

## ***Roti and Doubles as Comfort Foods for the Trinidadian Diaspora in Canada, the United States, and Britain***

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# Dwaine Plaza

## **Roti and Doubles as Comfort Foods for the Trinidadian Diaspora in Canada, the United States, and Britain**

CARIBBEAN PEOPLE HAVE A LONG HISTORY OF SURVIVING ECONOMIC ADVERSITY BY circulating within the region in pursuit of better economic opportunities. This practice expanded in the twentieth century to include longer-distance movements to North America and Europe (Marshall 1982). Caribbean people always brought with them aspects of their Creole cultural socialization and a desire to return “home” one day (Lowenthal 1972).

Since the 1960s, a Caribbean international “diaspora” has emerged in some major cities in the eastern United States (New York, Boston, Baltimore), in the United Kingdom (London, Manchester, Birmingham) and in Canada (Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg).<sup>1</sup> Despite being separated by great geographical distances, the transnational Caribbean community has managed to recreate familiar social spaces, such as “West Indian” grocery stores, fast food and fine dining restaurants, clothing stores, hair styling salons, and music shops. These commercial business spaces are often intentionally designed by the owners with goods, a décor, or ambiance that remind patrons immediately of what is traditionally considered to be an authentic “Caribbean.”

One trait in the outward migration of Caribbean people is the maintenance of continuing links with the region as a source for collective and personal inspiration and development (Hintzen 2001). The Caribbean is a “home” of the imagination, helping to develop and further define the region itself (Goulbourne and Solomos 2004). Caribbean people are influenced by a polychronic sense of time, space, and relationships (Hall 1976). Those migrants who did leave retained cultural baggage that included Caribbean food preferences, musical tastes, a colorful patios language, superstitions, myths, folklore, and unique living arrangements and family structures.

Many Caribbean immigrants living away from their country of birth, or “home” country, directly correlate specific foods with times of significance and memory. Culturally, food plays a large part in many aspects of Trinidadian immigrants’ memories. Particular foods become fundamentally associated with holidays, get-togethers, positive memories, social and familial relationships, and locations of cultural importance (Mintz 1997). The power of food lies not only in the foods themselves but also in the symbolism and meanings that people equate with them. Food commands the full sensory experience; it is touched, smelled, tasted, heard, and visually explored, and through interactions with food, individuals mentally mark the moments, days, and years of their lives (Counihan 1999).

Roti and doubles are particular cultural foods used by Trinidadians to define and maintain symbolic boundaries of identification, and are consistently associated with being authentically Trinidadian. Roti is a traditional flat bread originating from South Asia. Generally an Indian bread, made from stone ground wholemeal flour, roti is consumed in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. It is also consumed in parts of South Africa and the southern Caribbean, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and Fiji. Its defining characteristic is that it is unleavened.

Doubles is a common street food in Trinidad and Tobago. This food originated in Princess Town, Trinidad, through the Deen family in 1936. It is a sandwich made with two bara (flat fried bread), filled

with channa (curried chick peas) and topped with mango, shadon beni, cucumber, coconut, tamarind, and extra pepper sauce. It is usually eaten for breakfast, and sometimes lunch, but can be a late-night snack as well (Indar 1992).

Roti in particular has become a symbolic food that unites Indian, African, and other ethnic Trinidadian groups that have historically been divided by colonial practices of divide and rule and the subsequent naturalization of “racialized” hierarchies. Consuming roti and doubles as comfort foods<sup>2</sup> gives many Trinidadians in the diaspora a reprieve from feelings of alienation and marginalization in cities like New York, Toronto, London, or Miami, which are often hostile to them because they represent the “other” (Henry 1994). In virtually all Trinidadian diaspora locations, roti shops typically position themselves as an authentic “third space”<sup>3</sup> location that provides a reprieve from a “hunger” and yearning for a gastronomic passage to back “home.”

This paper examines how the Trinidadian diaspora’s early food socialization in their home country produces a long-lasting memory for roti and doubles. The practice of consuming roti and doubles in Trinidad while growing up has resulted in deep psychological imprinting in how immigrants living away perceive, relate, consume, and imagine a sense of “home.” Regular consumption of store-bought or homemade roti and doubles in New York, Toronto, or London often gives Trinidadian immigrants a temporary good feeling about all that they are mourning from back “home.” Roti and doubles often become a linking objects associated with significant memories and events that are positive from back “home.”

