

Transcultural Memory and Food in Julia Cho's *Aubergine*

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Julia Cho's *Aubergine* opens with a monologue by a character named Diane, who is described as a forty-year-old American. She talks directly to the audience about how her memory of childhood and her deceased father is profoundly connected to the taste of hot sandwiches her father used to make. She describes the last sandwich she ate with her father as "the best thing I have ever eaten in my entire life."¹ She and her husband have enough money to go to any restaurant in the world as "food tourists," but all she wants after her father's death is a restaurant that could give her "Los Angeles, 1982," which she describes as "Essence of hot buttered bread and pastrami. I am eight years old and my father is young. And he, just like me, is never going to die. We're going to eat sandwiches together forever" (7). After her monologue, Diane does not reappear until the last scene. The second scene opens the main storyline in which Ray, a thirty-eight-year-old Korean American chef, has to care for his dying father, Mr. Park. Ray wants to cook anything that his father could eat hoping that the food would help him miraculously recover. Mr. Park, a Korean immigrant in his late sixties, is dying of cirrhosis, is barely conscious, and is unable to eat. Born in Korea, he was infected with the liver disease while he was serving in the army, a mandatory duty for all young men in Korea. Living in the USA for nearly four decades, he raised Ray by himself after his wife died of a car accident while visiting Korea. Mr. Park is a lonely, bitter, friendless man who idiosyncratically always carried an old cell phone that never rang. Growing up with a father who believed fine cuisine a waste of money, Ray became a chef as a way to rebel against him, forging his identity in the kitchen. Faced with his father's impending death, Ray is filled with guilt and denial, initially thinking he should take care of his father alone. Luckily for both his father and himself, Ray receives essential assistance from Lucien, an experienced, deeply empathetic hospice nurse. Ray asks ex-girlfriend Cor-

nelia, who can speak Korean, to help him reach out to his uncle, who travels from Korea to the US to see his brother for the last time. The uncle makes Ray cook exotic dishes (including a turtle soup) in the hopes of recovery, but Mr. Park refuses everything. When his father dies, Ray resolves to take his father's body to Korea for burial in the family plot. The last scene, titled "Epilogue," returns to Diane from the play's opening monologue. She is at a restaurant owned by Ray and Cornelia. When Diane sits down, Cornelia tells her that there is no menu and that she should "trust the chef": "I promise you: It's worth it" (66). Soon Cornelia brings her "a dish with a perfect sandwich on it," the very pastrami sandwich she describes in the first scene (67). The play ends with Diane taking a bite, bowing her head, and closing her eyes while Cornelia and Ray quietly watch her with a smile.

Cho wrote a draft of the play in 2013 when she was commissioned by Berkeley Repertory Theatre to write a short play about food. The commission was timely for her because she was experiencing what she felt was a writer's block and had not written any play for over three years. Between 2002 and 2010, Cho had written twelve new plays, most of which premiered at major theatre companies. She was one of the most prolific American playwrights during that time.² However, in 2010, her father passed away, and, in 2013, one of her close friends died. The grief and loss Cho felt during those years made it difficult to write, and she was afraid that she would never write another play again. She is known for her poetic style that centers on memory, loss, and family, as exemplified by *99 Histories* and *The Architecture of Loss*. With the loss of her father and a friend, she felt she could not continue to pursue her signature themes. She welcomed the opportunity to attempt another theme: "I think had I sat down to write a play about grief and loss, there would be no way. . . . But by sitting down and thinking about food, it was this weird trick. I had tricked myself and didn't even know it! And it was probably the only thing that allowed me to write."³ The short play she wrote about food was the beginning of *Aubergine*. While the play is not autobiographical, Cho included some specific moments she experienced while staying with her dad during his last days in hospice care at home.

