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**Contemporary Art and Food:  
An Examination of Three Case Studies Using Anthropology and Diaspora as Key.**

by

**Viridiana Salas Mayagoitia**

A master thesis submitted to the City College of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History, The City University of New York

March 2020

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*Food preferences that emerge early in life do so within the bounds laid down by those who do the nurturing, and therefore within the rules of their society and culture. What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others.*

— Sidney W. Mintz

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## Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful for the contribution and support of many during the process of my thesis. I want to express my profound gratitude to my advisor Prof. Lise Kjaer, for her invaluable advice and thoughtful comments and feedback. Furthermore, to Prof. Harriet F. Senie for her guidance and support throughout the MA Art History Program. Also, I extend my sincere appreciation to the writing center's tutors and staff members, especially to Mona Schnitzler and Ana Marjanovic for their patience and exceptional assistance. I am also endlessly thankful to the City University of New York, for what has been a genuinely personal and professional changing experience.

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## Introduction

Food-related artworks are as crucial to understanding culture as other mediums in art like painting, installation, sculpture, and drawings. From Greek and Roman mosaics, Egyptian banquet scenes, to Renaissance frescoes and Flemish still-life paintings, the depiction of food and meals has had multiple meanings. Food as a medium in Western contemporary art was introduced in the 1930s by the Italian Futurists' banquets, which celebrated modernity and technology underlying social and political commentary.<sup>1</sup> It continued throughout the 1960s with performance art, conceptual art, and happenings, and in the 1970s with the Fluxus movement's exploration of the boundaries between art and life.<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, food through contemporary art examined issues of gender and identity; additionally, artists presented works based on relational aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* from 1990, and Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* from 1992, embraced food and the act of eating to open a conversation about gender, sexuality, and identity issues as a performative vehicle to bring awareness concerning the body in connection to the AIDS pandemic and loss, and society expectations for women's bodies, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See F. T. Maronetti, *Manifesto della Cucina Futurista* (The Futurist Cookbook), 1932. Ed. Suzanne Brill, and Lesley Chamberlain (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Kaprow's *Household Happening* in Philip Ursprung, "Allan Kaprow and the limits to painting" in *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson and the limits to art* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2013), 105; See Gordon Matta-Clark's *FOOD* in Pamela M. Lee, *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 68-72. See also works of Daniel Spoerri's *Snare Pictures* (1960), Alison Knowles's *Identical Lunch* (1969, 1971, 2011) and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Pig Roast* (1971).

<sup>3</sup> For works related to gender and body see Suzanne Lacy with Jean Nathan, Laverne Dunn, Marilee Snedeker and Betty Constant's *River Meetings: Lives of Women in the Delta* (1981-1982).

Relational aesthetics is a theory consisting of judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations that they represent, produce or prompt. Artists propose as artworks moments of sociability and objects producing sociability. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud created the term in order to explain art practices produced by a generation of artists in the 1990s, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled 1992/1995 (Free/ Still)*, Gabriel Orozco's *Hamoc en la Moma* (1993); and Jens Haaning's *Turkish Jokes* (1994). Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 33, 112.

<sup>4</sup> Felix González Torres's (b. 1957) *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1990) consisted of one-hundred and seventy-five pounds of hard candies wrapped individually in cellophane, representing the ideal weight of Gonzalez-Torres' former

During the late decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, more literature and exhibitions continued to engage with contemporary art and food practices. Shows such as “*Eating the Universe: Food in Art*” (2010), in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, presented the ongoing interest of artists in the subject of food as an elementary substance while focusing on Daniel Spoerri contributions and seminal works;<sup>5</sup> whereas “*Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*” (2012), at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, and the accompanying publication, surveyed the use of meals and hospitality as a compelling artistic medium.<sup>6</sup> Books like *Food and Museums* (2017) by Nina Levent and Irina D. Mihalache examined and observed exhibitions narratives through food.<sup>7</sup> The artist Olafur Eliasson published *Studio Olafur Eliasson: The Kitchen* (2016), a book that included vegetarian recipes and commented on the intimate relationships between nourishment, art, and community.<sup>8</sup> More recently, *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices* (2017) edited by Silvia Bottinelli, Margherita

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lover, Ross Laycock, who died of complications of AIDS in 1991. Viewers were encouraged to take a piece of candy, thus mirroring Ross’s weight loss and suffering, the pile of candies is endlessly supplied. Janine Antoni’s (b. 1964) *Gnaw* (1992) consisted of two 600-pound cubes – one of chocolate, the other of lard – and a three-paneled, mirrored cosmetic display cases. Using her mouth as a tool, Antoni nibbled the corners of both cubes, leaving visible teeth marks in the material. The chocolate fragments, blended with spit, were melted down and cast into 27 heart-shaped packages for chocolates, while the lard residue was combined with wax and bright red pigment to create 135 tubes of lipstick.

<sup>5</sup> Curated by Magdalena Holzhey in collaboration with Renate Buschmann. “Eating the Universe: Food in Art” participating artist included: Sonja Alhäuser, Arman, BBB Johannes Deimling, Christine Bernhard, Joseph Beuys, Michel Blazy, John Bock, Paul McCarthy, César, Arpad Dobriban, Dustin Ericksen/Mike Rogers, Lili Fischer, Thomas Feuerstein, Anya Gallacio, Carsten Höller, Christian Jankowski, Bernd Jansen, Elke Krystufek, Peter Kubelka, Richard Lindner, Gordon Matta-Clark, Antoni Miralda und Dorothee Selz, Tony Morgan, L.A. Raeven, Thomas Rentmeister, Zeger Reyers, Philip Ross, Dieter Roth, Mika Rottenberg, Judith Samen, Shimabuku, Daniel Spoerri, Jana Sterbak, André Thomkins, Rikrit Tiravanija, Günther Uecker, Ben Vautier, Andreas Wegner, and Günther Weseler. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue published at Dumont Publishing House with essays by Christiane Boje, Renate Buschmann, Beate Ermacora, Ulrike Groos, Magdalena Holzhey, Elke Krasny und Nikolai Wojtko sowie Künstlertexten von Sylvette Babin, Jörg van den Berg, Elodie Evers, Gerrit Gohlke, Roland Groenenboom, Thomas Hirsch, Magdalena Holzhey, Eva M. Kobler, Michael Krajewski, Harald Lemke, Johannes Meinhardt, Francis Outred, Philip Ross, Dietmar Rübel, Andreas Schlaegel and Henning Weidemann.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Smith, *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, Chicago, IL: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition show at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, IL.

<sup>7</sup> Nina Levent and Irina D. Mihalache, *Food and Museums* (London; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Olafur Eliasson and Alice Waters, *Studio Olafur Eliasson: The Kitchen* (London; New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2016).

d' Ayala Valva presented an essay collection that further examined the role of food in contemporary art practices.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the inclusion of food in art, it is essential to reflect that food and foodways are a product and reflection of society. In this case, it implies the eating habits and culinary practices of humans. It refers to all the food-related activities shared by a particular group of people. This includes production, consumption, and circulation of food, as well as the correlation to political, cultural, economic, social, and religious ideologies. Central to maintaining life, it implies issues that expose relationships between people and their communities, including diasporas.<sup>10</sup>

Rituals performed around food are essential to the social structure within diasporas; from the preparation of meals in the kitchen and the passing down of family recipes to dinner gatherings around the table, the environments created by food rituals become pathways for the continuation of cultural traditions. Throughout a meal, not only do family and friends dynamics take place, an intimate climate is fostered for dialogue about shared memories, identity, religious ceremonies, heritage, and political views. Culinary rituals within diasporas enhance a union between members, serving as a space to connect the past with the present. Sharing a meal is a time-honored ritual that helps with the construction of self-identity; it bonds diaspora members together while adapting to changes produced by relocation.

At the same time, a feast or a meal functions as an essential connector to learn about diasporas and their cultural identity, as well as those outside the diaspora. Breaking bread carries a significant role in social interaction and a vehicle for cultural exchange; a

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<sup>9</sup> Silvia Bottinelli and Margherita d' Ayala Valva, *The Taste of Art: Cooking, Food, and Counterculture in Contemporary Practices* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, "Food and Diaspora," *Food Culture and Society* Vol. 11, Issue 4 (2008): 510.

traditional dish becomes fundamental for collaborative social relationships and further understanding about the people who have cooked and served the meal. The cultural importance of ingredients and recipes, linked to their personal stories of diaspora experience, plays a significant role in self-perception and engaging with others.

Derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, “diaspora” addressed the concept of exile and dispersal of the Jews in the translation of the *Septuagint* scriptures (ca. 250 BCE).<sup>11</sup> In the twentieth century, the term diaspora relates to the involuntary dispersal and exile of specific populations. Since the 1980s, scholars expanded on the exploration of the term to analyze the experience of particular migrants, their descendants and their broad historical and cultural background. The word diaspora carries particular associations with human suffering, assimilation, preservation, and the course of history, however, the concept is culturally specific rather than universal.

Diaspora refers to the experience of populations displaced by forced migration, colonialism, and slavery. Not simply does it imply people’s displacement, scattering, and transplantation from a place of origin, but it also entails their relationship to the new places they inhabit.<sup>12</sup> Hybridity takes place as a consequence of the intersection between two or more cultures; this becomes an essential component in the continuous construction of diaspora identity. Eating is a primarily social activity that generates and strengthens social relationships. Food, for a member of such a population, often becomes one of the most viable ways to affirm their identity and establish a sense of acceptance, integration and belonging among the members of the same group, while maintaining a link to their traditions. The incorporation of food as a medium to highlight and address inquiries that

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: a very short introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2006): 296.

arise with diaspora identities are present in the works of Michael Rakowitz (b. 1973), Theaster Gates (b.1973), and Oscar Murillo (b.1986). Similarities and differences in the artists' works emphasize the effectiveness of food to express distinct diaspora experiences.

This thesis will examine Michael Rakowitz's *Return* from 2006 (Chapter1), Theaster Gates' *Soul Pavilion* and *Soul Food Starter Kit* from 2012 (Chapter 2), and Oscar Murillo's exhibition *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator* from 2013 (Chapter 3), with special focus on the artworks *If I Was to Draw a Line*, *Lottery* and *400 km North of the Equator*. It will display how these three artists' creative practices exemplify diverse ways in which contemporary art and food is intertwined with diasporas and issues of identity. Throughout each case study, it will analyze the distinct attempts to reformulate, reclaim and reconstruct a new sense of self by way of the communal rituals of sharing food as an essential agent for a symbolically charged mediation of experiences between cultures triggered by relocation, and the resulting critical political commentary.

For Rakowitz, trading, selling and consuming dates in a Brooklyn storefront evoke sweet memories of the past and create a forum for discussions about the complexities of the US-Iraqi diaspora; this work also reflects on the dire consequences of the Iraq War on the same community. On the other hand, Gates' performative dinners in the South Side of Chicago present an opportunity to open a dialogue about thoughts on history and tradition within the African American community by using the cultural significance of soul food as a catalyst. For Murillo, Colombian food assists as a medium to address his relationship to his micro-Colombian diaspora community in London, while challenging the phenomenon of global migration, food and labor issues on power, and class structures in the world. Food in

the art thus encompasses complete sensory (visual, aural, olfactory, and gustatory) experiences that address issues related to diaspora identities.

Academic contributions from Stuart Hall, Steven Nelson, Sydney W. Mintz, and Frederick Douglas Opie on diaspora, predominantly concerning African descent, have benefited the field of cultural studies, food studies, cultural anthropology, and art over the years. Stuart Hall's and Steve Nelson's inputs on the topic about the diaspora will provide the framework for this study, as well as the point of departure to explore the socio-cultural implications and outcomes of diasporic identities. Nelson explains that the term "diaspora" derives from the ancient Greek word "diaspeirein," (to scatter) and was first used in Septuagint, a third-century BC translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe Jews living in exile. In a contemporary context of globalization, the common use of the word "diaspora" has come to imply a more general sense of displacement, scattering and transplantation from a place of origin.<sup>13</sup> According to Hall, the concept of a diasporic identity is defined as a group of people who share a common culture, historical experiences, cultural codes and ancestry, that all provide stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meanings. However, as both, Nelson and Hall put it, this identity is not fixed; on the contrary, it is in constant transformation, adapting and reconstructing itself.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the study will employ Sydney W. Mintz and Frederick Douglas Opie's food anthropology and history publications on diaspora in order to examine the intrinsic connection between food and the construction of cultural identity through art.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views," 296-316 and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. Also reprinted in Mirzoeff (2000), 21-32.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 22.

<sup>15</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 1985) and "Food and Diaspora," 509-523 and Frederick Douglas Opie, *Hog and Hamony: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008)

As opposed to other examples of artists who use food in their work, the relevance of these artists and artworks, lies in the fact that they present an important intersection between cultural studies and food studies focused on diaspora and the subsequent impact on contemporary art practices. This thesis will add to the authors' specific ideas about the complexities of diaspora identity, their histories of assimilation, acculturation, hybridity, and continuous changes in the contemporary art field. The research and study of food in art history narratives is a work in progress; this thesis will contribute to this dialogue by focusing on food-based projects to highlight implications on diaspora issues. The showcase of three different artists' diaspora experiences through the inclusion of food and the act of sharing a meal as a medium in their practice illustrates different typologies, styles, and applications that underline the constant transformation of the diaspora identity.

The thesis will analyze the ways these three artists and their food-related artworks are influenced by the ongoing relocation and global migration of people, cultures, and food. However, it does not intend to essentialize one diaspora experience or categorize an aesthetic practice as "diaspora art." Instead, it will provide an in-depth analysis of how art is permeated by the inevitable context of the artists' specific displacement experiences and cultural heritage. Through the artists distinct styles and diverse creative and aesthetic approaches to address diaspora narratives (Rakowitz's means of trade, Gates' commensality, and Murillo's labor in a globalized food market), the thesis presents an in-depth exploration on how Rakowitz, Gates, and Murillo integrate issues of identity through food, their perspectives about living as part of two cultures, the ongoing negotiation between the idea of homeland and the host nation, and how their experiences have permeated their art production.

Collaboration is a key component in the food-related projects of these three artists resulting in various ways in which they have influenced a broader public. Notably, Michael Rakowitz's projects such as *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* from 2013, *Spoils* from 2011, and *Enemy Kitchen*, an ongoing project that breaks down cultural barriers through nourishment teach different public audiences, including middle and high school students the possibility of cultural visibility to produce an alternative discourse.<sup>16</sup> Following Theaster Gates's work focused on space theory and land development, sculpture and performance, and drawing on his interest and training in urban planning and preservation, he redeems spaces in the south side of Chicago such as *Peach's @ currency exchange café*, and *Dorchester Industries* to support underserved communities through food and handmade functional stoneware production to help redevelop neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Oscar Murillo's food-related project *A Mercantile Novel* from 2014, where he installed a candy factory with Colombian factory workers inside an art gallery, prompted visitors to reflect on his personal and universal link between labor and production.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the potential influences Rakowitz, Gates, and Murillo have had on the practice of other artists, the power of food in art as a medium continues inspiring the creative process and practice of artists

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Rakowitz's *Dar Al Sulh* (2013) was a restaurant that operated from May 1-7, 2013, in Dubai, in collaboration with Regine Basha and Dr. Ella Habiba Shohat; it was the first in the Arab World to serve the cuisine of Iraqi Jews since their exodus, which began in the 1940s as a result of riots and reprisals leading up to and after the establishment of the state of Israel. In September 2011, Rakowitz launched *Spoils* a culinary intervention in collaboration with Chef Kevin Lasko at Park Avenue Autumn in New York City, featuring venison atop Iraqi date syrup and tahini (*debes wa'rashi*), and served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein's palaces. For *Enemy Kitchen* (2003-ongoing), with the help of his mother, Rakowitz compiled Baghdadi recipes to teach to different public audiences, including middle and high school students.

