



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kimberly A. Gratz for the degree of Master of Art in Interdisciplinary Studies in English and Anthropology presented on April 23, 2012.

Title: The Power of Conceptual Metaphor in Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and *Birds of Paradise*

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Anita Helle

This thesis examines the use of religious metaphor as it applies to food in two literary works by Diana Abu-Jaber. First, *The Language of Baklava*, a culinary memoir published in 2005, reveals aspects of cultural identity and memory through food and metaphor. Second, Abu-Jaber's most recent novel, *Birds of Paradise*, explores complex family relationships enacted through metaphor. The analyses of textual representations of food rely on a theoretical framework that includes a cultural anthropological perspective, as well as a rhetorical perspective, and uses textual analysis to examine metaphor and food narratives in literature.

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The Power of Conceptual Metaphor in  
Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and *Birds of Paradise*

by  
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Kimberly A. Gratz, Author

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The Power of Conceptual Metaphor in  
Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* and *Birds of Paradise*

**Chapter One: Introduction**

Food is a powerful, ubiquitous metaphor. It informs our senses, conjures emotions and speaks to our fundamental survival. Terry Eagleton, literary critic and cultural theorist, claims that “food looks like an object but is actually a relationship, and the same is true of literary works” (Griffiths 213). Because food is central to cultural life, its metaphorical existence can be presumed to be equally persistent. As a metaphorical representation, food extends our relationship with literature and lends context to cultural and social interactions. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz claims that “consumption is always conditioned by meaning” and is “at the same time a form of self-identification and communication” (Round 54).

Voices and perspectives from many disciplines have contributed to the academic field of food studies, and consequently, my study is interdisciplinary. I am analyzing textual representations of food informed by a cultural anthropological perspective, and a rhetorical perspective, and employing textual analysis to examine metaphor and food narratives in literature. This study explores the use of religious metaphor as it applies to food in two literary works by Diana Abu-Jaber: *The Language of Baklava*, a culinary memoir published in 2005, that reveals aspects of cultural identity and memory through food and metaphor, and *Birds of Paradise*, Abu-

Jaber's most recent novel, published in 2011, that explores complex family relationships enacted through metaphor.

This topic emerged from my interest in the use of food imagery and metaphor in literature, and the nuances that surround its use as a literary device. Patterns emerged as I read authors across disciplines who employ religious metaphors to describe the experience of eating and tasting, and to make judgments about food and the methods of food preparation, and even to make direct comparisons between food and the divine. Generally, hegemonic Christian narratives are reflected in the analyses presented in this study.

Often food metaphors are treated as neutral by the author, as if this metaphor is not an intentional literary device at all, but a phrase or thought so embedded in our language as to slip easily onto the page, its power conveyed in a nearly unconscious manner. This occurs in literature as well as in popular culture, and one of the best examples is in the cultural icon Betty Crocker. Even as she was a fabrication of the executives at General Mills, she was named the most popular woman in America by *Fortune* magazine in 1945 indicating that while the General Mills executives were intentional in their creation, consumers viewed her as a person whose influence they valued (Marks 2005). Crocker's first cookbook is dedicated to "homemakers everywhere—to all of you who like to minister to your dear ones by serving them good food" (Tisdale 105). Author James Gray, in his book about the history of General Mills, calls Crocker "a high priestess who presides over a cult of excellence...[she is] the eternal and supreme housewife" (Gray 115). A CBS story in

2005 likened the sales of *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book* as rivaling those of “the other big book, the Bible” (CBS.com). These characterizations suggest that the executives at General Mills were attempting to create the ideal housewife and imbue her with holy qualities, as well as to give her a holy book.

Another example of the power of metaphor appears in a column titled “The Morality of Fat” written by Molly O’Neill, former food columnist for the *New York Times*. Fat is a “cunning demon” for which “constant vigilance is the only salvation,” writes O’Neill (1996). In this characterization and blatant use of religious metaphor, O’Neill is following a popular Western cultural convention that aligns fat with evil. The use of this metaphor in Western popular culture normalizes the associations between religion and food along with the associated judgments. Another example is in the book title *God in a Cup* where author Michael Weissman explores the specialty coffee trade. The title is part of a quote from a coffee connoisseur who experienced a unique and flavorful coffee. Certainly this connoisseur didn’t believe that God was literally in the cup, but the expression is powerful, suggesting an unattainable perfection and evoking a sacredness usually found only in church.

In order to dig more deeply into the cultural structure that underpins food and its metaphorical networks, this study employs the theories and observations of noted cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, and cognitive scientist and linguist George Lakoff. Douglas researched the social and cultural aspects of food and belief systems, while Burke’s study was one of the power of language and symbol. Finally, Lakoff’s work on conceptual metaphor and its

systematic formation of ideology will be extended to a discursive analysis of the religious metaphors identified in Abu-Jaber's texts.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework: Douglas, Burke and Lakoff**

In my study Mary Douglas provides a theoretical framework for the discussion and analysis of metaphors and their relationship to food in cultural practices. Douglas has written extensively about food and identified food as a social code claiming that “the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed” (“Deciphering a Meal” 36). Douglas finds that food, in its representations of “pure” and “dirty,” signifies moral contracts. The code defines and relegates “different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (“Deciphering a Meal” 36).

For my purposes Douglas’ perspective is useful because food as a code not only defines social relationships, but she also unpacks the idea that food leads to value judgments and beliefs about others based on their food choice, the perceived pleasure of consuming food, the ability to prepare food, and the context within the acceptance or receipt of the food. As moralistic judgment is an essential feature in most religious belief systems, identifying judgment points to one of the ways that religious metaphor plays out in cultural norms and belief systems. Judgments about food are often caught up in dialectical interplay and opposition between social propriety and unruly desire. Douglas points to these desires and their corresponding judgments in her assertion that “an unfavorable judgment on social life follows implicitly from moralizing against material pleasures” (*Food* 6). Just as physical items of comfort may be considered

material pleasures, so is the consumption of food, especially in the cases of decadence and indulgence, and in choosing healthy over less healthy foods.

According to several studies, choices that one makes about food can influence how a person's character and morality are perceived by others in a social system. (Stein & Nemeroff 1995; Pilner 2004; Vartanian, Herman & Polivy 2007). Qualities such as physical attractiveness, intelligence, and overall character are judged in relation to food choices as noted by Vartanian, et al, "People who eat 'good' or low-fat foods are generally perceived as being more attractive, as possessing characteristics such as intelligence and conscientiousness, and also being 'better' people than are those who eat high-fat foods" (2007). The moralistic judgments that are made about food choice ultimately translate to judgments about the character of an individual.

According to Douglas we are unable to fully escape the symbolic role that food plays in our society, even as we might try: "If the modern consumer is not behaving convincingly as a market-minded individual, neither seeking or using education about food values and food costs, perhaps the explanation is that the symbolic aspects of food in the system of social class really get in the way of optimizing expenditures for health and hygiene" (*Food* 9). Food is a social tool that signals subtle nuances about class, income level, and the value one places upon health. Categories of food (such as "snack," "meal," or "drink") signal the social expectation and accompanying social boundaries, and as Douglas notes, "the taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one" ("Deciphering a Meal" 36). These considerations point to the

nature of food in our society as a symbol laden with meaning and class distinction, and of our collective willingness to align with the symbol over our biological needs.

As food symbolically represents the aspects of religion, including its associated discourse, these are acted out in a systematic and predictable way. Douglas identifies many of the consequences of this metaphor (such as social constructions based on food, categories of meals, and gender boundaries), although she does not attribute these actions to metaphor. Rather, Douglas understood food cultures in a more general way, as “clear-cut opposites like culture versus nature, individual versus group, male versus female, fresh versus processed...” (Korthals 2008). Douglas believed that metaphors are “exclusive of social origin” (Korthals 2008), suggesting that the cultural values in a society align with the structure of its conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, “Contemporary Theory”).

Douglas’ approach to anthropology was based on structuralism, thus introducing the potential limitations of being overly universalist and generalist in its implications. In this thesis, I propose to adapt the broad parameters of Douglas’ structural interpretations of the symbolic role of food, the cultural significance of the taking of food and the structural dichotomies of “pure and “dirty.” In doing so, I provide a locationally and culturally specific reading in relation to the themes and textual motifs of Abu-Jaber’s works.

While Douglas’ analysis of food and cultural narratives originates in the physical world, Kenneth Burke begins his analysis of such material practices as they are represented through language, and in particular in metaphor. For Douglas food

operates as the code; language manifest this code for Burke. Rhetorical theories of culture assume that cultural patterns develop because they are encoded in language over time and through variation or “individuation” of authors. As expressed in both speech and written narrative, language is intentional, persuasive and paradoxical, and acts as a powerful, active tool. Douglas depends upon the physicality of the world while Burke considers language the point upon which all ideas are formed and play out. For Burke, language does not merely reflect social hierarchies and beliefs, but creates them. Burkean scholars assert “for Burke the world is encountered only in and through language” (Murray 28). In Burke’s view, community is created through our shared understandings and beliefs about symbols. These symbols, however, are difficult to recognize as they are integrated into our language and thought processes. One example of a ubiquitous symbol is food. Our collective reality is filtered through language and our understanding of events, our interpretations of ideas, and our classifications are all a result of language. In a Burkean analysis of the relationship between language and the material world, it would be logical to infer that one of the most potent symbols of social value is encoded in metaphors associated with food.

One of the most powerful filters, or tropes, of social value according to Burke, is metaphor. Metaphor can create a multitude of interpretations, while shared experiences of the metaphor can align interpretations and produce cohesion in a community. “Classifications lead to attitudes, which in turn lead to action” (Burke, *Permanence* 4). This action of linguistic expression may also be moral as Burke credits language with establishing values in the moral and spiritual world: “language

establishes value systems [and] calls for moral action” (Foss 76). The shared experience of understanding through metaphor creates bonds and community structure (Murray 33), and it is through the process of forming a symbolic understanding from a common belief that continuity is realized. “Men do not communicate by a neutral vocabulary,” writes Burke, “in the profoundest human sense, one communicates by weighted vocabulary in which the weightings are shared by his group as a whole (*Permanence* 162).