The play premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre on February 5, 2016. Directed by the artistic director Tony Taccone, the production received positive reviews. Leslie Katz, the theatre critic of the *San Francisco Examiner*, describes the premiere as "sweet, savory, and a little bit sad, too" and recalls that "there wasn't a dry eye in the house during some particularly bittersweet moments toward the show's end."⁴ The production went on to win the prestigious Will Glickman Award for best new play to premiere in the Bay Area

the previous year. The play opened in New York City in October 2016 under the direction of Kate Whoriskey at the Playwrights Horizons Off-Broadway theatre. In a less favorable review, Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* criticizes the play for what he describes as “a preciousness” that got under his skin. He finds the characters’ sincere monologues and statements about food, memory, and love “too-precious” and sentimental. He comments that those who “have Proust-like associations with bites from their past” would appreciate the play, but he is too cynical to believe that food can have spiritual and transcendental effect on people and dismisses the play as “undernourishing.”⁵

What Isherwood, a white critic, misses entirely in his review is the fact that the production at Playwrights Horizons was the first time a Korean American play was staged at a major theatre company in New York City with Korean American characters played by Korean American actors. Tim Kang played the role of Ray (who is best known for his role in the television drama *The Mentalist*), Stephen Park played Ray’s father, Sue Jean Kim played Cornelia, and Joseph Steven Yang played the uncle from Korea.⁶ Although the production team did not have any Korean American members, the set design was immediately recognizable as a Korean American living room, and both Sue Jean Kim and Joseph Steven Yang spoke Korean convincingly. Such cultural details were missed or ignored by Isherwood, who does not consider the possibility that the play is about more than food and memory. While on one level the play is about a chef with a dying father who cannot eat, on another Cho thoughtfully uses the specificity of Korean American characters to tell a broader story about American identity. In fact, only by understanding the particular, specific details of the Korean American context can the larger meaning of the play be illuminated.

Depending on the audience members’ knowledge of the Korean language and culture, one can potentially be watching two different stories. At first glance, the play is about, as Charles Isherwood describes, the “Proust-like” associations of food and memory and about death and family. On a culturally specific level, the play is about the unique experiences of Korean Americans.⁷ The first indication of this is in act 1, scene 4 when Ray’s father speaks for the first and also the last time. It is the middle of the night and Ray is drinking a can of “cheap beer” next to his motionless father. Empty beer cans are stacked in a pyramid shape nearby, indicating that Ray is doing very little except drinking. Suddenly his father starts to speak to him.

FATHER. Bap mo-goh-soh?

Ray stops mid-motion and looks over at his father.

... Bap..mo-goh-soh.

The words are soft but clear.

RAY. Hey.

FATHER: Did you?

RAY. Yeah. Are you—do you want some water? (12)

In this exchange, the father's line, "Bap mo-goh-soh?," which means "Have you eaten?," is not translated, and with Ray's unclear reply, there is no way for a non-Korean speaking audience to know what the father said. For the Korean speaking audience member, what the father says is exceedingly familiar. The father's question to his son is so ubiquitous in the Korean language that it is not uncommon to use it as a greeting among friends and family. The phrase in Korean literally means "Did you eat rice?" because "bap" can mean both rice and food. The cultural significance of rice in Korea is entangled with the country's history of foreign invasion, Japanese annexation, the Korean War, and the postwar poverty that affected the country through the 1960s and the 1970s. Given the fact that Ray is thirty-eight years old in the play and was born in America, his parents would have left Korea in the 1970s when many Korean professionals (such as doctors and engineers) immigrated to the US in the hopes of finding a better life for their children. The cultural and emotional meaning of the father's question cannot be translated, and that may be why Cho does not provide a literal translation as she does for other lines later in the play.

Mr. Park's question to Ray underscores the significance of food in the relationship between father and son and how they communicate with each other. There may be a language barrier between Ray and Mr. Park, but with food, they understand each other completely. Later in the play, Ray finally gives up the idea of cooking a miracle dish for his father and simply presents him a bowl of ramen. Ray tells his father, "Ramen. Ichiban. Ten cents a pack," and the stage direction reads, "And is it Ray's imagination or does his father smile?" (53). Ray then tells his father, "I'm sorry I didn't become what you wanted me to be. But I wish you could've known how good I was at what I do. . . . This thing you've carried all your life . . . you can set it down now. I'm here. To pick it up." (53). Following this moment, Ray's father dies. The set turns dark, all is silent. This is the saddest, most emotional moment in the Cho's play. What Ray tells his father echoes the widespread sentiment of grown children who must let go of their dying parents. But what make this moment even more poignant is the reference to Ichiban ramen, which has a specific meaning to a generation of Korean immigrants in the US. In the 1970s

and the early 1980s, Korean ramen was not available. The closest thing was Ichiban ramen made in Japan. The irony of finding gastronomical comfort in a Japanese dish is not lost on the generation of Korean immigrants whose reasons for leaving Korea had partially to do with Japan's annexation of Korea during the first half of the twentieth century. But as an immigrant, Ray's dad made Ichiban ramen his comfort food and was pleased to accept it as his last meal before dying.