<sup>17</sup> Theaster Gate's *Dorchester Industries* is an artist-led manufacturing platform that creates furniture, objects, and spaces using exceptional but often overlooked materials sourced through the City of Chicago; it produces handmade, functional stoneware, including Japanese and African-inspired functional and sculptural ware. The objects are designed and handmade in the studio, then fired in the *Dorchester Industries* anagama kiln, which was constructed on-site by employees from reclaimed fire brick. *Peach's @ currency exchange café* is part of the *Rebuild Foundation*, a platform for art, cultural development, and neighborhood transformation founded by the artist.

<sup>18</sup> Oscar Murillo's *A Mercantile Novel* (2014) presented in David Zwirner gallery in New York turned the gallery into a fully operational production site, where experienced candy-making employees from *Colombina*, a candy factory in La Paila, Colombia, worked in a production line at the gallery manufacturing one of *Colombina's* signature candies, the *Chocmelos®*, following the same recipe, ingredients, techniques, and quality control procedures as the facility in La Paila.



around the globe, including thought-provoking contributions by Marta Fernández Calvo, Cooking Sections, and Julio Cesar Morales' artworks, to mention a few, thus, expanding on the construction of cross-cultural dialogues and reimagining possibilities in diaspora narratives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Marta Fernández Calvo's (Logroño, Spain, 1978) work speculates on the re-wording of built environments through a variety of collaborative methods specific to each situation, including those outside of architectural and artistic traditions. Recently, Calvo presented *Casa Comidas* from 2019, in Delfina Foundation, London, UK, a collaborative performative meal offering guests access to *Casas de Comidas*, an intriguing phenomenon of power seized by women through food and recipe-sharing during the dictatorship in Spain.

Cooking Sections (Daniel Fernández Pascual b. 1984 & Alon Schwabe b.1984) is an independent duo of spatial practitioners. They explore the systems that organize the world through food. Using installation, performance and mapping, their research-based practice operates within the overlapping boundaries between visual arts, architecture and geopolitics. Recent projects include *The Empire Remains Shop* (2016), a public installation that speculates on the possibility and implications of selling back the remains of the British Empire in London today.

Julio Cesar Morales (Tijuana, Mexico, 1966) investigates issues of migration, underground economies, and labor on the personal and global scales. Morales' practice employs multifarious mediums specific to each project or body of work. For CURRENT:LA 2019, Max La Rivière-Hedrick and Julio César Morales collaborated on *New Shores: The Future Dialogue Between Two Homelands*, a food-based project focused on the duality of immigrant experiences through sound, music, poetry, food tastings, tapestry, film, installation, and performance.

## Chapter 1.

### Michael Rakowitz: *Return*

Michael Rakowitz, born in 1973, is an Iraqi-American artist trained in visual arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and currently based between Chicago and New York.<sup>20</sup> His practice involves diverse mediums such as installation, sculpture, performance, and design, mainly centered on social and political topics. Rakowitz's work is not limited to the frame of a gallery or a museum; his oeuvre includes the broader public sphere through projects and interventions in public spaces. This is the case of *Return* (2006), which was presented and produced by Creative Time's "Who Cares?" initiative.<sup>21</sup> "Who Cares" original drive was to create a series of private dinner forums where artists, educators, and theorists could openly discuss their views on the relationship between art and social action. To this end, a series of conversations were organized around three topics: "Anyone in the World," "Beauty and its Discontents," and "War Culture."<sup>22</sup> The encounters encouraged participants to address social topics about political issues in America, and to create art related works through social action, therefore becoming a catalyst for artists as originators of social change.

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<sup>20</sup> "Michael Rakowitz," Jane Lombard Gallery, accessed February 3, 2017, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5526ea47e4b0c120ebd8d303/t/594d781715d5dbe3a0985c9c/1498249240131/MR\\_Bio\\_NEW.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5526ea47e4b0c120ebd8d303/t/594d781715d5dbe3a0985c9c/1498249240131/MR_Bio_NEW.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Creative Time is a New York City based public arts organization. It works with artists in order to contribute to the dialogues, debates and dreams of current times. Founded in 1973, Creative Time supports the creation of innovative, site-specific, and socially engaging public art projects. "Mission," Creative Time, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://creativetime.org/about/#mission> *Return* was financially funded by Creative Time, The Rockefeller Brothers Fund and The New York Foundation for the Arts. Christine Lagorio, "How to Get a Date- From Iraq," *CBS News*, December 5, 2006, accessed July 15, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-to-get-a-date-from-iraq/2/>

<sup>22</sup> Anne Pasternak, *Who Cares? / Essay by Anne Pasternak and Doug Ashford* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2006), 9.

In light of these discussions, in the fall of 2006, “Who Cares” commissioned four public art projects. Rakowitz’s *Return* (2006) was one of these.<sup>23</sup> *Return* (2006) originated from the artist’s earlier site-specific project by the same name, first presented at the Jamaica Center for the Arts and Learning in Queens, from October 2004, through January 2005. It consisted of a small package drop box, which permitted members of the Iraqi diaspora and interested citizens to send objects and goods of their choice to Iraq without charge. The project grew from Rakowitz’s own political and social concerns, as the artist explained, “[A]t the time I have been reading media accounts about progress after one year of President Bush’s ‘mission accomplished’ speech. The reports were, of course, pessimistic, and served to expose the falling of the Iraqi structure as a result of the war, including that of shipping and trade.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the main project focus was to bring about a discussion about the Iraqi War through an open invitation for free shipping.

However, for *Return* (2006), the artist expanded on the idea of shipping and trade by focusing on Iraqi goods and the impact of the political conflicts for the Iraqi diaspora. The interest in the import of Iraqi products began after visiting Sahadi’s grocery, on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, a store frequented by Rakowitz’s grandparents when they first arrived in New York.<sup>25</sup> While purchasing a can of date syrup from Iraq, labeled “Product of Lebanon,” due to prohibited US customs and security sanctions, he

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<sup>23</sup> Creative Time through the “Who Cares” initiative invited 37 artists, curators and scholars to come together over 3 intimate dinners to discuss the viability of counter-cultural practice within the visual arts, which resulted in 4 public art projects, including Coco Fusco, Michael Rakowitz, Mel Chin and Jens Haaning, and the publication of a book. Anne Pasternak, Kiki Smith and Amy Sillman, *Who Cares* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2006), 9-11.

“The conversations focused on the ways in which art functions as public practice—from the globalization of creative economies and the dominance of restrictive notions of beauty, to the war culture we live in today.” Creative Time, “Who Cares Publication,” accessed July 3, 2017, <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/publication.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ben Parry, ed., *Cultural Hijack: Rethinking Intervention* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 86.

<sup>25</sup> Located in Brooklyn since 1948, Sahadi’s is a gourmet store specialized in Middle Eastern products. Charlie Sahadi, who helped Rakowitz with the import of dates, is the owner. Sahadi’s continues to be frequently visited by Rakowitz and his family members. Michael Rakowitz, *Store Log*, Creative Time (New York: Creative Time, 2006), Introduction, 1, 32 and 42, accessed January, 28, 2017, [http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects\\_rakowitz\\_blog.html](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz_blog.html)

decided to further explore Iraqi exports after the UN agreements.<sup>26</sup> The date syrup led the artist to dates, which were not just legendary in Iraq but also a fruit deeply rooted in his family culinary habits. Hence, Rakowitz proposed to “Who Cares” the opening of a storefront in Brooklyn, providing the same services as in *Return* (2004) this time emphasizing the import and sale of Iraqi dates and other Iraqi products.

For *Return* (2006), Rakowitz reopened Davisons & Co., the export and import business his family operated in Baghdad and later on in New York. Rakowitz’s family was exiled from Iraq in 1946. Like many Iraqi Jews, they were forced to leave the place where their ancestors lived for hundreds of years.<sup>27</sup> The artist’s family relocated to New York, where his grandfather opened an import and export company, Davisons & Co., which closed in 1963. Rakowitz’s *Return* storefront was located in Brooklyn at 529 Atlantic Avenue from October 1st to December 10th, 2006, in the core of New York City’s Arab community.<sup>28</sup> This art project intermingled the artist’s family diaspora experience while touching on the fragile political relationship between the US and Iraq. The artist’s reopening of his grandfather family business and the focus on the narrative around the import of Iraqi dates and other Iraqi goods, created a forum where different members outside and inside the Iraqi community could meet, talk and share stories.

The *Return* storefront displayed “Davisons & Co.” in black and white; an image of Rakowitz was next to an image of his grandfather, while white vinyl decal letters

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<sup>26</sup> Sanctions were first imposed on Baghdad after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990; though some relating to conventional trade and investment have been lifted since 2003. United Nations, “Security Council Lifts Sanctions on Iraq, Approves UN Role, Calls for Appointment of Secretary-General’s Special Representative,” Press Release United Nations, May 22, 2003, accessed July 17, 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7765.doc.htm>

<sup>27</sup> In the 1940s, one third of the population in Iraq was Jewish; in the WWII there was the anti-British *coup d’état* in Iraq (1941), a rise of pro-German government and anti-Semitism that led to the eruption of the *Farhud* in Baghdad in which approximately 150 Jews were murder, 600 wounded, 1,500 stores and homes robbed and damaged. These events escalated the persecution of Jewish people in Iraq, and by 1951 the majority of the Iraqi Jewish community, approximately 124,000 Jews out of 135,000, moved outside of Iraq escaping from hostility. Further reading Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 13-18.

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Benson and Philip M. Kayal, eds., *A Community of Many Worlds: Arabs Americans in New York City* (Museum of the City of New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 11, 12.

announced in both English and Arabic “We Sell Iraqi Dates” and “Free Shipping to Iraq,” (fig.1.1). Inside the store, on a table, a variety of dates were displayed and available for purchase, from Barhi, Khadrawy, Halawi to Zahdi dates, all Iraqi native dates seed grown in California (fig.1.2 and 1.3). Behind the dates table, on the wall, a timeline exposed the ancient and modern history of Iraqi dates.<sup>29</sup> Opposite the timeline, three different Iraqi flags were on display (fig.1.4). The flags had two functions: first, to illustrate the multiple changes the Iraqi flag underwent in the 20th century following the shifts in political power. Second, it featured the years during which Rakowitz’s grandfather operated the original Davisons & Co. (from the 1920s until 1963).<sup>30</sup> In the store, metal racks and wood countertops displayed various date products packaged over the years outside Iraq but made with Iraqi dates, including a selection of date syrups and *maamoul* cookies (fig. 1.5).<sup>31</sup> *Maamoul* is the Arab name for the Jewish *Menena*, a famous pastry stuffed with date paste, usually eaten after Ramadan and Lent. Close to them was a desk where Rakowitz placed orders from customers interested in acquiring the renowned date import products from Iraq, the first products labeled “product of Iraq” for sale in the US for approximately twenty-five years (fig.1.6).<sup>32</sup> These pre-orders were placed on a list. Customers received status updates about the import through a store blog created by the artist and via email.

The primary purpose of Rakowitz’s *Return* was to bring two hundred boxes (approximately one ton) of Iraqi dates into the country, along with providing free shipping services for the Iraqi diaspora, as well as families who had military personnel stationed in Iraq, “thereby creating a space where human concerns on both sides of the conflict could

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<sup>29</sup> For more information regarding Rakowitz’s history of dates see appendix.

<sup>30</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Eleey, “An Interview with Michael Rakowitz,” *Uovo Magazine* 14 (September 2007): 281, accessed July 10, 2017, [http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/press/uovo\\_rakowitz\\_eleey.pdf](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/press/uovo_rakowitz_eleey.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 2.

meet.”<sup>33</sup> Rakowitz stated that the project “attempts the importation of Iraqi dates and other products, offering them at prices that are clearly the result of prohibitive import charges and restrictions that remain years after the Gulf War embargo was lifted in 2003.”<sup>34</sup> The dates waited for days in the Jordanian border and then were sent back to Baghdad. After addressing several security demands by the Jordanian border control, the fruit was denied entry. On October 20th, the dates passed through Syria and finally arrived at the Damascus airport where they encountered more blockades through demands of extra fees and paperwork. On November 1st, they finally released the fruit, but the rough conditions and the passage of time created crystallization. After three months of import paperwork, business, harvesting, and travel, the dates turned bad while trying to leave Iraq.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the import and export attempt of Iraqi dates and other commodities assisted Rakowitz and the Iraqi diaspora as a memory catalyst of their cultural identity. Dates were a metaphor of the in-between complex identity encountered by the Iraqi diaspora due to relocation and subsequent adaptation.

Rakowitz’s *Return* aimed to raise public awareness of commerce, art, politics, and Iraq.<sup>36</sup> However, through nostalgia for the flavors of dates and food products from Iraq, involuntarily Rakowitz’s *Return* echoed Stuart Hall’s ideas regarding the difficulties of continuity and rupture in diaspora cultural identity. *Return* explored the pivotal role of food in establishing community bonding, while at the same time, reflecting on the constant transformation of diasporic identities. Through the import attempts of Iraqi dates and other date products, *Return* was able to evoke memories, and a desire to share and reconnect with

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<sup>33</sup> “Michael Rakowitz,” Who Cares Projects, Creative Time, accessed July 3, 2017, [http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects\\_rakowitz.html](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz.html)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lagorio, “How to Get a Date- From Iraq,” *CBS News*, December 5, 2006, accessed July 15, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-to-get-a-date-from-iraq/2/>

<sup>36</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 1.

other diaspora members; as reflected in the multiple interactions between the artist the customers and collaborators, especially Renée Shamooun Salih, Leila Makhdissi, Bakir Altai, and Ali, as well as members of the *Arab Arab American News* and Charlie Sahadi from Sahadi's grocery store.<sup>37</sup> The project explored the influence of a common Iraqi ingredient and its power in the formation and articulation of identity.

Rakowitz's inclusion of dates is central to understanding Hall's observations on cultural identity and diaspora. It acts as a social mechanism to connect, mediate, and integrate other tastes into culinary traditions and cultural identity. Hall's publications about cultural identity and diaspora focus on the experience of dislocation, displacement, and hybridity as consequences of migrating from one place to another.<sup>38</sup> He introduces the idea that diasporic cultural identity is composed not only of a single identity but also another; that is, one that is a collective shared culture based on similarities, as well as the continuous process of identification, adaptation, and negotiation to the new culture that a diasporic community inhabits.<sup>39</sup> This concept is reflected in Rakowitz's *Return* project, which, through the inclusion of food, explores an individual and collective narrative of his diaspora experience.

In order to understand Hall's ideas on the continuity and rupture of diasporic cultural identity behind Rakowitz's work, it is crucial to understand the symbolic cultural meaning of dates for the Iraqi community and Iraqi Jews. Iraq was once a leading producer of dates, yielding over 600 different varieties.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s, Iraq was the principal exporter of dates in the world, becoming their second-largest commercial product after

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<sup>37</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 21-32.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-24.