## **IDENTITY FORMATION AND MIGRATION**

Trinidadian immigrants, like other diaspora communities, make sense of their environment and their lives in relation to their own histories and anticipated futures. Trinidadian immigrants living in New York, Toronto, or London often alter or renegotiate their identity as part of the experience of fitting into a new culture.<sup>4</sup> There is a link between acculturation and an individual’s ethnic and national identity (Warde 1997),

which is also connected to promoting a sense of belonging and mattering (Schlossberg 1989). Ostensibly, for immigrants in a new country, ethnic identity becomes a significant aspect of the acculturation process (Phinney et al. 2001).

Trinidadian identities in the diaspora are often shaped by the twin forces of history and culture, which in turn are linked to imageries of myth, nostalgia, loss, yearning, and narrative (Hall 1996). Immigrants tend to negotiate their identity when they encounter new cultures. Their identities overlap multiple boundaries and become more fluid. Immigrants often develop a bicultural identity through the process of acculturation. A bicultural identity refers to a local identity grounded in the culture of the immigrants' homeland, and a global identity that comes from adapting to the conditions of multiculturalism and globalization (Arnett 2003). A bicultural identity involves an individual maintaining strong ethnic identity while embracing the culture of the host country.

In a similar vein, an immigrant's identity is indicative of a kind of "in-betweenness" or "bifocality," where their lives, values, and tastes are connected to more than one place or lived simultaneously here and there (Vertovec 2004, 221). This corresponds to what Turner (1974, 232) refers to as a "luminal identity," a space of being "betwixt and between." Immigrants constantly negotiate their identities "between here and there, past and present, homeland and host land, self and other creating an identity where each facet affiliates with different cultures" (Bhatia 2007, 197). Pedraza (1999) further suggests that instead of being amputated from their past, immigrants today concurrently exist in the past and present with deep emotional ties connecting both worlds through linking objects. They frequently create multiple attachments that are built on identities that simultaneously encompass two or more nations.

Various studies observe that Caribbean migrants in general, and Trinidadians in particular, do not forget their home communities or lose contact with families, community organizations, and political movements in their countries of origin as they become part of a new

society (Ho 1993; Olwig-Fog 2002) Rather, Caribbean migrants take advantage of new opportunities through travel and inexpensive telecommunications to be simultaneously part of their home society and the society to which they have moved (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Portes 1996; Vertovec 2001). Both home and the migrants' new settlement societies are simultaneously transformed by these transnational links. This can include infusions of food, music, dances, and festivals that celebrate the diverse contributions of these new immigrant groups into the host societies (Vertovec 2004). For many immigrants, food is an essential component of maintaining connections to home. Food connects across time and place, and for many Caribbean immigrants food is an essential component of maintaining connections to home. For Jamaicans this might be consuming stewed oxtail or jerk chicken; for Guyanese this might include pepper pot or metegee; and for Barbadians this might include cou cou and flying fish or macaroni pie.

As a direct result of exposure to systemic and institutionalized racism, many Caribbean migrants living in metropolitan countries have experienced a sense of "cultural mourning." The idea of cultural mourning has its origins in the theories of object loss as conceptualized by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud (1939, 29), the loss felt by the infant at the initial break from the mother compels the infant to repeatedly attempt to "fill the gap." The act of filling a gap takes many forms and may ultimately result in a perpetual attachment to the mother (Ainslie 1998). Severe object loss can be devastating and lead to a psychological imbalance with feelings of extreme sadness, guilt, or an "impairment of the capacity to function right" (Frankiel 1994, 72).

In most cases of object loss, however, mourning does not result in derangement. According to Volkan (1981), the mourner eventually finds "linking phenomena" that provide "a locus to externalize contact between aspects of the mourner's self-representation and aspects of the representation of the deceased" (55). Linking objects create "a symbolic bridge" that allows the mourner to reconcile his or her grief (56). Linking objects might include eating authentic "back home" food,

listening to soca or reggae music, belief in the myths and folklore of Caribbean culture, and code-switching in the use of language.

