Eating Identities

Xu, Wenying

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

Xu, Wenying.
Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature.
University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8297.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8297

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=180550
Allow me to begin with two stories.

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), hunger dominated my life in Baoding, Hebei Province, China, as it did millions of others. Only a small elite had access to protein, and their currency was power. Unlike abject starvation, the hunger I experienced permitted fantasies, such as meats, sweets, and fancy pastries. My family often sat at the dinner table after a meal of cornbread and boiled cabbage to continue eating imaginary delicacies. We would share in great detail the most delicious dishes we had ever eaten—their rare ingredients, their elaborate cooking, their distinctive tastes, and their spectacular presentations. The hungrier we were, the more extravagant our descriptions. On one of these occasions, when I began talking about my favorite Southern dessert, *tang yuan*, my father told the following story: when the British went to China in the late 1600s, one of the things about China that puzzled the British was *tang yuan*. “They liked the sticky rice ball very much,” he said. “It’s chewy and creamy at the same time. A burst of rich, fragrant sweetness goes off in your mouth like a bomb. The British had never tasted anything like it. That’s why it really bothered them that they couldn’t figure out how the Chinese put the sweet filling inside seamless balls. They took a few samples of *tang yuan* to their lab and dissected them. What they found in the center was a dark mass. It didn’t take them long to figure out that the dark substance consisted of brown sugar, lard, and sesame seeds. Since it congeals when cold and a mass is more difficult to insert into a ball than liquid, the Chinese must have melted the substance first. After repeated experiments, the English scientists finally came to the conclusion that the Chinese injected into sticky rice balls a sugar-lard-sesame seed syrup with a large hypodermic needle.” My father laughed and slapped his thigh at this point. “Of course, they proudly sent their finding to Queen Victoria.”

Now thinking back, I have no doubt that Father made up that story. But it is a story that dominated my childhood imagination about the West, about how curious, scientific-minded, and yet stupid the English were. Although I had
never tasted English food, I already concluded that it must be artless, tasteless, and redolent of Lysol, even during those long years of hunger.

Story 2: In 1987 Den Fujita, McDonald's partner in Japan, made the following statement: “The reason Japanese people are so short and have yellow skin is because they have eaten nothing but fish and rice for 2,000 years. If we eat McDonald's hamburgers and potatoes for a thousand years, we will become taller, our skin will become white and our hair blond” (qtd. in Reiter 169).

Food and Identity

Both anecdotes illustrate the central argument of this book—that food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others. Although commonplace practices of everyday life, cooking and eating have far-reaching significance in our subject formation. The first anecdote reveals a Chinese sense of culinary superiority that sets the self over against the other. Given China's defeat in the Opium War (1839–1842) by the British and other European powers and the subsequent partial colonization of China, my father's tale can be interpreted as an act of revenge. The second shows the success of Western colonization of the minds and taste buds of the Japanese. There, culinary differences become the ground for racialization that brings about the denigration not only of one's own foodways but also of one's own blood as polluted by those foodways.

This book argues for and explicates the relationship between food and identities specifically in Asian American literature, which abounds with culinary fiction and poetry. By reading the writings of seven Asian American authors, I place in the spaces of food, cooking, hunger, consumption, appetite, orality, and the like a wide range of identity issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, diaspora, and sexuality. In doing so, I hope to contribute to and complicate the ongoing discussion of the relationships between food and subjectivity in food studies in general and in Asian American literary studies in particular. Only a few critics have studied the significance of food in Asian American literature, and thus far they have focused primarily on food and ethnicity and gender. In addition, my interpretations of these Asian American literary texts provide models for reading food and identities in other literary traditions.

Food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways. In sociologist Claude Fischler's words, “Food not only nourishes but also signifies” (276). Cuisine, the process of transforming raw materials into safe, nourishing, and pleasing dishes, is central to our subjectivity, because this transformation operates in “the register of the imagination” more than of the material (Fischler
Every manipulation of the edible is a civilizing act that shows who we are, what values we uphold, how we interact with one another, and why we do food differently from others. Terry Eagleton sums up well the signifying properties of food: “If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food—it is endlessly interpretable—materialised emotion” (“Edible écriture” 204). And materialized emotions are vital to the health of a community. Benedict Anderson argues that human communities exist as imagined entities in which people “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). He proposes the three things that structure identifications: the community’s boundaries, sovereignty, and fraternity (7). It is unfortunate that Anderson fails to consider a community’s cuisine as a daily and visceral experience through which people imagine themselves as belonging to a unified and homogenous community, be it a nation, village, ethnicity, class, or religion. Slavoj Žižek, in advocating philosophical attention to the nondiscursive forms of identification, writes,

The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated. […] If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of the Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called “our way of life.” All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment. (Tarrying with the Negative 201)

Without intending to do so, Žižek amends Anderson’s lapse by underscoring the highly symbolic value of the material enjoyment of a community. Few people would dispute that, of all the forms of communal enjoyment, alimentary pleasure is the most frequent and visible one.