<sup>40</sup> Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," 280.

oil.<sup>41</sup> The existence of dates in Iraq dates back 50,000 years, making them one of the world's oldest cultivated fruit trees.<sup>42</sup> In Mesopotamia, the date palm was one of the most ancient symbolic forms of the concept "Tree of Life." The cultural significance of this fruit is found in Neo-Assyrian reliefs, as well as in the documented travels of Xenophon (c.430 BC - 354 BC).<sup>43</sup> Likewise, date palms and dates are equally praised and cherished by Iraqis, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians.<sup>44</sup> The date palm is mentioned multiple times in the Holy Quran and esteemed as well in Christianity and Judaism, associated with their numerous religious ceremonies such as Passover and Palm Sunday.<sup>45</sup> Aside from the fruit relevance linked to religious rituals, dates are relished for their unique flavor as well as for the great variety of products derived from them, including date syrup, date juice, date jam, date oil (seeds) and date paste. *Silan* (date syrup) was one of the many date products produced and consumed by the Iraqi-Jewish community.<sup>46</sup> As the artist recalled, "My grandfather always used to make the date syrup –it was an important thing to have on the table during Passover. Instead of Ashkenazi haroset –the apple, walnut, wine and honey mixture that you dip the matzoh in– Iraqi Jews used date syrup."<sup>47</sup> Thus, dates have an economic, historical, and religious role in the Iraqi diaspora, and also are a profound cultural symbol, associated with their habits, traditions, and identity.

Rakowitz's emphasis on the importation and sale of Iraqi dates mirrored Hall's remarks regarding one's true self-cultural identity in the diaspora where there is a necessary

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<sup>41</sup> Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," 280.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Rakowitz, *A History of Dates* (New York: Davison & Co.) 1-3, accessed July 4, 2017, [http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/\\_images/history\\_of\\_dates.pdf](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/_images/history_of_dates.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Nawal Nasrallah, *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and History of the Iraqi Cuisine* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, Ltd.), 402-403.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad Siddiq, Aleid M. Salah and Kader Adel, *Dates: Postharvest Science, Processing Technology and Health Benefits* (Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2014), 1-3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," 277.

<sup>47</sup> Liza Johnson, "Enemy Kitchen and Interview with Michael Rakowitz," *Gastronomica* Vol. 7 No 3 (Summer 2007): 13.



continuation of shared cultural codes. *Return* was aside from a socio-cultural exploration of the difficulties encountered in the export and import of Iraqi products due to political relationships between Iraq and the US, also an exploration of the personal vicissitudes that the artist's family encountered in the continuation of food habits, cultural traditions, and articulation of their Iraqi cultural identity. Rakowitz explained the inclusion and importance of dates for the *Return* project:

The date syrup was something I became interested in because it is an incredibly symbolic food in Iraq and I grew up around it. Then there was also the family photo album; we had such an incomplete archive of the family's history in Baghdad because they had to leave under duress. In a lot of ways, the project does do these things where it reconnects those relationships; the reason my grandfather came to be an importer and exporter when he was exiled from Iraq was because he was heartbroken at not being able to be Iraqi anymore, so he opened the company to stay in contact with his Iraqi partners.<sup>48</sup>

Dates, in this case, function as the cultural code and a link that activated a network between Iraqi diaspora members and their "homeland." In addition to Hall's ideas regarding diasporic cultural identity, art historian Steven Nelson underlines how, nowadays, thanks to different factors and mediums, diasporic communities are not fixed in a neighborhood. Thus, the diasporic cultural identity is "continuously constructed though flows, that keep them in close contact with one another but also with their "homes."<sup>49</sup> This is implemented in Rakowitz's *Return* where the artist incorporates the media to fulfill the prime purpose of the project (the import of Iraqi dates), as he stated,

[T]his really began in late July 2006, when I began corresponding with about a dozen companies in Iraq that responded to my call for a supplier of Iraqi dates willing to ship to the US. When I heard back from Bassam [Al Farez Co.], he told me that it was clear for him why I wanted to base my project in Iraqi dates: because it is said that every Iraqi has a date in his genes. He explained that is customary for

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<sup>48</sup> Anthony Downey, "From Invisible Enemy to Enemy Kitchen: Michael Rakowitz in conversation with Anthony Downey," *Ibraaz*, March 29, 2013, accessed July 4, 2017, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/62>

<sup>49</sup> Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views," 296.

the parents of a newborn child to place a date in the infant's mouth immediately after birth so that its first taste of life will be sweet.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, through ads in the *Arab American News*, a newspaper in Dearborn, Michigan, Rakowitz reached the largest population of Iraqis in the US, most of whom are Chaldeans, a Christian minority that experienced an exodus from Iraq in the 1960s,<sup>51</sup> thus allowing the artist to communicate, engage, and connect with different members of the Iraqi diaspora outside of Brooklyn. The ads announced the storefront, the future arrival of Iraqi dates, and also the free shipping service to Iraq (fig. 1.7). Rakowitz's inclusion of telephone and Internet (calls, video calls, emails, and a store blog) enabled the continuation of having close contact with the Iraqi diaspora, as well as their "homeland." Using dates as a trigger, Rakowitz activated Hall's ideas regarding the diaspora's "collective identity" where he is reinforcing a sense of belonging for the Iraqi diaspora through the connection of the common interest in a staple fruit. Media influence is vital to engage the Iraqi diaspora and to create an emblematic relationship to their cultural identity.

For Rakowitz and the Iraqi diaspora, the meaning is located around the transaction of dates as well as on the symbolic cultural value of Iraqi culinary habits. In this case, Iraqi dishes provide a frame of reference and significance for the Iraqi diasporic cultural identity. For the artist, Iraqi cuisine is linked to his mother's recipes and childhood memories. As he explained to Leila Makhdisi, a customer who entered the store asking for *Mann Wa Salwa*, an Iraqi taffy sweet commonly dished out as dessert or accompanied with coffee, whose name is attributed to the *manna* mentioned in the Quran and the Bible as food that God sent

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<sup>50</sup> Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," 287.

<sup>51</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 2.

to the people of Israel to survive their traveling in the desert.<sup>52</sup> Rakowitz at first did not recognize the name but after remembering he exclaimed,

When I was growing up, at all the family functions that happened on my mother's side of the family, there was always this big loaf of white, flour-covered candy that you would pull off and eat, one pinch at a time. I loved it. It was made with rosewater and pistachios, too, and it was the thing I most looked forward to when desserts were served. My mother told me that the candy was based on the manna that fell from the heavens in the story of Exodus.<sup>53</sup>

Products of Iraq prompted concealed stories of the Iraqi traditions and a mechanism to rediscover, exchange and continue sharing cultural experiences. *Return* enabled an interaction between diverse members of the Iraqi diaspora, such as Makhdiyyi and the artist.

In Rakowitz's project, the inclusion of dates acted as a reminder that the Iraqi cultural identity, as Hall observed, "is not a fixed origin to which they can make a final and absolute return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either... It has its histories--- and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects."<sup>54</sup> The site-specific project became a place to reflect and trade stories, memoirs, and experiences (fig. 1.8 and fig 1.9). Dates sparked conversations between Iraqi diaspora members and the artist. This is the case of Renée Shamoan Salih, an Iraqi Jew who flew from Baghdad in 1960, and Bakir Altai, a surgeon from New Jersey who left Iraq in 1946.<sup>55</sup> Salih shared with Rakowitz a date syrup recipe called *Dibis W'rashi*, a traditional Iraqi dip made with date syrup and tahini (sesame paste).<sup>56</sup> The preparation is usually spread on bread and eaten for breakfast or as a snack.<sup>57</sup> Altai gave Rakowitz a personal method for obtaining the best date syrup. It consisted of "piling fresh dates in the syrupy and wet rhutab, stage on top of a porous cloth or screen

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<sup>52</sup> Nasrallah, *Delights from the Garden of Eden*, 465.

<sup>53</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 24.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, "Enemy Kitchen: an interview with Michael Rakowitz," 11 and Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Kay Karim, "Date Syrup or Date Molasses, Dibi Iraqi Silan," *The Iraqi Family Cookbook Blog*, November 27, 2012, accessed October 20, 2017, <http://iraqifamilycookbook.blogspot.com/2012/11/date-syrup-or-date-molasses-dibis.html>

suspended like the plank of wood on a table... Underneath the cloth or screen would sit a large bucket or vessel to catch the syrup that “bleeds” out of the skin of the fruit, caused by the weight of the dates piled on top of each other.”<sup>58</sup> These stories elicit memories that have a symbolic effect on the Iraqi cultural identity. *Return* exemplifies how Iraqi cultural identity is constructed based on memory and narrative, creating continuity with the past, while also sharing the experience of discontinuity.

In *Return*, Rakowitz’s recollections from family photos, food customs, and flavors enabled him to stress two concerns (fig. 1.10): On the one hand, his personal family experience living in exile, on the other, how his Iraqi diaspora identity is shaped by both continuity and rupture. In a way parallel to the artist’s grandfather’s export and import store, Rakowitz’s *Return* was a space in which food performed a central narrative to maintain a connection with his cultural heritage. The conversation around Iraqi dates prompted nostalgia about the idea of home and cherished cultural traditions and identity. As Rakowitz explained in one of his multiple interactions with customers, a man named Ali called the store to place a pre-order after corroborating the news about the awaiting arrival of the Iraqi dates. Ali expressed great excitement because he “left Iraq over twenty-five years ago, and has not had one since and misses the taste.”<sup>59</sup> This is also palpable in another store visit from frequent customer Salih, who asked Rakowitz that once the Iraqi dates arrived, to “just hold on to a handful for me, just a little something for *thikra*.”<sup>60</sup> *Thikra*, Shamoon explained, means memory, nostalgia, a taste of home. Thus, dates are a central part of the cultural imagination of the Iraqi diaspora. The incorporation of dates products in Rakowitz’s artwork becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to

<sup>58</sup> *Rhutab* means wet. The name is used in most of the Arab date-growing world to refer to dates in their soft stage. V.H. Dowson and A. Aten, *Dates Handling, Processing and Packaging* (Italy: FAO, 1962), 363, and Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

inquire into the richly layered texture of how identity is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to assist and resist notions of home and belonging. This is undoubtedly true in Rakowitz's *Return*, where dates assisted in the desire to collectively embrace what is left of the past and native place of origin from which one is spatially and temporally displaced.

Furthermore, as Hall recognized about cultural identity, "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."<sup>61</sup> In the context of the Iraqi War throughout an art project, Rakowitz's *Return* evidences how this continuous play affects and reflects on the Iraqi diaspora's cultural identity. As he stated,

The narrative of the dates' ill-fated journey to the US mirrored the plight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees as they waited in a line of cars that was four days long at the Jordanian border, only to be sent back and forth to Baghdad, and then finally Damascus where the Baghdad-based company determined the dates had spoiled. While ten new boxes of dates were airlifted out of Baghdad and into New York City on December 2006, the overall transaction served as a surrogate for a more significant tragedy.<sup>62</sup>

It is through the extreme difficulty of the transaction of a staple product from Iraq that Rakowitz reflects on the future of the Iraqi refugees, and what is more, on the effects these actions will have on their cultural identity. The artist and the Iraqi diaspora who were interested in the Iraqi dates are unified or identified by the effects of the continuous play of power in Iraq. Therefore, it is through the shared experience of separation from the homeland and longing for the taste of Iraqi dates that *Return* creates a space enabling the reproduction for the representation of the Iraqi diaspora in an attempt to reconstruct an Iraqi identity, thus, participating in the constant transformation of the Iraqi cultural identity.

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<sup>61</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 23.

<sup>62</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 1.

As Hall remarked about the ways the diaspora is positioned by dominant regimes, “[t]hey had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘others.’”<sup>63</sup> This is manifested in the treatment of the dates, which extends to the perception within the Iraqi diaspora. Thus, Iraqi cultural identity is not something necessarily chosen, but placed by those in power, illustrating another example of the complex permanent construction of Iraqi cultural identity. Hall’s ideas are mirrored in the way in which the articulation of identity takes place inside the store through Rakowitz’s date display and exchange, and it is also further extended to actions outside the art frame, from the interactions of the dates’ route, such as between the Customs Agents in the US and Rakowitz’s broker. The small shipments of ten boxes, sent via express DHL, were on hold for twenty-one days and released after the inspection from the FDA (US Food and Drug Administration), USDA (US Department of Agriculture) and customs. While on hold, Rakowitz’s broker explained that

[O]ne of the Customs Agents gets the paperwork from [me], and comes back, saying, ‘I don’t think this is allowed. It says, Product of Iraq.’ [I] tell him to look at the papers. ‘You see the FDA numbers there, for both the US company and the Iraqi company? How the hell do you think the USFDA would allow for registration of a Food Facility located in another country if it wasn’t legal? We’re no longer at war with Iraq. We’re supposed to be rebuilding Iraq. Go back and do your job.’<sup>64</sup>

The forced external participation between individuals put into practice and made visible the difficulties encountered by Iraqi diaspora. Hence, Rakowitz’s work continued illuminating the mediation of a product that seemed a cultural impossibility while highlighting how Iraqi cultural identity and Iraqi experience were situated and formed by the “dominant regimes of representation.”<sup>65</sup> Such is the case of the erroneous beliefs that existed for the customs

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>65</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 24.

officials, where even though the transaction was legally made, they treated the Iraqi product as prohibited or illegal.

Rakowitz's *Return*, however, attempts to dismantle the representation imposed by those in power through the promotion of trading between Iraq and the US, thus creating another example of how cultural identity is mediated and intertwined by Iraqi diaspora. By initiating the first trade of Iraqi products in twenty-five years between Iraq and the US, the artist continued Iraqi cultural identity negotiation in different ways.<sup>66</sup> This is true, first, through the external, global, and virtual interaction between the dates (cultural symbol of the Iraqi identity) and the people involved with the project, including the multiple customs inspectors. As explained by the artist about the trade experience for *Return*, "Once those things [import and export between Iraq and the US] become familiar, it becomes less strange the next time it happens...It will make it closer to possible, closer to normal."<sup>67</sup> Second, prompting other importers to continue with new trade relationship from their homeland, such as the case of Lydia Khalil, a store visitor who, inspired by the project, explored the possibility of importing honey from Kurdistan.<sup>68</sup> Thus, by habituating the trade, Rakowitz attempts to break down ascribed cultural representations, and at the same time, gives more control over the culinary consumption of the Iraqi diaspora. Rakowitz's project enhances power in the Iraqi diaspora on how they and others think about their identity.

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<sup>66</sup> Sanctions were first imposed on Baghdad after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990; though some relating to conventional trade and investment have been lifted since 2003. Thus, Rakowitz's dates became the first "product of Iraq" to be sold in the United States in 25 years. United Nations, "Security Council Lifts Sanctions on Iraq, Approves UN Role, Calls for Appointment of Secretary-General's Special Representative," Press Release United Nations, May 22, 2003, accessed July 17, 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7765.doc.htm>

<sup>67</sup> Lagorio, "How to Get a Date- From Iraq," accessed July 15, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-to-get-a-date-from-iraq/2/>

<sup>68</sup> Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 4.

In Rakowitz's *Return*, hybridity was addressed via the nature of the public project, which took place in the intersection between art and a marketplace. Additionally, it focused on the process of assimilation of non-Iraqi dates by the Iraqi diaspora. This is emphasized by Rakowitz while remembering his culinary customs, "My mother told us that my grandfather used to make the *silan* himself...He left behind a bit that was refrigerated after he died and once this was finished, my mother would buy whatever was available, usually several brands from Israel."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the adaptation of ingredients continued through the purchase of dates from California, grown from Iraqi seeds, as a surrogate for the Iraqi ones.<sup>70</sup> The resulting migration of the artist's family to the US had a substantial impact on their food practices. Therefore, food restrictions, which are the consequence of political conflicts, force the Iraqi diaspora to appropriate and assimilate non-Iraqi dates into their diet.

