

**ROYAL CAFE: CHINESE-WESTERN IN ALBERTA**

**by**

**Elyse Bouvier**

**Bachelor of Applied Communications, Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta, 2010**

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**Abstract**

Across Alberta there are found many diner style restaurants serving both Chinese and Western Canadian meals to people in the small-towns they inhabit. It's a culturally significant and interesting aspect of Albertan identity. This research paper describes a journey to photograph and document these spaces and try to contextualize them within the context of Albertan identity. It details the research the author did to richer understanding of these spaces and their part in what it means to be Albertan. Included in this is a discussion on the significance of food and, in particular, the Chinese-Western dishes such as ginger beef, to communal identity. This paper details how the research influenced my own journey across Alberta and how it translated into a fully realized photo-documentary project that led the author to a greater understanding of what it means to be Albertan.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Royal Cafe* is about several journeys. At the most basic level, it is a story about a unique cuisine of the Prairies. It is also about the immigration of people into Canada and, in another way still, it is also a contemporary version of the classic road trip documentary. It also functions as a journey to complete a Master's of Fine Art in Documentary Media and as a research project. As a road trip project, *Royal Cafe* nods to other photographers such as Robert Frank, William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, or the Western Canadian photographer George Webber who drove and documented small towns of the Western United States and Canada. I have been fascinated and inspired by the various approaches many of these photographers chose to document the transitional landscapes and banality of the West but, also, the details. Although rarely the sole focus of their work, some of these photographers have observed how food plays into both the identity of and a relationship to a particular place. They saw, as do I, that photographing common, everyday food and meals tells us a lot about a place and its people.

The story of *Royal Cafe* began over five years ago on a somewhat blustery day in the Canadian prairies. Feeling rather sentimental and itching to leave the city, I packed up my Volvo station wagon and drove south of the city. While many people run to the mountains, my heart is firmly rooted in the prairies, in the endless meeting of sky and horizon. The aim of my spur of the moment road trip was to wander with my camera and notebook, and just lose myself for a while. Driving in the prairies has always been a sort of meditation for me, and this was no different. I found myself that day in Vulcan, Alberta, the town in which I spent the first five years of my life. I do not remember much of those early years, but I do recall the stories, the trips back to visit friends, and on that day I had a sense that somehow, I still belonged there. It was a miserable day, with a big prairie storm on its way, so I spent little time taking photos outside and

instead went straight to the New Club Cafe; it was one of a handful of food places in the town and a small-town, Chinese-Western restaurant. I ate a salad (I was on a gluten-free kick and the only food option for me was a salad), and scribbled probably a not-very-good poem, full of nostalgic sentiment. And as I was leaving, I took one photo of the restaurant sign that was across the street: the Royal Cafe.



*Figure 9 The Royal Cafe*

When I was a child, my family would drive out of town to visit friends at the Royal Cafe in Vulcan (a small town in rural Alberta, approximately two hours away from Calgary). The Royal Cafe was the town's main Chinese-Western establishment and it was situated comfortably in the middle of Centre Street, beside Vulcan's only bakery and across from the New Club Cafe (a pizza and steak restaurant, run by another Chinese family in town). Along one of its walls was situated a service counter with a cash register, a milkshake machine, and red Naugahyde-upholstered chrome stools lining the counter. Matching chairs were scattered around tables with faux-wood tabletops. Fluorescent lighting mingled with sunshine streaming through slatted blinds, and within this diner environment were scattered other reminders of the Chinese owners'

own history: red lanterns and a maneki-neko cat next to the till. Foggy as these memories from my childhood are, what I remember most about the Royal Cafe was the food. The owners were known for their Chinese food but they also served a full Western menu, including hamburgers, turkey sandwiches and, of course, grilled cheese sandwiches—my childhood favourite.



*Figure 10 Google street view, the Royal Cafe, June 2012*

Like the town of Vulcan itself, the Royal Cafe’s atmosphere and menu felt out of step with time. Fellow Westerner, Kyler Zeleny, refers to this sensation as the “rural unstuck,” that “as one moves through the streets of rural communities one is bombarded with haphazard visions of decades past and present.”<sup>1</sup> The Chinese-Western cafes—a uniquely Albertan moniker for the ever-present Chinese-Canadian establishments found in small-town Canada—are oddly situated in several time periods and cultural identities all at once. They have the feeling of being left over from another, a previous time and are precariously on the brink of extinction; but, in reality, they are the surviving pockets of cultural significance in the small-towns of Alberta. Like “the prairie

<sup>1</sup> Kyler Zeleny, “The Rural Unstuck,” in *Out West* (London: Velvet Cell, 2014), 104.

grain elevator, it seems as though its time has passed, that the restaurants which remain are little more than anachronistic reminders of another time, another history” and yet, “the small town Chinese restaurant is an awkward reminder of the ways in which modernity sometimes stammers, prematurely announcing the death of that which is not yet dead.”<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese-Western restaurants that are scattered across small towns in Alberta, though often characterized by a different era, are not gone, dying out, or leaving. They are a fixture in their communities—indeed, an important part of Albertan identity and prevalent across the Canadian West. Inside their walls, Chinese-Western restaurants hold the sensory experiences and memories of the people that have passed through them. These spaces contain histories of Chinese people in Canada, and their interactions with Western settlers; and they re-present a narrative that counters the rural Western Canadian hegemonic norms. The sensory experience of the spaces, the taste of the food and patterns on the walls, become materials for memory, community of people, and, even, resistance politics. Chinese-Westerns exist in two worlds, consistently resisting being named as one thing or another—Chinese or Western, Canadian or immigrant, past or present—but instead revealing the complexity of Canadian identity.

While the Royal Cafe I visited in my childhood now exists mainly in my memory—recently replaced by the Town Cafe: slightly different, yet strangely the same—it has come to be a place, and a name, that symbolizes the many small-town Chinese-Western establishments found across Alberta, and, reflective of a more complex rural Western identity. My project, *Royal Cafe*, brings together many seemingly insignificant details, collected from these places on a solitary road journey across the province. Through tastes experienced, sounds recorded, materials gathered, and photographs of patterns, peoples, and places; my project is more than just

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<sup>2</sup> Lily Cho, *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 113.

documentation of a cultural phenomenon—it is a sensory (re)collection that addresses the complex identity of the Canadian West.

## **PHOTOGRAPHING CHINESE-WESTERN**

Alberta is a province that brings to mind a picturesque ideal of Canadian landscape: the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, the endlessness sky of the prairies, the rolling ranches in the foothills, etc. However, more often than not, Alberta is also associated with crude oil, conservatism, and rich natural resources. One of the aims of the *Royal Cafe* project is to look at Albertan identity from a different viewpoint: through these small-town Chinese-Western food spaces. It highlights other, and significant, narratives about what it means to be Albertan, while simultaneously challenging hegemonic perspectives on rural Alberta. Examining rural Chinese food of a province that is better known for its big trucks and big oil than for its cultural diversity, reveals a more nuanced picture of Canadian identity.