Ainslie (1998) elaborates on the theory of cultural mourning to help explain the transition that often takes place with immigrant groups such as Trinidadians, who may live in a hostile foreign location where the white dominant group racializes them or labels them as the inassimilable “other.” When an immigrant leaves loved ones at home, he or she also leaves the cultural enclosures that have organized and sustained their experience. The immigrant simultaneously must come to terms with the loss of family and friends on the one hand, and cultural forms (food, music, art, for example) that have given the immigrant’s native world a distinct and highly personal character, on the other. It is not only the people who are mourned but the culture itself, which is inseparable from the loved ones whom it holds (118).

Ainslie draws on Winnicott’s theory, which suggests that immigrants living abroad often find a space to engage in activities “that bridge the emotional gaps” created by their feelings of dislocation and loss (1969, 91). This space allows first-generation immigrants and their children (the second generation) to restore the object loss they feel. This might include the engagement in activities that create the “illusion of restoration of what was lost” (92), such as regularly consuming “back home” food, going into a social space (such as a night club) where a single ethnic group predominates, attending a church whose members are mainly from a similar ethnic origin, or participating in a cultural event that is from one specific ethnic group (such as a reggae performance). Ainslie further notes that immigrants tend to fill this potential “empty” space with activities, objects, or artifacts that keep alive continuity with their homeland. In this regard, the potential space serves as a platform where immigrants can begin to negotiate their adaptation to the new environment but also surround themselves for a moment with memories of “back home.”

## FOOD AS A CULTURAL MARKER

Food's cultural significance and its role in the articulation of group identity have been well researched (Mintz 1997; Douglas 1997; Counihan and Van Esterik 1997). Mintz (1986), Appadurai (1997), Wilk (1997), and Bell (2002) help to contextualize and trace global food entanglements and national cuisine discourses in relation to which particular domestic food practices frame their meanings. Food practices mark social boundaries but are also used to construct identities. Losing traditional culinary practices for many immigrants is equated with the "abandonment of community, family, and religion" (Gabaccia 1998, 54). Food has the power to ground us in place and at the same time (through memory) helps us transcend our present moment. Gabaccia asserts that "to eat the familiar home food is to be at home, at least in the heart—as well as the stomach" (56). Traditional foods and foodways thus serve to ease the difficulty and stress associated with migration and life changes. Our early food socialization leaves deep marks in the ways we perceive, relate, consume, and imagine a sense of "home" in the world. The power of food as communicative resource, as site of narrative performance, and as mediator in cultural encounters is particularly important for immigrant communities (Counihan 1999).

Food is significant because it holds meanings that are at once deeply symbolic, sensuous, psychological, social, and cultural. The layers of meaning invoked by food come from its ability to fulfill basic physical needs and evoke important physiological associations, namely, our senses, emotions and memories (Counihan 1999). Food choices for immigrants convey cultural meaning for diasporas (Weismantel 1988). The multiple ways that migrant groups remember their homeland through the eating and sharing of food, and recreate a cultural community at a distance from the homeland, reveal the critical role of food in the diasporic experience. Food consumption and the ways of its preparation manifest the relationship with "home" whether this manifestation is rendered nostalgic, mechanical, reflective, inauspicious, or idealistic. In any case, our knowledge and experience of food comes first from home (whatever kind of home it was), and the memory is

later perpetuated, contested, and negotiated in different ways. This is both a social and a personal experience, which among many other cultural, political, or religious experiences contributes to the net of social relationships and to our identities.

Food making and food consumption project the concept of “home,” understood as a state of normalcy to be regained in the face of the destabilized conditions of life in the diaspora. The experience of food evokes recollection, which is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical (Sutton 2001). Food provides the comfort of home and a tangible link to places, times and people of importance. This can be especially significant to those who relocate to a new place and desire to have a connection to their past.

Foods become invested with cultural importance and significance through the ways that people think about and utilize food in their lives. As people symbolically link food to identity, it becomes a tool to maintain culture, share and display heritage, and transmit elements of cultural importance to successive generations.

Food experiences in the diaspora can therefore evoke memories that allow subjects to cross geographic boundaries, even if only momentarily. Food memories connect Trinidadian migrants to their families and their homes abroad by invoking shared experiences that transcend the distance between them. Foods like roti and doubles connect across time and place, and for many Trinidadians living in the diaspora it provides them with a feeling of both gastronomic satisfaction and a link to memories of all that is good from back “home” (Gabaccia 1998).