Continuing with Hall's observations on cultural identity and hybridity, it is significant to notice that hybridity is not simply the blending of cultures and cultural practices, but it involves a negotiation of power. In Rakowitz's *Return*, this phenomenon mainly signified the bilateral commercial exchange of cultural production and consumption from both countries (US and Iraq). Rakowitz evoked this negotiation through the overall concept of the import and export store art project. The artist underlined the negotiation of the diaspora power to maintain a relationship with their culture and tradition while adding outside influences. Rakowitz's *Return* extended the literal concept of hybridity (dates grown in California from Iraqi seeds) to an abstract sense of hybridity—a state of mind

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<sup>69</sup> Eleey, "An Interview with Michael Rakowitz," 277.

<sup>70</sup> "In 1911, Bernard G. Johnson, the "father of the California date industry," establishes a USDA experimental station near Mecca, California, and plants date seeds acquired from Iraq. The successful endeavor marks the birth of the industry: today over a quarter million trees in the Coachella Valley primarily produce four varieties native to Iraq, the Barhi, Halawi, Khedrawi, and Zahidi." Michael Rakowitz, *A History of Dates* (New York: Davison & Co.) 1-3, accessed July 4, 2017, [http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/\\_images/history\\_of\\_dates.pdf](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/_images/history_of_dates.pdf)



opened to multiple cultural positions. It is through the simple gesture of food, a vital substance for human existence, where the blending of global and local forces takes place, that the Iraqi diaspora is reimagining and constructing their cultural identity.

In conclusion, Rakowitz's *Return* reflected the complex construction of the Iraqi diaspora's cultural identity within the context of political conflicts. Rakowitz's public art project offered a conceptual and practical example of Hall's focal ideas around displacement and diasporic cultural identity. As Rakowitz reflected at the end of the project, "Titled *Return*, the original proposal asked what return—financial or existential—could be yielded. Return proved impossible. For my grandfather. For my mother...and, for millions of others."<sup>71</sup> Hence, as the name of the project indicates, Rakowitz explored the impossibility of returning to the place of origin. However, it is this impossibility that triggers a shared collective and individual memory of Iraqi cultural identity. The embodiment of dates in *Return* offered a way to articulate an imaginary coherence of the experience of dispersal and fragmentation in Iraqi diaspora. The fruitlessness of returning "home," to the place that triggered the memories of the store visitors, including the taste of sweet dates, is impossible to reproduce. Memories can capture a moment that is incapable of repeating because it is gone forever. However, the longing for dates illustrates this experience of dislocation and non-belonging, the stories behind years of journeys, as well as the need to connect with the different members of the Iraqi diaspora.

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Rakowitz, *Store Log*, 4.

## Chapter 2.

### Theaster Gates: *Soul Pavilion and Soul Food Starter Kit.*

According to art historian Steven Nelson, the term “diaspora” derived from the ancient Greek word “diaspeirein,” (to scatter) and was first used in the Septuagint, a third-century BC translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to describe Jews living in exile. In the contemporary context of globalization, Nelson, while reflecting on Stuart Hall’s diaspora studies, further explained that the frequent use of the word “diaspora” has come to imply a more general sense of displacement, scattering, and transplantation from a place of origin, and more importantly, a center for hybridity.<sup>72</sup> Focusing on Nelson’s view about how diaspora has operated in contemporary art practices, this chapter will underscore two unique aspects regarding the African American diaspora, not just as a condition of hybridity but as a catalyst of multilayered artistic practice that addresses reinvention, recreation, and representation through artist Theaster Gates’ performative and ritual-like acts, cuisine and ceramic objects involving soul food.<sup>73</sup> Nelson’s first viewpoint on hybridity focuses on the “diaspora visual practices understood and communicated in relation to the survival of cultural forms in the diaspora, despite the Middle Passage and European Imperialism.”<sup>74</sup> The second perspective highlights how artists’ diasporic experiences contributed modes of reception to explore or put into practice their multiple worldviews made up of experience and memory. In this case, modes of receptions refer to the different ways language and individual cultural context are received, assimilated, transformed, and interpreted through creative means.

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<sup>72</sup> Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views,” 296.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 308. Examples used by Nelson include, but are not limited to, Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santeria, Brazilian Candomble, and Jewishness in modern American, European and Jewish Israeli art.

Food practices in both life and contemporary art have been used as a vehicle to explore diasporic identity. Food often becomes one of the most viable ways to affirm and reinvent one's identity and establish a sense of link and acceptance to their host nation, while maintaining a connection to their same ethnic group and past. The migration of people is central to eating behaviors, habits, and an identity marker in diasporic populations.<sup>75</sup> This is further analyzed and manifested in Theaster Gates' *Soul Pavilion* and *Soul Food Starter Kit*, both from 2012, where he applied the cultural significance of soul food as an incentive to reframe his cultural identity.

Gates' performative dinners and artworks presented an opportunity to open a dialogue about the history of the African American diaspora and the contemporary issues affecting the African American community of the South Side of Chicago to a broader public. Departing from Nelson's perspective about the influence of the diaspora in art, this chapter will deconstruct Gates' artistic practice around soul food in *Soul Pavilion* and *Soul Food Starter Kit* from two viewpoints: First, through the artist's wide ranging worldview produced by the fusion of culinary-related crafts; second, through the survival of cultural forms around food in the African American diaspora employing rituals and oral traditions as a way to reflect on how Gates' artworks provided a system to reinvent, re-create, and re-present his cultural identity. Furthermore, it will analyze how the use of food in art created a space to meditate about the construction of identity, the exchange, and connection of shared identity between African American members and multiple cultures, as well as a gathering site for social change.

Theaster Gates is a multidisciplinary American artist and urban activist, born in Chicago, Illinois in 1973. Gates' family migrated to Chicago in 1955 from Yazoo City,

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<sup>75</sup> Mintz, "Food and Diaspora," 510.

Mississippi, as part of the mass exodus known as the Great Migration.<sup>76</sup> His educational background in urban planning, religious studies, and fine arts has served as an incentive to explore particular forms in art, including ceramics, installation, performance, sculpture, and urban interventions.<sup>77</sup> Central to the artist's practice is the use of reclaimed materials with complex political histories involving the civil rights struggles of African Americans.<sup>78</sup> During *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art (Feast)* an exhibition presented by the Smart Museum of Art, in Chicago, IL, in 2012, Gates created *Soul Pavilion* and *Soul Food Starter Kit*. The principal premise of *Feast* was to show aesthetic practices centered on eating and drinking as a means to create encounters of hospitality.<sup>79</sup> However, in doing so, Gates evoked thoughts on the African American heritage using food as a central device while allowing participants to step outside of the museum and experience art in a different location. Gates' artwork around dinners presented an opportunity to start a dialogue with a broader public about the history of the African American diaspora and contemporary issues concerning the African American community in the South Side of Chicago.

Gates' *Soul Pavilion* consisted of five intimate performative dinners held at the Archive House of Dorchester Projects, in collaboration with soul food expert Erika Dudley

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<sup>76</sup> Between the 1920s and 1970s, approximately six million African Americans moved from the rural south to cities such as Chicago, St Louis and New York. This mass migration led to one of the most critical demographic transformations in the history of the United States of America. "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, Panel 1," *Museum of Modern Art*, accessed May 22, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/panel/1>

<sup>77</sup> Regent Projects, Theaster Gates biography, *Regent Projects*, accessed May 22, 2107, <http://www.regenprojects.com/artists/theaster-gates/biography>

<sup>78</sup> See *Civil Tapestry 4* from 2011, *In Event of a Race Riot* from 2011 and *Flag Series* from 2012 artwork made of decommissioned fire hoses. Fire hoses evoke images of Civil Rights participants being restrained with water from fire hoses. See Becker and Borchardt-Hume, *Theaster Gates*, 57-60.

<sup>79</sup> *Feast* included art, documentary materials, and new public projects by Marina Abramović and Ulay, Sonja Alhäuser, Mary Ellen Carroll, Fallen Fruit, Theaster Gates, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, InCUBATE, The Italian Futurists, Mella Jaarsma, Alison Knowles, Suzanne Lacy, Lee Mingwei, Laura Letinsky, Tom Marioni, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mildred's Lane, Julio César Morales and Max La Rivière-Hedrick, motiroti, National Bitter Melon Council, Ana Prvacki, Sudsiri Pui-Ock, Michael Rakowitz, Ayman Ramadan, Red76, David Robbins, Allen Ruppersberg, Bonnie Sherk, Barbara T. Smith, Daniel Spoerri, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. See Stephanie Smith, *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, Chicago, IL: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2013. Published in conjunction with the exhibition show at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, IL.

and chefs Erick Williams and Michael Kornick.<sup>80</sup> The meals were plated on specially commissioned ceramics created by Gates in alliance with Japanese master potter Kouichi Ohara. Dinners revolved around discussions of a variety of themes: “The Geography of Soul,” “The Art of Soul,” “The History of Soul,” “The Politics of Soul,” and “The Community of Soul.” The *Soul Food Pavilion* dinners were limited to twenty guests, participants were chosen partly by lottery, partly by the artist and museum’s organization. Among the guest were artists, musicians, poets, pioneer activists, community members from the South Side of Chicago, donors, as well as members of the public whose names were drawn from a pool.<sup>81</sup> *Soul Pavilion* was connected back to the museum space through *Soul Food Starter Kit*, a dish pantry and sculpture made from reclaimed wood, and ceramics like those used for the *Soul Pavilion* dinners. Close to the sculpture, the text *Soul Manifesto #2* hung mounted on the wall in graphite on a wooden fragment.<sup>82</sup> The text inscribed by the artist displayed the following statement,

Soul Manifesto #2

Mississippi is my Africa  
She mourns my forgetting  
I have pulled back the  
Tanders and my appetite  
is great.

Where is the plate for my fish  
and bowl for my grits? Where is  
the yam and rice + pea

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<sup>80</sup> Founded by Theaster Gates, Dorchester Projects is part of the Rebuild Foundation, a platform for art, cultural development and neighborhood transformation in the south of Chicago. It is comprised of The Listening House, The Archive House, Black Artist Retreat, Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative, Stony Island Arts Bank, the Ash Project, Bing Art Books, Dorchester Industries and Black Cinema House. “About,” 2017, Rebuild Foundation, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://rebuild-foundation.org/chicago/>

<sup>81</sup> The themes and dates were: The Geography of Soul (February 19), The Art of Soul (March 11, 2012), The History of Soul (April 15, 2012), The Politics of Soul (May 6, 2012), and The Community of Soul (May 20, 2012). “Join the Feast,” Exhibitions Smart Museum. See “Join the Feast,” Exhibitions Smart Museum, accessed March 21, 2017, <http://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/join-the-feast/> and Monica Szweczyk, “Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art,” *Frieze Online*, September 1, 2012, accessed March 22, 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/feast-radical-hospitality-contemporary-art>

<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Feast*, 190, 191.

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It is growing in Gulfport  
sleeping in Yazoo City  
first cup, then bowl  
then plate-

Then rent.<sup>83</sup>

Gates' participation for the *Feast* exhibition resulted not just in a creative encounter of hospitality but it pushed the boundaries of art to touch on hybridity and the dynamism of reformulation within the African American diaspora. Through his off-site project, Gates created a space for food interaction and performance, where he invited visitors to share a meal and to participate in an open conversation about the connection between African American food and their complex personal diasporic history. The menus were changed for each event, yet they maintained in each carte key ingredients distinctive of soul food, such as black-eyed peas, chitlins (pigs' intestines), grits, and greens. The menus had two functional purposes: first, they presented the list of dishes offered at the event, and second, they displayed the performances program that accompanied the meal.

Accompanying the soul food dishes, *Soul Pavilion* was guided by musical performances, in which the Black Monks of Mississippi (BMM) sang in gospel and blues evoking a Black Church atmosphere, while other members of the group recited sermons. BMM is an experimental jazz and blues ensemble created by Gates along with musicians Yaw Agyeman, Mikel Patrick Avery, Michael Drayton, and Khari Lemuel.<sup>84</sup>

According to Nelson, "Diaspora as such not only encompasses movements of people, it also includes their experiences. In this way, to think about diaspora also is to

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>84</sup> Laura Robertson, "The Black Charismatic," *Frieze Online*, April 24, 2017, accessed May 10, 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/black-charismatic>

think about histories of assimilation, acculturation, and hybridity.”<sup>85</sup> Nelson’s observations resonated with the selection of ingredients and dishes but with Gates’s choice for the location of *Soul Pavilion*. For Gates, the site was as important as the works exhibited in the museum, because it was the place where he lived and worked since 2006. Founded by the artist, Archive House is part of Dorchester Projects, a platform of urban and cultural development in the Greater Grand Crossing of the South Side of Chicago (fig. 2.1). Greater Grand Crossing is a low-income neighborhood in the south of Chicago whose early residents in the 1890s were of Irish, English and Scottish descent. By the 1930s, African Americans came to the community in high numbers. During the 1950s, the black population increased from 6 percent to 86 percent. Since the 1980s, the community has remained 99 percent African American.<sup>86</sup> After the 2008 housing crisis, the neighborhood experienced an exodus and fell into disrepair, increasing poverty, dilapidation, and violence. More than 40 percent of Greater Grand Crossing’s residents lost their homes; tenants and owners were evicted or moved elsewhere because they could no longer pay their mortgage.<sup>87</sup> To this effect, Gates began to acquire abandoned properties, transforming them into cultural spaces, as a way to explore creative systems outside the museum space as well as to apply political resistance. The site for *Soul Pavilion* exposed Greater Grand Crossing as an active art and cultural participant and contributor where assimilation, acculturation, and hybridity takes place and is put into practice.

Furthermore, Nelson’s remarks on the African American diaspora were manifested in the ritual-like “Geography of Soul” evening dinner where a seven-course tasting menu functioned as a medium to address their experience, acculturation, and hybridity (fig. 2.2).

<sup>85</sup> Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views,” 297.

<sup>86</sup> Ann Durking Keating, *Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 163, 164.

<sup>87</sup> Carol Becker and Achim Borchardt-Hume, *Theaster Gates* (London; New York: Phaidon, 2015), 48.

The meal offered black-eyed pea fritters and southern red bell pepper puree, fried okra with remoulade, poached Mississippi shrimps with creole mayonnaise, smoked Gulf catfish with pickled banana peppers, wild watercress and yellow mustard seed, collard greens and smoked turkey including turnip tops and bottoms with fatback, hoecakes, pot roast, and for dessert, a red velvet cake (fig. 2.3). Some of these African ingredients, such as okras, an ingredient initially harvested and used in Senegalese cuisine and brought to America during slavery, shaped southern American cooking. The dishes mirrored the culinary and cultural hybridity forced by relocation, in which ingredients, serving styles, culinary presentations, as well as cooking techniques from both continents (America and Africa) merged to create soul food.

Nelson's views regarding the influence of the diaspora's collective memory and experience in contemporary art practices as a means to reconstruct and reinvent the diasporic cultural identity was further explored in Gates' *Soul Pavilion*. The food served in "Geography of Soul," integrated the hard experience under slavery and after slavery in the rural southern United States and the survival of cultural forms despite the relocation of African Americans.<sup>88</sup> This is accurate in the presentation and selection of dishes for the event. During slavery, the diet of African Americans was extremely limited, consisting mainly of cornbread, sweet potatoes, and vegetables, and in certain occasions, parts of the hog that the master's family refused to eat such as intestines, tails, ears, and feet (offal). Pork became central in the discourse of soul food.<sup>89</sup> Gates continued with the narrative of the symbolic connection between pork and slavery, while at the same time, raising its cultural and gastronomical significance. What is more, the assertive inclusion of chitlings in

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<sup>88</sup> According to Douglas Opie, in the seventeenth century, Africans were familiar with native ingredients and techniques, including okra, greens, black-eyed peas, watermelon, millet, frying, baking and making soups, as well as the cultivation and preparation of ingredients from the new world. Douglas Opie, *Hog and Hominy*, 1-4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



every dinner as *hors d'oeuvres* testified how the artist, through a collaboration with chefs and a food historian, embraced their culinary past and transformed what once was seen as leftovers or inferior food to *haute cuisine* (fig. 2.6). Participants interacted with tangible and savory evidence of resistance and reinvention. *Soul Pavilion* acted as a celebration of the continuity of culinary habits from the past, and the adoption of new diet ingredients and food practices as a way to transform and reinvent history.