George Lakoff, cognitive scientist, linguist and noted researcher, has modernized and honed a Burkean understanding of the symbolic power of language by focusing more specifically on metaphor. Lakoff attributes the power of conceptual metaphors in our language to the systematic shaping of our collective belief systems and resulting behavior (*Metaphors* 5). Lakoff defines metaphors such as those encoded in representation as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (*Metaphors* 5).

While Lakoff does not write directly about food metaphors, his research about the discursive power of metaphor and its power to shape ideology and behavior is applied in this thesis. I have named the metaphor Food is Religion to represent the network of metaphorical associations around the representations of food following Lakoff’s convention that corresponds to a set of “conceptual correspondences” or metaphorical mappings (“Contemporary Theory” 5) that align a concept with its metaphorical equivalent, and according to Lakoff, are “grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge” (“Contemporary Theory” 2). These mappings

appear throughout this research; some in this section are identified as common metaphorical phrases, and others occur throughout the textual analyses.

Lakoff's ideas about metaphor follow Burke's notion that language forms our ideas and creates a shared reality. Lakoff claims that we think in terms of metaphor and then unconsciously act out the consequences of the metaphor. According to Lakoff, our conceptual system is "fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (*Metaphors* 158). Because language dictates our conceptual system, the way that we think about things and act upon them is intimately related to metaphor. Metaphors "play a central role in the construction of social and political reality," according to Lakoff (*Metaphors* 159). Just as language for Burke not only reflects the world, but creates our understanding of it (Brummett 69), so do metaphors construct our understanding and create our reality as it relates to certain events in Lakoff's view. How we think about events such as arguments influences our actions and reactions, how we resolve an issue, or not, and how the event is "recorded" in our own histories as well as the history of our larger culture are all constructed through language. "We act according to the way we conceive of things," says Lakoff (*Metaphors* 5). My intent in incorporating Lakoff's views into this research is to demonstrate the power of conceptual metaphor as it relates to religious imagery and food, and how it systematically shapes ideology about food.

These ideologies play out in the context of the concept being co-opted. For example, when food is understood in the context of religion then the tenets of this system are applied to food. For instance, the concepts of sacred, ritualistic and

judgmental, among others, are applied to food and to the actions and choices that surround food. Lakoff, in his example of the metaphor Argument is War, further explains these results, or consequences of the metaphor. As an argument is perceived in terms of war (for instance, defending one's position, preparing for battle, going in with the big guns) the concept of argument begins to take on the qualities of war, and people begin to think about arguments as wars or battles to be won or lost. Just as war is predicable and systematic in aspects such as fighting, death, defense, winners, losers, etc., so do these concepts extend to arguments as they play out, predictably following the constructions of war. The consequence of acting out an argument through the concept of war can extend from one-on-one conflicts to our larger community, politics, business strategy, and our country's international relations (*Metaphors* 10).

The diacritical metaphors that equate food with the divine or sacred are among the most prevalent as well as the most under recognized. The metaphor Food is Religion exists not only in language, but also in the collective practices of our society, such as in the taking of communion, the sharing of a ceremonial meal, the experience of guilt for eating a particular food, the experience of redemption at having lost weight or in the denial of temptation, and experiencing the judgment of another based on food choices. According to Lakoff, "The metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason" ("Contemporary Theory" 6).

For the purposes of this study, "religion" or a religious system is a non-denominational concept that includes general spiritual practices extending from the Western idea of Christianity to traditions such as Voodoo and Greek Mythology. In

this study rituals such as communion, baptism and sacrifice are represented, as are practices associated with black magic and representations of goddesses in Greek mythology. The pairing of food and religion, and the resulting consequences, are not dependent upon a single understanding of religion or spirituality, but do depend upon the mystery, power and reverence that are exhibited in these and other belief systems.

In everyday language this metaphor is represented through common phrases such as:

The cake is *heavenly*.  
 The cookies are *sinful*.  
 I was *good* and had a salad at lunch.  
 Betty Crocker issued “*divine pronouncements*” in her cookbook (Tisdale 147).  
 He considered his grandmother a *virtuous* homemaker.  
 The *miracle* of modern chemistry allows us to have canned tomatoes.  
 I want my child to eat *good* food.  
 The soufflé was *divine*.

In addition to phrases such as these, many foods are also named with religious language, such as:

*Devils* food cake  
*Angel* food cake  
*Divinity*  
*Deviled* eggs

These expressions and food names are dictated by the metaphor Food is Religion and serve to reinforce the systematic nature of the metaphor by invoking reactions such as guilt, relief, reverence and mystery. These reactions can translate into actions as Lakoff notes, “Metaphors can be made real...in physical symptoms, social practices, law, and even foreign policy...” (“Contemporary Theory” 35). These reactions help to maintain the ideology that dictates our behaviors around food.

Virtue is often aligned with food choice, for example, contemporary food debates often center around conventional versus industrial farming as well as growing practices such organic or nonorganic. While there is much to debate about the methods and practices of growing and producing food, (including environmental policy, energy consumption, the danger in pesticides, and the plight of small farmers) much of the moralistic judgment that frames these debates (i.e. good vs. evil, sin vs. purity, wholesomeness vs. immoral) arise from the religious metaphors that direct our language in our discussions and considerations about food.

Virtue can also be witnessed in the context of denial, as in abstaining from gluttonous behavior. Francine Prose, in her book *Gluttony*, claims that while the sin of gluttony may not carry the threat of eternal damnation that it once did, the artifacts of the sin are present in modern-day Western culture in the form of dieting, and in our collective preoccupation with weight, food and our appearance.

Sociologist Patricia Allen suggests that food choice, consumption and the subsequent moralistic judgments are framed and defined by discourse (81). As these metaphors are reproduced they work to elevate food to religious significance, thus creating a discourse that elevates symbolic value while justifying the moralistic judgments that often accompany food choice and consumption. These metaphors are charged with the embedded values in our culture, thus creating the illusion of neutrality and invisibility (Richardson 122). It is through these metaphors that our values and actions around food are formed and often treated as “true” without further critical examination.

Another aspect of the discourse of food is that which Allen identifies as “insidious” in that the “extent to which it can operate outside our awareness. This opacity makes it a particularly effective shaper of reality” (81). Even while we are not consciously aware, however, we act upon discourse, just as we do symbols and metaphors that are embedded in our language. It is in this way that language establishes and enforces our value systems (Burke, *Rhetoric* 290).

The remainder of this study will examine the conceptual metaphor Food is Religion as it is presented in Diana Abu-Jaber’s texts *The Language of Baklava* and *Birds of Paradise*, respectively. Detailed textual analysis will explore how Abu-Jaber employs the metaphor to reconstruct and reinterpret her family life, and how it is used to represent the life and family of the principal character in the novel. Abu-Jaber writes across genres consistently employing the metaphor Food is Religion to elevate food and create a feeling of sacredness and otherworldliness in the kitchens, the food, as well as in the people. The persistence of this metaphorical pattern across genres suggests that the Food is Religion metaphor is a pervasive cultural narrative.

“There is communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk.”  
M.F.K. Fisher

### **Chapter 3: *The Language of Baklava***

Stories, when told through the lens of food, take on new meaning and offer a new dimension of insight. In Diana Abu-Jaber’s culinary memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, (released in 2005), this lens may not be overtly religious or spiritual, but aspects of the language and the circumstances suggest an adherence and a proliferation of the metaphor Food is Religion. Through Abu-Jaber’s revelations and use of metaphor, food gains religious significance and lends weight to the meaning of cooking and eating in her life in the cultural context of her father’s Jordanian heritage and her American mother. One scholar has noted, “the Qur’an describes the Islamic paradise in purely sensual terms using natural imagery to highlight the connection between Allah, food, and nature” (Mehta 209). These connections are formed through Abu-Jaber’s artful use of language as she evokes associations through the use of food, making food metaphors and social discursive networks more visible (Mehta 205). Throughout her memoir, Abu-Jaber tells her formative life stories using food as a reliable back drop, as well as confronts her identity in the midst of her father’s struggle to define his own identity as a Jordanian living in the suburbs of America.

In an interview with Abu-Jaber in February, 2011, I spoke with her about *The Language of Baklava* as well as her current food life and how she approaches food within her own family. This interview was conducted over the phone, was audio recorded, transcribed and coded according to ethnographic principles (Bernard 210).

One of the major themes to emerge from the interview was the importance of food choice in the development of one's identity; "People really identify with this, they build their sense of self [around food]" (Abu-Jaber Interview). Many scholars have linked food and identity and assert that food choices affect peoples' values and identity (Anderson 2005; Pascalev 2003; Allen et al 2008). In Abu-Jaber's case her identity was formed partially around the dual cultural experience of having an American mother and a Jordanian father as well as a large extended family. When she was in elementary school Abu-Jaber's family moved to Jordan. This experience very clearly shaped her, not only in terms of food choice and preferences, but in terms of language, culture and familial ties, as well as in her eventual return to Jordan as a scholar, which is discussed near the end of the book.

The reference to baklava in the title of the book serves as a condensation of metaphorical purpose in Abu-Jaber's writing. Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries vie for the title of country of origin when it comes to baklava. The word comes from the Greek "leaf" referring to the thinness of the phyllo dough that accounts for the crispy delicate layers in this pastry (Rodén 398). A rich honey syrup adds the sweetness and most recipes call for nuts—almonds, walnuts or pistachios.