Driving through the seemingly endless open skies of Alberta is a sharp contrast to the concentration of people and landscape in the cities where I have mainly lived: Calgary, London, UK, and then, most recently, Toronto. While shooting my project, I found myself alone almost all the time. In the city I am also alone; but its expression is vastly different in the city, where I am lost in crowds and alienated by the sheer mass of people, than out on the prairie road, where the Prairies spread out flat around me. On the road, I embrace the solitude; in the city, I feel lonely. Loneliness and solitude are rival expressions of what is essentially the same condition: to be alone. In driving solo from place to place, setting up a tent for one, I was alone with my thoughts; an experience I am no longer accustomed to in the city nor in the hyper-connected world.



*Figure 11 The view from my tent, central Alberta*

I grew up as if between the city and the small town, living in both before my family had finally settled in a mid-sized bedroom town near Calgary. A town caught, like I am, between an intense busyness of the city and a quiet openness of the country. I am also a product of my generation, which grew up without the hyper-connectedness of the Internet and then, suddenly, was thrown into a globally networked world. I am never without my mobile device, obsessively checking Facebook and Instagram to feel like I am part of something, to see what's going on—filled with FOMO, the fear of missing out—or even just to take comfort in knowing there are people out there, somewhere, that I care about, that care about me. This is especially true when I am in the city. Something about being surrounded by unfamiliar people and dwarfed by high-rise buildings brings out the need in me to see and be seen all the time. As a teenager I journaled all the time, allowing my mind to wander and unloading my restlessness and anxieties onto a page. Now, I obsessively check my social networks, falsely associating these online connections with being less lonely. I rarely sit without music or Netflix or some article open on my Internet



browser; instead, I jump from distraction to distraction. I fear that we have lost the ability to be still.

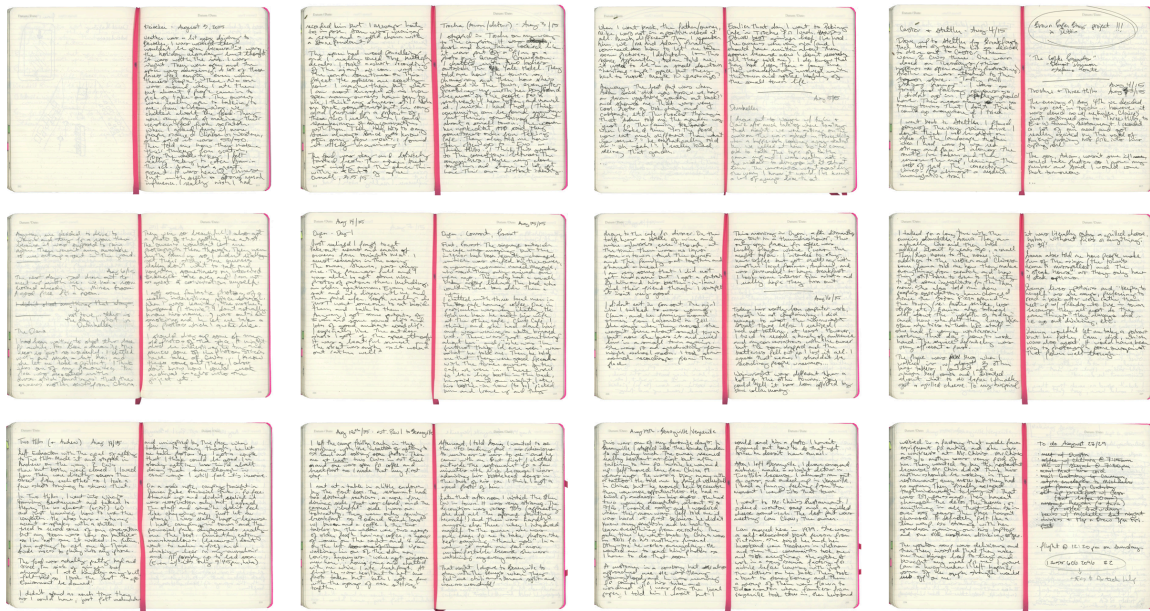


Figure 12 Scanned diary pages, summer 2015

Living in the city, one of the things I miss the most is driving. I long to drive out of the city, to escape the busy hum and, instead, feel space around me and allow myself time to breathe. When I am driving, I am focused on the road and, at the same time, I am comfortable enough to let my mind wander. I often drive without having any music turned on, the rumble of the car and my wandering thoughts are the only companions to the familiar landscape scrolling out my window. When other people talk about meditation, this is what I picture: an open road, a flat land, and an endlessly big sky. Others have described similar experiences while driving in Alberta. Craig Campbell's describes his experience:

...you're alone with the road and mountains or lonely farms or coulees or small towns that still make sense despite seeming, occasionally, to be from another time. You're also alone with space that fills your head and diverts your attention, causing you to hop from one ephemeral association and thought to the next. Solitude is as precarious as the roads.



Attention to the rural scene – seen in passing – is fleeting; it is at once fascinating and dull.<sup>3</sup>

In the West, and Alberta in particular, it feels like you could drive forever, chasing an endless horizon. And the openness gives your mind permission to expand, to dream, to question without the urgency of answers, often felt in the urban landscape.



*Figure 13 A typical view from the car, central Alberta*

Photography, like driving, is a similarly solitary endeavour. “Solitude and taking photographs are connected in an important way. If you aren’t alone, you can never acquire this way of seeing, this complete immersion in what you see, no longer needing to interpret, just looking.”<sup>4</sup> When I drive the straight open roads of Alberta, I am not questioning or analysing the landscape around me; I am ‘just looking’. To photograph is an act of visual listening. Even

<sup>3</sup> Craig Campbell, “The Rural Scene,” in *Out West*, (The Velvet Cell: London, 2014), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Wim Wenders, interviewed by Alain Bergala, “Interview between Wim Wenders and Alain Bergala,” in *Written in the West, Revisited*, (Schirmer/Mosel: Munich, 2015), 8.

‘observe’<sup>5</sup> is in many ways too active a word. Observation implies some sort of analysis or significance. To ‘listen visually’ is to absorb, to meditate, and to become open to what you see around you. It makes all things equal and significant. In photographing this way, each shutter click is a blink, an act of remembrance, external recreation with digital sensors and screens. Only then, once an image is created can the captured moment become a part of a collective memory. Teju Cole states, “There are no instantaneous photographs: each must be exposed for a length of time, no matter how brief: in this sense, every photograph is a time-lapse image, and photography is necessarily an archival art.”<sup>6</sup> These visual reminders, memories, can be collected, shared, wept over, or forgotten. Only then does the photographic image become a monument to collective remembrance. But the creation of the image is a solitary act. There is only one hand on the camera.