Sharing food plays a central role in the formation of social groupings. In many cultures eating alone is an uncomfortable if not a shameful act. Solitary eating is often associated with loneliness, unpopularity, social isolation, unhealthy lifestyle, or eating disorder. With humor Mary Lukanuski tells of her broaching this subject with friends, family, and colleagues: “The overwhelming response was one of embarrassment, as if we were discussing their masturbation rituals. And who wants to admit they’re having it, food or sex, alone?” (115). We eat together, and sometimes cook together, to affirm our feelings of family, community, friendship, love, and comfort. As Lukanuski puts it, “In
the sharing of food, the sense of community is continually defined and maintained” (113).

Each culture’s foodways always already function in its system of representation as signs of sophistication or civilization over against others engaged in “crude and barbaric” food practices. In its variant ways of transferring Nature to Culture, therefore, cuisine inculcates eaters with a deep-seated (corporeal) sense of diversity and hierarchy within their social group and over against other groups. Lukanuski writes,

How food is consumed is a powerful method of further defining a community. A group who follows proscriptions forbidding certain foods, and or combinations of foods, immediately separate themselves. A sense of order, place, and discipline is created: the tacit understanding, beside any divine command, is that without such regulations the community would fall victim to its individual appetites. Once members of the community were pursuing their own desires, the community would disintegrate. (113)

As much as cuisine induces an imaginary solidarity among members of a community, it stratifies us also in that our food practices and taste buds render us acquiescent to divisions along the lines of culture, region, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, and sexuality—a hegemony that is exercised via appetite and desire. This hegemony is probably more effectively inscribed in us than other ideological hegemonies. As we often express our intolerance of other cultures by our repugnance toward their food practices, so do we demonstrate our cosmopolitan and adventurous selves by trying and relishing exotic dishes. Eating is indeed inseparable from personhood.

The classic philosophy in the West, however, regards personhood as an autonomous and disembodied mind. Any philosophical attention to the embodied self is often deemed to be ordinary and banal. Such a split between body and mind, as Deane Curtin points out, “has tended to silence philosophical interest in food.” Given the valorization of mind over body, “dualisms are not only dualisms of ontological kind, but also of value” (6). It is no surprise that many of those who grow and prepare food do not occupy the full status of personhood in the Western philosophical tradition, and these people are, more often than not, manual laborers, women, and people of color. To register food with ontological significance is not only to restore full personhood to those marginalized but also to politicize what has been perceived as common and banal. Deborah Lupton argues that cooking and eating “are the ways that we live in and through our bodies” (1). Who we think we are has everything to do with what and how we eat. The authors of Food and Cultural Studies treat food as an index to the British national identity. “The distancing of self from those others
who eat curry or spaghetti specifically, or in general from consumers of ‘foreign muck’, has contributed significantly to the definition of Britishness” (Ashley et al. 83). During World War II, being American and being patriotic were also defined by eating habits. Donna Gabaccia writes about culinary nationalism in the chapter “Food Fights and American Value.”

To create a scientific, healthful, and national cuisine, domestic scientists proposed […] programs of education for immigrants and minorities throughout the United States. […] As late as 1940, the Home Economics Section of New York's Department of Welfare recommended that immigrants should eat the old colonial creoles: for breakfast, hominy grits with milk and sugar, bread with butter, and milk and coffee; for dinner, baked beans, coleslaw with carrots, bread with butter, and custard pudding with raisins; and for supper, cream of carrot soup with rice, cottage cheese and prune salad, bread with butter, and tea. (128, 129)

Homogenizing immigrants’ and minorities’ foodways was part and parcel of the project of assimilation.

