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=180557
Notes

Introduction
2. Amazon.com uses the first sentence to advertise this novel.
3. In Mother Jones (January/February 1997), Mukherjee declares, “I choose to describe myself on my own terms, as an American, rather than as an Asian-American. Why is it that hyphenation is imposed only on nonwhite Americans? Rejecting hyphenation is my refusal to categorize the cultural landscape into a center and its peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation deliver the promises of its dream and its Constitution to all its citizens equally.” See http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/1997/01/mukherjee.html.
4. “A close reader” might also suggest the connotation of “a closed reader.”

Chapter 1: Enjoyment and Ethnic Identity in No-No Boy and Obasan
1. “Feminine” in Kristeva is not equivalent to “female.” Toril Moi defines the “feminine” as a quality acquired through nurture, “female,” through nature (108). Moi also points out that Kristeva flatly refuses to define “femininity,” for the latter “prefers to see it as a position. If femininity can be said to have a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply as ‘that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order’” (Moi 111).
2. The Real is never some amorphous stuff that exists independent of some concrete, incarnate manner of living, even though social rules, roles, desires, and ideologies never can totally control it. It is through fantasy that attempts are made to fill the resistant hole in the social that enjoyment always forces to remain open. Individuals fantasize about living in such a way that both Kant and Sade can be obeyed. The universal imperatives of the law and the personal imperative to enjoy oneself are not met in this fantasized life of success, popularity, and joy. Communities fantasize about a utopian way of life in which social chaos and individual alienation are absent. Persons and communities often are unaware of the fantasies at work in their yearning for unity and peace, but they make them manifest through behavior patterns and the dreams of those sleeping and awake. Although constructed out of social and cultural materials, fantasies,
like the Real, are never simply part of the symbolic world. The desired ontological consistency of personal and communal identities, produced by fantasies bridging the gap between law and enjoyment, is only a fantasy, however. Tension always remains.

3. All male Japanese Americans over the age of seventeen were required to answer two questions: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered? and Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any form of allegiance to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?

4. Kristeva once defined the semiotic chora this way: “The chora is a womb or a nurse in which elements are without identity and without reason. The chora is a place of a chaos which is and which becomes, preliminary to the constitution of the first measurable body…the chora plays with the body of the mother—of woman—, but in the signifying process” (Polylogue 57; this is Kelly Oliver’s translation in her Reading Kristeva 46).

5. Donna Gabaccia describes the eating habits of early immigrant communities as enclave eating (36–63). She cites the family eating habits of California-born Hiroshi Shikuma: “The family ate Japanese food exclusively—Japanese style rice […] and fish […]. Shikuma’s mother prepared a wide range of familiar American vegetables Japanese style; the family also raised daikon and napa cabbage, which they viewed as ‘Japanese vegetables’” (50). Although Gabaccia dates cross-cultural eating as taking place between the 1900s and 1940s, it is safe to presume that the Japanese immigrant community, facing more isolation than ever during World War II, practiced mainly enclave eating.

Chapter 2: Masculinity, Food, and Appetite in Frank Chin’s Donald Duk and “The Eat and Run Midnight People”

1. Susan Koshy in “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” sees Chin’s early works as a search for independence from white supremacy—an ethnic autonomy that “leads him to formulate such authenticity in purist and separatist terms” (476). Ironically, in the effort to “repudiate the prevailing stereotype of Asians as perpetual foreigners in America,” Chin rejects “the Asian part of his identity” and affirms “the experiences of the many Asians in America […] who are several generations removed from the homeland”—a formulation Koshy describes as an “obsession with the white gaze” (476).

2. Jennifer Ann Ho also centers on this novel’s food references, which, she argues “form a system of communication that allows characters to speak to one another and convey messages” (29). In her analysis regarding the protagonist Donald’s rite of passage, food stories play a positive role in constituting ethnic and gender pride.

3. See Cheung’s “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?”


5. Shawn Wong, for instance, in his 1996 novel American Knees successfully negotiates Chinese American and American masculinities to give his protagonist, Raymond
Ding, a sexy, sensitive, and secure yet vulnerable manhood. Interestingly, Wong, one of Chin’s comrades in arms (co-editors of Aiieeeeee!) in the war against the humiliating representations of Asian American men in the popular culture, gains control of anger and bitterness. By virtue of that control, Wong’s portrayal of the Chinese American character stops being reactionary to that humiliation but is truthful to many Chinese American men, whose gender identity is a daily negotiation among qualities of intelligence, kindness, sexual competence, aggression, and vulnerability.