The photographs of diners, hotel meals, and cafes-on-the-road by Stephen Shore, William Eggleston, and other photographers like them are of another time, taken in another time. And yet, they share a similarity with images in *Royal Cafe*, as they are often hard to place solely in one decade. Images like theirs and mine, of interiors of food places, invite us in by virtue of how familiar, and indeed, mundane and ordinary they are. Like these photographers, I hope to capture something wonderful in these comfortable, ordinary places. “To see something spectacular and recognise it as a photographic possibility is not making a very big leap. But to see something ordinary, something you'd see every day, and recognise it as a photographic possibility - that is what I am interested in.”<sup>7</sup> A photograph of a booth with plastic cups and mismatched floral fabric seems insignificant, much like the act of photographing the same plate of ginger beef, over

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<sup>5</sup> I use ‘observe’ here as defined by most dictionaries as noticing something as being significant or attentively watching.

<sup>6</sup> Teju Cole, “Disappearing Shanghai,” in *Known and Strange Things*, (Random House: New York, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Shore, interviewed by Leo Benedictus, “Stephen Shore's best shot,” *The Guardian*, September 27, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/sep/27/photography.art>.

and over again, seems entirely pointless but these details become significant as they come together. What could possibly be documentary, let alone considered as art, in photographs of a plate with food? But we know, in fact, that contrary to their seeming banality, these photographs of familiar and dull culinary scenes actually speak to the part of us where we are comfortable, where we are “home.” And because these casual dining spaces are where people in rural Alberta feel at ease, they are indicative of identity across broader expanses of land and the communities there.



*Figure 14 Booth and cups in E & W Family Restaurant, Three Hills, Alberta*

At the centre of the *Royal Cafe* project is food. The food we eat is filled with clues that point to who we are, where we come from, and where we currently align ourselves culturally. Food “has long ceased to be merely about sustenance and nutrition. It is packed with social, cultural and symbolic meanings. Every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about

ourselves, and about our place in the world.”<sup>8</sup> We learn who we are through what we eat and, as we age, we tell others about ourselves through the meals we cook, and share, and photograph. That the Internet is overrun with images of food is not inconsequential. We use food to situate ourselves and relate to those around us. Eating food is a social activity, so we want to share our experience, whether online or off; but it is also intimate and familiar, and can be a comfort or a challenge.

Food is not pure. It’s a complex mixture of cultures, land, and technology. Therefore, when considering Chinese-Western food as a reflection of identity, it is important to understand that it is more than just a ‘fusion’ between Chinese and Western cuisine. And like any aspect of our collective or individual identities, culinary identity is constantly shifting and changing in relation to place, time, people, and culture. This is why the meal is a full expression of the complexity of changing identity, particularly in a young, diverse country like Canada. To eat Chinese-Western food in Alberta is to taste and discover how cultures and people relate to each other and to the land, and how these are constantly in flux. Food embodies the most complex of our cultural identities and by looking closely at communally significant places, the Chinese-Western restaurants, we can learn about ourselves, our histories, and our present identity.

Margaret Atwood wrote, “eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk.”<sup>9</sup> So, it goes without saying that what we eat gives us important insight into the identity of ourselves, our communities, and our nation. This is as true in Alberta as it is anywhere, and the ubiquity of the Chinese-Western cafe across Alberta underpins this communal identity across a large

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<sup>8</sup> David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Atwood, introduction to *The CanLit Foodbook: From Pen to Palate* (Toronto: Totem Books, 1987), 2.

geographical space. However, the significance of food and eating is too often either forgotten, or undervalued, or simply not recognized. Thus, the aim of *Royal Cafe* was to convey the experience of being in a rural Chinese-Western space, and captures the complex histories and sensory experiences that are embodied in the food, people, and places. But what exactly is that experience of “eating Chinese”?

Food has the power to hold complex communal histories and to elicit feelings of nostalgia<sup>10</sup> for people, times and places. C. Nadia Seremetakis states that “artifacts are in themselves histories of prior commensal events and emotional sensory exchanges, and it is these very histories that are exchanged at commensal events that qualify the object as commensal in the first place.”<sup>11</sup> Eating ginger beef, or any other Chinese-Western dish, becomes its own commensal<sup>12</sup> event that shares in the histories and experiences of those that make the dish. Eating in these restaurants allows one a taste of history of immigration and resistance of the Chinese people, who survive and thrive in rural Alberta and have become woven into the complex history of the province.

One of the essential ingredients in this project, one that gave it direction and shape, was the experience of eating the food—ginger beef—in each place. Ginger beef is often described as uniquely Albertan dish and, indeed, it is one of the most popular dishes no matter where you go in the province. It is a perfect hybrid of elements of Chinese and Western Canada cuisines—of ginger and spices with deep-fried beef and sweet sauce. In this way, and because of its mythical status among Albertans, ginger beef becomes a symbol of the hybrid Chinese-Western identity in Alberta, and in my project. By eating this same meal over and over (in sixteen restaurants in

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<sup>10</sup> Late 18th cent. (in the sense ‘**acute homesickness**’): modern Latin (translating German *Heimweh* ‘**homesickness**’), from Greek *nostos* ‘**return home**’ + *algos* ‘**pain**.’

<sup>11</sup> C. Nadia Seremetakis, “Memory of the Senses, Part I,” in *The Senses Still* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Seremetakis, and I, too, use ‘commensal’ in its etymological sense which is: late 19th cent.: from medieval Latin *commensalis*, from *com-* ‘sharing’ + *mensa* ‘a table.’

total), the minute differences and similarities between the dishes became heightened for me, and I was essentially performing my own identity as an Albertan through this act of eating. The repetition was exhausting but the process of repeating this act reinforced the ginger beef dish as a significant clue to rural Chinese-Western identity. In many ways, I was literally consuming the complex histories of places, people, and landscape through the experience of eating. However, this act of consumption should not be confused with bell hooks's notions of consuming of colonial others or of "eating the other,"<sup>13</sup> which are bound with colonial past and the unrelenting structures of economic power and racial oppression; my notion of consumption is tied to the commensal event and, by extension, to the necessity of communication (of histories and identities) as the foundation of any community and of understanding bound with ethics.