In addition to nation building through culinary standardization, food and eating often serve as a set of gendering and gendered signs that circulates in everyday life. Not only are eating disorders most frequently associated with girls and women, but also certain foods are considered to be men's or women's. For instance, fish is considered a feminine food by the French working classes. Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Fish has to be eaten in a way which totally contradicts the masculine way of eating, that is, with restraint, in small mouthfuls, chewed gently, with the front of the mouth, on the tips of the teeth […] The whole masculine identity […] is involved in these two ways of eating, nibbling and picking, as befits a woman” (Distinction 190–191). Most of us are familiar with culinary myths that dictate our gendering activity. For instance, we regard sweet, pale, and delicate foods as feminine and most fit for women's constitution. Men, on the other hand, “are typically associated with red meat and large helpings of food” (Lupton 104). In the context of this country, femininity is often at the mercy of one's dietary habit, a point that Shirley Geok-lin Lim sums up well: “In the United States, eating and non-eating or starvation are often marked as gendered activities, bearing particular significance for women and deeply identified with images of female bodies valued as desirable or debased as contemptible and worthless” (304). A recent TV commercial for Hummers portrays a young male vegetarian who is embarrassed by the stares from other male shoppers checking out steaks, spareribs, and other red meats. In the second scene, the vegetarian man regains equilibrium by purchasing a Hummer.
More prominently than gendering, food stratifies in terms of classes and races/ethnicities. The diet of the poor living in the Appalachians differs greatly from that of the middle and upper classes of America both in kind and in quality, and the cuisine of Vietnamese Americans appears exotic if not alien to many white and black Americans. In differentiating foodways, we often believe that our food not only tastes better but is also more healthful and cleaner than others’. Our assessment of other food practices operates from our sense of order—edible versus inedible food, appropriate versus inappropriate place of cooking, clean versus dirty food, and so on. Our system of ordering culinary matters socializes our taste buds and metabolisms, which in turn stand in the front line of demarcating the border between them and us. Such demarcation is never simply a line drawn between good and bad cuisine or even clean and filthy food. It always informs the construction of a moral judgment of a particular social group. Those who eat “filthy” food are believed to indulge in filthy ways. An example is the nineteenth- and twentieth-century stereotype of the rat-eating Chinese men lying languidly in opium dens and engaged in turning innocent white girls into sex slaves.¹ Doris Witt, in Black Hunger, recalls a particular scene regarding chitterlings in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man that is most suitable “for exploring the triangulated relationships among blackness, food, and filth prior to the valorization of soul food” (83). Ellison’s narrator fantasizes about exposing Dr. Bledsoe as someone who aspires to assimilate into the white culture while secretly holding onto black habits. The narrator whips out “a foot or two of chitterlings, raw, uncleaned and dripping sticky circles on the floor” and shakes them in Bledsoe’s face. He yells, “Bledsoe, you’re a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in private when you think you’re unobserved!” (265). Witt insightfully interprets this scene as both racial and homosexual, fraught with ambivalent feelings of desire and repulsion.

Class and race/ethnicity are inextricably linked not only because of their significant intersections but also because of their frequent synonymy. The unforgettable and disturbing images of Katrina victims in New Orleans were predominantly of black Americans who were too poor to evacuate (because they did not own cars or did not have money for gas and motels). In How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, Manning Marable argues that the majority of black Americans have been subjected to economic and political exploitation.

The most striking fact about American economic history and politics is the brutal and systemic underdevelopment of Black people. Afro-Americans have been on the other side of one of the most remarkable and rapid accumulations of capital seen anywhere in human history, existing as a necessary yet
circumscribed victim within the proverbial belly of the beast. The relationship is filled with paradoxes: each advance in white freedom was purchased by Black enslavement; white affluence coexists with Black poverty; white state and corporate power is the product in part of Black powerlessness; income mobility for the few is rooted in income stasis for the many. (1–2)

The great discrepancy Marable describes between the economic contribution and the economic earnings of African Americans has continually brought hunger, illiteracy, poor health, and powerlessness to the black community. After all, soul food—chitterlings, trotters, neck bones, pig’s tails, and the like—is a cuisine born from poverty and necessity that transforms into nourishment parts of animals considered undesirable or filthy by the middle and upper classes.

Much as Marable argues about how capitalism impoverishes black Americans, Lisa Lowe, in Immigrant Acts, exposes the asymmetrical relationship between white America and Asian America in U.S. history. In centralizing the contradictions within capitalism and American democracy at the critical site of Asian immigration, she narrates how legal, economic, and social discriminations against Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have helped maximize economic profits for the dominant population of this country. “Capital in the 1880s utilized racialized divisions among laborers to maximize its profits; it needed the exclusion of further Chinese immigration to prevent a superabundance of cheap labor, and the disenfranchisement of the existing Chinese immigrant labor force, to prevent capital accumulation by these wage laborers” (13). It is generally agreed that an Asian American middle class did not begin to emerge until after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended eighty-some years of Asian exclusion. Lowe places this shift of immigration policy within the demand for “economic internationalism to expand labor and capital, to secure raw materials and consumer markets, to locate areas in which to invest surplus capital, and to provide a safety valve for domestic tension” (15). Since 1965 most Asian immigrants have been low-wage workers or underpaid professionals, whose labor and skills are directly responsible for the growth of global capitalism, particularly of the dominance of the U.S. economy in the Pacific Rim. Accompanying the increasing professionalization of the Asian American population is “the increased proletarianization of Asian immigrant women’s labor in the United States,” a racialized, gendered, and exploited group used as “a ‘flexible’ work force in the restructuring of capitalism globally” (16). American media are mainly interested in economic success stories about Asian Americans and thus perpetuate the myth of the model minority. It rarely enters into the American consciousness that tens of thousands of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans continue eking out a living in ethnic ghettos with neither health care nor pension plans.
It is banal to claim that Asian Americans have a special relationship with food. Who doesn’t? Every social group is bound by an interrelated system of food production, rituals, and ideology. Having said this, however, I must insist that food and eating occupy a significant place in the formation of Asian American subjectivity. First, the racialization of Asian Americans has been achieved prominently through the mainstream’s representation and appropriation of Asian foodways. Second, in Asian American history, food and eating do not simply fulfill necessities; rather they serve as an index to a material history of survival, adaptation, ingenuity, and hybridization—a triumphant history of overcoming adversities.

