to difficult arithmetic. Thus, Indian Jews in Canada, a minority within a minority, celebrate three types of holidays: their strong identification with both Hindu and Jewish culture means they observe festivals such as Diwali and Holi, apart from the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Passover. They claim allegiance to three countries because they have been shaped by them – Israel, India and Canada. A member of this community describes it in terms of food discourse: “A Jew is a Jew. We’re the same everywhere *but I do like spicing up my food*” (Yelaja; italics added).

Because of mixed marriages and multiple affiliations, sometimes people find it difficult to work out identity-related issues. They no longer know who they are. A concern about such identity loss is symbolized by the title of an autobiographic play performed during Winnipeg Fringe Fest Theatre in 2007. The scene of the play called *Deep Fried Curried Perogies* is laid in Edmonton – described as Edmontchuk in order to stress one of the character’s Ukrainian roots. The writer, Michelle Todd (half Filipino, half Jamaican), has an Anglo-Ukrainian boyfriend. Thinking about the future of their baby, she is worried about its cultural identity: “What shall I serve the kid for ethnic lunches at school? Deep-fried curried perogies?” As a happy end, however, Todd proudly declares her Canadian identity, the highly charged ethnic and cultural mix notwithstanding.

Perhaps the single most important change is recognition by many of a distinct character of Canadian food. *The Great Canadian Feast* features many new recipes as the beginning of a new family tradition. Lydia Marrett from Toronto, Ontario, for example, extols the virtues of curried chickpea soup which “combines ingredients from my old family’s country, Jamaica, with spices from my new family’s neighbourhood, Little India in Toronto’s east end” (20). Curried chickpea soup – the beginning of a new family tradition with a Canadian identity story of its own to tell – and a truly Canadian metaphor.

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