A pastry of disputed origins with different spellings, ingredients, techniques and shapes is the perfect image for the title of *The Language of Baklava*. Echoing the motif of cultural displacement that dominates the story, baklava appears in the book as a resistance to Arabic food, and the language of the pastry is the power seized by

Diana as she and her Aunt Aya agree to use the Greek name for the pastry, baklava, instead of the Arabic name baqláwah (*Baklava* 185).

The opening scene in the book speaks to the greater struggle of identity for all of her father's immigrated brothers. Abu-Jaber describes the scene from her perspective as a young child during the event, as well as from her perspective as a adult, reflecting back with more developed empathy and understanding. In the scene, Abu-Jaber's family goes to her uncle Hal and aunt Rachel's farm to have dinner. She describes her many cousins in the driveway to greet them, and the unusual presence of a lamb upon their arrival: "I am stricken with love," she writes (*Baklava* 13). And, as a naïve reader, I too am lulled by the sweet and soft descriptions of the lamb with no inkling of what is to come. Suddenly the kids are whisked away by two of the aunties, taken into town for ice cream—and although Abu-Jaber acknowledges this is very much out of the ordinary, she is a child and this is, after all, ice cream.

While the chocolate shell that hardens over her ice cream is characterized as a "minor miracle" (*Baklava* 14), Abu-Jaber brings us immediately back to the farm to discover "a curious lethargy" hanging over the house with air that is "towel damp and heavy with mystery" (*Baklava* 14). She continues her description of dinner, which is said to be chicken and stuffed squash and comments about the guilt she feels, although she doesn't know why. Abu-Jaber is only six in this scene and cannot comprehend the connection between the lamb and the dinner, even after an older cousin reveals that the squash was stuffed with the lamb (*Baklava* 16). Much in this scene reflects the Food is Religion metaphor, from the miracle of the chocolate shell to the suggestion of the

sacrificial lamb. Not only are the images significant, but the process by which the lamb was slaughtered also figures prominently in the interpretation of this scene. Bud and his brothers were raised in the Syrian Orthodox church, but Bud converted to Islam when he was in the air force. Instructions specific to the slaughtering of animals, or *Dhabiha*, are a part of Islamic law and if they are not precisely carried out the animal is not to be consumed (Abu-Jaber, email communication).

Abu-Jaber finishes the scene from a perspective 20 years later when she recounts a conversation with her father on a visit home after finishing up graduate school. Her allegiance to this story demonstrates the power of the event as well as the symbolic importance of the sacrifice of the lamb to her father's family. Abu-Jaber's father, Bud, tells the story of the lamb and how the brothers intended to butcher it and eat it just as their family had done when they were kids in Jordan. While the boys hadn't been directly involved in the butchering in Jordan, their family had owned a farm and had prepared fresh meat for cooking on the grill. The brothers were attempting to recreate some of their Jordanian identity by slaughtering the lamb. Instead of killing the lamb quickly, the brothers botched the job and caused it to suffer before one of them was able to kill it. It is a sad and bloody scene, one that still affects Bud, even as he tells the story from the distance of 20 years. Abu-Jaber succeeds in communicating the weight of the sacrifice of the lamb when she writes,

When Uncle Hal saw the runty lamb in his neighbor's fields, he thought of the feather-light springtime in Jordan when the countryside was filled with new lambs and the scent of freshly grilled meat and the way he and his brothers stood between these two events, birth and food, though they were only boys; so much responsibility for a miraculous, sacred transformation (*Baklava* 17).

The gravity, not only of killing the lamb, but of the need for her father and his brothers to locate their identity, sets the tone for the remainder of the book, forcing the reader to constantly attend to the fact that Abu-Jaber herself is never quite settled in her own skin.

From a religious perspective much can be made of the image of the lamb and its sacrifice. Sacrificial animals precede Biblical traditions by thousands of years, and in the Islamic tradition any slaughter is guided by strict laws. Sacrifice in many traditions is often aligned with obedience and atonement, and in the case of this scene the sacrifice was made to recreate a memory, to honor a heritage, and perhaps make amends with their collective past. This scene reveals the diacritical nature of the metaphors in that a single event possesses several possible meanings, all of which may be simultaneously accurate.

The family moves to Jordan when Abu-Jaber is seven and she is confronted not only with a new culture, but her mother's difficulty in negotiating all that is different and new. The scene that best demonstrates this challenge is when Abu-Jaber's mother sets out to make pancakes. After weeks of attempting to adjust to markets where no food is familiar, a kitchen with an enormous refrigerator—the only one in the neighborhood—and the general ill at ease in joining a new culture, her mother longs for something of home. The scene is set at the store where they search for the most basic of ingredients (in American terms), flour, baking powder, milk and eggs (*Baklava* 37). As the vast community of neighbors and family in Jordan is ever-

present in their apartment and in their lives, so they are on this day watching her mother attempt to make pancakes. One of the onlookers emits “an air of wrathful judgment” (*Baklava* 37) as the pancakes are produced. Abu-Jaber is tentative about the meg-shift pancakes at first, but offers up a bit to the judgmental onlooker, who turns out to love the “burnt American flat food” (*Baklava* 38). This seems not only recognition of her mother’s cooking ability, but redemption in the eyes of the one whose wrath was so threatening. This scene speaks to the personal importance of food as a cultural marker: Abu-Jaber’s mother had to make pancakes to feel American, as well to the dual identity that Abu-Jaber was trying to straddle between her American mother and Jordanian father. The judgment imposed on Abu-Jaber’s mother in relation to her food choices and cooking ability recalls Douglas’s assertion that food is an enforcer of social norms and gender boundaries (“Deciphering a Meal” 6).

During the time that the family lives in Jordan one of the family’s servants, Hamouda, is thought by Abu-Jaber to be an angelic, mystical figure who watches over the family, especially the children (*Baklava* 53). He is described by Abu-Jaber as a pious Muslim who believes that everything good “from a clear day to a scrap of bread” has come to him from heaven (*Baklava* 54). Abu-Jaber recounts a scene where she and her sisters are rescued by him from a busy traffic circle where they traveled alone to buy ice cream from the vendor who sets up there daily, revealing a feeling of “pure, ineluctable rescue” (*Baklava* 57). His presence in her story is a marker not only of the Food is Religion metaphor, but also of her cultural journey as she attempts to connect to Jordan and integrate it into her identity. In the same time period as the rescue by

Hamouda, Abu-Jaber also recalls “only a certain amount of space in my brain, and the more space Jordan takes up, the less room there is for America” (*Baklava* 58). She writes about the confluence of the two languages—English and Arabic—and how one is slowly beginning to dominate her speech and her thoughts, and she also discusses how her tastes are evolving to prefer Jordanian foods and smells. The things that were once familiar are no longer.

The mystery of Jordan also comes out again in this part of the book. Mixed in with the cultural mysteries of traffic, weather, and violent windstorms are the more superstitious mysteries and warnings from the native Jordanians. Munira, another of the family’s servants, tells Abu-Jaber of bad omens and misplaced spells brought by the winds (*Baklava* 59). This conversation foreshadows the trip that the family will take to the desert, to visit the Bedouin tribe and Bud’s extended family. This encounter, a “returning to the center of life” (*Baklava* 61) is described by Abu-Jaber in mysterious and ancient language, and although she’s never been to the Bedouin, she is nonetheless, “returning” (*Baklava* 61). When they arrive people suddenly take on ethereal qualities as they “blend into the air” and “levitate” and are attributed with “magical powers” (*Baklava* 62). Time is also suddenly without meaning and some vital piece of Bud that has been missing is returned in this setting (*Baklava* 64). The food takes on a magical, surreal quality, the “air sparkles” with the steam and aroma of the food, and Abu-Jaber “cannot separate the eating from the food itself” (*Baklava* 65). Also, in a stark contrast to the early scene in which the men attempt to slaughter a lamb, a baby goat is killed “silently” (*Baklava* 64) and then cooked properly. There is

no guilt in this scene, only celebration and an other-worldly sensation. The mystical nature of this scene suggests a biblical quality in the ancient traditions of the Bedouin people, the vastness of the desert, the sacrifice of a baby goat, and in the return of Bud to his family of origin.

The trip into the desert leads Abu-Jaber to an examination of her identity as she senses a “deep weirdness” about her “existence in the world” (*Baklava* 64), and in spite of assurances that “this is where you belong; you’re a wind baby” (*Baklava* 67), Abu-Jaber is left to wonder “whether people have to decide exactly who they are and where exactly their home is. Do we have to know who we are once and for all?” (*Baklava* 69). These are questions that appear to be influenced by Bud’s own search for his identity among his own people as well as Abu-Jaber’s growing awareness about her dual identity as an American with deep Jordanian roots.

After one year in Jordan, Bud returns the family to Syracuse to confront another period of culture shock and readjustment. “America is a cold breeze,” Abu-Jaber writes (*Baklava* 71). Just as she has lulled the reader into a magical calm in meeting the Bedouin tribe, she wakes us up with the force of the cold breeze. Soon after their arrival in Syracuse, it begins to snow and Abu-Jaber ends up with frostbitten toes (*Baklava* 77). She then recounts her struggle to negotiate her life back in the states, as well as the fourth grade, “I’m trying to get my bearings. Throughout our first year back...I seem to see everything through a glittering mist. I hear the expression *American Dream* and I think that, somehow, this quality of mistiness must be what it refers to” (*Baklava* 78).

As the family continues to adjust, it is spring in Syracuse and they decide to have a picnic on the front lawn. In Jordan this would have been a call to the neighborhood to join, to gossip, laugh and come together as a community. In the suburbs of Syracuse, however, it is an oddity. “We are lost in the food, in the smell of grilling, and in the spring when there is a powdery sort of sensation sprinkling down the back of my neck and suddenly I realize a man and a woman are standing at the edge of the street, just a few feet away, staring at us” (*Baklava* 80). After an exchange where it is revealed that the man and woman are there to make sure there’s no trouble, Abu-Jaber is burdened with the understanding of the implications of what has just transpired. “And that’s about when I get the feeling that starts somewhere at the center of my chest, as heavy as an iron ingot, a bit like fear or sadness or anger, but none of these exactly; it is simply there, suspended between my ribs. I look up at the neighborhood and the mist has cleared...[and] the sky is empty as a gasp” (*Baklava* 81). At once the community and intimacy that the family knew at meal times in Jordan has quickly disappeared. The reader is again forced back with her by the cold breeze of social unrest and racism in Syracuse, 1969. This scene suggests rebirth with the picnic in the front yard to celebrate spring, although it is a clear violation of the social norms as suggested by the visit from the neighbors.