“They eat rats.” “They eat dogs and cats.” “They eat monkey brains.” “They eat snakes and grasshoppers.” “They eat slugs.” I could go on reiterating the many dietary accusations against Asians, for these sensational tidbits litter news reports, literature, scholarly studies, cartoons, TV shows, movies, and everyday conversations. Even though there is a certain degree of truth in some of these accusations, they are not made to simply offer facts about Asian foodways. Rather, these tales are told with the intention of defaming, of othering, and of abjecting Asians in America. American media’s representation of Asian Americans is irrevocably associated with “the food of their ethnic ancestries,” as Jennifer Ann Ho points out. “Indeed, it is fair to say that Asian Americans are almost invariably portrayed through foodways in television and film” (11). As recently as December 2005, such dietary othering was alive and well on television. In Curb Your Enthusiasm, episode number 49, Larry David’s Korean American bookie is suspected of having stolen and killed Jeff’s German shepherd, Oscar, for food. It also happens that this jolly, entrepreneurial Korean American man supplies flowers for a fancy wedding on the beach. Along with flowers he brings a meat dish, which the wedding guests find exceptionally delicious. When Larry (mis)informs the wedding crowd about the source of the meat, mass vomiting breaks out, everyone spitting, choking, and writhing on the beach. This episode’s comicalness, though satirical of Larry’s ignorance and misjudgment, depends upon racist stereotyping of Asian foodways.

When it’s not representing Asian food as disgusting, mainstream culture exoticizes and romanticizes Asian food. The recent vogue of fusion cuisine creolizes the East with the West, offering foodies hip atmospheres and pretty, petite, and pricey entrees, such as fried calamari with creamy miso, pasta with curried vegetables, and green tea cake. In such fusion, the East and West often are not equal partners; European cuisines occupy a dominant position while Asian cuisines complement and embellish. Wolfgang Puck, the celebrated
fusion chef who catered the 2006 Oscar party, has made a fortune in fusing Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, or Indian with European cuisines. Such appropriation of Asian foodways to satisfy culinary curiosities, the desire for thrills, and the drive for profit has earned it the name “cultural food colonialism,” which Lisa Heldke aptly coins. Heldke points out that ethnic foods are “most frequently and most notably the foods of economically dominated or ‘third world’ cultures” (xv). The appropriation of Asian foods in fusion cuisine resembles the practices of “nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painters, anthropologists, and explorers who set out in search of ever ‘newer,’ ever more ‘remote’ cultures that they could co-opt, borrow from freely and out of context, and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery” (xvi). But does this charge apply to Asian American fusion chefs such as Ming Tsai and Padma Lakshmi (who are the two best-known Asian American personalities on the Food Network)? Anita Mannur in her essay on fusion cuisine points out that both chefs appropriate more Asian cuisines than those in which they have life experiences or training.

Tsai never explains how Indian or Vietnamese cuisine fits into his repertoire and yet he offers recipes for pho and lemon basmatic rice. Similarly, Padma Lakshmi never explains how recipes for “Oriental Shrimp Salad,” “Thai Chicken Stew,” or “Pan Asian Fried Rice” enter her repertoire. […] They suggest that a knowledge of the range of Asian cuisines seeps through their pores merely by virtue of being Asian. (“Model Minority” 85)

While Tsai and Lakshmi resemble white chefs in appropriating and exotically Asian cuisines, they also invite an entirely different question, which Mannur phrases well: “How does the cooking style of each chef suggest that Asianness need not be understood as an unassimilable presence within the United States, but rather as something that can assimilate quietly and subtly into the U.S. culinary landscape?” (85, emphasis mine). The quiet and subtle food fusion of East with West serves as an emblem of U.S. multiculturalism, whose success chiefly rests upon the quiet and subtle coercion of multiethnic cultures into a highly commodified and self-exhibitionist performance. One good example in culinary multiculturalism is the (Japanese) TV show The Iron Chef, which entertains by performing exotic ethnicities in combat by knives and tongues. Furthermore, what disturbs many Asian Americans about the stereotype of the model minority is precisely the image of tolerance of racism and classism and compliance with mainstream norms, as though assimilability is contingent on how thoroughly ethnic minorities can dislearn the two quintessential codes of American democracy—discontent and dissent. Tsai, glorified as “the Asian American poster boy of cooking,” is a model
minority par excellence owing to the fact that he never talks about unpleasant racial encounters and moves smoothly in and out of the Eastern and Western worlds (Lan N. Nguyen 31).

