**Kitchen Activism: Digitally Representing Detroit’s Global Cuisine**

When I proposed this presentation, it was merely days following Anthony Bourdain’s death by suicide. I’m not a chef, I’m barely a home cook, but I realized how far Bourdain’s reached into my various networks: music, cooking, activism, feminism, even detective fiction. There’s something about Bourdain’s death that touched many aspects of my daily life and research areas. But what is most interesting, and more importantly tied to this presentation, is the overwhelming argument in all Bourdain’s work that promotes the idea of food as activism.

I’m not going to spend this presentation discussing much of Bourdain’s work or legacy. I also won’t be discussing the hugely important suggestions, as fraught as this idea is, that categorize Detroit as a “Food Desert.” That is its own sort of activist presentation. Instead, I want to focus on existing establishments and how they are represented digitally through Sheldon Simeon’s web series for *Eater*, *Cooking in America*. Too often, these representations are overwrought with optimism: “Detroit’s coming back!” What we see in these episodes are glimpses of success stories but from eateries that are either well established or have quickly become cultural institutions.

With the recent death of chef and author Anthony Bourdain, many celebrity remembrances focused on his implicit activism through food. His travels, and the television series that documented his explorations, were indicative of how, culturally, food unites. More locally, Detroit has always been a microcosm of global food culture. More specifically, this presentation dives into the web series *Cooking in America*, whose third season focused on the various food cultures in Detroit. Taken together, these episodes raise awareness of the cultural impact of global cuisine. Such global cuisine is the result of both a heavily established immigrant culture but more importantly, the deep desire to maintain the traditions and memories of such cultures. General sites like Yelp allow diners to “play critic,” posting reviews either to express pleasure or distaste, from which the spaces highlighted in *Cooking in America* are not exempt. So I want to look at that combination of the professional representation on the one hand (the web series) and the amateur analysis (Yelp reviews) on the other. While digital spaces present a question of access, not unlike similar questions derived from the consistent availability of affordable produce and proteins in the city spaces and smaller communities, it’s interesting and important to consider whether the digital representation of these places are fooling our perspective.

1. Review *Cooking in America* series:

**[SLIDE]**

* 1. From the final episode: I think this is a good representation of idea I’m going for here:
     1. Chef Greg Azar states: “Once you start calling food art, it become pretentious. Food is for everyone.” Once cooking becomes pretentious, it loses its connection to the people.
        1. What’s really interesting, and you’ll see this later, are the Yelp reactions to his restaurant. To be continued…
     2. This is not unlike someone like Michael Twitty, who, in *The Cooking Gene*, argues for the heritage aspect, however cruel (in his case, tracing the roots of southern cuisine via slavery). For Twitty, he sees the connection from “pretentious” food where people are appropriating his heritage and neglecting the tragic and difficult connections to an enslaved past.
  2. The series, while very short episodes, focuses on smaller establishments

1. Locations (Briefly describe each one):

**[SLIDE (EXPLAIN MAP)]**

* 1. Midwest Buddhist Meditation Center: lots of Thai cuisine, summer gatherings for locals
  2. Dearborn Meat Market: Sam (the owner); taking cuts of meat and immediately grilling them in the back
  3. Maty’s African Cuisine (“When you come here as an immigrant, you don’t have any money, which is how he started the restaurant.”)
  4. Taystee’s Burgers: Halal meat in a gas station; elevating what we think we know about “gas station food”
  5. Polish Village Café: long standing tradition in Hamtramck
  6. La Feria: Learned to cook in her mom’s kitchen; tapas restaurant
  7. Amar Pizza: Bangladeshi pizzeria (Bangladeshi ingredients/flavors)
  8. Flowers of Vietnam: The influence of Vietnamese food in Detroit (Azar didn’t want to have to drive to Madison Heights to access the flavors)

1. Explain Sheldon’s questions:
   1. He asks each owner: Why Detroit? Why stay here? What do you see for the future of this city?
      1. Various answers: family, cultural heritage, it’s the place to develop
2. There are people doing critical work on Detroit food scenes
   1. Alex B. Hill (who may or may not be at this presentation!): his mappings of a variety of food based research (including work on “food deserts”) is useful for this type of project, in particular if speaking about restaurants versus the number of Detroit residents on food stamps. His work shows 1 in 3 households rely on food stamps. (I don’t have the images to show—honestly, I wasn’t comfortable borrowing them for this presentation, especially considering he might be here—but his very interesting work can be found on his website, design.alexbhill.org)
      1. This disparity between the restaurant culture being represented, on the one hand, and the evidence of economic devastation of the city on the other shouldn’t go unnoticed, as the representations in this web series really does focus on the Detroit food scene in restaurants, and not the lack of grocery stores in the city proper.
   2. Others, like rhetorician Jeff Rice, use Detroit as the back drop when investigating its digital representations in a variety of perspectives.
      1. More specifically in his book *Digital Detroit: Rhetoric in the Space and Age of the Network*, he looks at the networks between physical spaces and the cultural and historical import that connect these institutions together.
         1. To say it another way, his book came out a few years ago (2012), somewhat before the heavy proliferation of AR (or augmented reality).
         2. I think Rice is trying to imply those sorts of connections in his work: the ones you “can’t see” without some sort of special tool, be that an app or headset that visualizes data, or a more analog tool such as a tour guide, historical marker, or family stories.

Rice’s suggestion that the city is inherently networked through its cultural institutions suggests something similar to what I’m suggesting in this project, which is the representations of various food establishments which draw on both the cultural heritage of the individuals running it as well as the local importance of its placement. What consumers don’t necessarily recognize, but are implicit in, is that cultural connection. Other food shows, not necessarily tied to Detroit, suggest this. For instance, the Netflix series *Ugly Delicious* has an episode called “Fried Chicken,” in which host chef David Chang explores the cultural implications of this one particular food item. While those who might eat this meal without giving it much thought, Chang and his guests illustrate the hugely important connection to the African-American community. Not everyone sees these connections, and I think that’s what Rice is trying to say in his work, from which we can borrow to think through this idea in this project specifically.

I want to switch gears now and think about the other digital representation I mentioned earlier: Yelp reviews. Each review I’ve selected speaks to that kind of network that Rice suggests. Some of these reviews are the rude ones, ones actually proving the point that there are unseen networks embedded in these restaurants. Others speak to the authenticity. Let’s take a look!

**[SLIDES]**

1. Midwest Buddhist Meditation Center
2. Dearborn Meat Market
3. Maty’s African Cuisine
4. Taystee’s Burgers
5. Polish Village Café
6. La Feria
7. Amar Pizza
8. Flowers of Vietnam

Overall, I hope this project will continue as I dig deeper into the digital representations of these and other establishments. Food, as we’ve seen here, is an activist stance, whether it’s representing a cultural heritage or simply being in a place for some time.

Thank you!