Food is closely linked with identity for two reasons. Firstly, it is a full sensory experience—which relates to our memories and our bodies in certain time and space. Secondly, food is directly connected to the land. We eat what is provided to us by the earth: bread made with the wheat of the Prairies, beef that comes from cattle that roam the foothills. But we do not only eat what is locally and seasonally available to us. Food moves with people and technology—cuisines migrate with people over space and time; edibles are transported on ships and trains and cars and planes around the globe. In this sense, we can taste the world in our homes. Chinese cuisine came to Alberta with Chinese people, and, like that of the European settlers' before, it adapted and evolved to suit the new, foreign land. This element of migration renders Chinese-Western very different than fusion food, which purposefully brings together multiple cuisines motivated by taste and trends in food consumption, rather than being the result

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<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, "Eating the other: Desire and resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, pp. 21–39. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

of histories and cultures of various ethnic groups influenced by migration. Chinese-Western food in Alberta is not fusion food but a hybrid—a culmination of years of necessity of Chinese business owners to make food palatable for Western Canadian tastes (that are heavily influenced by farming and European cuisine—think of meat and potatoes based dishes) using locally available ingredients. It does not pretend to be like the food one eats in China, nor is it any less ‘authentic’ than regional cuisine of that country. It is a tangible and eatable expression of the people in the communities where it originated: small, rural Western Canada towns largely settled by Europeans (largely British, Ukrainian, German, and Scandinavian) and small groups of Chinese and other Asian immigrants, and their descendants.

While many parts of Canada are increasingly becoming urban and multicultural, Chinese-Western establishments embody a different Canadian identity: one that is rural and shared between the minority East Asian population and the majority of Canadians of European descent. These Chinese-Western spaces are often the only eating establishment in town, further embedding their significance in the lives of small town communities and of their relationship to the shared rural Western identity. Through food, over time, and in spite of years of resistance, Chinese Canadians in rural Alberta have established themselves as part of the fabric of this province, thereby, as key in the history and identity of the communities of which they belong.

\* \* \*

While passing through the town of Stavely, Alberta this summer, a town that is quite literally a blink-and-you-miss-it kind of town, I wandered into the Sunshine Cafe. From the outside, it looked like all the other Chinese-Western restaurants I visited—worn down, older,

something out of the past—however, everything inside was brand new. It combined the typical blandness of the modern monochrome palette with dark-wood features and chrome, the typical decor of family-run restaurants. The Sunshine Cafe was indeed quite different than many other cafes I had been to, and, interestingly, it was only opened a year prior, in 2014, by a young Chinese couple who moved to this small town from Calgary. And yet, despite the modern feel, the menu of Sunshine Cafe was almost identical to the many other Chinese-Western restaurants. There was a Chinese side of the menu, featuring combos for one or two and chop suey, and a Western side, with hamburgers and chicken noodle soup. The Sunshine Cafe stands out as the latest iteration of the rural Chinese restaurant—a place with its roots in rural Alberta’s hybrid history, while determinedly moving into the future. Sunshine Cafe, like many of the other Chinese-Western restaurants I documented across Alberta, function as reminders,

... that places, in fact, are always constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not only internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere. Their 'local uniqueness' is always already a product of wider contacts; the local is always already a product in part of 'global' forces, where global in this context refers not necessarily to the planetary scale, but to the geographical beyond, the world beyond the place itself.<sup>14</sup>

In the same way, Chinese-Western restaurants reflect rural Alberta’s culture. They stand as representations of the migrations of people and food, of modernity and changing technology, and of the meaning of “home”. For many Albertans, to eat Chinese is to be home.

## HISTORY

Starting in the late 1800s until roughly 1920, thousands of Chinese men made the trek east from British Columbia to Alberta and beyond.

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<sup>14</sup> Doreen Massey, “Places and Their Pasts,” *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995): 183.



They were attracted to the sparsely populated Prairies by opportunities to escape poverty, to open shops, and to become merchants. With merchant status, men inched closer to “whiteness” and had economic, social, and cultural opportunities that labourers did not. [...] On the Prairies, valuable merchant status was more easily attained, and people were generally less hostile toward Chinese immigrants than were those who lived elsewhere in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

In Canada, Chinese communities consisted largely of “bachelors”—men who mainly immigrated to Canada to work as labourers on the Canadian Pacific Railway—despite the fact that many of those men were actually married to women back in China. Most women and families were unable to immigrate with the men because of Canada’s racist Chinese Immigration Act, which included a rather excessive head tax of up to \$500 at its peak in 1903. As a result, “by 1921, there were nearly 3,500 Chinese in the province, but less than 200 were women.”<sup>16</sup> After 1923, the Chinese Exclusion Act almost exclusively banned those of Chinese descent from immigrating to Canada until the act was repealed in 1947. It is all the more incredible and humbling to me, that despite even today making up less than five percent of Alberta’s population,<sup>17</sup> and experiencing extreme racism and opposition to immigration for many years, the Chinese community in Alberta persisted and, in many cases, even thrived in the Prairies. And thankfully, Chinese-Western hybrid cuisine has become an important part of the province’s complex cultural identity.

After 1895, cafes and restaurants became the dominant type of business for Chinese immigrants in the prairie provinces. Prior to 1895, many Chinese men were labourers or worked as launderers—doing the “women’s” work that was looked down upon by other immigrants to Canada. In the early years, Chinese-Western restaurants in Alberta, although run by Chinese

<sup>15</sup> Alison R. Marshall, *Cultivating Connections: The Making of Chinese Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), 26.

<sup>17</sup> “NHS Profile, Alberta, 2011,” Statistics Canada, accessed December 28, 2015, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/Page.cfm?%20Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=48&Data=Count&SearchText=Alberta&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=48>

immigrants, served almost exclusively Western-Canadian dishes like hot turkey sandwiches and roast beef. However, as immigration policies loosened over time, a hybrid version of Chinese and Western food started to appear on menus, alongside the Western fare. The style and diversity of the food served in Alberta's Chinese-Western restaurants follows a cycle of social progression and greater acceptance toward Chinese immigrants in the province. This is, of course, not to say that racism was eliminated from the Prairie towns; however, as Westerners started to accept the new Chinese menu, their initial prejudices lessened. "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, restaurants became the venue, and food the medium, of the first hesitant steps toward culinary and cultural exchange."<sup>18</sup> Chinese food on the Prairies became a way for Chinese living in Alberta to re-negotiate their cultural identity and challenge the hegemonic norms of the Canadian West.

As a white Western-Canadian woman from the city, who grew up in both rural and urban communities, I still feel welcomed to sit and eat Chinese; and, yet, these spaces remain still foreign to me. They speak to what it means to have an Asian identity in largely white, rural communities. Distinct from Chinatowns in urban centres, Chinese-Western restaurants are often alone in the towns they occupy, which sometimes means they are part of a very small minority of Chinese or East Asians in the area.