While touching on hybridity, *Soul Pavilion* continued a positive reinterpretation of soul food within the African American diaspora as a way to embrace and reframe their food habits from negative connotations. As Erika Dudley stated, “Many 21st-century African Americans have rejected soul food. It is not a healthy choice, it represents an unpleasant history, and it is what we used to do. So, how do we keep these traditions alive and show why they are important to black identity?”<sup>90</sup> Gates’ work presented an opportunity to reclaim what once was referred to as unhealthy food through new ways of presentation and preparations. The artist’s gravitation towards art, performance, and food, effectively created an interaction in which soul food and the African American past were honored and reinvented. During dinners, chefs Erick Williams and Michael Kornick shared with *Soul Pavilion’s* attendees’ facts and historical details about the menu as well as cooking techniques that enhanced and boosted the dishes’ flavors.<sup>91</sup> This soul food cuisine was reinterpreted in a healthy practice through interaction, *haute* and *nouvelle* techniques to transform itself in its own distinctive ways.

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<sup>90</sup> Fishman Elly, “Theaster Gates and the art of soul,” *Chicago Reader Online*, March 13, 2012, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/03/13/theaster-gates-and-the-art-of-soul>

<sup>91</sup> “We took this catfish and gently smoked it so it could stay moist. Next coming up a collaboration of mini vegetables and pickled essence that allows this dish to take on a character that is familiar in the real deep, heart of the South,” Chef Erick Williams.

“These are greens that are cooked with smoked turkey and hoecakes. When people were working in the fields, they mixed the cornmeal and they cooked it on the side of the steel of the hoe.” Chef Michael Kornick.

Smart Museum of Art, “Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion,” *Vimeo*, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/37407879>

The artist's revival of cultural customs embedded around soul food during dinner also coincides as a catalyst for the African American diaspora as participants and contributors for cultural production outside established cultural frameworks. This provided the neighborhood's community with tools to become active contributors as well as cultural producers (fig. 2.5). As Nelson reflected on the diaspora's cultural production, there is a "persistence of the necessity of articulating a politics in and against hegemonic structures that invoke racialized and racist discourse as a means to maintain their control over the public sphere and the lives of those living in it."<sup>92</sup> It is through the inclusion of soul food, and the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood participation that Gates decentralized the established cultural structures, in this case, the museum as the leading site and articulator of creative thinking. Therefore, the event sponsored manifold purposes; first, it gave their members a voice and space to share their experiences with outsiders, and, at the same time, built a sense of community and a proud sense of identity. Second, Gates, with the collaboration of food professionals, was able to provide a unique view of the African American diaspora through art. Gates' relocation of soul food into the museum frame empowers and reinforces his African American identity inside and outside the Greater Grand Crossing.

Gates' manufacture of value in the soul food dinnerware followed the need to remind participants about the austere and painful past of African Americans, besides, the possibilities of self-representation as a means to embrace, renovate and to challenge the social issues of today. The created tableware functioned as a vehicle to upgrade and adapt the symbolic cultural significance of African American traditions while continually constructing a new cultural identity. As Gates stated about *Soul Food Pavilion*, "The

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<sup>92</sup> Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views," 297.

history of food in America for African Americans is a really complicated story. Food delineated a kind of inferior relationship to a dark past.”<sup>93</sup> Food as a medium assisted to open an examination of inequality reflected in the history of the ingredients and dishes of soul food due to the forced integration of different edibles and rituals to their dietary habits, as well as African Americans’ ability to improvise, improve and refine what they had in hand.

The artist’s exploration of the diasporic experience and the construction of African American identity did not stop with the reinvention, recreation, and representation of culinary traditions. It continued with the aesthetic and function of the objects used for serving soul food in *Soul Food Starter Kit*, the ceramic crockery and wood cabinet sculpture exhibited in the museum (fig. 2.9). For *Soul Food Starter Kit*, Gates was interested to “[O]bjectify, emblemize the idea of the soul food ritual.”<sup>94</sup> Inspired by his multiple contemporary worldviews around food ritual ceremonies, the artist reflected the concept of the Japanese tea ceremony into soul food; he created a set of ceramic plates that responded to the needs of particular dishes. This is the case of bowls designed to boost and contain the flavor of juicy collard greens (fig. 2.10). Gates’ collaboration with Kouichi Ohara, and his exposure to Japanese culture while a pottery student in Japan, helped the artist to imagine and express more profound value and significance of soul food and the ritual around it. Thus, the artist borrowed and incorporated meaningful ceremonial elements to soul food, endorsing a new way to reproduce and reimagine his African American cultural identity.

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<sup>93</sup> Smart Museum of Art, “Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion,” *Vimeo*, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/37407879>

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

What is more, the artist's participation in *Feast* was limited to a visual aesthetic investigation, likewise it encouraged social interaction and awareness outside of the formal art space. The ritual around food was included as a means to promote collaboration, while at the same time engaging local and external participants in social exchange, thereby expanding the frame of traditional art forms. Gates' ceramics promoted a deep engagement with soul food in an attempt to include others in the complexities of African American cultural identity. The collaboration between Gates and O'hara prompted social participation through an exchange of cultural understanding. As Gates explained about *Soul Pavilion* and *Soul Food Starter Kit*:

[They] aren't afraid to be temporary and aren't afraid to incorporate my complex history with the rest of the world. This project got me really excited to reach out to friends in Japan, China, Korea and parts of Africa, and ask them about the utensils they use for the food of their people. I was really honored that I was able to invite three friends from Japan who are production potters who would answer this question with me: 'What is soul food ware?' We reflected on the tea ceremony and Shintoism, but also on collard greens and the juice they produce.<sup>95</sup>

*Soul Food Starter Kit* represented an example to acknowledge the different visions of what being an African American entails. Gates promoted the understanding that diasporic identity is not static but always in transformation. It is composed of collective experiences and viewpoints.

Implied in *Soul Pavilion*'s "Geography of Soul," the geographical frame of the American South, prompted a starting point to address the historical and symbolic importance of soul food. Though sermons and musical performances interlaced with the dinner, the BMM evoked the complicated past of African Americans, while celebrating their cultural identity. Throughout the feast, the BMM preached sermons about the impact of the South on black culture and diet, evoking themes related to Christianity, Jim Crow

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<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Feast*, 193, 194.

laws, racial segregation, and discrimination (fig. 2.4). According to historian Frederick Douglas Opie, the term “soul” for African Americans has cultural, ideological and political meanings: “soul is the style of rural folk culture, embodying the essence of suffering, endurance, and survival.”<sup>96</sup> Even though the ideology of soul began in the 1920s, mainly in the rural southeast and then in the urban northeast, African Americans commonly used “soul” in the 1960s in relation to the civil right movements. Since then, “soul” —music and food— has been associated with African American culture and identity. The embrace of soul food was the result of this “assimilation, acculturation and hybridity,” adopted by people of different heritages and regions of Africa to establish a collective African American identity. Gates’ performance and dinner for *Soul Pavilion* broadened the ideology of soul and expanded the boundaries beyond art through participation, while sharing a meal. He transformed ceramic artworks, ingredients, performances through music and sermons into experiences, as well as a space where interactions about history and restoration between commensals were enabled.

Furthermore, in addition to the ingredients’ symbolism in soul food, Gates also explored the significance of the ceremonial ritual of gathering and sharing a soul food meal. Rituals around food are rooted in the history of African Americans. Soul food for the African American cultural identity is closely linked to religion and special ceremonies. According to Robert Graetz, a white Lutheran minister working in Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1950s, interracial Bible Camp meals “provided a vital means of fellowship, in violation of state customs and laws.”<sup>97</sup> Food was an essential component in religious gatherings where meals provided a chance for interracial relationships to come about, as

<sup>96</sup> Douglas Opie, *Hog and Hominy*, 121-138.

<sup>97</sup> See Anthony J. Stanonis, “Feast of the Mau Mau: Christianity Conjures and the Origins of Soul Food,” in *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama*, ed. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, Psyche Williams-Forsen and Rebecca Sharpless, (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 96.

well as an emphasis on family unity and a sense of community. The ritualistic experience of music and food were part of the artist's recollection of the interaction between his family and community. He stated about the inspiration of the *Soul Pavilion's* dinners, "we [BMM] are borrowing moments from like how Sunday dinner worked at my house, where like, whoever was visiting if it were a good singer my mom might say hey you should get up there and sing, or TG recite a poem."<sup>98</sup> Thus, Gates' rituals were related to personal memories of family gatherings, while simultaneously, the inclusion of elements of Christianity (sermons and gospel) reinforced the artwork's relationship to participants and their cultural identity.

Stuart Hall, while reflecting on the significance of the past for the diaspora and their cultural identity, explained that "it no longer addresses us as simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already 'after a break.' It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth."<sup>99</sup> Gates' *Soul Pavilion* embodied this complex construction of the past through the diverging impact of oral tradition around soul food in the African American diaspora. On the one hand, there is a relationship between oral tradition and the apprenticeship of soul food cooking. On the other, oral traditions are rooted in ritual ceremonies around soul food dinners employing cooking and eating interactions.

Oral traditions embedded in the preparation of soul food are shaped and confirmed by experience and memory, and what is more, developed as a critical form for information

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<sup>98</sup> Smart Museum of Art, "Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion," *Vimeo*, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/37407879>

<sup>99</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 24.

transmission during slavery.<sup>100</sup> Throughout slavery, oral traditions were passed from generation to generation, as a system to preserve unique preparations of food, due to the prohibition to read or write.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the recipes, cooking techniques, and seasonings of soul food dishes are the result of the close interaction between family and community members, and the continuation of past rituals. For Gates, the inclusion of soul food in *Soul Pavilion* acted as a central facilitator for participants to recollect different experiences concerning memory and identity. Such is the case of Erika Dudley, where during one of the dinner sessions she shared with participants her recollections around soul food, the significance of sharing soul food, and the importance of family bonds (fig. 2.7). As Dudley expressed, “My granddaddy every time he prepared BBQ, presented us by the cake, he would say, “What is this?” And we would say “Love” ...he said if you share food you are family, so I want to say thank you so much family for being a part of this”<sup>102</sup> Hence, diners’ contributions continued the construction of African American identity through memories of soul food and the continuation of narratives around shared experiences.

Soul food for African American cultural identity is intimately connected to spirituality, church, and heritage. Through means of oral interaction, singing, and sermons, to discourse and dialogue, Gates enacts the influence of oral traditions for African Americans, employing gospel, blues and religious-like sermons, thus vital components of his cultural identity. As Nelson explained, “Diasporic cultural practices are articulated in relation to the survival of cultural forms in diaspora... through the continuity of African forms, sounds, and worldviews in the arts of people of African descent in the western

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<sup>100</sup> Several Acts such as the South Carolina Act of 1740 and 1834, and Virginia 1819, banned the education of slaves, thus making it a crime to learn or teach to read or write. “The Slave Experience: Education, Arts and Culture,” *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, accessed June 6, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>

<sup>101</sup> Douglas Opie, *Hog and Hominy*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Smart Museum of Art, “Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion,” *Vimeo*, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/37407879>

hemisphere.”<sup>103</sup> Before the arrival of European literary traditions, oral traditions played a vital role in West African societies. Oral tradition through means of songs and storytelling in rituals carried core values and memories. The training and teaching of the gospel and Christianity in the South were also done by word of mouth.<sup>104</sup> As Gates recalled, “I gravitated to the gospel choir, it wasn’t about the church, it was about the voice... It was kind of my first encounter with creativity. The black church allowed me more space to dream and imagine the probable.”<sup>105</sup> Gates’ background in religious studies and his experience attending a black church while growing up influenced his *Soul Pavilion* performance; moreover, it allowed him to present a uniquely creative approach and practice as a way to accentuate the significance of rituals around soul food in the African America diaspora.

The link between religion and soul food, through oral tradition, in *Soul Pavilion* was reinforced by the presence of BMM. The performances that accompanied the meals assisted as a vehicle to express, in combined gospel and blues spirit, a narration of Gates’ African American experience. He provided a means to recreate an oral interactive atmosphere that allowed African American participants to share memories meaningful to their cultural identity. As Irma Dixon stated during the dinner, “They [children of the neighborhood] started to ask me ‘What the hell is going on there [Dorchester]?’ and I tell them what is going on, so during the summer we have a lot of those children listening to the music [Listening House: Archive of Dr. Wax records]...so when they learn more, they did

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<sup>103</sup> Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple World Views,” 308.

<sup>104</sup> Mitzi J. Smith and Lalitha Jayachitra, *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 68.

<sup>105</sup> “Theaster Gates in Chicago,” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 8, September 16, 2016, accessed June 6, 2017, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/theaster-gates-in-chicago-segment/>



more.”<sup>106</sup> The participation of BMM gave the artist not only another layer to extend his individual experience, but also a medium to reflect on the crucial part of oral tradition for African Americans participants. This was exemplified in the previous contribution of Irma Dixon, where she shared with participants her views about the importance of rescued traditions, including soul food and soul music, and their positive impact for the future of the community (fig. 2.8).

In conclusion, as Hall emphasized, “the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion of the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy of the Western world), ‘unified’ these peoples across differences, in the same moment as it cuts them off from direct access to their past.”<sup>107</sup> Soul food is a conceived tradition. It presents a chronicle of African American cuisine that follows the purpose of consolidating diverse and numerous communities into a political and cultural entity, evoking a sense of dignity and achievement in its members.<sup>108</sup> Gates unified diverse communities and reclaimed and reformulated soul food’s meaning and recipes for the African American diaspora. The hybrid creative mediums and context that accompanied soul food also created a platform to give agency to a specific community and diaspora in the South Side of Chicago. Gates’ performative acts and shared tastes of the African American diaspora’s soul food meal brought together people from different social, racial and cultural contexts, consequently reshaping the visitor’s idea of African American cultural forms and rituals around soul food. This was visible from the role Japan played in the creation of the ceremonial soul

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<sup>106</sup> They [children of the neighborhood] started to ask me “What the hell is going on there [Dorchester]?” and I tell them what is going on, so during the summer we have a lot of those children listening to the music [Listening House: Archive of Dr. Wax records]...so when they learn more, they did more...” Irma Dixon. Smart Museum of Art, “Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion,” *Vimeo*, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/37407879>

<sup>107</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 25

<sup>108</sup> Katharina Vester, “A Date with a Dish: Revisiting Freda De Knight’s African American Cuisine,” in *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama*, ed. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, Psyche Williams-Forsen and Rebecca Sharpless, (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 52,53.

food ware, the practical and theoretical knowledge from Chefs Erick Williams and Michael Kornick, and soul food specialist Erika Dudley, the input from Great Grand Crossing neighbor Irma Dixon, to the multiple participants chosen from a draw by the organizers.<sup>109</sup>

*Soul Food Starter Kit* and *Soul Pavilion* dinners manifested the complex African American experience during and after slavery as well as the hybridization of cultural practices. They also point out the importance of soul food and the rituals around soul food as a connector and unifier of the African American community. The artist's practice through a parallel hybridization on interaction, ceramics, soul food, music, and performance, explored the constant shaping of their cultural identity. Additionally, Gates enhanced the experience of memory, the past, and the present global migration of the African American diaspora to create multiple cultural connections between different cultures around the world, such as Japan through ceramic techniques and rituals around the tea ceremony, as well as French cuisine techniques and presentation during dinners. By questioning the significance of soul food in contemporary culture and bringing a familiar ritual into the art space, Gates opened up possibilities to reimagine and represent an African American cultural identity.