The picnic-in-the-front-yard event leads Abu-Jaber to a confession of sorts, seemingly spawned by the presence of panna cotta. In the first spoonful she is startled and wants “to laugh or sing or confess my sins” (*Baklava* 84). As she continues to eat and “before long, without even realizing it, I’m talking, telling all, secrets dissolving

like panna cotta in the mouth” (*Baklava* 84). Abu-Jaber confesses to a neighbor, Mrs. Manarelli about the earlier confrontation and the picnic and how she’s been treated at school as a result. Somehow the food in the her mouth that “tastes of sweetness and cream and even of the tiny early flowers the cows have eaten to make the cream” (*Baklava* 84) allows her to speak, and to express the burdens of her confusion and shame. This confession as heard by a friendly neighbor and enabled by food draws on the Food is Religion metaphor as Abu-Jaber confesses the sins of the racist neighbors and the resulting cruelty she’s experienced.

As the burdens of social judgment and exclusion add to the development of Abu-Jaber’s cultural identity, so does the relationship between Bud and her maternal grandmother, Gram. The religious conflicts in this relationship are well known to Abu-Jaber as she reveals her perceptions of Gram and the tensions in her family from her nine-year-old perspective. “The problem seems obvious to me: Gram is a baker, Bud’s a cook. Cooks are dashing, improvisational, wayward, intuitive; bakers are measured, careful, rational, precise” (*Baklava* 90). While the conflict is religious, Abu-Jaber interprets it through food roles.

Gram is game for culinary and cultural adventures as she takes Abu-Jaber to the Imperial Palace in New York for “Oriental” food, “Carnegie Hall, the Russian Tea Room, the Guggenheim—stuffing me with culture every chance she gets” (*Baklava* 93). In a separate piece that Abu-Jaber wrote for a popular magazine she discusses the relationship between Gram and Bud: “When my parents married at Gram’s church, and the priest presented Dad with a contract to promise to raise his kids Catholic,

instead of signing his name, Dad wrote in Arabic: 'I can make no promises' ("Sugar Fiend" 2).

As the cultural conflicts in her life continue, Abu-Jaber observes Bud and his brothers and their ongoing discomfort with life in the United States. Abu-Jaber recounts another visit to uncle Hal's farm, this time to celebrate New Year's Eve. From the moment they arrive the brothers are sharing their misery: "what is the point of this?" Bud asks. With a sweep of arms, he's indicating not only the grill, the snow, the cold, celebrating New Year's Eve, the alien lunar landscape" (*Baklava* 112). Their complaining continues throughout the day, "Too many times I think we'll never get home again,' Great-Uncle Abdelhafiz says" (*Baklava* 116). And Uncle Hal, perhaps understanding better than all the nostalgia and irrelevance of wishing for home says, "What home? Show it to me" (*Baklava* 116). During all of this, "Bud sits with his arms crossed and his eyes closed, nodding in solemn agreement. He opens his eyes to see the children bunched up on the couch across from them. 'Americans,' he mutters. 'We're surrounded by Americans'" (*Baklava* 117). This sad and disappointing dialogue was likely anticipated by Abu-Jaber as she commented on the pastry sitting on her lap during the ride to Uncle Hal's, "It feels like the true center of gravity of the universe" (*Baklava* 112). She ascribes the weight to a dessert, giving it the burden of God in that, for just a moment, it is the center of the universe.

"The *knaffea* calms Bud and Uncle Hal down and makes them remember their mother, as they forget again about being surrounded by Americans" (*Baklava* 119). Food not

only plays a healing and calming role, but also becomes the metaphorical center of all existence, if only for a short time.

At age 12, just as Abu-Jaber has begun to grow into her American identity, Bud decides to move the family back to Jordan. Abu-Jaber reflects, “That fiery reentry comes back to me, the memory of having to re-create myself at seven, at nine, and now again. It hasn’t been easy for me to construct this American self” (*Baklava* 135). Abu-Jaber also reveals Bud’s frame of mind in his decision, “...nobody asks for the children’s opinion. Bud’s eyes are focused on an invisible, interior point—the repository of his childhood, the place of innocence and wholeness, a brushstroke of cedar and its lingering perfume” (*Baklava* 136). Even in her awareness of Bud’s seeking for something lost and nostalgic, Abu-Jaber is still inclined to blame herself for his unhappiness as an American and his unsettled nature:

My sisters and I are chief among Bud’s reasons for moving back to Jordan. And I feel guilty for this, as if becoming American is a weak-minded decision I’ve made. A better girl would have embraced the Saturday morning Arabic lessons in the old church basement downtown, would have cheerfully made all the Arabic food and Arabic coffees her father wanted. I believe that if only I had willed myself more fully Arab in America, all this dislocation might have been averted (*Baklava* 138).

In the end the family escapes the move and Bud returns home from Jordan with little explanation about why they are suddenly not to move. The family is marooned as they have sold all of their belongings, quit their jobs, and must stay in a tiny apartment while a friend is out of town. Their mini-odyssey from the suburbs of Syracuse to prepare for a move to Jordan ends with the Bud purchasing a country house: “The

countryside feels vast and fabulous, depressing, inspiring, and inescapable: utterly isolated” (*Baklava* 141). This physical isolation only adds to the cultural isolation that Abu-Jaber already feels.

Abu-Jaber learns to negotiate her new landscape with the help of her cousins who also live in the country, and her new high school with the help of other kids whose parents’ are immigrants. One of the stories that Abu-Jaber recounts is about Mr. Basilovich, the father of her friend Olga. He is a survivor of the Nazi death camps and continues to suffer from his experience, and is dramatically affected by Bud’s stuffed cabbage. Mr. Basilovich is inspired to cook the “Russian-Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish version of stuffed cabbages” for Abu-Jaber and surprises Olga and her sisters as he cooks (*Baklava* 164). This inspiration recalls the magical quality of Jordanian food that Abu-Jaber celebrates throughout the book. Shortly after Mr. Basilovich cooks for Abu-Jaber he is hospitalized because he can’t stop crying, and a few days later commits suicide by jumping out of a six-story window. The tragedy is punctuated by Abu-Jaber’s encounter with a pigeon the morning of the funeral, “I hold still, barely breathing, and stare at the bird. It comes so close that I think it will climb up my arm. It turns its profile to me, watching for a long moment with its unblinking eye” (*Baklava* 166). This experience is significant for Abu-Jaber in the terms of the food as well as the a link to the spiritual world, “some years later I learn that *golubsti*, the name of Mr. Basilovich’s stuffed cabbages, refers to their plump round shape and means, literally, ‘pigeon’” (*Baklava* 166). It is a chilling moment in the book, and one that aligns the afterlife with food and employs the Food is Religion metaphor.

Just as the family was poised to move back to Jordan, so were they prepared and ready when Bud attempted to open a new restaurant. “According to Bud, this golden place...will be a Shangri-la that finally heals the old wound between East and West. All languages will be spoken here, all religions honored. And the food will be pure and true as the first food, the kind that weighed down golden boughs and shone in the wind” (*Baklava* 172). With Bud’s idealist vision of cultural, religious, and culinary harmony, the reader understands that this will not be—it cannot be—the way that Bud’s life will go. What he seeks is the best in people, the best in cultures, and the best of what he remembers of his childhood in Jordan. Just as the reader is tipped off to this impossibility, Abu-Jaber reveals the fate of the restaurant not-to-be as the sellers’ back out at the last moment. In Bud’s preparation to be a restaurant owner he attempts to embrace being an American, “America the beautiful. It’s right here. And it’s here I tell you: Come here, open a restaurant, be who you are...I have been crazy to want to go back home” (*Baklava* 174). Abu-Jaber reacts to the disappointment of not getting the restaurant with empathy as she and Bud share a common trait when faced with big disappointments: “[we] seize up, our insides tightening fiercely around our desires” (*Baklava* 176). Although she wasn’t initially excited about the restaurant plan, she is now disappointed and in mourning with her father. The idea that cooking and serving food could bring harmony and peace between East and West demonstrates the power of belief in food, and thus reinforces the metaphor Food is Religion.

The chapter that shares the name of the title of the book, “The Language of Baklava,” tells a story of Abu-Jaber in adolescence, how her relationship with Bud had

evolved into the “Long War” (*Baklava* 181), and the resulting intervention of Aunt Aya and baklava. Bud and Abu-Jaber fight, and he would threaten to send her back to Jordan. Abu-Jaber characterizes Bud at this time as “trapped, destitute in the American dream” (*Baklava* 182). The confluence of her adolescence and his unhappiness combine to create storms and fights “like thunder through the house” (*Baklava* 182). These fights as she recounts them often contained the worst statements either could imagine to make, “You deny your ancestors and culture and your whole family!” says Bud, as Abu-Jaber fires back, “My family isn’t Jordanian, my family is American!” (*Baklava* 182). At this point in the book the conflicts in their respective identities are still alive and continue to play a vital and volatile role in how they relate to one another.