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This paper is based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected from a nonrandom electronic survey of (N=116) Trinidadian-origin men and women living in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. The survey was administered through Qualtrics, an online platform, and consisted of 21 questions. The first 10 questions asked about sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, the length

of time living in the diaspora, number of return visits, education, and employment. The next set of questions was a mixture of closed and open-ended questions focused on food consumption with special emphasis on roti and doubles. The link to the survey was distributed on September 13, 2012, and closed on November 1, 2012. While the survey was open two reminder emails were sent out to a network of potential participants. Respondents for the survey were recruited using a snowball sampling method, where family, friends, and acquaintances of the researcher's Facebook social media network were asked to participate by clicking on a link that directed them to an online survey about food choices. The researcher is Trinidadian by birth, so his network of over 230 friends was the starting point to initiate the dissemination of the survey. Once an individual completed the survey, he or she was then asked to forward the survey link to at least five of their Trinidadian Facebook or email friends. Consequently, the survey results are not based on a random selection of the population, and therefore must be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized.

This study is also based on a nonrandom quantitative content analysis of roti shop websites on the Internet (n=80). The sample is a convenient and judgmental one in that the researcher looked at websites that were created and are maintained by roti and doubles shops across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. A Google search for roti shops and restaurants on January 15, 2013, yielded 978,000 hits. To be selected as part of the sample, three main criteria were used: first, the roti or doubles shop needed to have photographs or images; second, the website had to be an establishment that is currently operating; and third, the roti or doubles restaurant website needed to be either created by the business or featured by other websites such as Yelp.

Qualitative data used in this study came from the typed-in comments on the online survey from four open-ended questions. These questions included: (1) When you do eat roti or doubles, please tell us the three most significant feelings that come to your mind? (2) Can you tell us if eating Caribbean food gives you a comforting feeling? (3)

Can you share any stories about measures that you may have taken in the past to find roti and doubles where you currently live? (4) Tell us about any final thoughts you might have about eating roti and doubles while living in the diaspora.

The data collected from these questions yielded results that ranged from a few words to many paragraphs. This data was analyzed using the “constant comparative method of analysis,” a strategy of data analysis that calls for the continual “making comparisons” and “asking questions” (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The data were coded and sorted according to emerging themes, which were then compared to each other for generalizability. According to Patton (2002, 55), inductive analysis allows for “categories or dimensions to emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated.” Essentially, as Patton (2002) notes, this type of analysis involves the identification of categories, patterns, and themes in one’s data through one’s interaction with the data. After this analysis, similarities and differences were documented based on the researcher’s personal understanding, professional knowledge of the topic, and the existing research literature.

The use of multiple research methods to study roti and doubles consumption among Trinidadians living in the diaspora has allowed for exploration of the ways in which eating or cooking certain foods can be a physical and emotional reminder of another time, person, or place for Trinidadians. Roti and doubles often serve to summon collective memories and, with them, identities that further reinforce the comfort of belonging within a situation otherwise fraught with transition and stress. Roti and doubles also help to ease the difficulty and stress associated with migration and life changes.

This case study approach for studying roti and doubles as a source for comfort and identity for Trinidadians is exploratory and cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. What is important about this research is that it begins to reveal how Trinidadian immigrants use roti and doubles as a way to maintain a nostalgic link to good memories of back home, where life is often romanticized as

“ideal.” For the second generation, roti and doubles is a symbol of ethnicity and functions as a connection to the past and to heritage. It also allows individuals to forge transnational connections with their parents’ homeland, which is an example of cultural transnationalism.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY**

Of the 21 questions from the online survey, some very interesting trends were found in the way Trinidadians made, consumed, or bought roti and doubles in the diaspora. These trends reflect the nostalgic nature of roti and doubles as a comfort food and how these two foods give many Trinidadians a sense of their unique identity.

The sociodemographic profile of the respondents included 53 men and 65 women. The oldest respondent was 76 years old while the youngest was 18. The average age of the respondents was 45 years. The Trinidadian-origin respondents came from various ethnic groups that included 30 African, 36 Indian, 41 mixed ethnicity, and 9 Syrian, Chinese, white, and other groups. It was important to have representatives from these ethnic groups because they provide an accurate representation of Trinidad, a country with a very heterogeneous set of people (Ryan 2009). With respect to the highest level of education, this sample of individuals tended to reflect a disproportionate number with higher levels of education. There were 9 respondents who reported completing primary school, 29 who reported completing high school, 33 reported completing college-level schooling, and 45 completed university. This included bachelor-, master-, and doctoral-level studies. In terms of continued linkages to Trinidad, this was measured through the number of return visits since migration. What was most surprising was the high number of reports of individuals traveling back “home.” Only 9 respondents reported never having visited Trinidad since migrating. Thirty-nine had made between one and four return visits. Twenty-two had gone back between five and nine times, and 43 had gone back ten or more times. These rates of return visits suggest that this sample is maintaining a very close transnational connection with their place of origin (Vertovec 2004).