Thankfully, I am not the only one that has noticed something quite special about this particular aspect of Chinese diaspora and the complexities of negotiating cultural identity in rural Alberta. Other academics have examined aspects of the Chinese-Western food identity in Alberta; most notably, York University Associate Professor, Lily Cho in her book *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada*. Cho's research largely looks at these

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<sup>18</sup> Samantha Barbas, "'I'll Take Chop Suey': Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change," *Journal of Popular Culture* 36 (2003), 670.

unique spaces through the lens of literary and cultural theories, and draws many of the same conclusions as I have. In fact, Cho says it best when she states that Chinese-Western “restaurants are spaces where a range of people will, at least for a moment, be eating Chinese. Through the consumption and production of something that will be called Chinese food, a series of interactions and negotiations unfold.”<sup>19</sup> In the Chinese-Western restaurant, Chinese owners were able to create their own safe space, in an inhospitable environment, and at that same time, they invited, though perhaps reluctantly, Westerners to come in to their space and eat. The invitation was also economically motivated. Chinese owners, no doubt, could not afford to turn away anyone, even if racists and bigots darkened the door of their establishment. However, through creating a space of their own, where people were fed, it only seems natural that over time the tensions would lessen and, through food, cultural change could begin.

A friend once told me a story about her grandmother, who was from rural Alberta. The white grandmother was mistrustful of anyone that was not like her and, at times, she was even outwardly racist. However, she was particularly fond of Chinese food. For her, the Western-Chinese food of the Prairies was no longer something “other,” connected to a different race and culture; instead, it was part of her every day, of her life. (This does not excuse, by any means, her racism in other contexts but is an interesting example of how, over time, food can become a way to break down barriers of otherness in closed-off communities.) In another example, while in Oyen, Alberta at the Lucky Dragon restaurant, I was eating dinner alone and an older farmer from town, a man named Evan, invited me to sit with him. Though the menu had both Western and Chinese items, Evan ordered a sizzling plate of stir-fry. When I asked him what kind of food

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<sup>19</sup> Cho, *Eating Chinese*, 126.

he liked to eat, he only responded, “you know, normal food.”<sup>20</sup> For Evan, as well as my friend’s grandmother, not only were they partaking in something Chinese but also in something familiar and quite ordinary, “normal” as Evan would say.

Disparate and dispersed, small town Chinese restaurants create a space that is nonetheless constitutive of a recognizable public that persists in addressing strangers and the strangeness of dominant culture through an invitation to sit down, to open up the menu, to consume something familiar and different.<sup>21</sup>

To many people who call rural Alberta home, to eat Chinese is not something outside of their everyday, it is as comforting as eating Western-Canadian traditional food in their own home.



*Figure 15 A selfie with Evan after our meal, Lucky Dragon, Oyen, Alberta*

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<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Evan conducted August 14, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Cho, *Eating Chinese*, 113.

## METHODS: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The way I approached this project was by first looking at the larger picture—the rural Alberta landscape—and then to progressively move from the wider scope to the more focused look at the specific aspects of that landscape: the towns, the streets, the signs, the people, the restaurants, the tables, the chairs, the food, and even the wallpaper. While the details took on larger presence in the project as it progressed, the landscape moved to the background, but remained always present. *Royal Cafe* follows the tradition of photographing small towns and rural places of the West, but also forayed outside it in looking closer at the subject and moving beyond neatly framed images.

In the initial stages of research for this project, I focused mainly on the idea of a community space, i.e., on an idealized notion of “third place,” where people from all walks of life come together. I discovered in the course of my research, and especially once I was on the road visiting the restaurants themselves, that this was a very small part of my project. The Chinese-Western is less of a community hub where “everybody knows your name” and more of a central intersection or junction of rural lives, comings, and goings. During my visit to these cafes in the summer, I noticed that they often had a busy hour around lunch or dinner; however, there was a constant stream of locals picking up take-out with only a few people staying in to eat. I also observed that in some places people almost always ordered from the Chinese menu and, in others, almost always from the Western side of the menu. However, almost every restaurant, save for one or two that I visited to, had an extensive menu for both cuisines. Only a few cafes seemed to truly be split down the middle in terms equal numbers of people ordering Chinese food and Western food.

For a brief period of time, I titled the project *Intersections* because of what I observed: people's different paths meeting briefly at one point, much like the main intersection of roads in town. I began to see the places themselves not so much as community hubs but rather as spaces that were the centre of a brief yet important encounters between community members: Asian or Western, farmer or townie, young or old. These restaurants represent the world of in-between, and that feeling of being from an indefinable time period from the past.

Central to my understanding of the Chinese-Western as a place of cultural negotiation was Cho's aforementioned book. Shortly after I read it—my copy heavily highlighted and dog-eared—I met with Cho for a coffee and chat. Talking with her about my project provided me with more insight and helped me look at Chinese-Westerns as places of cultural negotiation and re-presentation. Since that first meeting, I met with her on several occasions, and her insights and support of my project have been tremendously encouraging.

In the course of research on spaces and publics, Chinese-Western restaurants and cafes emerged in my mind as a places that highlighted hybrid identity—in many ways, an identity that opposes more institutionalized notions of Canadian “multiculturalism.” Around this time, I attended the Canadian Association of Food Studies annual conference and met Samantha Chow who spoke about the idea of the hybrid in food and Canadian identity, in an aptly titled paper, “Eat It, Multiculturalism.” From my conversations with both Chow and Cho, I discovered new ways to talk about the Chinese-Western experience and started to think about how all the sensory elements of the spaces—sounds of chatter and whirring fridges, scattered visual reminders of both Asian and rural influence, the smells of ginger and fried burgers coming from the kitchens—also relate to my own identity.

## **METHODS: PRACTICAL DILEMMAS**

From test shoots in a few small-town restaurants in Alberta in the spring of 2015, I quickly discovered that there was some resistance from owners to the idea of me photographing or recording them. I was really worried about going to Alberta for the summer and not being able to shoot, i.e., work on my project. I kept thinking: “What if no one would talk to me or let me take pictures of them or their cafe?” Because I quickly became aware of this resistance through my test shoots, I revised the way I would talk to people. So I tested out the idea of ordering food first, then observing, and finally telling the owner what I was working on. This helped me out in two big ways: firstly, I was able to at least take a few photos of the food inconspicuously, so if the owner refused to let me take pictures I would at least have documentation of the meals I ate and, secondly, it made me less intimidating to the owners. I was able to start a conversation about the food I ate and their restaurant before diving into questions about them and then, ideally, be able to take photographs of them and their restaurant with full permission. I had some wonderful conversations with owners, servers, and townspeople, and I am really grateful for that. If I had gone in, with my camera and audio equipment, and just ask to take photos, most of the owners would have been resistant, and rightly so. In sitting down to eat first, I was acknowledging that this was their space and place of business, and that acknowledgement gave us a starting point for conversation.