Aya, a visiting aunt from Jordan, enters the scene during the time of the stormy fighting. Abu-Jaber met her in Jordan when she was eight and recalls her as mysterious and exotic, and the one in the family who “knows the ways of the Bedu” (*Baklava* 183). She is the trusted medicine woman and offers traditional healings to the brothers during her visit. She is also rumored to communicate with the spirit world. As she introduces baklava, Abu-Jaber equates her cooking to something magical: “...they say she can tempt angels out of the trees. It’s too good, some of my aunties say, it’s not natural. For some reason, no one can remember her recipes after she demonstrates her dishes, and she never writes them down. If you write them, Aya says, they lose their power. I have been warned by some of the other family not to eat her food, told that it’s magical, a disruptive force” (*Baklava* 186). Food is granted magical,

mysterious qualities, and in this case, so is aunt Aya. Abu-Jaber and aunt Aya cook every day for week, creating “cream puffs, layered cakes, tortes, *kolaches*, cookies” (*Baklava* 186). Aya is an other-worldly figure, she is magical and she “tempts angels.” She is also the one who offers rebirth through baklava.

Aunt Aya parlays much wisdom, much of it new information for Abu-Jaber. “After years of assuming that the purpose of all this cooking and working—the purpose of everything, really—was to produce and grow babies, this is the first intimation I have heard of another way through life” (*Baklava* 186). This gift is granted to Abu-Jaber as she and aunt Aya bake pastries and discuss Bud, life in America, and life in Jordan. “Jordan is not the place he thinks it is. It won’t save him...” (*Baklava* 187). The baklava as aunt Aya makes it is “too dear for this world. The scent contains the mysteries of time, loss, and grief, as well as promises of journeys and rebirth...The baklava is so good, it gives me a new way of tasting Arabic food. It is like a poem about the deeply bred luxuries of Eastern cultures” (*Baklava* 191). This scene and the transcendent baklava represent the rebirth of the relationship between Abu-Jaber and Bud. Bud proclaims the pastry “magic” (*Baklava* 191) after a single bite and Aya proclaims that “eating is a form of listening” and then threatens to walk out of his life if he continues to tell Abu-Jaber that she will be sent back to Jordan. In this moment Bud recognizes his crime and over the eating of the baklava, there is peace. Although there continues to be conflict with Bud throughout Abu-Jaber’s adolescence, she is no longer haunted by the possibility that Bud will send her away.

As Abu-Jaber leaves home for college, she explores a new world of her own creation; “the night belongs to me alone. It is a creature of my own invention—a new, seductive country” (*Baklava* 223). In her trips home to visit her family she is plagued by nausea after meals and isn’t able to keep Bud’s food down. “I turn inside out, my body physically rejecting the food. A rejection of something more powerful than food” (*Baklava* 227). Just as saints and other religious devotees deny the bodily necessity of eating in an attempt to rise above earthly, physical needs and serve the spiritual, Abu-Jaber denies part of her heritage as she attempts to embrace her independence and define her identity. During her time at home during the Christmas break Abu-Jaber and Bud argue about boys, about her major, about what she is doing at college. She describes being awakened one night by purple lights and as she focuses on these lights she feels “a startling cellular jolt of exquisite love and connection...it is like a benediction...I sense the distance between places...start to disintegrate” (*Baklava* 229). After the purple lights dissipate Abu-Jaber discovers that she is hungry and travels to the kitchen to eat some *lebeneh*, “the simplest dish in the world: yogurt that’s been drained and thickened so it’s mild and rich as cream” (*Baklava* 229). After this nighttime benediction, Abu-Jaber is able to eat at home again, “The nausea has stopped as mysteriously as it started. I sleep soundlessly and dreamlessly, and I wake with a good taste in my mouth” (*Baklava* 229). The Food is Religion metaphor takes on physicality and Abu-Jaber’s rejection of Jordanian food is reminiscent of . Only through her epiphanic feast is she hungry and able to return to Jordanian food in a pure and simple form.

Throughout all of her stories in *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber infuses a sense of spirituality and mystery into her descriptions of and about food. She clearly understands the power of food to shape cultural and individual identities, as well as its power to communicate complex ideas. Abu-Jaber's dual identity is wound around and tangled up with her father's own struggle to achieve his identity as a Jordanian, and as an American. Abu-Jaber was confronted with her own need to make peace with her Jordanian identity as she traveled to Jordan to live for a year as a scholar after she published her first novel, *Arabian Jazz*. Bud's legacy of displacement and uneasiness with his position in American society influenced Abu-Jaber and ultimately led to her decision to live in Jordan. In her description of food and the events surrounding eating and cooking, Abu-Jaber invokes the conceptual metaphor Food is Religion as well as the mystical nature of Jordan, spiritual imagery and language. Throughout the application of the metaphor she communicates the elevated nature of food in the development of her cultural identity, and in her family's life.

*“The Lord walks among the pots and pans.”*

Saint Teresa of Avila

#### **Chapter 4: *Birds of Paradise***

The following analysis examines the metaphor Food is Religion as it appears throughout Abu-Jaber’s most recent novel (released in 2011), *Birds of Paradise*. In the previous analysis of *The Language of Baklava* the imagery was examined chronologically, following the flow of Abu-Jaber’s storyline. In *Birds of Paradise* the analysis progresses thematically to examine imagery and symbols as they relate to the Food is Religion metaphor. The novel is organized by chapters in which each character becomes central and the story is told from their perspective. The majority of my analysis focuses on the chapters in which Avis’ perspective is featured as she is the central figure upon which much of the Food is Religion metaphor is based.

The metaphor Food is Religion is revealed through religious imagery and interwoven into the life and family of the principal character, Avis. Abu-Jaber uses religious and spiritual imagery to infuse meaning into Avis’ life and profession as a pastry chef. From her baked creations to her physical surroundings, Abu-Jaber frames Avis’ profession and life in terms of “church” (*Birds* 161) and consistently references her pastries in religious and otherworldly terms. This imagery elevates Avis and her pursuits in the kitchen, as well as in her efforts to mend the damaged relationships with her family. She is grounded only in her suffering, which serves not only to propel

her forward, but also suggests religious overtones and calls to mind sainthood and martyrdom, although Avis possesses neither the conviction nor the holiness to properly fulfill either role. While much of the imagery draws on a Christian or Western understanding of religious traditions, some of it represents the religious traditions and beliefs associated with Voodoo. For instance there are references to Avis being a witch (*Birds* 167), a god (*Birds* 157), and to her cooking as a dark art (*Birds* 165).

The premise of the novel is that Felice, a thirteen-year-old girl, ran away from home; her mother, Avis, desperately searches for her for two years before turning the energy of her suffering toward her home bakery business. As the novel begins, Felice has been gone for nearly five years. In these five years Avis' marriage has suffered, her son Stanley, largely ignored and undervalued in the family, opened a trendy grocery store that is facing financial hardship, and Avis' husband Brian is in the throws of a spiritual and professional crisis. The novel is set in Miami, Florida and begins in August 2005, just days before hurricane Katrina makes landfall. The coming storm sets a tense tone, and the anticipation leading up to the storm parallels Avis' increasing anxiety and observance of Felice's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In this novel Abu-Jaber provides a title rich with meaning, just as she did in her memoir *The Language of Baklava*. In the context of the novel the title, *Birds of Paradise* has several layered and possible meanings; from the literal meanings that reference a breed of bird and a flower, to the many generic birds in Miami and the Paradise that is often associated with sunny beaches, warm temperatures and beautiful

landscapes. Beyond the obvious and generic meanings, Paradise is commonly understood in the Christian tradition as a Biblical image referencing Eden, and for Muslims a reference to Heaven. The reader eventually learns that Avis has named her business Paradise Bakery because she was thinking about cathedrals (*Birds* 161). Abu-Jaber gives this character an internal dialogue and an understanding of the world that is rich in religious imagery and metaphor. Avis thinks of her kitchen as a church (*Birds* 161) and the novel opens with a scene reminiscent of a communion ceremony where Avis places a thin wafer cookie into the mouths of her children and proclaims the cookies are like “souls” (*Birds* 11). Avis is also endowed with physical qualities that are suggestive of angels and birds (*Birds* 15, 350), and her name in Latin means “bird.”

Avis is not the only “bird” that the title references as a noisy “angry” bird next door is introduced almost immediately into the narrative. Avis notices the noise of the bird as she’s leaving to meet her daughter Felice, the singing “starts sweetly, then sharpens and escalates” (*Birds* 15). Avis later learns that the bird echoes the tragic past suffered in Haiti by her neighbor Solange. The bird acts as the impetus for the meeting and eventual (albeit brief) friendship between Avis and Solange. Finally, the flowers Bird of Paradise appear in at least two scenes in the book, one with Felice at a bar (*Birds* 64) and the other a mention that the flowers are stocked at Stanley’s grocery store (*Birds* 353).

The novel opens with Avis assembling a tin of the same cookies that she fed her children in the opening scene, but this time they are an offering to her daughter

Felice. A meeting time and place has been set by Felice, and although Avis has been stood up by Felice in the past she dutifully prepares her offering and is hopeful she can see her daughter. As Avis packs the tin of cookies, her husband, Brian holds one up to the light. His reverence for Avis' aptitude as a pastry chef and the beauty of the cookie she produced is evident, as is his anger at Felice and his anguish over the loss of his daughter, and his wife's subsequent pain (*Birds* 114).

The scene is rich in religious imagery as is the back story provided by Abu-Jaber. "Sugar and air and vanilla are elements of the firmament," (*Birds* 114) Avis used to tell her children. As these ingredients are from the vault of heaven, then Avis' offering to Felice becomes even more charged with meaning. Avis makes her way to meet Felice with the tin of cookies that possess the quality of "evanescence" (*Birds* 17). As Avis walks to the restaurant that is to be the meeting place, "...she tries not to hold the bakery box too high," (*Birds* 20) an image that brings to mind a priest carrying communion wafers, a gesture of reverence and piety. Communion wafers are also representative of the body of Christ in the Christian tradition, and reflect the physicality and body politic present in the Food is Religion metaphor. It is also revealed that Avis considers the tin to be her "talisman" (*Birds* 23). While waiting for Felice at the restaurant, Avis is forced to contend with a waiter whom she characterizes as "demonic" because of his rude intrusions on her pain and pointless waiting. These images combine to elevate the tin of cookies to something sacred.