Finally, respondents were asked if they had experienced discrimination in the diaspora since migration. Thirty-eight of the respondents felt that they were treated differently because of their race in the diaspora. This was also significant when broken down by gender. Forty percent of the men compared to 30 percent of the women reported experiencing racism in their new place of residence. This is similar to the finding of Simmons and Plaza (2006), who note that black Caribbean-origin men were significantly more likely to report being at the forefront of racist verbal or physical attacks in Canada because they are often stereotyped and racialized by authority figures such as the police.

Turning next to the responses provided about the consumption of particular types of food, respondents reported that when they ate doubles the most significant feeling was, “eating doubles puts me in a good mood” (25 percent); “eating doubles makes me feel like I am back home” (25 percent); “I think about missing home” (25 percent); and, “I think about my Trinidadian identity (35 percent). These results suggest a strong parallel with Sutton’s (2001) research; he notes that eating certain ethnic food for some immigrants evokes recollection, which is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical. Food provides the comfort of home and a tangible link to places, times, and people of importance. The responses were similar to Weismantel (1998), who notes that the multiple means by which migrant groups remember their homeland are through the eating and sharing of ethnic “home” food. This recreates in their consciousness a cultural community at a distance from the homeland.

The respondents who ate roti had similar positive sentiments to back home. They reported that their most significant feelings when eating roti were: “eating a roti puts me in a good mood” (56 percent); “eating a roti makes me feel like I am back home” (40 percent); “I think about the smells in my mother’s kitchen when eating roti” (26 percent); or “I think about missing home when eating a roti” (22 percent). The layers of meaning invoked by consuming roti for our respondents suggest a parallel with Counihan’s research (1999). She

notes that ethnic food for immigrants living away fulfills a basic physical need while at the same time evoking important physiological associations, namely the senses, emotions, and positive memories of back “home.” The sentiments from the survey also suggest a link back to Ainslie (1998), who notes that immigrants who are feeling lonely are often looking for linking objects “that bridge the emotional gaps” created by their feelings of dislocation and loss.

### **REFLECTIONS ON ROTI AND DOUBLES**

In the next section we examine how some Trinidadians in the diaspora experience nostalgia for the consumption of roti and doubles as a sacred, authentic “home” comfort food. “Home” for Trinidadians seems to be a psychological refuge, in the sense of finding familiarity, affinities, networks of solidarity, and of community; even though “home” is a constant aspiration it is also fraught with conflicts and negotiations. Home for diaspora Trinidadians is a form of spatial embodiment that gets translated through their active imagination. In interpreting Trinidadian place experiences through the lens of food, such sites are already “inscribed and inscribing” (Abarca 2006) by specific foods, memories, and former homes.

The sentiments below are taken from the five open-ended questions in the online survey. Because some individuals provided reflective comments related to food, we were able to piece together their tropes and examine how Trinidadians overall reflect cultural mores that are instilled early in life as part of their food socialization process. Consequently, food habits for Trinidadians and the significance imparted to foods are thought to be relatively stable (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). We use pseudonyms and a general characterization of the individual respondents, including age, gender, and ethnicity, to help build an understanding of the important role food in general—and roti or doubles more specifically—plays in the lives of diaspora Trinidadians.

### **Food as a Gendered Memory**

For the most part, food preparation in Trinidadian households continues to be a venue where historical enactments of gender roles are witnessed, particularly in immigrant generations. Women tend to be responsible for most of the cooking, and the influence of mothers and mother-figures is repeatedly evidenced in comments provided by the survey participants. As the kitchen has historically been a gendered space in Caribbean culture, it is logical that food is often associated with matriarchs (mothers, grandmothers, or mothers-in-law). This was certainly a sentiment reflected in the survey. Maggie, a 50-year-old Trinidadian of mixed ethnicity, makes this point quite succinctly when she recalls her mother's kitchen and the food she cooked there. She writes that

roti and doubles not only satisfies the palate and hunger, but it takes us back to our roots and homeland. All of a sudden memories and images flood our minds and hearts, and the feeling is euphoric. . . . I always can remember the smells of my mothers' kitchen particularly on a Sunday when she was working from 9:00 am to create the big lunch we would all eventually share. . . . Eating Trini food gives me a comforting feeling as it reminds me of home and family times. It takes me back to my roots and how far away I am from that, and it is saddening.