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<sup>109</sup> Japanese potters Haruka Komatsu, Yoko Matsumoto, and Kouichi Ohara stayed on the South Side of Chicago with Theaster Gates making pots for two months. The pots became a permanent collection of works for *Soul Pavilion*, and people were only able to experience the work by having dinner with Theaster Gates and his South Side neighbors. Smith, *Feast*, 194.

### Chapter 3.

Oscar Murillo:

*If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 Km North of the Equator*

Stuart Hall, while reflecting on the diaspora, presents two different standpoints on cultural identity. The first stance sees cultural identity as a shared culture, a “collective one true self,” established through a shared common history, cultural codes and ancestry that assists in the construction of continuous frames of reference and meaning.<sup>110</sup> The other viewpoint sees cultural identity as marked by multiple elements of similarities as well as differences, thus subscribing to constant transformation.<sup>111</sup> That is, even though there are shared similarities in diasporic cultural identity, at the same time, there is also a notion of an unstable, permanently changing and contradictory identity. In addition to Hall’s observations concerning these issues, a third layer can be observed in the relationship with the collective and continuously changing cultural identity, which is the micro-community (family members and friends) with which the diaspora affiliates.

In the large-scale migration prompted by globalization that marks the post-modern era, food purposes not only function as a source of nourishment essential to human existence, but as a tool to assimilate and resist the constructions and references of diasporic cultural identity, including relevant political issues.<sup>112</sup> Powerfully, food assists a significant ritual function to bind a community together. This is echoed in Oscar Murillo’s South London Gallery (SLG) exhibition *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started*

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<sup>110</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>112</sup> Often dated after the World War II period, post-modernism is defined in various ways. Most consider it to be the questioning of modernist “master narratives” in the late twentieth century and the consequences of capitalism in global communication and exchange. According to Frederic Jameson, post-modernism in culture is necessarily and implicitly an explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today. See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press: 1991), 4-10.

*Approximately 400 km North of the Equator (If I Was to Draw a Line)* from 2013, most notably in the artworks, *If Was to Draw a Line*, *Lottery*, and *400km North of the Equator*. For Murillo, Colombian food provided a medium to address, on the one hand, his relation to the micro-Colombian diaspora in London, and on the other, to the connection between global migration and labor issues touching on power and class structures. Murillo's exhibition exemplifies diverse ways in which contemporary art and food are intertwined with diaspora and issues of identity. Using Hall's perspective on cultural identity, this chapter will deconstruct Murillo's insertion of food in his artworks from two angles; from a "collective one true self," and the unstable, permanently changing contradictory identity. Also, it will explore how food supplied a mechanism to cope with cultural displacement while reconstructing diasporic identity for his micro-community. Food is applied as a medium to negotiate the clash of cultures.

London-based since the age of ten, artist Oscar Murillo was born in 1986 in La Paila, a village in western Colombia, where both of his parents worked in a local factory.<sup>113</sup> A London's Royal College of Art graduate, Murillo works in a variety of mediums, such as video, performance, installation, and painting.<sup>114</sup> Most of his paintings are composed of sewed canvases, graffiti features, and food-related words, which play a central role in the artist's oeuvre. However, this study is focused on the intersection between performance, installation, and the inclusion of food and foodstuff packages for the SLG exhibition. Murillo's personal background and distinctive practice is reflected in the body of work exhibited for *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of*

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<sup>113</sup> Semana, "Oscar Murillo: Soy Desconocido en Colombia," *Semana Online*, November 09, 2013, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://www.semana.com/cultura/articulo/oscar-murillo-artista-obras-caras/363966-3>

<sup>114</sup> Ben Luke, "Oscar Murillo, interview: Art to me has never been about paying the bills." *London Evening Standard Online*, October 09, 2015, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/esrewards/exhibitions/oscar-murillo-interview-art-to-me-has-never-been-about-paying-the-bills-a3086696.html>

*the Equator*, which was not limited to traditional art production such as painting developed in a specific site, prompting the viewer to experience art from different perspectives, but also including the artist's family as active art producers and diasporic experience articulators.

In the fall of 2013, SLG presented *If I Was to Draw a Line*, Oscar Murillo's first solo exhibition in the UK. The gallery, established in Peckham, a district of the London Borough of Southwark, is one of the most ethnically diverse districts in London.<sup>115</sup> Murillo's work included painting, installation, video, and performance. According to curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow, Murillo's project responded to both the gallery specific location and the artist's interest in the connection between art and labor.<sup>116</sup> However, in addressing topics about commodification, art production, and value, the artist opened a dialogue regarding the power of food and people displacement in terms of economic and political issues. More importantly, Murillo emphasized the inclusion of food in his exhibition as a tool to draw attention to the diasporic cultural identity in London.

For the show, Murillo displayed layers of accumulated materials and objects in the central gallery. The materials appeared as evidence of the production process and, at the same time, shaped and formed the main gallery exhibition. On the floor, a raised platform with canal drains acted as a setting for the main body of the exhibition. The iron tables with stainless steel corn grinders rested above copper and aluminum surfaces, serving as both workspaces and as pedestals for sculptures made out of boiled and ground corn seeds (fig.

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<sup>115</sup> Southwark has an ethnically diverse and youthful population; it has the highest proportion of residents in the UK born in Africa (12.9%), as well as a significant population from Latin America, with 75% of reception-age children from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. There are over 120 languages spoken in Southwark, with 11% of households having no member of the household who speaks English as a first language. Southwark has the 9th highest population density in England and Wales at 9,988 residents per square kilometer. See "Southwark Demographic Factsheet," and "About Southwark Council," Southwark Council, accessed March 21, 2017, [http://www.2.southwark.gov.uk/info/10058/about\\_southwark\\_council](http://www.2.southwark.gov.uk/info/10058/about_southwark_council)

<sup>116</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.

3.1 and fig. 3.2). Along the surface of the gallery floor and platform, visitors encountered beer bottle caps, folded canvases with Murillo's drawings, concrete balls with remains of foodstuff packages, cooking pots with uncooked black and white corn seeds, sacks of corn seeds, white plastic chairs, and ceramic reproductions of Colombia's gold *Poporo Quimbaya*.<sup>117</sup> The ceramic reproductions held aluminum rings strips from a painted placard with *Vita Coco's* brand image (fig. 3.3 and fig. 3.4). Along one of the gallery walls and central to the exhibition was *If I Was to Draw a Line*, an artwork that consisted of a line of fragments composed of foodstuff packages from imported products mainly from South America, Africa, and Asia. Opposite the foodstuff wall, a large raw black oil canvas, made of small and medium fragments of canvas sewn together, hung from two upper corners in the middle of the wall. During opening night, Murillo's family members prepared and served traditional Colombian dishes which included *Lechona*, a preparation made of pork stuffed with rice, peas and spices; *tamales*; and *arepas* (fig. 3.5).<sup>118</sup> In each South American country, there are several regional varieties of tamales; in Colombia, there are tamales *tolimense* made with beef, pork, chicken, and vegetables, with ground corn, boiled or steamed in plantain leaves or corn husk casings.<sup>119</sup> The inclusion of Colombian dishes,

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<sup>117</sup> Pre-Colombian gold vase from the Quimbaya region which stretches from the north of the department of Valle de Cauca to the north of the department of Antioquia in Colombia, with the Cauca river as its main geographical axis. *Poporos* were used for ritual purposes, the urn held lime that was needed to extract alkaloids when chewing coca leaves. The lime kept in a *poporo* was taken out with a long gold stick that was moistened with saliva. See Efraín Sánchez Cabra, *Quimbaya* (Museo del Oro, Bogotá: Banco de la República, Museo del Oro, 2008), 15, 23, and 25.

<sup>118</sup> An arepa is small corn flour dough, cooked over a flame of griddle. It must be eaten when freshly cooked. Even though this dish dates back to pre-Colombian times, this corn pancake probably gets its name from a word for corn in the Chibcha language, which was spoken by the Muisca and other tribes, but it is hard to tell because speaking Chibcha was illegal from 1770 until 1991. Therefore, it became an extinct language. See Ken Albala, *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*, 4v, s.v. "Colombia" (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 75.

The tamal (Nahuatl *tamalli*, meaning wrapped) is a generic name given to several Latin American dishes of Mesoamerican origin generally prepared with corn dough, wrapped in corn husks of the same corn, or banana leaf, and steamed. See Robert A. Palmatier, *Food: A Dictionary of Literal and Nonliteral Terms* (Westport, US: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), 65.

<sup>119</sup> Albala, *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*, 82.

as well as Murillo's actual family in the exhibition, added a meaningful layer to the artist's narrative on diasporic identity.

On the gallery's first-floor, Murillo showcased part of his *Lottery* project where ninety-nine lottery tickets were on display throughout the exhibition along with *Ramón how was trade today? Enjoy food but you are not welcome at this table*, a video screening a day in the life of Ramón, a street lottery vendor in La Paila. The artist and a member of his family oil painted each silkscreen-printed ticket in a combination of colors, including blue, red, black, and yellow. This was done before the artist hired a calligrapher to inscribe the future purchasers' names (fig. 3.6). Tickets cost £2,500 each and were for sale from September 2nd to October 18th, 2013. Even though purchasers knew about the prizes only during the draw, the tickets sold out, and all the proceeds were used to support the South London Gallery.<sup>120</sup>

The last day of the gallery show, the lottery draw performance took place at *Distriandina*, a Colombian bar, café and nightclub in Elephant and Castle, where attendees savored *empanadas*, oysters and Colombian *aguardiente*.<sup>121</sup> For the occasion, Murillo made a piñata, which he later suspended over the dance floor, filled with different kinds of circular objects, such as tennis balls, limes, and golf balls, some marked with numbers and others with sad faces (fig. 3.7). The third place received a t-shirt from Murillo's collaboration with the fashion label *Comme des Garçons*. The second place won a "memory trip" to Mexico for Ramón, the Colombian lottery ticket seller from La Paila in

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Savory little fried or baked corn-flour turnovers. The name *empanada* derives from the Latin *in panis*, or "in bread," *empanadas* are hand-held pockets stuffed with an array of fillings. *Empanadas* have their origins in Galicia (Spain) and Portugal. They first appeared in Medieval Iberia during the time of the Moorish invasions. Spanish colonists carried the dish to Latin America and the Philippines. As each Latin American country began to multiply *empanada* recipes each gave their own twist by replacing traditional ingredients with those natives of each area. Sandra Gutierrez, *Empanadas: The Hand-Held pies of Latin America* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2015), 3-6. *Aguardiente* is the national beverage of Colombia, an aniseed-flavored sugarcane liqueur. See Albala, *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia*, 82.

Murillo's video, which was on view in the exhibition. The first place obtained a "memory trip" to Colombia, comprised of postcards, images, and memorabilia collected by Oscar Murillo.<sup>122</sup>

The goal of the exhibition was to start a discussion focused on the relationship between socioeconomic and cultural boundaries.<sup>123</sup> However, the artist prompted a dialogue about displacement, relocation, and the effects on the consumption and production of food in diasporic communities as well. As Sidney W. Mintz explained about diaspora and food, "the link between the movement of people and the food-related behavior is obvious and important."<sup>124</sup> For the diaspora and their members, food has a powerful symbolic meaning attached to ethnicity and identity. Murillo further evidenced this link in *If I Was to Draw a Line* (fig. 3.8), where the incorporation of foodstuff containers applied to his work incited the exchange of symbols and flavors between two sites: the world's Northern and Southern hemispheres. As Harlow emphasized:

Murillo's participation for us was very significant and for the area we are situated within. It is a very diverse community; two of the biggest communities are Nigerian and Sierra emigrated communities, but also Elephant & Castle has one of the largest Latin American communities in Europe. It was interesting for us to show Murillo's work, where he was bringing in all of these other kinds of cultural references that would lead to a kind of entry point for other people as well. He was interested in having the kind of difference that comes in with the sign or design of food in different places, that was kind of a central thing [the food] and how that is packaged in his home and personal history with his family working in this sweets factory in Colombia.<sup>125</sup>

The artwork included packages such as *Tropiway* plantain and cocoyam *Fufu* flour (a staple food in many African countries); *Aguardiente* nectar E.L.C (Empresa de Licores de

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<sup>122</sup> South London Gallery, "Oscar Murillo: If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400km North of the Equator," Press Release, London UK, 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Mintz, "Food and Diaspora," 518.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.



Cundinamarca) from Colombia; cardboard boxes from *Selvatica* plantains grown in Ecuador; *Auténtica Lechona Tolimense* from Spain; *Colomba* eddoes card boxes, *Frijoles Antiqueños* “Doña Paula” tags, and *Colombina’s Bon Bon Bum* candies from Colombia; *Mezcal Mezonte* from Mexico; *Pride’s Vegetable Oil* from the United Kingdom; and *Poker* beer tags from Colombia.

Hall’s perspective concerning diaspora as an unstable, changeable and contradictory cultural identity takes place through the incorporation of foodstuff packages, signifying the production and consumption of tastes of other cultures, furthermore, as a way to construct a connection to home (Colombia), and as a reflection of the artist’s family’s labor past and genesis of their diasporic experience. Several generations of Murillo’s family, including his parents, worked for *Colombina*, a global food company in La Paila, and many of the artist’s family members and childhood friends continue to be employees.<sup>126</sup> As explained by an interview, “When his father lost his job in the mid-Nineties, his thoughts turned to England. ‘It was so easy, then,’ Murillo explained in an interview. ‘It was very possible to do it, and through his work, he was a trade unionist, and a lot of his colleagues were being murdered, earlier on, in the Eighties, and that gave him an incentive.’”<sup>127</sup> The artist’s imaginary equatorial food line highpoints two points related to his personal diasporic experience. On the one hand, the economic and social inequalities between producers and consumers based on the artist’s personal family experience evoked a connection to their forced migration due to economic and social hardship. Hall’s remarks on the continually changeable cultural identity are highlighted in the modified diaspora food practices, both production and consumption echoed in Murrillo’s family experience as workers in a multinational food

<sup>126</sup> Luke, “Oscar Murillo, interview: Art to me has never been about paying the bills,” accessed November 14, 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/esrewards/exhibitions/oscar-murillo-interview-art-to-me-has-never-been-about-paying-the-bills-a3086696.html>

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

company in La Paila and their subsequent migration to London. For the exhibition, the artist encouraged visitors to question their food consumption habits but also, enabled them to think more about the links between food consumption and migration. On the other hand, Murillo's exhibition examined how, over time, diasporas shape culturally-specific food systems in this case, Murillo's diet and food consumption habits. *If I Was to Draw a Line* produced and provided a language to formulate and expose its cultural identity in both the Colombian and the British imagination. The consequence of forced relocation influenced his cultural identity while signaling the continuous adaptation and assimilation of food products from other cultures.