Although Felice doesn't come to the meeting with Avis, the opportunity to complete the act of offering the cookies presents itself as Avis sits in her assistant's

car waiting for a traffic light to change. An “emaciated” man “burnt down to a shadow” (81) approaches the car and Avis first gives him some of the money that had been intended for Felice. Avis had brought only fifties to the meeting place and didn’t have any smaller bills so gave the man “some fifties” (*Birds* 82). The man exclaims “O Bondye Mwen bon sou late” or “Oh my God on earth” (*Birds* 82). In a “jolt of pleasure” Avis hands over the tin of cookies to the man as well, completing her mission of offering (*Birds* 82).

Images of church and religion continue to build as Abu-Jaber reveals that for Avis “every sugar crust she rolled, every simple *tarte tatin*” is “a bit of church. She consecrated herself to it...” making this her sacred and duty-bound endeavor. Avis’ training at a prestigious pastry program and her apprenticeship with a botanical illustrator demonstrate her commitment to her profession (*Birds* 86). The image continues, extending to her kitchen and home as “her cathedral to enter, to console her.” A friend said “that her pastries would be transcendent, if only she weren’t American” (*Birds* 161). Although Avis attempts to transcend her American identity through her final culinary school exhibition of her pastry as art called “Remembering the Lost Country” featuring cakes “decorated in perfectly rendered sugar olive branches, cross sections of figs and frosting replicas of lemon leaves” (*Birds* 86) she is bound to her cultural identity as an American. Abu-Jaber defines baking for Avis as “an exquisite transfiguration” (*Birds* 32). This image references the physical transformation of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels and alerts the reader to the importance of Avis’ craft. At one point Avis hopes that creating pastry “might have the power to save her” (*Birds*

86). Salvation may be what each character in the novel is seeking, but it is through Avis that the imagery reveals the Food is Religion metaphor most powerfully.

Avis continues her offerings as she prepares and delivers a tray of black bittersweet cookies to her neighbor with the noisy bird. The cookies are a guise aimed at giving Avis a reason to knock on the door; a more polite way to complain about the noise of the bird. The woman that answers the door is “slight...with dark brown skin” and wears a “cotton garment...the sort of thing that used to be called a housedress” (*Birds* 95). To Avis she appears out of place and Avis notes that she doesn’t feel the typical breeze of air conditioning coming from her open front door (*Birds* 93). The woman is not receptive to the offering and refuses to reach out and take the tray of cookies. Avis is forced to place the silver tray with the cookies at her feet (*Birds* 94). Avis offers more sweets to the neighbor after being caught “spying” (*Birds* 170) from behind a tree in the backyard. When she makes the second offering she learns that the woman’s name is Solange (*Birds* 174). Solange is a French name meaning the angel of the sun and is also the name of a saint venerated in France in about 880 (catholic.org)

Solange becomes an important figure as she offers the possibility of rebirth for Avis in the ritual to ask for Felice’s return. Solange practices Voodoo and the rituals she offers Avis reflect this tradition. Solange directs Avis to bake a cake and then drive out to the beach. They both go and Avis crumbles the cake and throws it into the ocean as an offering. She “feels a kind of flinch” (*Birds* 235) when Solange asks her to break up the cake and throw it into the ocean “for the fishes and the birds” (*Birds* 235), as if destroying her creation would be a desecration to her craft and to herself. Still,

Avis walks into the ocean and breaks up the cake, silently wishing Felice a happy birthday. She wades in until the water covers her head and she feels the fish surround her feet, feeding on the cake (*Birds* 235). Avis emerges from the ocean reborn and feels “a sense of tranquility” the following morning (*Birds* 270). The ocean baptism represents the diacritical nature of the Food is Religion metaphor in its complex and concurrent interpretations.

Before the storm’s arrival Avis meets Solange’s husband as he comes around searching for her. Avis has not seen her since the previous day, just after their trip to the ocean. He declares Avis’ backyard the “true chapel” and Avis hears “confession in his voice” (*Birds* 273) as he begins to talk about Solange. Avis prepares coffee and cookies and although he is not hungry, he eats the sweets as he reveals truths about and confesses their life in Haiti, the atrocities they have suffered, and Solange’s tragic loss of her first husband and son (*Birds* 276). Avis is aware of a “transaction taking place” over the cookies and thinks of it as confession even as it’s happening (*Birds* 275). When the man is nearly finished he tells Avis about the church in Haiti as it came under siege, and although the small stained glass windows weren’t covered they were spared the destruction of the rest of the windows in the building. As the man looks at the plate of cookies he says, “Little miracles, right? Something to live for?” (*Birds* 277). From the context of the conversation it is likely that he referring to the windows, but as his gaze is on the cookies he could also mean the cookies in addition to the windows.

The first offering from Avis after her ocean baptism comes after hurricane

Katrina makes landfall and passes over Miami. Avis and Brian bake “humble, crude” (*Birds* 347) cookies together and drive around in the aftermath of the storm offering them to people working to clean up the mess. One man accepts a cookie, “looking as if he might cry” (*Birds* 348). This offering is significant in the difference from previous offerings in the creation of the food and its intention. The cookies are “humble and crude” and also made with another person, Brian. Avis has gone to great effort to create the other offerings for Felice and Solange, and the tone of the earlier offerings is formal, and in the case with Felice, a demonstration of power in offering of the same wafer cookies used in the first scene of the novel.

The final offering from Avis comes after the storm when she and Brian visit Stanley’s store to lend him the money that he requested earlier in the story. Avis is not armed with a bakery box and “feels naked,” (*Birds* 353) “diminutive and humble” (*Birds* 354). She is “timid about this late offering” (*Birds* 354) and is disarmed without the power of her pastries. Avis’ vulnerability in this scene demonstrates her progression from offering the highly formal and labor-intensive wafer cookies in the first scene, to only bringing the thing requested by Stanley: the money he needs to keep the store running.

Avis’ family members and her neighbor, Solange, are also represented by religious imagery and through interactions with food. The images that dominate the descriptions of Felice represent her transcendent beauty and suggest her angelic qualities as they relate to flying. Early on Abu-Jaber identifies Felice with a “loveliness elevated into something unearthly” (*Birds* 26). Felice also has “winglike”

arms (*Birds* 30), and is a “Miami angel” (*Birds* 116). Abu-Jaber extends this imagery to skateboarding and compares it to “wearing wings” for Felice (*Birds* 127). Felice is the object of Avis’ suffering as well as the one from whom Avis requires the consolation of baking and of her kitchen (*Birds* 161). Felice’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday is significant for her family and while Avis’ character does many meaningful things on this day, the most significant is when she swims in the ocean and crumbles the cake (*Birds* 235).

Although Avis’ mother is dead, Geraldine is still very much a character in the story. Many references to her throughout the novel reveal how Avis’ understanding of her profession and her role as mother have developed. Additionally, Abu-Jaber infuses Geraldine’s memory with commentary about heaven. “Heaven is unhaveable, her mother said” (*Birds* 174), and Avis reveals that her mother’s essays were “trying to get at heaven” (*Birds* 270). It also seems to be her mother to whom she is making peace with at the end of the novel when she defines her purpose and what she is “hunting for” (*Birds* 352). “She believes that her work is hard and essential...she’ll be needed after the collapse of civilization...a crucial grace note. She exerts herself wholly and physically to produce an evanescence of sugar and butter—a phoenix’s wing” (*Birds* 352). The images implicitly suggest Biblical notions as in the end of civilization, obedience, rebirth and immortality, and the grace and beauty in her creations and abilities.

Stanley, on the other hand, is still living and while he is less of a direct physical force for Avis, she reflects often about her treatment of him and their

resulting relationship. Avis recalls how she discouraged Stanley from baking by rejecting a cake that he had spent hours crafting (*Birds* 34), and how she tried to get him to be a lawyer, “she murmured the word [lawyer] to him like an incantation” (*Birds* 32). Throughout the novel Avis is referred to as a “witch” (*Birds* 167) and the suggestion that Avis mutters a magical spell or prayer for her son’s career choice supports this imagery. Abu-Jaber also aligns Stanley with saints (*Birds* 192) and sets a glass figure of the Greek goddess Persephone over the main entrance of Stanley’s grocery store (*Birds* 324). The story of Persephone’s abduction into the underworld parallels Felice’s journey to the streets of Miami and Avis’ early efforts to find her. Persephone is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the harvest goddess; Persephone is considered the vegetation goddess and represents the changing seasons. The reader is not told if the choice of Persephone is intentional for Stanley, but because of the figure’s relationship to the store, it is a powerful image in relation to food and Stanley’s family.

The metaphor Food is Religion is consistent through the interjection of images of the divine throughout the novel. Avis’ identity is built on religious imagery and the quest for salvation as her bakery is her “cathedral” (*Birds* 161) and she looks to pastry hoping that it “has the power to save her” (*Birds* 86). Her actions are driven by religious ideals most notably in her continuing suffering in Felice’s absence, the confessions she hears, the communion she administers, as well as in the offerings she bakes. The imagery serves to elevate the food as well as Avis, creating a tension that when combined with the inevitability of the hurricane making landfall, and Felice’s

18<sup>th</sup> birthday, drives Avis to free herself from the confines of her suffering and resurface transformed. In this way Avis is much like the phoenix in that she is rebirthed, emerging from the ashes to be created once again.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined how the conceptual metaphor Food is Religion manifests in two works by Diana Abu-Jaber: *The Language of Baklava* and *Birds of Paradise*. By keeping the focus narrow I was able to more deeply explore how the Food is Religion metaphor infiltrates the language and imagery of two stories with food as a central theme.