Ginger beef as a subject, whether of a cataloguing project or of a photographic series, is rather dull and absurd—humorous even. When discussing this component of my project in group conversation, it usually brought about a good round of laughter, not that I entirely minded but the humour was not lost on me. There is something ridiculous and even amusing about eating the same food over and over, and photographing it. Considering our society’s current obsession with

the beautiful gourmet food photography,<sup>22</sup> ginger beef, photographed from the same distance (above the plate), is downright unappealing. And after eating ginger beef meals over a dozen times in a month, it was the last thing I wanted to eat or photograph. But through the repetitive act of eating, photographing, and then organizing this food into a grid, this series of photos also reflects the documentarian's need to organize the world through the lens.

## **METHODS: PHOTOGRAPHY AS A PERFORMATIVE ACT**

Photographing for *Royal Cafe* was less about the need to record or document something that “has past” and more about the process and act of photographing, following the action, the event and circumstance (planned and unplanned) of my journey and of the many different smaller crossings—both literally as I took new roads and also in myself as I discovered new aspects of myself and of the Albertan identity—I found myself on within that journey. “‘Performativity’ [...] signals an awareness of the way the present gesture is always an iteration or repetition of preceding acts. It therefore points to the collective dimension of speech and action.”<sup>23</sup> As a performative act, *Royal Cafe* followed a set of actions set out by me: to find and visit Chinese-Western establishments in rural towns of Alberta; to eat in every one of the ones I visit; to speak with the owners and patrons; to study each space through careful observation; and, lastly, to visually represent my experience of being in them. My photographs of plates with Chinese food capture the more inconspicuous aspects of their very presence: food being a source of energy, a fuel for the human body, and signifying identity, histories, and place. The plate of

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<sup>22</sup> Take the hashtag #foodporn, for example, which has been tagged in 96,419,537 public posts on Instagram at the time of writing (August 29, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Iversen, Margaret, “Following Pieces: On Performative Photography,” *The Art Seminar: Photography Theory*, James Elkins, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 97.



ginger beef is a symbol of the hyphenated Chinese-Western identity and through the repetitive act of eating of it, I perform my own complex identity. In Ed Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* (1967), the photographs serve as documentation of a performative action (throwing of a Royal typewriter out a speeding car's window). Likewise, my own images of Chinese food and the spaces, in which the food is found, serve as documentation of my performative act (eating at every restaurant I visited), while experiencing the effects of changing modernity<sup>24</sup> on these spaces, food, and identity. Furthermore, the act of eating and the photo documentation of the plate before it is consumed also point to the significance of visual experience of food, since images of food prompt sensory and corporeal responses in us, e.g., salivation and stomach grumbles. This also draws attention to the role senses play in our memories, and that sight is but one dimension of our rich sensory life and that taste, touch, sound and, in particular, smell have some weight in forming and recalling our memories of place. Perhaps, this is why the photograph, as a documentation of memory consistently often falls short in conveying the remembered experience.

## **METHODS: THE ROAD TRIP**

Before I went back to Alberta to begin shooting, I started compiling a list of either towns or restaurants I had been to, heard of, or found through Google searches. Once I had a good idea of some must-go restaurants, I created a schedule for myself. I did not know if I could handle being out on the road the entire summer, so I left a few days between trips for rest, back at home

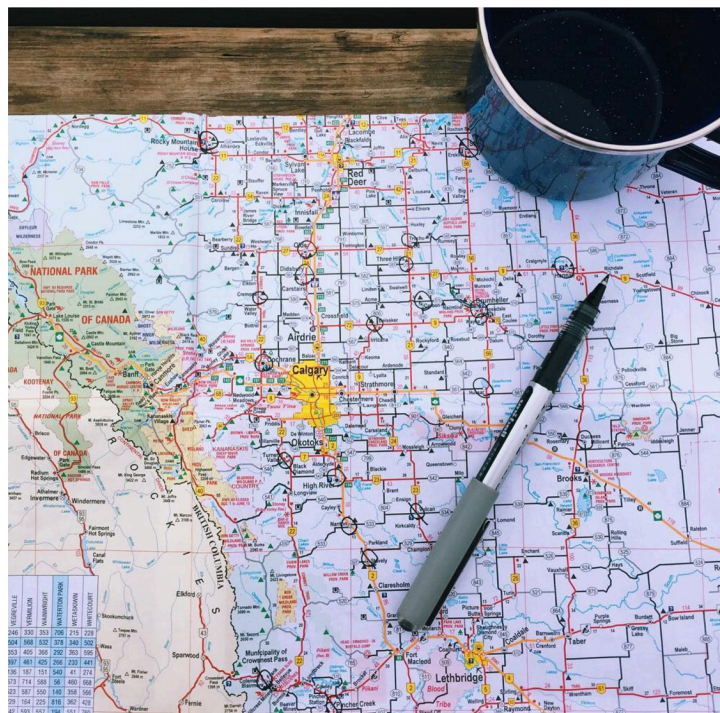
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<sup>24</sup> This is why the Sunshine Cafe is an interesting example of the collision between a distant yet familiar past of post-industrial modernity with the present sleekness of post-modern communications. Cho expands further on this concept in regards to small-town Chinese restaurants in her book especially when she states "the small town Chinese restaurant is an awkward reminder of the ways in which modernity sometimes stammers, prematurely announcing the death of that which is not yet dead."

in Calgary. I think this was the right choice and allowed me to process and reflect on the places I had been to. I kept my itinerary fairly light for the first trip, driving south of Calgary, stopping in Turner Valley, Pincher Creek, Blairmore, and back up through Vulcan. For the second trip, I planned even more carefully, deciding well ahead about where to camp and which places exactly I wanted to go visit. Unfortunately, plans do not usually work out as perfectly as one wishes, and there were restaurants I wanted to go visit that were closed. I discovered early on that Chinese-Western restaurants in rural towns play by their own rules. I had expected that some restaurants may be closed on Sundays, or even Mondays or Tuesdays, but across the province, I found that almost every day of the week was accounted for by some restaurant somewhere as a “restaurant closed” day. This unpredictability made planning difficult but also left some room for unexpected opportunities. During the second trip, I met up with Kyler Zeleny and Claire Power, two Toronto-based photographer/researchers, who were also shooting in small Western towns over the summer. Travelling alongside them greatly influenced both my pacing and energy, and the way I was able to relate to the people I was photographing. In being able to observe their interactions with people in these towns and, also, to feed off their creativity, gave me more confidence in my own shooting.