In history the Asian American relationship with food had little to do with the thrill of creation and discovery or even profit (although creation and discovery did take place). It was survival and adaptation that governed the lives of generations of Asian immigrants and their descendants. Food production and service allowed the immigrants to gain a foothold in their adopted country. The Chinese went to San Francisco in the mid-1800s to participate in the gold rush, and facing the racist law that prohibited them from working new mines, many turned to farming, fishing, and cooking, among other things, for a livelihood. In the San Joaquin and Sacramento delta, Chinese immigrants turned marshes into lush, arable land by constructing a sophisticated system of drainage and channels. In 1870 only 18 percent of farmworkers in California were Chinese. By 1880 the Chinese made up 86 percent of the farming population in Sacramento County, 85 percent in Yuba County, and 67 percent in Solano County. Gabaccia writes, “In California, Chinese immigrants made up between half and three-quarters of the cultivators of specialized vegetable crops in the early 1880s. [...] In 1870 San Francisco had over a hundred Chinese truck gardeners; by 1880 Chinese truck gardeners were also prominent in Los Angeles and in the upper Sacramento Valley” (110–111). After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the anti-Chinese sentiment in the West became so great that the state of California in 1878 held a constitutional convention to settle “the Chinese problem.” The resulting constitution prohibited the Chinese from entering the state and empowered cities and counties to drive them out completely. Some Chinese fled from the West Coast to the South and made a living by growing and selling vegetables to “poor blacks and whites in rural towns in the 1870s” (Gabaccia 113).

The Chinese introduced several species of fruit to America, including the Bing cherry (bred by Ah Bing) and the frost-resistant oranges (bred by Me Gim Gong) that jump-started Florida’s nascent citrus industry (Cao 22–23). Jack Chen is correct in claiming that “much of the development of the present multimillion-dollar fruit industry of California could not have been done without the Chinese farmers” (88). There were other Chinese who entered Californian history on the strength of their produce, such as Thomas Foon Chen, who was known as the “Asparagus King” of San Francisco, and Chin Lung, known as the “Chinese Potato King” in the Sacramento–San Joaquin delta (Chang 162). In 1850 a camp of Chinese fisherman was established at Rincon; in 1852 there were 25 boats bringing three thousand pounds of fresh fish to market every day (Jack Chen 57). The Chinese “introduced the use of funnel-shaped
traps for shrimping and fishing” (Gabaccia 111). In 1888 Chinese labor in the salmon canneries of California and the Northwest coast made up 88 percent of the total work force (Jack Chen 83). In Hawai‘i, “Chinese rice growers imported familiar fish varieties from Asia” (Gabaccia 66).

The Chinese were among the first to open eateries in San Francisco, despite the fact that cooking was mainly women’s work in China. Chinese restaurants had been so popular that by 1920 they involved roughly a quarter of the Chinese population in America (Chang 163). Gabaccia remarks, “No enclave businessmen enjoyed greater success attracting culinary tourists in search of inexpensive exoticism than Chinese restaurants in the Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco” (102). Their signature entree in the late 1800s and early 1900s was chop suey, a dish invented by bachelors, who stir-fried a hodgepodge of vegetables, meats, seafood, and noodles. It instantly became a popular entree on the Chinese menu, so popular that some restaurants on the East Coast even offered chop suey sandwiches. The gold miner William Shaw in his memoir, *Golden Dreams and Waking Realities* (1851), wrote that “the best eating houses in San Francisco are those kept by Celestials and conducted Chinese fashion” and declared that they served not only the best but also the cheapest food in San Francisco (qtd. in Jack Chen 57). To Americans no Chinese meal is over until fortune cookies are served (they are unsettlingly absent to people visiting China), but few people know that fortune cookies were invented in America—by David Jung, who opened a noodle company in 1916, with the intention of turning San Francisco’s Chinatown from a ghetto into a “quaint tourist attraction” (Chang 163).