Likewise, Hall's observations on diaspora stood out in Murillo's lottery prize draw event (see page 44) in *Distriandina*, where 150 guests, along with lottery ticket holders, SLG staff and Murillo's family members and friends shared *empanadas*, oysters and Colombian *aguardiente*. The draw was part of Murillo's lottery ticket paintings and installation back in the SLG. The event focused on Murillo's interest in the popularity of lottery as a "phenomenon in many cultures," and the consequent "intricacies of social and cultural encounters, raising numerous questions about authenticity, value, and the complex relationship between the public, private and commercial sectors of the art world."<sup>128</sup>

However, Murillo's raffle also offered a mechanism to explore, activate, and integrate his diasporic circle. The inclusion of a Colombian establishment and food as part of the exhibition, along with the participation of family members, reflects Murillo's continuous identity negotiation and transformation.

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<sup>128</sup> South London Gallery, "Oscar Murillo: If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400km North of the Equator," Exhibition Guide, London UK, 2013.

The lottery activity functioned as a setting to display how diasporic communities differentiate and incorporate into the host culture, thus influencing their fluid cultural identity. Murillo shared his standard cultural codes (lottery, *empanadas*, and *aguardiente*) among his diaspora members outside the diaspora framing, in his case via a contemporary art gallery. The meaning attached to the lottery had different connotations from one culture to another. The lottery is a primary consumer good in Colombia, while in the UK it has a negative association related to vice.<sup>129</sup> Chance games in Colombia, including lottery and bingo, as the artist explained, are associated with positive family conviviality and play.<sup>130</sup> The artist's chosen location, *Distriandina*, a hub for the Latin American community in London, and the selection of Colombian dishes served during the event, reflected the artist's cultural affiliation, which is an unstable yet permanent construction of cultural identity. Murillo confronted this cultural variation by incorporating the lottery pool where he deconstructed and detached the British representation of lottery by adding Colombian dishes and a Latin American environment into the actual location (London).

As Harlow explained, "there is a juxtaposition and a reflection of the people who came together during the event."<sup>131</sup> The juxtaposition produced by the lottery draft extended to the food selected by the artist. The dishes are the result of the effort to incorporate traditional dishes to a particular context, while at the same time adding new ones into the diaspora diet. The artist explored the idea of how traditions such as lottery and food are lost, encountered, and reinterpreted in new localities. There is a paradoxical invention of the artist's diasporic identity, which pushes him to recreate staged

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<sup>129</sup> "En Colombia, comprar lotería hace parte de la canasta familiar," *El tiempo*, January 31, 2005, accessed June 27, 2017. <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1683467>

<sup>130</sup> Oscar Murillo, Juan Roselione-Valadez, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Liam Gillick, Nicola Lees, and Jonathan P. Watts, *Oscar Murillo: Work: Rubell Family Collection* (Miami, Florida: Rubell Family Collection, Contemporary Arts Foundation, 2012), 25.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.

performances of his culture. He used the “authenticity” of regional gastronomy and lottery in social life to explore identity and the experience of diaspora. Nevertheless, the result is a reference to the original, a culture in between two countries.

In turn, Hall’s “collective one true self” can be observed in the SLG’s opening night dinner where Murillo’s aunt prepared and dished out *lechona*, *tamales*, and *arepas*. The dinner was considered part of the exhibition, a response to the space and narrative of the show. However, the recreation of his food practices addresses two specific purposes: the incorporation of Colombian dishes to the gallery space and the British palate, as well as the reaffirmation of membership in his micro-Colombian community. The interaction with his work and the participation of the viewer through the socialization process and food intake triggers the meaning and principal purpose of Murillo’s oeuvre accessing diasporic symbols, tastes, and meanings. As the artist pointed out, the importance of his micro-community is not representative of a Colombian identity per se, but the family and friends from the village of la Paila in Zarzal Valle de Cauca.<sup>132</sup> By including his family in the process and preparation of dishes, Murillo created a continuity of his own identity and food system, and at the same time, shared codes, dishes, and customs with his micro-community. Therefore, in Hall’s observations about “collective one true self” in diasporic cultural identity, it is significant to mention the embedded influence and importance of the micro-community with which the diaspora affiliates. As Harlow remarked about the participation of Murillo’s family members in his artwork:

I think he felt it was important for them to be present or have a voice or be part of the contribution of it. Also, he appreciated to have his family present, and also that

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<sup>132</sup> According to Oscar Murillo, since his arrival, approximately 70 family members and friends from La Paila have migrated to London. Clara Dublanc, Cesar Garcia and Oscar Murillo, “Talk with Oscar Murillo,” South London Gallery, London, UK, November 20, 2013. For more information about demographics of La Paila, Zarzal Valle de Cauca see Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas [http://www.dane.gov.co/files/censo2005/PERFIL\\_PDF\\_CG2005/76895T7T000.PDF](http://www.dane.gov.co/files/censo2005/PERFIL_PDF_CG2005/76895T7T000.PDF)

he could pay them, the labor was remunerated because we hired his auntie's catering company and it was about making sure everyone involved got a share of the project.<sup>133</sup>

Through taste and culinary traditions, Murillo's work generated the circumstances to promote his former food habits in his actual geographical context. Even though Murillo's diasporic experience takes place in an Anglo-Saxon context, the artist's artworks manifested their members shared cultural heritage, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging.

Murillo's artworks further analyze the contrasting effects concerning the clash of two or more cultures in diasporic identity. *If I Was to Draw a Line, Lottery, and 400km North of the Equator* blurred the line and, at the same time, separated different cultures, prompting a negotiation of meanings around identity and food. As Mintz stated, "What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others."<sup>134</sup> The artist's inclusion of food packages and Colombian dishes in the periphery of the exhibition (opening night and *Distriandina*) is used to convey collaborative relationships by enabling interaction and communication using food as a mediator. Consequently, an exchange of codes and information between participants takes place, and the artist creates an environment that allows social and cultural mediation. In *If I Was to Draw a Line*, the codes that carry information are food brands. On the one hand, they are available to read or be interpreted by those who speak the language written on the label and are familiar with dishes and ingredients depicted in the foodstuff line. On the other hand, for those who encounter a language barrier, images provided a representation of an object that they could recognize, such as roasted pork, beans, or rice. The shared

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<sup>133</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.

<sup>134</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 4.

experience facilitated a bridge between cultures and, at the same time, a mechanism to build a home away from home, a marker of the artist's identity.

Hall stated that “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”<sup>135</sup> The artist's cultural removal prompted him to reflect on his individual and collective experience of dislocation and adaptation. In this case, the cultural differences functioned as a catalyst to explore his diaspora identity in new ways for *If I Was to Draw a Line*. As explained by the artist, when his family arrived in London, he encountered dissimilarity in language, on top of that “an astonishing cultural displacement.”<sup>136</sup> Even though Murillo's artwork is comprised of multiple layers of analysis in which the artist explores the class-related meaning of food, he is significantly connected to his Colombian roots while also coping with his English context; therefore he and his artwork are informed by continuity and rapture.

The artist echoed the experience of relocation, the resulting cultural differences encountered, and the adaptation to a new setting, in the performance and production of sculptures from boiled ground corn kernels made by him and his uncle in the main gallery. A staple in the Latin Americans diet includes corn-based dishes. Although different ethnic and cultural groups nowadays consume maize-based dishes around the world, the production and consumption of maize were introduced to Europe and Africa after contact with America through the Columbian Exchange. It is an ingredient that helps the Colombian and Latin American diaspora cope with a new place, away from their native land. For the main gallery, the artist and his uncle created—with the malleable corn

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<sup>135</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 31.

<sup>136</sup> Carol Vogel, “Art World Places Its Bet: Oscar Murillo Keeps His Eyes on The Canvas,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2014.

paste— several amorphous handmade organic shaped sculptures of medium and small sizes, which were left in the space until the end of the exhibition (fig. 3.9). Due to the materials' life span and the gallery's atmospheric conditions, the appearance of the sculptures changed over time. The sculptures' slow shift of appearance paralleled the artist's exploration of displacement, adaptation, and transformation in a new culture. By using an essential ingredient from Latin American gastronomy, Murillo reconstructed and reimagined his cultural heritage. The sculptures exemplified an interpretation of diasporic cultural production in a location away from where its origins, and the changes resulting from the mediation and contradiction encountered between two cultures marked by difference.

Another layer in Murillo's artwork in relation to the diaspora and the complex construction of cultural identity in new localities took place in *400km North of the Equator*, the series of porcelain vessels with coated aluminum rings, and *If I Was to Draw a Line*, the line configuration produced from foodstuffs on the main gallery wall. In both, the artist addressed and opened inquiries regarding the role of western transnational food companies as mediators and producers of hybridity and diasporic cultural identity. Murillo explained that the porcelain reproduction of *Poporos Quimabayas* with aluminum strips made from hand-painted placards with the image of *Vita Coco* addressed the contrast of value systems of pre-Columbian and contemporary cultures. As he stated, "What interests me in relation to my work is that gold in pre-Columbian culture and society didn't have the same kind of value it has today. It had a ceremonial and cultural status but it wasn't a commodity... [T]oday they have completely different functions as rescued artifacts."<sup>137</sup> However, the

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<sup>137</sup> Clara Dublanc, Cesar Garcia and Oscar Murillo, "Talk with Oscar Murillo," South London Gallery, London, UK, November 20, 2013.

inclusion of the coconut water brand and packages, eddoes *Colomba* cardboard boxes and *Pride's* vegetable oil (fig. 3.10), enabled the artist to challenge the audience to rethink what is implicit in our choice of food consumption, cultural exchange, and hybridization. This is corroborated in Murillo's insertion of products by multinational companies, such as *Pride's* vegetable oil, a company owned by Westmill Foods, as part of Associated British Food (ABF), one of the largest suppliers of flour, rice, spices, sauce, edible oil, and noodles to the UK and European ethnic wholesale markets, food service, industrial sectors and the grocery supermarkets.<sup>138</sup> On the one hand, food companies are adapting and transforming their market following the need to supply diaspora communities, in this case, London. In doing so, the companies are also changing and adapting the palate and diet of non-diasporic communities. On the other hand, as Mintz stated, "Human movement is a primary cause of changes in food behavior."<sup>139</sup> What is interesting to observe in Murillo's work is how the artist, at the same time, resists the changes forced by relocation by incorporating Colombian tags and brands in his work and diet, such as *Poker* beer, *Frijoles Antiqueños* "Doña Paula" and *Colombina's Bon Bon Bum* candies.<sup>140</sup> Even though food consumption for diasporic communities is limited to what western transnational food companies offer, they also break away from that option by clandestinely importing their homeland products. This action provides agency to groups and individuals, giving them the ability to continue their homeland culinary traditions, additionally, it contributes to the

<sup>138</sup> See Westmill, "Company," accessed April 17, 2017, <https://westmill.co.uk/company/>  
 Vitacoco is US Company, which produces coconut water in countries such as Brazil, Malaysia, India, Philippines, etc. See vitacoco "Our Story," accessed April 18, 2017, <https://www.vitacoco.com/about>  
 Colomba is an English import/export food company own by FMX Foods with branches in South America, Africa and Asia. See FMX Foods, "Home," FMX Foods, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.fmxfoods.com/index.html>

<sup>139</sup> Mintz, "Food and Diaspora," 516

<sup>140</sup> *Colombina* and *Doña Paula* are traditional Colombian food companies, both regionally and nationally. *Colombina* was founded in Murillo's hometown of La Paila, in 1927. See Colombina, "About Us," *Colombina*, and "About Us," *Doña Paula*, accessed February 12, 2017, <http://www.colombinausa.com/about-us/our-history>, <http://alimentosdonapaula.com/>



multilayered hybridity process and the construction of diaspora identity. What once was strange and foreign has infiltrated the British diet and culture. Murillo emphasizes how this interaction changes what previously was considered authentic, or ethnic, into hybridity, because in adapting the diaspora ingredients to mass consumption and the western palette, transnational food companies reinterpret the product.

One of the primary purposes of the exhibition was to raise inquiries about “authenticity, value, and the complex relationship between the public, private, and commercial sectors of the art world.”<sup>141</sup> However, Murillo’s insertion of his micro-community into *If I Was to Draw the Line* portrayed the influence of diaspora in his oeuvre.

As Harlow stated:

Murillo is very close [to his family], and there is also this geographical distance for maybe some of his extended family, because he has been living here, although he visits it is not the same as when you are living in a place. The inspiration of his work and how he was looking at labor and the production of food in particular related to his personal history of them working in this Colombian factory and political history of that for them.<sup>142</sup>

From the inclusion of Murillo’s aunt for the food preparation, where several family members helped to serve dishes, to the artist’s family participation in the making of maize sculptures and the contribution of other family members in the painting of lottery tickets, the presence of the artist’s family marked a highly personal reflection on the pivotal role of his family experience of displacement, adjustment, and diasporic transfiguration. As Hall explained about cultural identity in the diaspora, “[it] is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant

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<sup>141</sup> South London Gallery, “Oscar Murillo: If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400km North of the Equator,” Exhibition Guide, London UK, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with curatorial assistant Rachael Harlow at South London Gallery, London, UK, March 14, 2017.

transformation.”<sup>143</sup> For Murillo, his family is included in his artwork as simultaneous carriers of cultural traditions and a support mechanism for the assimilation and adaptation of new cultures. Therefore, the family not merely assisted in the continuation of cultural traditions but also in the integration of a new cultural identity.

In conclusion, even if Murillo’s artworks for *If I Was to Draw a Line* did not intend the significance taken away from the show, which is the intersection of food and diasporic cultural identity, his oeuvres undoubtedly embedded examinations about the global circulation of people, codes, and meanings in our everyday unconscious food practices. Inevitably, as the name of the exhibition conveys, Murillo’s journey started in La Paila, approximately 400 Km north of the equator, where his individual experience of being separated from his original location and later affiliation to a micro-community in London, activated an initiative for the incorporation of food into the SLG exhibition. The artist’s approach reflected how diasporic identities struggle to integrate into their immersed context. The diaspora is neither part of the host nation nor the home nation, but a hybrid, an identity in constant reinvention.

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<sup>143</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 23.

## Conclusion

This thesis has presented three artists who integrated food, food-related products, and foodways into their artistic practices. Michael Rakowitz, Theaster Gates, and Oscar Murillo's incorporation of food is central, not only as a medium and creative approach to an aesthetic experience, but more importantly, highly linked to their personal diasporic experiences and their construction of cultural identity. The unique food related practices shared by each artist connected diverse cultures and assisted as a vehicle to establish a home away from home, a marker of the artists' identities. In each of the artworks included in the artists' exhibitions and projects, food played a crucial role establishing a sense of self, but perhaps more importantly, it also functioned as a medium to share and prompt a conversation around food and human displacement and relocation.

This study showed artists' variations in style and taste through the inclusion of food, as a means to prompt engagement and conversations about diaspora experiences; through Rakowitz's means of trade, Gates' commensality, and Murillo's labor in a globalized food market, the addition of food in each distinctive narrative creates a space for dialogue and exchange between different social groups and cultures. The insertion of the family or home practices to the public space asserts in connecting others (outside the diaspora) into the intricacies of the artists' cultural identity. At the same time, each particular art project reaffirms a sense of belonging to the artists' specific diasporic community. However, even though the inclusion of food as a medium marked similarity, there are vast differences in each creative outcome. Michael Rakowitz focused on the Iraqi diaspora. He established networks among members of his community using the impossibility of trading and consuming a staple ingredient from Iraq. The absence of products from Iraq, especially date

products, triggered the memory and sense of identity between diaspora members while reflecting on the complex construction of cultural identity. In contrast, Theaster Gates' representation of soul food rituals and dishes in a setting outside of the museum space forced visitors to experience the history of the African American diaspora through taste and performative storytelling.