My way of photographing subjects was very informal and conversational, which made it increasingly difficult for me to also record sound. Several issues played into this problem: first, many owners did not wish to be recorded on sound, though they had no issues with me recording ambient sounds of the space itself. Second, I was having conversations with them while I was taking photos. This meant that any audio recording would have the loud shutter clicks of my camera throughout the entire recording, which would not be productive or useful to me. Thirdly, I did not want to record audio without permission; although, several of the audio samples are

recordings I took while I was eating, so people could be heard in the background but not be directly identifiable, except as generic conversation. For all these reasons, I recorded less audio than I had planned, and much of the audio I recorded consisted of various hums of coolers, fans and of the indistinct sounds of a busy—or not-so-busy—restaurant: clinking, radio sounds, conversations, door bells, etc. These audio recordings, though a seemingly small part of the entire project, added much to the ambience in the gallery, hence to the experience of the project. Not only did the final soundscape audio track become another layer of experience but it also added complexity to the images, drawing the viewer into the photographs by way of imagined space through audio.



*Figure 16 A view of my map on the road.*

## METHODS: DOCUMENTARY COLLAGE

While keeping in mind the complexity of many identities, I approached *Royal Cafe* with the idea of a “documentary collage,” something I had been thinking about since the first year of the Documentary Media program. Through the act of collecting, my task as a documentarian was to then assemble together—to collage—the seemingly disparate pieces, which, in reality, are all layers of the same story. *Royal Cafe* is not a project that strives for conclusions. Instead, as an artist, I prefer “dwelling in a space of inquiry that resists formal naming: a willingness to allow for discomfort, frayed edges, and holes.”<sup>25</sup> And quite literally, there were “frayed edges” in the installation (the map).

In exploring the idea of collage as integral to process-based and open-ended documentary, in both research and conceptual framework; it became clear that using collage as a method allowed for multiple narratives to co-exist within and between several components that made up my project. The photographs that I took over the summer, when displayed alone, spoke only of my representation of the spaces and people I saw, i.e., they represented one (my) perspective. However, when these images were sequenced in a book, situated on a table near the images collaged on one wall (with other found materials around them) and the photographic grid of ginger beef on the other wall, with the audio of Chinese-Western ambience filling the exhibition space, a dynamic of contiguity emerged. The complex relationships between people, place, food, identity, and varying experiences all together entered into a dialogue. Jaishree K. Odin writes how this collage-like structure (specifically, hypertext in literature) can be used to highlight the complexities of multiple post-colonial narratives:

The literary assemblage created out of discontinuous fragments constitutes a whole which exists alongside its individual constituents, without subsuming them into

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<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Springgay, “A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, December (2005): 901.

any totality or without unifying or totalizing the work. The whole so created is open because of the continuously changing nature of the relationship between the multiple elements as the reader interacts with the text. In-between spaces or gaps created amongst disparate components of the assemblage provide pathways for other stories and other voices to emerge that challenge the dominant narrative.<sup>26</sup>

Through disparate yet related parts, my project contributes to documentary practice by highlighting, through its open-ended approach and its final form guided by the method of collage, the complexities of identity and how different facets of this subject can be discovered using the lens of food culture. The various pieces of the *Royal Cafe* “collage” project give equal voice to Chinese and Western, and to intimate and broad views. This project nods to the history and tradition of documenting small towns, rurality, and of the Canadian West. However, its primary focus experience: the personal—my own journey as a documentarian and Albertan; the social and political—stories of Chinese-Albertan resilience, resourcefulness, and resolve to remain despite overwhelming obstacles; and the poetic—the journey of a place, of shared sensory experiences, and of the landscape rendered through documentary art practice. By looking at Canadian identity through the lens of Chinese-Western places, this project highlights the uniqueness of these rural spaces in the context of Canadian multiculturalism—or better yet, hybrid identity.

### ***ROYAL CAFE, IN THE GALLERY***

The visual experience of photographs was the most significant part of my *Royal Cafe* installation. I created a handmade photo book, using paper I sourced from Japan (for its textured feel) and printed cloth for the cover, with the same floral print I custom-printed on washi tape and on vinyl (for wall accents in the gallery). Every part of the book was made by me down to

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<sup>26</sup> Jaishree K. Odin, “Collage Aesthetics, Hypertext, and Postcolonial Perspectives,” *Genre* 41 (2008), 42.

the glue that held the whole book together. The images contained in this book are an integral part of the experience; they are the heart of this project. Carefully selected and sequenced, these images are snapshots of various activities that take place inside these establishments. Some of these are of patrons and owners (Chinese and “Western”), of the close-up details of carpets and patterns, and of the fading exteriors of these restaurants, with a lineup of rural SUVs parked out front. There also pictures of children (daughters of the owner) playing at the back of the restaurant; and of two women, just finishing a shift, sitting outside on the curb at twilight. I chose not to write any names of places or people, instead focused on the experience of the images themselves as documentation, while drawing more attention to the sameness and similarities than the differences between them. My intention was for every person, who would spend time with the book, to be drawn into different an experience of these spaces; and, in the context of the larger installation in the gallery, for some to also notice how the details found within the book itself are repeated in the rest of the gallery space.

One wall in the gallery featured the actual map I used on my trip, a corner was torn away somewhere along the road. Red thread was affixed to the t-pins (bought in Toronto’s Chinatown) and drawn out, connecting the towns I visited (on the map) with the clusters of related images and found objects on the wall, surrounding the map and attached with custom-printed washi tape. Turner Valley, Alberta, for example, was one of the most interesting clusters in this collage-composition part of the project. This cluster featured: a photograph I took of a very quiet intersection, which the Turner Valley Family Inn Chinese-Western occupied; a print of a postcard, dating from 1880s, with the main street and the sign “Royal Cafe” prominently displayed; a take-out menu (pink, with a cartoon train on the front) I had picked up at the restaurant; and a fortune from one of the many fortune cookies I had collected over the course of

that summer. Other clusters around the map followed suit with more photographs of the cafes, menus, vintage postcards, a *maneki-neko* cat, scanned pages from my diary, and fortunes with sayings like, “you have an unusual magnetic personality.”

The grid arrangement of my photographs of sixteen Chinese food plates (with ginger beef on all but one plate of grilled cheese, all eaten during my summer 2015 road trip) on the gallery wall, conveys the idea of photography as a document and an organizing tool, which neatly cleaves rectangular fragments out of time and space. However, in the case of ginger beef such organizing (cataloguing) process can never be complete as there so many restaurants and it would be easy to miss many, or the project would never be complete as new cafes are continually opening or changing over ownership. Since the experience of food resists rigid organization, as it is ephemeral and sensory, it therefore evades being captured and categorized. The experience of eating is fleeting but flavour, through taste and smell, lingers in memory; in fact, taste and smell are some of the strongest triggers of memory.<sup>27</sup> Trying to arrange these meals into a grid of images, devoid of smell and flavour, goes against the fleeting nature of the meal and, in this way, reaffirms food’s resistance to being organized.