### **Roti and Doubles as Part of Identity and Memory**

Trinidadian foodways serve as cultural markers of identity and can communicate much about the immigrant experience. The symbolic meaning of roti and doubles as comfort foods for Trinidadians in the diaspora was evident in the responses from the open-ended questions. While there may be changes or adaptations to foods and traditions that accommodate a new way of life in diaspora spaces and individual lifestyles, there seemed to be consistent threads that connect descendants to their "home" culture. For Trinidadians this was clearly the consumption of roti and doubles as two foods that individuals used to delineate their

identity and to demonstrate positive aspects of their cultural memory. This sentiment was found in the writings of a number of survey respondents. Felix, a 38-year-old African Trinidadian living in New York, makes this point in his statement:

Roti tastes great, feels good, but it is unhealthy. . . . It does have a comforting feeling, because nothing tastes as good, it is delicious food; it is also what I grew up eating and is use to [sic]. . . . It tastes awesome when I eat it, not the healthiest of foods; but it feels good to eat it when I do; I have not come across anyone in New York who can cook as good as when you actually buy it in Trinidad.

Lauren, a 32-year-old Trinidad-born Indian living in Toronto, makes a similar point in answer to the question, “Can you tell us if eating Caribbean food gives you a comforting feeling?” She says:

Absolutely! It takes me right back to the feeling of belonging that I don’t always feel where I live. . . . The positive associations I have with roti and doubles can be interrupted if I finally find either and then they are not good. The disappointment is real, and it brings the nostalgia to a grinding halt.

### **Roti and Doubles as Sacred Food**

The strong connection between food and identity means that immigrants tend to conserve dietary habits (Gabaccia 1998). More relevant to this research, and not as well studied, are personal remembrance processes as active re-imagination and recall from the present. This “private” individual memory is crucial to understanding how collective histories and public discourses are produced and interpreted, as even institutional and state memorial processes are managed and produced by individuals through complex negotiations. Gabaccia notes that “whilst changes in language and clothing may come fairly readily for immigrants, food habits change slowly, if at all” (56). This was certainly

reflected in the responses to the open-ended survey questions. Amar, a 33-year-old Indian male living in Toronto, makes this quite clear in his reflections on why he considers roti and doubles sacred foods for him both in Canada and Trinidad. He writes:

Roti especially is quite sacred. It is a sort of a private affair that I love to eat alone in the privacy of my home—where I can create a myth about not being in a Canadian space. Doubles has lost a bit of its appeal, as I know it as street food, and this is disallowed in Canada. I wait until I return to Trinidad to eat doubles in public—it has a performance aspect to it [that is, eating at the vendor] that establishes it as an authentic taste. . . . Roti and doubles not only satisfies [sic] the palate and hunger, but it takes us back to our roots and homeland. All of a sudden memories and images flood our minds and hearts, and the feeling is euphoric.

#### **Extreme Measures to Find Roti and Doubles**

Nostalgia and a longing for a connection to back home can be manifest in food memories. Repetitive routines, such as domestic activities (cooking, eating), can have associations with the trauma of migrating and the loneliness that may be experienced in a new land. In the case of some migrants, the struggle to find authentic food can reach extremes. This was certainly the case for Cheryl, a 49-year-old Trinidadian Indian who lives in Toronto. She recalls the measures she took to ensure that her family and friends were able to enjoy the taste of roti and doubles, and the feelings that she had in providing this opportunity for them. Her actions are similar to what Mauss (1960) suggests: that the power of food as a gift “obligates” people into relations of reciprocity and solidarity even if not consciously intended. Yet, as Sutton (2001) has suggested, within some communities it is not an immediate reciprocity, or material exchange, or even prestige that is obtained, but what we could call “memory capital,” to produce from present food exchanges future food-narrative memories and remembrance. Cheryl writes:

Introducing roti and doubles to non-Canadians is always a pleasure, and gives me a sense of pride in my background. . . . I have brought roti and doubles for friends and family members living out of my hometown and taken it to them; for one friend I took a large box of doubles and roti on a three-hour flight (with a connection) because he lives in a remote area where there are no Caribbean restaurants. On another occasion I took roti and doubles by car to my brother who lives four hours away near Montreal.