In the 2005 culinary memoir *The Language of Baklava* Abu-Jaber uses the Food is Religion metaphor to enact relationships that tell the story of her family, her struggle to define her cultural identity, and the subsequent challenges and gifts of her bicultural family. In her most recent novel, *Birds of Paradise*, Abu-Jaber uses Avis, the character central to the Food is Religion metaphor, to embody the metaphor in her thinking and resulting actions. Food is predominant in both of the works, an essential vehicle to the telling of Abu-Jaber's own story, as well as that of her fictional character Avis.

In both of these works the Food is Religion metaphor serves as a ubiquitous cultural narrative that elevates food to a sacred status. Douglas' most basic assertion that food is a code, along with Burke's reliance on the power of language to shape our ideology, and Lakoff's identification of the systematic nature of conceptual metaphors, work together to explain not only the symbolism present in a memoir or a work of fiction, but to offer the greater summation that the language used to describe food is

never innocent. While my work in this thesis maintained a narrow focus, broader scholarship and exploration is warranted into the social implications of the Food is Religion metaphor, and the effects of the resulting ideologies.

During the course of my research I read several essays, studies and books that explore the current food culture, as well as examine and reflect contemporary food related ideologies. One of the books was Sallie Tisdale's *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted: The Secret of Food*. In this work Tisdale incorporates history, anthropology, food science, marketing research, and personal narrative into a critique of contemporary food systems and behaviors related to food in the United States. I interviewed Sallie for an anthropology project in February 2011, and she expressed opinions that reflected the ideology formed by the Food is Religion metaphor. For instance, in her book she writes, "Food is bonding, sacrament, joy....We have a very long history of treating food as a potent, holy, and mystically precious thing. (*Best Thing* 304). While Tisdale characterizes the book as one that investigates our shared experience with food, she does so in the context of viewing food as a holy sacrament. In using this metaphor, Tisdale equates food behaviors, associations and habits with religious virtue, miracles, rituals, shame, and the righteousness in the denial of appetite and abundance.

Additional manifestations of the Food is Religion metaphor that I found during the course of my study included an examination of religious imagery and food advertising. The power of the conceptual metaphor Food is Religion has not been lost on marketers. In fact, many food marketing and advertising campaigns take advantage

of this connection, sometimes by drawing upon religious images directly, and sometimes by implicit suggestion. Consumer food choice and consumption habits are based in part on advertising and the brand image that the food manufacturers project. Factors such as convenience, price and availability play a large part in food choice, but consumers are also motivated by what their choices communicate about their identity, how it may align them with a group, or set them apart (Mintz, 1985).

I also examined the possible link between the research about impression management and the moralistic judgment that accompanies the Food is Religion metaphor. According to several studies, the choices that one makes about food impact how others view a person's character and morality (Stein & Nemeroff 1995; Pilner 2004; Vartanian, Herman & Polivy 2007). This represents the moralistic judgment to which Mary Douglas refers and is reinforced through the ideology created by the Food is Religion metaphor. The connection between the results of these studies and broader social food and hunger issues merits further scholarship.

Another aspect that I examined was the weight loss and diet industry's historical and current employment of the Food is Religion metaphor to co-opt concepts such as sin, guilt, salvation, obedience and redemption from common religious tenets. Several contemporary weight loss programs contain faith elements and religious associations, and claim to be extremely successful. My question was how does the Food is Religion metaphor impact the participants' personal and cultural narratives, and how does the experience of belonging to a faith-based weigh-loss group affect the participants' resulting behaviors with regard to the weight and food

choice of others? This industry and its ideology is part of a larger social conversation about obesity and the current discourse proclaiming an epidemic. Further research into how the weight loss industry's rhetoric may be impacting our collective beliefs about obesity and our resulting judgments is warranted.

My purpose in this thesis, and in my research, was not to examine questions of social policy with regard to hunger in the U.S., but after many months of reading and thinking about the far-reaching effects of conceptual metaphors and how they impact cultural narratives, I began to consider the possibility that this metaphor—embedded, ubiquitous and demonstrability at work in our most recent literature—could be shaping social policy. More than three-quarters of Americans identify as Christian (gallup.com), implying that the vast majority of our population is familiar with the hegemonic narratives common to Christian belief systems and have internalized the basic concepts and structure of the faith. Further research examining the connection between the conceptual metaphor Food is Religion and the formation of social policy with regard to hunger is warranted.

Finally, evidence of the complex relationships between food and sacredness occur throughout history. While this metaphor is evident in current works of literature, the connections between food and religion began in the earliest days in the form of ritual sacrifice, and blessings over a successful hunt. Perhaps our contemporary understandings are unique—or perhaps we have simply adopted a new vocabulary in which to convey the ancient truth of the sacredness and life-giving power of food.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix I: Interview Narrative, Diana Abu-Jaber**

This portion of my study was guided by ethnographic methods and principles in interviewing Diana Abu-Jaber (Bernard 210). The research question driving the interview was: *what is the relationship between the language used to describe food and the resulting ideas of morality, divinity and virtue that are associated with food?* Abu-Jaber provided a personal food narrative in her memoir and both books use religious metaphor as they discuss food.

The Abu-Jaber interview was conducted in February 2011 over the phone as she lives part of the year in Florida and seeing her face-to-face was not possible. A transcript of the interview is included as an Appendix in the end of this document.

I approached Abu-Jaber with a set of questions designed to discover the ways in which her writing focused on food, her subsequent language choices, and the idea of morality in relation to food choices. As she has written about these ideas, or similar ones, my questions were in line with ideas and beliefs she has spent considerable time writing and thinking about. Abu-Jaber approached my questions about language with ease and her answers produced the theme: Food choices define and reflect identity and character. Three subthemes emerged from this theme, they are defined below.

### **Food choices define and reflect identity and character**

The first and most easily identifiable theme from the interviews is that food selection defines and reflects one's identity and character. I assigned this theme three subthemes: Anxiety; family and relationships; and socio economic status.

In the interview I suggested that food choices might be somehow tied to the formation of one's identity. This got the conversation moving in the direction I wanted it to go. Abu-Jaber was supportive of this idea and helped me articulate how identity might be formed through food. "Food is such a metaphor for everything. Every aspect of life and identity. People really identify with this, they build their sense of self around these kinds of issues," she said. Diana and I also discussed the aspect of moral judgment and self-righteousness that can accompany some people's food selections and ways they choose to live with food: "The vegetarian and vegan movements...do smack of that kind of virtuousness. I'm sure you've seen "Portlandia?"...The whole show is satiring that kind of slightly self-righteous, kind of pleased with oneself." At the time of the interview I hadn't seen the show "Portlandia," but have since tuned in to discover an eerie truth portrayed by the characters that speaks directly to the self righteousness that Diana mentioned.

As we continued to discuss these qualities Diana noted the contrast between her experience when she lived in Portland, and in her current city of Miami. "I do see a difference between the righteousness factor when you leave the Northwest and come to a place like Florida. Miamians are a little bit slower to get the memo, so they're not

as groovy as Northwesty folk are...It's a little more refreshing and innocent right now," she said.

The first subtheme in the larger theme of identity and character definition is anxiety. Abu-Jaber highlighted this topic when she said, "People love to identify with their food choices and it seems there's a lot of anxiety with it." She went on to tell a story about one of her babysitters who was worried about the foods that Abu-Jaber allows her daughter to eat. Abu-Jaber articulated the sitter's anxiety and noted that "this anxiety infiltrates everything."

#### *Family and relationships*

Abu-Jaber referenced family and cultural traditions to identify food with family. Diana was quick to point out the "difference in how I'd been raised and what I was doing as an adult...I was really surprised at the disjuncture that had happened." Diana went on to identify the increasing demands of her professional life as one of the reasons that she had drifted from the food traditions of her family.

In terms of relationships outside the family, Diana defined food as "a huge metaphor in Middle-Eastern cinema because instead of showing scenes of sexuality...they'll show people eating together. The intimate nature of food becomes a substitute for romance. The intimacy that we share in family food relationships transcends these boundaries and appears as the replacement for other forms of intimacy such as sex."

#### *Social economic status*

Diana's eating habits were affected as her "professional life developed...cooking for myself shrank and shrank and shrank as my work life increased." While Diana's experience is not unique—many people with busy professional lives don't have time to cook and often resort to eating out or not eating much at all—she demonstrated an awareness about this shift in her eating habits over time.

**Appendix II:** Interview Transcript, Diana Abu-Jaber

This interview was conducted in February 2011 over the phone, audio recorded, transcribed and coded according to ethnographic principles (Bernard 2006, 210). The purpose of the interview was to further explore the textual metaphorical motifs around food and religion in Abu-Jaber's work. At the time of the interview Abu-Jaber was still at work on the novel *Birds of Paradise*.

Diana: Hey, Kim

Me: Hi there.

Diana: How's it going?

Me: It's ok.

Diana: I'm just doing a little toddler negotiation. I think we've got the situation under control, we'll see it goes.

Me: Yeah, ya never can tell.

Diana: All kinds of surprises. Gracie is two years old now...yeah, she's fun...she's a wild woman. She's really something to write home about.

So tell me about your project.

Me: I'm working on...I'm interested in food and how people talk about it...the morality that always seems to come into it, especially with women, and then I started seeing it everywhere. I've talked with Sallie Tisdale, last week.

Diana: Yeah, very interesting. I like that.

Me: Keeping it contained is my challenge.

Diana: You just have to be patient with that long collecting process. Doing the research and all that background stuff.

Me: Yeah, it's been really fun...I really appreciate that you're willing to take the time.

Diana: Oh sure, absolutely. I'm not sure how long I can promise, we're a little bit on borrowed time due to my babysitter surprised me today so it's me and the toddler winging it here.

Me: I have a five year old so...

Diana: So, you know.

Me: I have questions in two groups. One is about food and food choices and the other group is about writing and your writing process.

Diana: Ok.