The grid arrangement of photographs of ginger beef also represents the highways and patchwork farms of the Prairies, reflecting the grid-like pattern that organizes the land in the West. “Against nature’s irregular geometry, the rural world draws a grid: highways and train tracks, telephone poles and power wires, lines compressing the distance to the other world, the one made by human hands.”<sup>28</sup> These roads, power lines and other artifacts that jut out of the land constitute the human/land interface and its meeting with the long, straight horizon. The grid of

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<sup>27</sup> Matsunaga, Masahiro, Yu Bai, Kaori Yamakawa, Asako Toyama, Mitsuyoshi Kashiwagi, Kazuyuki Fukuda, Akiko Oshida, Kazue Sanada, Seisuke Fukuyama, Jun Shinoda, Jitsuhiro Yamada, Norihiro Sadato, and Hideki Ohira. “Brain–Immune Interaction Accompanying Odor-Evoked Autobiographic Memory.” *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 8 (2013). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22286798>.

<sup>28</sup> Strand, Ginger, “Framing the Country” in *Out West*, (The Velvet Cell: London, 2014), 90.

plates with ginger beef was an attempt at organizing that which resists being organized: the experiential, the sensory, the temporary and fleeting. Further, the act of organizing (in this case, images of) food speaks to the collective experience of sharing a meal. Even when eating alone, in many Chinese-Western restaurants across the province, I connected these places to each other physically: through my mouth and by assembling them together visually in one place to share with gallery visitors.

A parabolic speaker, hung above a table in the far corner of the gallery, played the audio so that once seated at the table and looking through the handmade photo book, the viewers would be able to hear the sounds of Alberta's Chinese-Western restaurants I visited—conversations, cutlery hitting plates, pop music and classical piano on radio, kitchen clangs, and chewing of food—while visually engaging with the work. Audio, therefore, contributed another sensory level for viewers, which was key for them to be able to enter my aesthetic recreation of the Chinese-Western space.

The exhibition space played a key role in my project, as this is where all the elements of the project were brought together, and which activated this space as a site of experience and participation; rather than of the typical passive reception of aesthetic objects. A wooden kitchen table, with four stools around it, was placed in the gallery, diagonally across from the entrance. As people entered the space, they were invited to sit, like the people of rural Alberta in Chinese-Western restaurants, and to partake in the commensal event; although, they consumed photographs and sounds—the experience of the Chinese-Western as an aesthetic reconstruction.

In exploring the idea of collage as integral to documentary, in research and thought, it became clear that using the idea of collage allowed for multiple non-linear narratives to exist at the same time within the framework of the project. The photographs alone, that I took over the



summer, spoke only to my representation of the spaces and people I saw, but when the images are sequenced in a book and collaged on the wall with audio and other found materials accompanying them, the complex relationship between people, place, food, identity, and varying experience can all come together in one dialogue. Jaishree K. Odin writes how this kind of collage-like structure (specifically, hypertext in literature) can be used to highlight the complexities of multiple post-colonial narratives:

“The literary assemblage created out of discontinuous fragments constitutes a whole which exists alongside its individual constituents, without subsuming them into any totality or without unifying or totalizing the work. The whole so created is open because of the continuously changing nature of the relationship between the multiple elements as the reader interacts with the text. In-between spaces or gaps created amongst disparate components of the assemblage provide pathways for other stories and other voices to emerge that challenge the dominant narrative.”<sup>29</sup>

Through disparate yet related parts, this work moves forward in the documentary genre by highlighting the complexity of identity through an examination of a food culture. The various pieces of the *Royal Cafe* puzzle gives equal voice to Chinese and Western and intimate and broad views. The installation nods to a history of documenting small towns, rurality, and the notion of a place like “the West” but is focussed on experience: the personal—my own journey as the documentarian and Albertan; the political—a story of Chinese-Albertan resilience, resourcefulness, and resolve to remain despite overwhelming obstacles; and the poetic—the journey of a place, of shared sensory experience, and of the landscape. By looking at Canadian identity through the lens of Chinese-Western places, this project highlights the uniqueness of these rural spaces in the context of a Canadian multiculturalism—or better yet, hybridized identity.

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<sup>29</sup> Jaishree K. Odin, “Collage Aesthetics, Hypertext, and Postcolonial Perspectives,” *Genre* 41 (2008), 42.

## CONCLUSION

*Royal Cafe* does not set out to make any conclusions about the Chinese or Asian diaspora in Alberta, nor does it try to map out one simplistic narrative of what these spaces mean to rural identity. Instead, my project aims to problematize an often overlooked aspect of rural Alberta life, to allow wonder and aesthetic exploration into how various identities fit together. By using photographic documentation, as well as collected materials and audio, my hope is that those who engage with the work will leave with a richer understanding of the ways that multiple cultural identities change and form over time.

Perhaps this project was, and still is, a way for me to chase a familiar experience and try to understand what it means to be home. A few years ago, when I began thinking about this project, I did not know how to proceed, which is what led me to formally pursue the project in Toronto. An alternate title for this project could have been *Searching for Royal Cafe*. What started as a sentimental journey to re-discover the Royal Cafe of my childhood and seek to understand its importance in my own identity—at least, it may have begun that way—resulted in a journey toward a better understanding of the rich, shared history of Canada, reflected in the Chinese-Western restaurants and food. This project has reiterated the importance of each person's history in what makes Alberta what it is today—an evolution of cultural identity in rural places. To those outside Alberta, the prevalence of the small-town Chinese restaurant in this province may seem an unusual phenomenon but to those of us who grew up in Alberta, they are a comforting reminder of home and a significant symbol of what it means to be a Western Canadian.

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As part of the exhibition, I invited Lily Cho to come and talk with me in the gallery while I cooked ginger beef from scratch. It was an intimate and engaging event. One participant commented that he was amazed at how many senses were involved in the space. This is exactly what I had hoped for. Food is a full multisensory experience, so, when we talk about documentary, food itself allows for a richer and more layered experience. By cooking ginger beef in the gallery space, I brought another aspect to the “documentary collage” and filled the space with the smell and sound of cooking. Standing in front of the images of all the ginger beef I ate I invited people into the experience I had by making them food to taste. I was able to feed them knowledge about these communities, of course, but by allowing them to taste and smell, I was doing what I had been invited in to do at so many Chinese-Western restaurants in Alberta: eat Chinese.

(Word count: 9977)

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