Additionally, Gates incorporated food ritual elements from other cultures, to recreate and reflect on hybridity as a platform to embrace and enrich his African American cultural identity. Meanwhile, Oscar Murillo's inclusion of Colombian and non-Colombian dishes and foodstuff packages, and food symbols, exposed labor, socio-economic and cultural boundaries, also highlighted the artist's relationship to his micro-community and his present locality. For Murillo, the contemporary art gallery operated as a mechanism to integrate his family members into the artist's creative practice. The inclusion of Murillo's family members as active participants in the exhibition and the presence of his culinary traditions helped him to cope with his cultural construction and transformation and to reassert his micro-community identity.

The incorporation of food in the artists' practice and art spaces invited visitors to engage in a complete sensory visual, aural, olfactory, and gustatory experience. Thus, the artists' exploration on food as a medium aimed to push the limits of art, and more importantly, addressed food as a means to connect and reflect on diasporic issues. Sharing a meal with friends or strangers or recollecting flavors, producing an immediate atmosphere of intimacy where people can easily exchange ideas with others, food enables a dialogue of exchange and sociability.

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## Appendix

**50,000 years ago** – Wild date seeds from this era have been found in the Shanidar Cave of northern Iraq. The date features as the main food source for early cave dwellers.

**6,000 B.C.** –The Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) originates in the Persian Gulf region.

**5,000 B.C.** – The Sumerians, located in southern Mesopotamia (southeastern Iraq), cultivate the date palm as a food staple and find many uses for the rest of the tree. Its leaves are woven into devices such as baskets, its wood serves as a building material, and other parts produce rope.

**Circa 4,000 B.C.** – Hebrew scripture in the Old Testament Book of Genesis places the Garden of Eden at the juncture of the Tigris and Euphrates River, a location that would be situated in modern day Iraq.

**1792-1750 B.C.** – Babylonian ruler Hammurabi's 200-article decree lists some 7 devoted solely to date palms, including a fine of 225 grams of silver to be levied against any subject who dares cut down a palm tree.

**Circa 5 B.C.** – In the Qur'an it is said that date palm leaves sheltered Mary during Jesus's birth and that she ate fresh dates to ease her labor pains:

And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm-tree.  
She said: Oh, would that I had died here this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten! Then (one) cried unto her from below her, saying:  
Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee. And shake the trunk of the palm-tree toward thee, thou wilt cause ripe dates to fall upon thee. (Surat Maryam)

**7<sup>th</sup> century, A.D.**– The Qur'an mentions the palm tree 20 times. In one Hadith (prophetic saying), Mohammad likens the Muslim to the palm tree because its leaves don't wither.

**Circa 717-801 A.D.** – Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, an 8<sup>th</sup>-century female Islamic saint from Basra, Iraq, is believed to have maintained such an austere and righteous path that she even denied herself the pleasure of Iraqi dates. During an illness, a friend asked her if she desired anything.

How can you ask me such a question as "What do I desire?" I swear by the glory of God that for twelve years I have desired fresh dates, and you know that in Basra dates are plentiful, and I have not yet tasted them. I am a servant (of God), and what has a servant to do with desire?

(Margaret Smith, The Way of the Mystics: The Early Christian Mystics and the Rise of the Sufis, Oxford, 1978)

**1911 A.D.** – Bernard G. Johnson, the “father of the California date industry,” establishes a USDA experimental station near Mecca, California, and plants date seeds acquired from Iraq. The successful endeavor marks the birth of the industry: today over a quarter million trees in the Coachella Valley primarily produce four varieties native to Iraq, the Barhi, Halawi, Khedrawi, and Zahidi.

**1930s A.D.** – Iraqis contend that Americans steal an entire shipload of date saplings to plant in California in an attempt to replicate the exact taste and texture of a variety of Iraqi dates.

**1930s-1979 A.D.** – With over 627 known varieties of dates, Iraq becomes a world leader in date production and exportation, peaking in the mid 1970s. After oil, dates account for Iraq’s largest export market. Renowned especially in the Middle East, the quality of the Iraqi date is believed to be the result of specific soil conditions in Basra and other regions. At its height, Iraq has the largest date palm orchards in the world with over 30 million trees.

**September 1980-August 1988 A.D.** – The Iran-Iraq War sees Iraq’s date orchards decimated in the contested al-Faw Peninsula and Basra. The number of date palms throughout the country is believed halved by the war’s conclusion.

**August 2, 1990 A.D.** – Iraq invades and annexes Kuwait, doubling its oil supply and giving it control of nearly 20% of the world’s oil reserves. Four days later, the United Nations Security Council passes Resolution 661, imposing comprehensive sanctions on Iraq and establishing a committee to monitor them.

**January 15, 1991 A.D.** – The U.N. Security Council endorses a U.S.-led coalition to use military force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. The Gulf War begins two days later.

**February 27, 1991** – Kuwait is declared liberated and hostilities cease. The ceasefire (Resolution 687) that follows Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait obliges disarmament of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The Iraqi date groves further deteriorate as economic sanctions remain firmly in place, save for a U.N.-sponsored Oil for Food program later instituted to provide humanitarian relief.

**January 4, 1996 A.D.** – President Clinton sends a letter to the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in order to keep the Congress fully informed about U.S.-Iraqi sanctions efforts. In addition to seizing a \$6m shipment of oil, he wrote, the American navy seized 20 small sailing vessels carrying \$3.45m worth of Iraqi dates, acknowledging that Iraqi dates were up there in value with crude oil.

**2000-2004 A.D.** – The Al-Moosawi Date Company in Basra packages their dates in boxes bearing the label “Dubai Dates,” a company operating out of Sharjah, U.A.E. They are exported worldwide as “Product of the United Arab Emirates.”

**March 20, 2003 A.D.** – A U.S.-led Coalition invades Iraq, resolving to disarm it and discontinue what it believes to be Iraq's continuing development of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

**May 1, 2003 A.D.** – President George W. Bush declares the end of major combat operations in Iraq aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, in front of a banner reading "Mission Accomplished."

**May 22, 2003 A.D.** – The U.N. Security Council lifts its sanctions against Iraq. Of the 16 million date palms that stood before the war, only 3 million survive, with groves now replaced by an expanse of charred stumps. Many remaining trees suffer from fusarium, a fungus, resulting from the use of depleted uranium shells in allied bombings, that attacks the crowns of trees and causes them to topple over, twisting their flaccid trunks.

**2003-2006 A.D.** – U.S.-based importers shy away from the importation of Iraqi products, due to prohibitive duties and shipping costs, as well as security-related charges and regulations.

**September 2006 A.D.** – Davisons & Co., in association with Sahadi Fine Foods, signs a contract with the Baghdad-based company Al Farez Co. for the importation of one ton of Khestawi dates from the Iraqi city of al Hilla, formerly Babel. The dates, bearing the label of the Babylon Iraqi Date Company, are expected to arrive in-store by mid-October if the shipment clears U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and Homeland Security inspections. Prices will reflect the charges and duties levied on the freight, representing the complexities involved in such a transaction.

*A house with a date palm will never starve.*

(Prophetic saying)

Creative Time, Who Cares, A History of Dates compiled by Michael Rakowitz, accessed October 22, 2017,

[http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/\\_images/history\\_of\\_dates.pdf](http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/_images/history_of_dates.pdf)

## Images



**Figure 1.1.** Michael Rakowitz, Davisons & Co., storefront on Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 2006. Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz



**Figure 1.2.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Detail of Iraqi seeds grown in California. Still from Michael Rakowitz's *Return* Video. Courtesy of Creative Time.



**Figure 1.3.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Details of a variety of dates displayed and available to purchase. Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



**Figure 1.4.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Details of Iraqi Flags on display. Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



**Figure 1.5.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Products sold at Davidson & Co. These products use Iraqi dates but are packed and labeled as products from Lebanon, the Netherland and Saudi Arabia. Photo: Michael Rakowitz and Lombard-Freid Projects, New York. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



Figure 1.6. Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. The artist operating Davidson & Co. Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of The New York Times.

أطيب التمور في العالم. تأتي من العراق  
... إلى شارع أتلانتك في بروكلين  
The best dates in the world come from Iraq  
...TO OUR STORE IN BROOKLYN

My grandfather Nissim owned and operated Davisons & Co., an import-export company, in Baghdad until 1946, the year of his exile. The company reopened in New York and continued through the early 1960s. Nissim died in 1975. I am pleased to announce that Davisons & Co. is once again open for business, temporarily located from 1-31 October at 529 Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Members of the Iraqi diaspora, families with military personnel stationed in Iraq, and interested citizens are invited to send objects and goods that will be shipped, free of charge, to recipients in Iraq. We have also signed the first deal in many years to import Iraqi dates, which are due to arrive and will be on sale in our store by 10 October.

كان جدي نسيمة يملك ويدير شركة دافيسونز أند كو للإستيراد والتصدير في بغداد حتى عام ١٩٤٦، وهو نفس العام الذي نفي فيه إلى خارج العراق. أعيد افتتاح الشركة في نيويورك، واستمر العمل فيها إلى أوائل الستينيات، توريته جدي نسيمة في عام ١٩٧٥. وأنا اليوم سعيد بإعلان إعادة افتتاح شركة دافيسونز أند كو الكائنة مؤقتاً واعتباراً من ١ إلى ٣١ تشرين أول/ أكتوبر في ٥٢٩ أتلانتك، أهنئوهم في بروكلين. ندعو أبناء الجالية العراقية ومقاتلات الجلود المشتركين في العراق والمواطنين المهتمين ممن يرغبون بإرسال أغراض وصناعات إلى العراق إلى الاتصال بنا، وسوف نقوم ببحثها إلى متسلميها في العراق مجاناً. كما أننا وفقاً لأول صفقة منذ عدة سنوات لإستيراد التمور العراقية المتوقعة وصولها قريباً والتي ستعرض للبيع في متجرنا في ١٠ تشرين أول/ أكتوبر.

For more information, please call Michael Rakowitz at 917-692-5592 or email: [davisonco@yahoo.com](mailto:davisonco@yahoo.com). Items from out of town can also be sent before October 25th to DAVISONS & CO., 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 11217 USA.

مزيد من المعلومات يرجى الاتصال بالنسيمة مايكل راكوفيتز على هاتف رقم 917-692-5592 أو بواسطة البريد الإلكتروني التالي: [davisonco@yahoo.com](mailto:davisonco@yahoo.com) يمكن إرسال الحاجيات القادمة من خارج المدينة قبل ٢٥ تشرين أول/ أكتوبر إلى DAVISONS & CO., 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 11217 USA

نفتح جميع أيام الأسبوع ما عدا نهار الأربعاء. 42  
42  
Open Thursday-Tuesday. Closed Wednesdays. Hours of operation 11:00 AM- 7:00 PM

**FREE SHIPPING TO IRAQ** شحن مجاني الى العراق

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Figure 1.7. Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Ad in the *Arab American News*, a newspaper in Dearborn, Michigan.





**Figure 1.8.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Customer Shamoon Salih visiting Davidson & Co., who spoke about Iraq with memory and nostalgia. Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



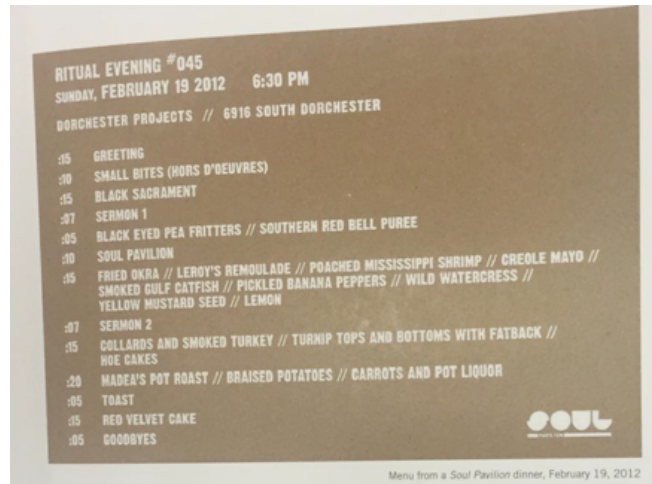
**Figure 1.9.** Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2006. Customers visiting Davidson & Co., Photo: Michael Rakowitz. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



**Figure 1.10.** Michael Rakowitz's grandfather, Nissim Isaac Daoud, as a young man with his family in Baghdad. Courtesy of Michael Rakowitz.



**Figure 2.1.** Theaster Gates, The Dorchester Projects in Chicago, 2013. Photo: Sara Pooley. Courtesy of New York Times.



**Figure 2.2.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Detail of Menu for *Geography of Soul*, Sunday February 19, 2012. Photo: Smart Museum of Art. Courtesy of Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.



**Figure 2.3.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Detail of dishes served on Sunday February 19, 2012. Photo: ©All rights reserved by Louisa Chu. Courtesy of Flickr.



**Figure 2.4.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Sermon performed for *Geography of Soul*, Sunday February 19, 2012. Still from *Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion*. Courtesy of The University of Chicago.



**Figure 2.5.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Guest at the *Geography of Soul*, Sunday February 19, 2012. Photo: ©All rights reserved by Louisa Chu. Courtesy of Flickr.



**Figure 2.6.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Erika Dudley serving “black sacrament” (chitlins). Photo: Smart Museum of Art. Courtesy of Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.



**Figure 2.7.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Erika Dudley's interaction at the *Geography of Soul*, Sunday February 19, 2012. Still from *Theaster Gates: Soul Food Pavilion*. Courtesy of The University of Chicago.



**Figure 2.8.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Irma Dixon's interaction at the *Geography of Soul*, Sunday February 19, 2012. Photo: ©All rights reserved by Louisa Chu. Courtesy of Flickr.



**Figure 2.9.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Food Starter Kit*, 2012. Photo: Smart Museum of Art. Courtesy of Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.



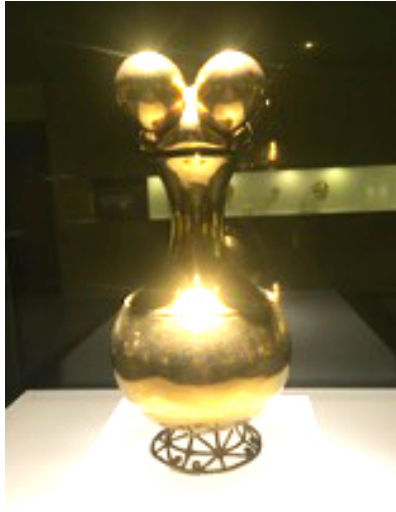
**Figure 2.10.** Theaster Gates, *Soul Pavilion*, 2012. Photo: Sara Pooley. Courtesy of Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.



**Figure 3.1.** Oscar Murillo, *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.2.** Oscar Murillo, *Oscar Murillo, If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.3.** Cauca Medio- Quimbaya. Early period, 500 BC to 700 AD. Courtesy of Museo del Oro Banco de la República, Bogota, Colombia.



**Figure 3.4.** Oscar Murillo, *400 km North of the Equator, If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Still from Video Oscar Murillo-South London Gallery. Courtesy of LalulaTV.



**Figure 3.5.** Oscar Murillo, *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Still from Video Oscar Murillo-South London Gallery. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.6.** Oscar Murillo, *Lottery, If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.7.** Oscar Murillo, *If Was to Draw a Line, If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.8.** Oscar Murillo, *If Was to Draw a Line, If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.9.** Oscar Murillo, *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.



**Figure 3.10.** Oscar Murillo, *If Was to Draw a Line* detail, *If I Was to Draw a Line, This Journey Started Approximately 400 km North of the Equator*, 2013. Courtesy of South London Gallery, UK.