The Japanese arrived in California roughly two decades after the Chinese. They first established the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony north of San Francisco to grow tea and mulberry trees (whose leaves are food to silkworms). Large numbers of Japanese immigrants arrived in the 1890s in California, Washington, and Oregon to work in the salmon canneries and fishing fleets, and to grow vegetables. Gabaccia documents,

In California, Japanese farmers introduced Napa cabbage and the radishes of their homeland. [...] By 1920 Japanese farmers raised 90 percent of snap beans; 50–90 percent of artichokes, canning beans, cauliflower, celery, cucumber, fall peas, spinach, and tomatoes; and 25–50 percent of asparagus, cabbage, cantaloupes, carrots, lettuce, onions, and watermelons. At that time they made up 3 percent of the farmers in California. (66, 119)

In Hawai‘i large numbers of Japanese settled in the 1880s to work on sugar plantations that were begun by Chinese labor (Cao 84–92). In the early 1900s
Filipinos joined the Japanese in Hawai‘i on these plantations. In California and Alaska, Filipinos worked on Japanese farms and in the salmon canneries (Cao 164–168).

Southeast Asians came to America after the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s and brought new “exotic” cuisines with them. Vietnamese restaurants began to appear in cosmopolitan centers, many of them “pho restaurants,” which serve as their signature entree rice noodles in beef broth heavily flavored with star anise. Thai cuisine has been a rage in America for over three decades. Its rich and fragrant curry-coconut dishes are popular among people of all ethnicities. In addition to traditional Southeast Asian cuisine, the hybrid cuisine of Asian and French cooking—one of the few happy consequences of French colonization of Indochina—was introduced and largely credited with the launching of the elite industry of fusion cuisine. Immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have also been engaged in other food industries, such as shrimp and crab catching and processing. Mark Moberg and J. Stephen Thomas, writing in the late 1980s about Southeast Asian immigrant workers in the Gulf of Mexico seafood industry, remark,

The Indochinese entry into the labor market has had a dramatic effect on the scale of local crab processing. Between 1979 and 1988 the number of crab shops operating in the area increased from thirteen to 23. Small processors that had once averaged 2,000 pounds of crab per day now processed 10,000 pounds. […] By 1983 the character of the labor force in the crab processing industry had changed dramatically. […] Nearly 70 per cent of the workers in the crab processing industry are now Asian. (50)

With the growing health consciousness and increasing demand for seafood by U.S. consumers, South Asian immigrants are playing a significant role in helping seafood industries keep up with the market demand.

My review of the Asian American history on food production presents a larger picture of Chinese Americans than of Japanese, Filipino, and Southeast Asian Americans because in U.S. history Chinese immigrants came in greater numbers, and they also have been in the country longer than most of the other Asian immigrant groups. Regardless of their numbers and lengths of history, Asian Americans have been invariably involved in food service and production. There is nothing natural or culturally predetermined about Asian Americans’ vital relationship with food. Harsh circumstances made such work one of the few options available to them. To survive in this country and to be able to send money to loved ones left behind and barred from immigration, they did what others wouldn’t, and did it with pride and dignity.
Food in Asian American Literature

Culinary and alimentary motifs and tropes abound in Asian American literature. On the one hand, this is in part due to the representational reinforcement of the association of Asian Americans with their food practices. To a certain extent, Asian cuisines serve as a medium for casual and safe exchanges between Asian Americans and white strangers. Many times when I have been introduced to white people, the icebreaker predictably is about Chinese food. For Asian American writers to succeed in attracting the interest of mainstream readers, they must scatter in their writings interesting if not exotic cultural details, among which food practices are most popular. Take for an example Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003). The novel’s hook comes in its two opening sentences: “On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix” (1). With this exotic food scene, Lahiri successfully pulls the reader into the story. Let me offer another example. In *The Woman Warrior* (1975), Maxine Hong Kingston depicts the unforgettable scene of a monkey-brain feast told by her mother.

“The eaters sit around a thick wood table with a hole in the middle. Boys bring in the monkey at the end of a pole. Its neck is in a collar at the end of the pole, and it is screaming. Its hands are tied behind it. They clamp the monkey into the table; the whole table fits like another collar around its neck. Using a surgeon’s saw, the cooks cut a clean line in a circle at the top of its head. To loosen the bone, they tap with a tiny hammer and wedge here and there with a silver pick. Then an old woman reaches out her hand to the monkey’s face and up to its scalp, where she tufts some hairs and lifts off the lid of the skull. The eaters spoon out the brain.” (91–92)

When encountering this scene, almost everyone, including Chinese readers, inevitably experiences the mixture of shock, repulsion, and hilarity—a powerful emotional response almost all writers would die for.