While the bowl of ramen is unable to conjure the miracle that can bring Mr. Park back from the brink of death, it can be described as miraculous. Its power is revealed through Ray's interaction with other characters in the play. Ray has an uncanny ability to know exactly what food others deeply crave. Like the bowl of Ichiban ramen he makes for his father, each dish Ray chooses for those around him is precisely what they desire even if they are not aware of it. Cornelia, for instance, describes how she fell in love with Ray when he gave her a bowl of mulberries, food that she subconsciously associates with early memories of her father's garden. "How did you know?" she asks rhetorically and answers her own question: "He didn't know how he knew, he just did" (41). Ray's inexplicable miracles are summarily dismissed as "too precious" by Charles Isherwood. Yet I see it representing a significant change in Cho's writing. As Ju Yon Kim notes, Cho regrets never learning Korean and has written about the feeling of loss and regret in *The Language Archive* and other plays.⁸ The recurring themes of loss, displacement, and remorse in Cho's plays stem from the sense of disconnect she feels in regard to Korea and Korean culture. Instead of writing directly about Korean American themes, Julia Cho has written about Asian Americans. Kim explains, "[Cho's] shift, then, to describing her plays as works about Asian Americans instead of on Korean American themes suggests that, rather than an imposition, writing about Asian American experiences is a choice; rather than set a limit, it offers limitless fascinations."⁹ In other words, in the plays she wrote prior to *Aubergine*, Cho frames her work as Asian American to broaden the questions of cultural negotiations and politics of representation. With *Aubergine*, on the other hand, Cho broadens her scope even further and dramatizes her fascinations with the American identity.

Miseong Woo, in writing about *Aubergine*, describes Cho's oeuvre as being about postmemory, a concept described by Marianne Hirsch as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."¹⁰ It is indeed accurate to describe Cho's earlier plays as works about postmemory, and her characters

are haunted by the memories (both real and fake) of the past that are specific to the trauma of their family and ancestors. However, in *Aubergine*, Cho writes about transcultural memory as an American experience. According to Astrid Erll, the concept of transcultural memory describes “the programmatic move away from the assumption that memory is the product of bounded ‘cultures,’ often national cultures” and emphasizes instead “the fluidity and fuzziness of memory in culture as well as the nonisomorphy of culture, nation, territory, ethnicity, social groups, and memory.”¹¹ By underscoring transcultural memory, Cho’s characters remember moments and feelings that are beyond ethnic-specific experiences, opening the possibility of sharing memories across cultures. Cornelia, for instance, does not crave her mother’s Korean food, and instead finds joy in a simple bowl of mulberries while Ray tells the audience that the best meal he has ever had was store-bought fried chicken that was “greasy and cold and we washed it down with Coke” (65). In this context, it is fitting that Mr. Park’s last meal is a bowl of Ichiban ramen.

The use of transcultural memory as a central theme is made clear by Cho’s depiction of the character of Diane. Cho describes Diane as a forty-year-old “American.” In Playwrights Horizons’ production, Diana was played by a white actress, Jessica Love, but the character can be played by anyone who looks and sounds like a forty-year-old American. By bookending the play with Diane’s story, Cho emphasizes the possibility of people from different backgrounds finding deep connections that transcend individual lives, and such connections are framed as “American.” It is food that allows those important moments of transcultural discoveries. Cho deliberately provides her characters with memories of food that are both individualized and beyond the essentialized boundaries of race, ethnicity, or nationality in order to drive home the point that they are all interconnected through histories of migration, wars, and globalization. Cornelia does not recall her mother’s incessant cooking of Korean food but the mulberries from her father’s garden; Ray’s favorite memory of food is store-bought fried chicken with Coke; Diane wishes to taste her father’s pastrami sandwich again; and Mr. Park favors Ichiban ramen as his comfort food. All of the food items may have culturally specific origins, but like the characters, they have traveled and found different connections and meanings in America.