### **THE ROTI SHOP AS AN AUTHENTIC THIRD SPACE FOR THE DIASPORA**

Trinidadian roti shops have opened in major cities throughout Canada, the United States, and Britain. Remembering the tastes of Trinidadian food and remaking it in the diaspora has become an important means of both cultural identification and an enactment of the past. Trinidadian roti shops in the diaspora reinforce food memories and make them concrete. In this sense, in the diaspora the experiences surrounding eating and drinking Trinidadian food are distinctly different from the experience of performing the same practice in Trinidad. The roti shop in the diaspora becomes a third space where friends meet and share life stories, information, gossip, and advice. For the immigrant coming home from the workday in alienating North America or Europe, the smells of familiar cooking in the roti shop are comforting links not only to the past but to a unique culture—links that have strength despite the pressure to assimilate into North American or European society. The Trinidadian roti and doubles shops in the diaspora tap into the early food socialization that left deep impressions on the ways in which their patrons perceive, relate, consume, and imagine a sense of “home” in the new country. The power of the roti shop as a communicative resource, as a site of narrative performance, and as a mediator in cultural encounters seems to be particularly important for Trinidadians living abroad. This was most evident in the qualitative data collected from the survey.

To examine the role of the roti shop as a third space in the diaspora for preserving what is authentically Trinidadian, a content analysis of the websites created by roti shop owners located in Canada, the United States, and Britain was conducted. This analysis did not involve the researcher physically visiting these locations; rather the shops with websites were explored over the Internet. The sampling methodology involved a selection of roti shops using a Google search engine. On January 15, 2013, (n=80) roti shop websites in the diaspora were located on the Internet. This was done using the Google search engine and typing in the words “roti shop.” Each of the websites was downloaded as a source of data. This included images, text, hyperlinks, and comments left at the website, along with any other information included as part of the website.

As there was no valid coding scheme available to study web pages constructed by roti shop owners, one was developed by adapting several content categories found in previous Internet and Caribbean transnational research, including Plaza (2009), who examined Internet websites maintained by second-generation Caribbean university students; Adams-Parnham (2004), who examined the Internet as a tool for Haitians in the diaspora to engage in civic deliberations and networking; and Horst and Miller (2006), who studied cell phone records to examine the “link up” transnational networking strategies employed by Jamaicans. Twelve codes were selected to study the online roti shops. The codes included Caribbean colors in the restaurant; palm trees or a beach scene visible; a Trinidadian flag present; Trinidad in the naming of the restaurant; “authentic” in the description of the restaurant; close-up images or photographs of roti or doubles in the restaurant; soca music evident at the website; traditional Trinidadian pastries, condiments, and spices for sale in the restaurant; soft drinks, alcohol, or beer from Trinidad for sale in the restaurant; Trinidadian social event or fete flyers shown or linked to the website; and display cases for the food in the restaurant. These codes were also based on the previous visits to roti shops by the principal researcher in Toronto, New York, Miami, and London. Figures 1 and 2 are photographs taken by



**Figure 1.** The interior of Sonny's Roti Shop, Queens, New York, 2013.



**Figure 2.** The interior of Drupati's Doubles and Roti Shop, Toronto, 2013.

the researcher of the interior views of two roti shops, one operating in New York and the other in Toronto. The photographs highlight many of the features, styles, and décor selections that are typically found in roti shops throughout the diaspora.

A two-stage coding procedure was used in this study. In the first stage, the websites were examined by the principal researcher and individually rated by assigning one or more content categories, based on central themes in each part of the website in the sample. The content categories were coded for either their presence or their absence. A concern about inter-coder reliability led to a second round of coding of the websites (N=80). The principal researcher and an undergraduate student in the social sciences worked independently to recode the sample. The undergraduate student was trained to become aware of the coding themes at each of the websites. He also received a written codebook that defined each of the codes relevant to the study. The principal researcher and the undergraduate student showed a good-to-fair degree of inter-coder reliability (Landis and Koch 1977).