6. The word “funny” in American culture sometimes signifies homosexuality and querness. There is that famous scene in the film Goodfellas in which Tommy, played by Joe Pesci, confronts Henry Hill in a bar about what he means when he uses the word “funny.” (I thank Fred Gardaphe for this connection.) Funny Boy, by the Asian Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai, tells the story of a young Sri Lankan who prefers dressing up as a girl to playing cricket with his older brothers. (I thank David Eng for this connection.)

7. Traditionally speaking, men enjoy cooking when they get to perform for an audience. It is almost always the father, for instance, who carves the Thanksgiving turkey. When men cook, more often than not they make a great mess in the kitchen, and it is women who clean it up afterward. The quintessential national enjoyment of America is men’s fanfare of outdoor cooking—flames and smoke with slabs of meat sizzling on the grill. One may think of Emeril Live as an American phenomenon of masculine performance. His popularity with men is precisely because of his disdain of (female associated) measurement, moderation, and health consciousness. “Kick it up another notch!” and “Pork fat rules!” are among his sound bites most endearing to the male audience. The Iron Chef is also a show about masculine, performative cooking, with its thrill generated by the language of battle.

8. Patricia Chu enters the thickets of The Three Kingdoms to highlight its deeply embedded patriarchy and its subordination of women even when they are warriors themselves (177–180). I find it revealing that Chin has such fervor for this classic tale and that he selectively borrows its male characters to be celebrated as mythical heroes in Donald Duk.

9. One may perceive my reference to wen-wu as an instance of ethnic overdetermination. But the fact remains that Chin has repeatedly alluded to both The Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin, both of which are saturated with the wen-wu paradigm.

10. The reference Kam Louie makes is from oral and opera traditions in which Diao Chan, an extraordinary beauty, is presented as a gift to Guan Yu. “Instead of accepting her as the spoils of war,” he “kills her with his sword” (28).

11. See chapter 42 of a complete translation of The Water Margin (e.g., Pearl Buck’s All Men Are Brothers [754–775]). Chin’s own act of disloyalty to Chinese classics makes a joke out of his attack on other Asian American writers for their revision of Chinese myths. He writes, for instance, “Kingston, Hwang, and Tan are the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry, to so boldly fake the best-known
works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (*The Big Aiiiieeeee!*)

12. I thank Jane Caputi for this insight.


14. For a fascinating, feminist interpretation of ancient myths and religions, see Sjöö and Mor’s *The Great Cosmic Mother*.

15. Marx himself has largely ignored domestic work in his analysis of labor and capital. For a feminist critique of Marx, see Juliet Mitchell’s *Women’s Estate*.

16. Thinly veiled beneath this mocking remark about memoir writing is the intertextuality with Chin’s essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake!” where he castigates Maxine Hong Kingston for having written an autobiography, a genre he associates not only with Christian converts but also with females. Interestingly, Daisy Duk is a Christian (*Donald Duk* 163).

17. One may ask how well Frank Chin is versed in Confucianism and whether the connection with wen-wu is forced. To this I would answer that Confucianism so saturates literature, operas, oral traditions, and daily living that few people in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Chinatowns, other than Confucian scholars, read *The Analects*.

18. For details see Yiyan Wang’s “Mr. Butterfly in *Defunct Capital*: ‘Soft’ Masculinity and (Mis)engendering China.”

19. To achieve “nurture life” or yang shen, men are advised to have sex frequently with different partners and without ejaculation and even to “change partners midstream.” Men are also advised to choose “childless young women, well-covered with flesh, as partners who offer particularly nourishing jing for male collection” (*Farquhar* 268).

20. This tradition teaches men the methods of producing female orgasm in order to collect and benefit from jing emitted by them. Such practice is famed to have ten benefits. “One arousal without orgasm makes the eyes and ears sharp and bright. Two and the voice is clear. Three and the skin is radiant. Four and the back and flanks are strong. Five and the buttocks and thighs become muscular. Six and the water course flows. Seven and the whole body becomes sturdy and strong. Eight and the pores glow. Nine and one achieves spiritual illumination. Ten and the whole body endures” (*Wile* 78).

21. Chin’s particular choice of Lily as former Catholic nun is resonant with his condemnation of the Christian mission, which he describes in his introduction to *The Big Aiiiieeeee!* and elsewhere as an instrument of yellow extinction.