Lucien, the hospice nurse, likewise has a deep hunger for a dish he tasted as a child, long before he became a refugee and a naturalized US citizen. Lucien’s home country is not specified in the play, but in the New York production his refugee status was from a French-speaking African country. Lucien’s food memory is *aubergine*, the French word for eggplant. Unlike the Ameri-

can eggplant, which are “hardy,” “strong,” and “large,” Lucien tells Ray, *aubergines* are small, colorful, and wild, but they are also impossible to grow in the US. Ray manages to find them and makes a dish for him. When Lucien asks how he knew how to cook it, Ray replies, “I don’t know. I just had a sense . . . that this is the way they wanted to be cooked. Does that sound stupid?” (57). Deeply grateful, Lucien tells Ray, “I have missed this taste. It’s like something I used to eat a long, long time ago. And when I eat this, I am young” (57). Lucien thought it would be impossible to taste the dish again in America, but with the help of Ray, the son of a Korean immigrant, he can remember who he was and where he came from. With that memory, he is in a sense liberated and, like his *aubergine*, can finally put down roots and thrive in his new home country.

Both Lucien and Ray ended up in America because of decisions made by others, but they are able to find a genuine friendship even in a generic place Cho describes as “a house in the suburbs of a large city.” The American suburbs may have become a symbol of loneliness and disconnectedness, but the American experience is not necessarily lonely. Lucien reminds Ray that humans share more commonalities than differences: “As humans, we spend the vast majority of our time feeling alone, apart, other. Vibrating at different frequencies. But when you are in the presence of death, somehow all frequencies become one” (58). Lucien’s description of death consoles Ray and helps him realize what his father’s death means to him. The penultimate scene before the epilogue ends with Ray demonstrating his idea of death and possibly “heaven”: he and his father sit at opposite ends of a table mirroring each other and eat together. This concluding image of father and son is surreal and otherworldly, but it is, Cho seems to say, what Ray wishes. Even after death, Ray wants to make sure his father is not alone. In turn, Mr. Park did not want his son to live a lonely life. He would be pleased to see Ray creating miraculous dishes that have the potential to make others in America feel a deep sense of connection and belonging. Diane, Lucien, and Cornelia may come from very different personal and historical backgrounds, but Cho connects them through Ray, a Korean American chef who knows exactly what they crave.

Notes

1. Julia Cho, *Aubergine* (New York: Dramatists Play Services, 2017), 7. Subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.
2. Cho’s major plays include *The Language Archive* (2010), *The Piano Teacher* (2007),

Durango (2003), *The Winchester House*, *BFE* (2002), *The Architecture of Loss* (2002), and *99 Histories* (2001).

3. Diep Tran, "Julia Cho Returns to Playwriting with 'Aubergine' and 'Office Hour,'" *American Theatre*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/02/17/julia-cho-returns-to-playwriting-with-two-new-plays/>

4. Leslie Katz, "Berkeley Rep's 'Aubergine': Tasty and Satisfying," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 20, 2016, <http://www.sfexaminer.com/berkeley-reps-aubergine-tasty-and-satisfying/>

5. Charles Isherwood, "Review: 'Aubergine,' A Stew of Regret and Impending Loss," *New York Times*, October 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/13/theater/aubergine-review-julia-cho.html>

6. *Aubergine*, Playwrights Horizons, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.playwrightshorizons.org/shows/plays/aubergine/>

7. For an interpretation of the play as a study of the "dualistic ideas of Korea and Korean America," see Jieun Lee's essay, "Recipe for Last Supper: Food and Memory in Julia Cho's *Aubergine*," *Art & Performance* (World Arts & Cultures Institute at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies) 2 (2019): 169–92.

8. Ju Yon Kim, "Korean American Theater and Performing Arts: Networks of Practice and Bodies of Work," in *A Companion to Korean American Studies*, ed. Rachael Miyung Joo and Shelley Sang-Hee Lee (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 166.

9. Kim, "Korean American Theater and Performing Arts," 166.

10. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 103. Quoted in Miseong Woo, "Korean Diaspora Onstage: Diasporic Consciousness and Reconciliation with the Homeland in Julia Cho's *Aubergine*," *Journal of Modern English Drama* 30, no. 3 (2017): 237.

11. Astrid Erll, "Transcultural Memory," *Éditions Kimé*, no. 119 (2014): 178. Also see Lucy Bod and Jessica Rapson, *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory between and beyond Borders* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).