The results from the content analysis showed that 75 percent of the restaurants sampled had Caribbean colors (pastels, greens, pinks, and blues) in the restaurant ambiance. Sixty-three percent of the restaurants had palm trees or a beach scene visible on the website or in the restaurant décor. A Trinidad and Tobago national flag was present in 32 percent of the restaurants. Trinidad was in the title of 27 percent of the restaurant names. The naming of the restaurant with Trinidad in the title signified to patrons that this was an authentic third space where one would be guaranteed authentic local food. Twenty-three percent of the restaurants showed close-up images or photographs of pristine-looking roti or doubles, images designed to elicit a gastronomic memory of the good taste of these foods. Thirty percent of the restaurants also created links to community social events or soca music. Twenty-two percent of the restaurants showed an image that suggested they sold authentic Trinidadian pastries, chutneys, condiments, and spices. Twenty-eight percent of the restaurant websites had logos or indications that they sell soft drinks, alcohol, or beer made in

Trinidad but then imported for consumption in the diaspora. Fifty-six percent of the restaurants were set up as fast-food takeaway. Although they did have some tables and chairs, it appears that 42 percent had food display cases to feature the freshly made food for sale. The patron could choose his or her selected foods, which would be packaged and taken to a cashier, who would collect money for what the individual requested.

What is evident from this content analysis of roti shops on the Internet is that the local restaurant owner caters to in-group communities, so a degree of familiarity and flavor must be preserved to retain authentic Trinidadian diaspora clients. This seems to be accomplished in two ways by Trinidadian roti shop owners: first, by preserving the casual and identifiable cultural atmosphere of Trinidadian communicative environments, including ways of relating, music, and decorations; and second, by maintaining the reputation for the quality of some key food items (roti, doubles, stew chicken, pelau, calaloo, curry goat) or other particular specialties of the restaurant. The restaurateur tries to tap into the early food socialization of Trinidadian immigrants now living in the diaspora, while creating an ambiance in the restaurant that rekindles the ways individuals perceive, relate, consume, and imagine a sense of “home” in the new world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The power of food as a communicative resource, as site of narrative performance, and as mediator in cultural encounters is particularly important for immigrant communities. Roti and doubles are foods that embody the cultural identity of what it means to be authentically Trinidadian. They are clearly potent symbols of personal and group identity for Trinidadians, and they can be a physical and emotional reminder of another time or place. These two foods form a foundation of both individuality and a sense of common membership in a larger, bounded group.

Roti and doubles consumption for the group of Trinidadians surveyed for this study seemed to summon collective memories and,

with them, identities that further reinforce the comfort of belonging within a situation otherwise fraught with transition and stress. Roti and doubles also seem to ease the difficulty and stress associated with migration and life changes that Trinidadians experience in Toronto, New York, or London. By surrounding themselves with linking objects (music, food, language), both at home and in the environment of roti shops, Trinidadian immigrants in the transnational diaspora seem to be better equipped to confront alienation and other feelings of marginalization.

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### **NOTES**

1. There are numerous postcolonial definitions of the term “diaspora.” Bill Ashcroft et al. (2000, 61) define it as “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions.” This dispersal from their country of origin is enduring, occurs in two or more countries, and entails searching for employment, empire building, or community expansion through trade (Satzewich and Wong 2006). Diasporas are characterized by “traumas of separation and dislocation” but are also “the sites of hope and new beginnings” (Brah 1996, 193).
2. Comfort food is a traditionally eaten food that often provides a nostalgic or sentimental feeling to the person eating it. Comfort foods often pique positive emotions and relieve individuals from previously negative psychological feelings.
3. Homi Bhabha (2004) notes that there are three “spaces” of construction, one being the domestic sphere, a sacred location for family and the home. A second space is the sphere of civic engagement, including school, work, and other forms of public participation. Set against these is a “third space” where an individual can sometimes plot out

transgressive acts against the oppressors. This is the space in which oppressed individuals can let their “real” selves show without fear of being judged or ridiculed by the oppressors.

4. Kidd (2002, 5–26) articulates three types of identity: “individual identity” (the idea of personhood embraced by each individual); “social identity” (a collective or shared sense of belonging to a group); and “cultural identity” (the notion of being part of a distinctive group based on ethnicity, culture, or a subculture).

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