On the other hand, the rich culinary materials in Asian American literature have also come about because Asian Americans have been racialized, gendered, and classed through their involvement with food by restrictive U.S. immigration laws, limited occupational options, and media representations. To portray the material existence of Asian Americans, food and eating become necessary not only for the sake of realism but also for their symbolism of the ontological
conditions of the characters. For instance, in Gish Jen’s *Typical American* (1991), eating fried chicken and operating Chicken Palace are symbolic of Ralph Chang’s conceptualization and experience of the American Dream. As more and more cracks appear in the structure of Chicken Palace until it collapses, the American Dream sinks deeper and deeper into American reality.

In Asian American literary studies, several scholars recognize the relevance of food and eating to issues of race and ethnicity in Asian American literature. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong devotes one chapter of her 1993 book to the study of alimentary images in order to “explore issues of economic and cultural survival” of Asian Americans (12). Monica Chiu in *Filthy Fiction* spends one chapter discussing how the precarious divide between clean and filthy food structures ethnic and gender identification in Ruth L. Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats*. Anita Mannur’s work on food and Asian America has appeared in journals as well as in *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass* and *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, among others. She maintains that “consumption is a racializing process that warrants closer analysis” (*Asian American Studies* 57). Jeffrey Partridge, Eileen Chia-Ching Fung, Nicole Waller, and Wilfried Raussert have written journal articles on food in Asian American literature. The only book-length study on food and Asian American literature is by Jennifer Ann Ho; it focuses on the ambivalent relationship that young Asian American protagonists have with their ethnic foodways. All these scholars center their analyses mainly on the relationship between food and race/ethnicity.

Building upon their work, this book treats table narrative in Asian American literature as a dominant site of economic, cultural, and political struggle, not as a site to produce self-exotism or food pornography. My contribution to this ongoing discussion lies in my broadening of the issue of food and identity to gender, class, diaspora, and sexuality. As none of these identities could be teased apart from others as a singular entity, I often work in the interstices between them. In chapter 1 I pair John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1982), with the former being the first American novel dealing with the subject of Japanese internment in the United States and the latter being a more recent portrayal of a similar experience in Canada. What fascinates me in this pairing is their very different approaches to the maternal, a psychosocial space in which food and rituals operate as an index to racial/ethnic consciousness. *No-No Boy*’s textual gesture directs the reader toward the rejection of the maternal and thus the erasure of food while *Obasan* enfolds the reader in the maternal manifested via food and rituals. I argue that the different treatments of the maternal in these two novels contribute to their protagonists’ ethnic identification or disidentification. The characters’ relationships with their ethnic forms of enjoyment demonstrate microcosmically their relationship with the dominant cultures in North America. By contextualizing both
Okada and Kogawa within their worlds, which hold different degrees of racism toward Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians, this chapter traces the movement from self-loathing to self-affirmation through these two writers’ delineations of their protagonists’ relationships to food and rituals.

Chapter 2 centers on gendered consumption in selected works of Frank Chin. I choose to read Chin because he is the most vocal author in Asian American literature on the historical problem of Asian American emasculation. His novel *Donald Duk* (1991) and short story “The Eat and Run Midnight People” (1988) are saturated with references to the relationship between food and masculinity. Crucial to issues of Asian American masculinity is that of ethnicity, for both ethnicity and gender powerfully inform each other. I argue that it is through two sets of embedded discourses—cooking and violence, appetite and sexuality—that Chin produces the narrative energy to achieve his project of remasculinizing the Asian American male subject. By placing Chin’s works within competing forms of masculinity and within the hetero-masculinist cultures of consuming the feminine in both East and West, this chapter demonstrates that Chin’s construction of an Asian American manhood is not remote from the hegemonic white masculinity that he has fought against throughout his literary career.

Chapter 3 explores how culinary tropes underscore the intersection of race, class, and gender in David Wong Louie’s *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000), a rich novel that has received very little scholarly attention. I choose to focus this chapter on this single text in order to do justice to its sophistication and abundance of culinary references. Placing the chosen vocation of French cuisine of protagonist Sterling Lung against his repugnance for his parents’ Chinese foodways, I locate in alimentary matters the nexus of identity issues of class, ethnicity, and gender. Lung’s class aspiration, inextricably associated with his gender and ethnic anxieties, is brought to light by his ambivalent relationships to both French and Chinese cuisines. By practicing a class critique that respects aesthetics, this chapter analyzes Lung’s self-alienation as brought about by race, class, and gender ideologies manifested through and propagated by the cultural sign of food.