Me: Let's get as far as we get. I'll start with the writing questions. So the book I'm using is *The Language of Baklava* and I love *Crescent* so I'll probably bring some of that in too. She's great and I love her.

I was wondering what you learned about yourself in relation to food after writing these books?

Diana: Mmm. Interesting question. Let's see. Ya know I feel like with the *LofB* it really highlighted for me a difference for me in how I'd been raised and what I was doing as an adult and I was really surprised at the kind of disjuncture that had happened, my parents were very traditional in the way they raised us, we had a family meal, we sat down at the table, when it wasn't a work day we had all three meals together and on work days we had breakfast and dinner together. And my parents cooked every meal and on the weekends very elaborately, multi-course meals and they had dinner parties almost every weekend and they both worked and they had three kids (laughs). So I kind of thought of that when I was writing the *LofB*, I thought about how much cooking and thinking about cooking and food we did and it was something that I just took absolutely for granted and when I was in college as a young adult I actually had conducted a much more food oriented life at that point when I was newly out of my parents' house I had a lot of dinner parties, I did a lot of entertaining, I did a lot of cooking, rarely went out. Partially it was economic, but largely it was...that's how I was raised, that's what I knew to do. And it wasn't until...as my professional life developed that cooking for myself it shrank and shrank and shrank as my work life increased. And so by the time I was writing the *LofB* I realized that I had really moved very far away from what I'd grown up and I was living this life that was completely centered around writing and my profession and food had shrunk to a very small part of things. So that was a big revelation. Because *Crescent* was more of a romantic work (Hi from Gracie the toddler. Hi. Hi. Hi.). Because *Crescent* was...ok let me see if I can switch the situation here, hold on (Hello, hello, hello). Trying to find some visual entertainment...ok...sorry, I wasn't expecting this. Our baby sitter is a college student and you just never know....ok, let's see how this goes.

Crescent was a more romantic work I didn't really apply it that personally to my own life. I didn't think about my own experience quite as much. It came out of personal experience. I was teaching a class on Middle Eastern culture and literature and I was doing a lot of food journalism at the time, I was writing a column for the Oregonian on restaurant news, I was reviewing restaurants on City Search, I was doing the dining guide for the Oregonian, and so I was really steeped in food journalism and research and it grew out of the research I was doing and for me it was kind of a fun explanation of food as a metaphor for romance. I was thinking a lot about how, especially in ME culture, because it's so traditional. Especially with my dad—he's Jordanian—and Jordanians are very traditional. Because they're so traditional and so conservative you can't talk explicitly about love, or sexuality, romance, everything is put through the filter of something else. So even love songs on the radio they often will not have a male singer sing to a female subject. They will often have a male sing to another male. Ya know, even though it's a romantic song because it would be too suggestive to have the male sing directly to a woman. You know the Bedouin love songs and love poetry are always to their goats and to their sheep because it's too suggestive to address a woman. So um, food became a huge metaphor...it's a big metaphor in ME film cinema because instead of showing scenes of sexuality, any kind of bedroom scene, they'll show people eating together. I was thinking about that a lot and how the intimate nature of food becomes a substitute for romance and I wondered if that could be satisfying for a western audience so I was playing a lot with the metaphor and seeing how far I could push it. (Hello, Hello, Hello, from Gracie. ) Sorry, Kim, I have a toddler laying on top of my head.

(skipped the toddler dialogue)

Ok, so there's one question for you...let's keep going.

Me: Did you have any inspirations in writing the books? Either of the books, or just in general?

Diana: With Crescent I was thinking about Othello, actually. I had seen the play in Central Park—they had done a Shakespeare in the park and I started thinking about how—and of course this was earlier—back in 2000, 2001—I was thinking about how the Arab was kind of the Moor. In Sin the Park and in the film too they interpret Othello as African American but I started to think about interesting this would be if he were an Arab and how that would change or impact the way the story was told. That was really the first kind of jumping off point for me with Crescent. I wrote an almost reinterpretation of Othello the first draft of Crescent and then I tore the whole thing apart and basically wrote a new plot. I wanted to keep those themes alive and in play in the novel as I was working on it. And then after Crescent came out my editor actually was talking to me about and she said ya know you've got all this research you've done and you've talked about all this food, you're part of a food obsessed

family, why don't you just keep going, basically, and tell these stories—tell these family stories and give us kind of a food memoir and um, I'd been reading Ruth Reichl, *Tender at the Bone*, and really enjoyed that. I thought it was such a beautiful form. I'd never read a food memory before. I'd read Laurie Coleman(?) and I loved *Housekeeping*. Those were kind of my triggers, the jumping off points if you will. I just kept it going from there.

Me: *Tender at the Bone* was the first food memoir I ever read and I was completely hooked from there.

Diana: It's a beautiful book. I don't love as much the ones that followed. I read the others, but there's something really special about *Tender at the Bone*.

Me: I think I'll interject a few questions about food choices. Have you noticed a connection between food and morality, food and virtue, and if you haven't, is this something that remotely makes sense to you?

Diana: Can you talk more about this?

Me: So a concrete example would be—I go to McDonald's and get lunch and you go to Whole Food and buy a local, organic green salad. There's a difference, right?

Diana: Yeah, right. Yeah, you almost seem like a better person if you go and get the salad.

Yes, I definitely see that and feel that regularly. That people love to identify with their food choices and it seems there's a lot of anxiety with it. I've noticed that with babysitters, actually, because they will ask us, in a way that's filled with anxiety, when they're talking about their duties, they'll say, do you insist on only organic foods, what kind of allergies? Is it ok to bring peanuts into the house? Can she have a cupcake? Everyone one of these questions, just seems laden with anxiety. The girls seem very worried, very preoccupied, they've all told us that all the houses that they babysat at, they all have rules. One showed us a print out that she'd gotten from one of the houses where she babysits and it had all of the restrictions. The child may have this much,...it was like limiting the sugar, no non-organic, no chocolate and it went on for two pages. List after list, item after item.

Me: wow.

Diana: Yeah. It was really. I don't know, to me it really seems excessive and people are kind of freaked out about it, people always comment when we're out with Gracie, they comment on how she'll eat anything, ya know, people sort of marvel at that. And I think that a lot of our anxiety about food gets projected onto our kids, I think

basically we just offer Gracie whatever we're eating, that's what she eats. And I think that people are so worried and so anxious about controlling their food, almost kind of afraid of food and the kids just grow up wanting white food, or yellow food, or fried stuff. Obviously there are predilections and personalities and real allergies, but I really think that there is this anxiety that infiltrates everything. And the vegetarian and the vegan movements do...they do smack of that kind of virtuousness. I'm sure you've seen Portlandia.

Me: I haven't.

Diana: Oh, well, you better see it! That's kind of what the whole show is satirizing that kind of slightly self righteous, kind of pleased with oneself. Everything is groovy. They have this one skit where they're in the restaurant and they want the chicken but they want to make sure that the chicken had a good life (laughs). The waitress brings out a doisee on the chicken's background and they end up going to the farm where the chicken was raised (laughs)...

Me: It isn't that far from the truth...

Diana: No, it's not (laughs). Yeah, it's really pretty hilarious and yet scary because people do have that kind of righteousness about it and ya know and sometimes I feel like ya know, we have to pick our battles. One of the last times we went out for a bday dinner in Portland, there was this restaurant I think it's gone now, but I think was called Hurley's and it was in the NW section of Portland and it was famous for using *foie gras* and when we got to the restaurant there was a line of protestors around the corner. We thought they were customers waiting for tables, but they were protestors because he was using goose liver and ya know they were picketing and chanting and apparently they'd done this every single day since he'd opened the restaurant and um this to me this was beyond belief. I remember sort of stewing over it because this was also at the same time that we were bombing Afghanistan and I couldn't stop thinking that there were actual children dying right now and this is what you're choosing to get out and march about. Yeah, ya know. It's definitely there and it's definitely happening. Perhaps because it feels more manageable for people. I guess we can also feel some of that in the gluten-free movement. I have a good friend who is one of the gluten-free mavens and she really does have celiac's disease and she has a terrible allergy to gluten and she's managed to create a beautiful eating life for herself but she has followers like some kind of charismatic, evangelical leader. Thousands of people believe they're allergic to gluten and I think it's related to this, the kind of desire for control, the desire for correctness, which is also inextricably entwined with anxiety about food and eating. It gets tiresome.

Funny our world has gotten very complicated and odd.

People really identify with this, they build their sense of self around these kinds of issues. I do see a difference between the righteousness factor when you leave the NW and come to place like Florida. Miamians are a little bit slower to get the memo, so they're not as groovy as NWesty folk are. They're getting there but they lag behind quite a bit. They're still discovering the beauty of Whole Foods...and they don't know that Whole Foods has betrayed us yet, on and on...they're just at the beginning of these layers...so it's a little more refreshing and innocent right now. People are still asking things like, is it ok to eat organic food? Stuff that...remember people used to be afraid of organic food and say that it had bacteria and germs and stuff like that?

Me: I do remember this, and my mom is still there. We have a small CSA and grow vegetables and she won't eat our food because it's not sprayed.

Diana: Wasn't it John Stonsill who did that expose on the dangers of organic food and how it's filled with microbes? Ridiculous. (Laughs)

Food is such a metaphor for everything. Every aspect of life and identity. (Gracie: Hello, hello, hello, hello).

Me: I just had a little brainstorm—I'm still waiting for IRB approval for this interview so I'll have to come back to you for a follow and to get the proper consent, so this way I can let you have the afternoon with your daughter.

Diana: Yes, the critical moment has been reached, so...you can just email me and we'll pick another time and hopefully I'll be able to have childcare at that time.

Me: I really appreciate your time and your willingness to talk with me.

Diana: Sure. This is great—it's a balancing act. It's fun, it's all good. I'll be happy to talk with you more about this, so just send me a note. I think it's really interesting stuff, good luck putting the rest of it together.

Me: Thanks, have a good night. Bye.