Li-Young Lee, a remarkable and prolific poet, resists his classification as an Asian American writer by appealing to the transcendental. Some other Asian American authors, such as Bharati Mukherjee, find the ethnic label not only restricting but also ghettoizing. By identifying themselves as American writers, not just ethnic American writers, they demand integration into mainstream, if not canonical, literature. Lee, however, employs transcendentalism to subvert the practice of ethnic labeling. In chapter 4 I examine the ontological condition of Lee in several of his poems as diasporic and exilic and argue that his lyrical descriptions of Asian cuisines offer him a place from which to articulate
the ethics and aesthetics of the exiled. I bring to the forefront the colonial history of the spice trade in relationship to Lee's central trope of “seeds” and the significance of orality in the Chinese culture to explore the dynamics between his transcendentalist polemics and his poetic reliance on ethnic signifiers such as Asian food and histories.

Food and sexuality, a highly symbolic domain of interchange, is the subject of chapter 5. Here, I focus on The Book of Salt (2003) by Monique Truong and Eating Chinese Food Naked (1998) by Mei Ng. Both novels, being wonderfully culinary, deal with the issue of sexuality—homosexuality and bisexuality. Truong juxtaposes two cases of diasporic gay existence in Paris in the 1930s, one of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and the other of Binh, their Vietnamese cook, both of which unfold chiefly via culinary tropes to reveal the truth that the ability to practice sexual transgression depends on one's race and class. It is also through alimentary imageries and tropes that Ng dramatizes the tensions between the ethnic, domestic space and the cosmopolitan space of streets—tensions that interlock motifs of food, ethnicity, and sexuality. I read Eating Chinese Food Naked against The Book of Salt so that the former, presenting a contemporary character whose sexuality evolves from hetero- to bisexuality, a fluid identity, invites me to critique the rigidity of hetero/homo bifurcation that is central to the latter.

These five chapters chiefly study Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese American authors. There is no representation of South Asian literature in this book, partly because I do not have an adequate knowledge of South Asian foodways and partly because I wish to yield space to Anita Mannur, who has written elegant essays on food and South Asian American literature and is currently completing a book on this very topic.

My last word here is in defense of literary reading or close reading, which is a significant methodology in this book. Many people from my generation (graduate schooling in the 1990s) and those coming after fear the label of close readers, for it suggests not only discipleship with New Criticism that divorces literature from politics but also an inadequate grasp of theories, which is perceived as fatal for one's professional life as a scholar. As a result, we have witnessed a large quantity of contemporary scholarship that treats literary texts as testing grounds for theories and political positions. It is not that these approaches are intrinsically inappropriate for studying literature; the disciplinary demand for theoretical rigor, however, tends to produce literary criticism that imposes theory and politics upon literature, or colonizes literature, if I may, forcing it to speak words and yield meanings at the cost of its dismemberment. In the words of Lindsay Waters in his December 16, 2005, article in the Chronicle Review,
“This kind of literary criticism has nothing to do with aesthetic responses to art, only with conscious acts of will” (B7). He laments that “literary criticism no longer aims to appreciate aesthetics—to study how human beings respond to art” (B6). Surely, Waters does not mean to limit aesthetics to readerly or viewerly responses, for aesthetics invites not only the question “Do you get dizzy when you look at a Turner painting of a storm at sea?” (B6) but also the question “What did Turner do in the painting to make you dizzy?”

The latter question considers ideas and craft as well as emotions. Turner’s subjects of shipwrecks, whaling, and slave ships, laden with his views on human conditions in the early and mid-1800s, considerably determined his choices of materials and techniques to evoke certain sensations in the viewer. Sense (meaning) and sensation, therefore, are necessary twins in aesthetic evaluation. One without the other reduces art and literature to ideology, for a purely emotional or experiential approach is suspiciously ideological as well. I want to advocate that a fair balance between theory and aesthetics can produce a happy union of sense and sensation, of writerly operation and readerly response, and I think that one of the significant ways to achieve this goal lies in the politically charged and theory-informed literary reading. Theory itself, being fragmented as Vincent Leitch points out, is a set of competing discourses that are “flexible, useful, and contingent devices” in a toolbox (123). Leitch’s metaphor frees us from the demand for a singular and systematic narrative in our deployment of theory, such as being a Marxist, a feminist, or a postcolonialist, not being all three, in one essay or work. Coherence and homogeneity in positioning often depend on a willful dismissal of contradictions between a text and a theory through which the text is processed. A sustained literary reading, not just that of a passage or two that perfectly suits one’s theoretical position, wonderfully frustrates any attempt to keep one’s theoretical position singular, because a responsible literary reading often leads a critic in various theoretical directions that sometimes converge or diverge on the terms the text dictates. In other words, to allow literary or aesthetic nuances to direct one’s implementation of theoretical tools and modify one’s argument promises rich and interesting discussions that respect both meaning and emotion. This is precisely what has happened in my reading of various Asian American texts, and the following chapters are an endeavor to bring theory and aesthetics into a politically charged conversation.