22. The Chinese mythology of the Moon Lady, Chang E, has some affinity with the story of the Fall. Chang E stole the peach of immortality from her husband, and her punishment was her eternal loneliness on the Moon. I thank Cheng Lok Chua for this connection.

23. Mary Daly points out that Catholicism stole this cauldron symbol and made it the holy chalice (81–83).
Chapter 3: Class and Cuisine in David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians Are Coming*


2. Almost from its beginning, Asian American literary study focused on the racial castration of Asian American males. In the 1970s, emulating African Americans, the Asian American movement adopted manhood as a master trope of protest against racial inequality. The editors of the first anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), used race and masculinity to forge an Asian American solidarity in combat with mainstream culture. Two years later Maxine Hong Kingston published her memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, which engendered an Asian American feminist discourse. Kingston began the book with her mother's injunction for silence and her breaking of that silence. The silencing of Asian American women, therefore, became a new trope for the cultural condition of Asian Americans. In response to the success of a number of Asian American writers, particularly Kingston and Amy Tan, the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* produced a second edition that further heightened its potency by prefixing it with “big.” *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991) decisively pitted the discourse of masculinity against that of feminism, a paper war still being waged. From this point on gender and race began to dominate the discussion in this field.

3. Such a textual organization by no means suggests that these two sets of issues are independent of each other.

4. Robert Perucci and Earl Wysong define “skill capital” as “the specialized knowledge that people accumulate through their work experience, training, or education. […] Skilled capital is exchanged in a labor market, just as investment capital is used in connection with a financial market” (14).


6. Professional jobs didn’t exist for Asian Americans until the mid 1970s, when Asian immigration patterns changed.

7. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong postulates “two contrasting modes of existence and operation” in her discussion of Asian American literature: Necessity and Extravagance (*Reading Asian American Literature* 13). She elaborates that Necessity is “contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded,” whereas Extravagance is “attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism” (13). Wong associates Necessity chiefly with the first generation of Asian immigrants and Extravagance with their American-born children. The latter’s desire to belong leads to their attraction to the mainstream lifestyle as well as their shame over the parents’.
8. There are several stories of the wolf boy in the world. Benedictine monks told the story of the wolf boy of Hesse—a boy aged about seven or eight had been living with wolves since he was taken by them at the age of three. The dates are unclear, ranging from 1304 to 1744. In *Arcana Microcosmi* (1652), Alexander Ross gave an account of the wolf boy as well. Louie’s allusion is most likely to Rudyard Kipling’s novel *The Jungle Book* (1894–1895), which created the unforgettable character of the wolf boy Mowgli.

9. Zandy mentions several examples including Richard Wright’s “I Have Seen Black Hands,” Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, and Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio* (Hands 1).

10. In chapter 2 I made the case that food and women are interchangeable in the masculinist discourse of consumption and consummation.

11. The Page Law of 1875 prohibited the immigration of Asian women on the grounds of morality.

12. Sterling is an example of Chinese American men who find Chinese women undesirable. He thinks, “[I]n my heart every Chinese woman registers as an aunt, my mother, my sisters, or the Hong Kong girl whose picture my mother keeps taped to the kitchen mirror. They hold no romantic interest for me” (7).

13. See James H. Mittelman and Norani Othman, eds., *Capturing Globalization*.

**Chapter 4: Diaspora, Transcendentalism, and Ethnic Gastronomy in the Works of Li-Young Lee**

1. Apparent in Hall’s theorization of the position of enunciation, “place” here has little relationship to physical locations. Rather, it is a semantic nexus from which one articulates unifying motifs or imageries, which in turn offer the ground for a self-representation. In Lee’s case, the position of enunciation is more than a semantic one as food straddles the semantic and the semiotic in that it is both a system of representation (the symbolic) and jouissance (the semiotic). Therefore, it is more appropriate to describe this place in Lee’s poetry as a semantic/semiotic nexus.

2. I’m referring to the Lacanian notion of the divided subject. Žižek aptly explains it in differentiation of the poststructuralist notion of the subject-position. He writes, “If we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivation, all the fullness of experience present in the way the individuals are ‘living’ their subject-positions, what remains is an empty place which was filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure, is the subject, the subject of the signifier. The subject is therefore to be strictly opposed to the effect of subjectivation: what the subjectivation masks is not a pre- or trans-subjective process of writing but a lack in the structure, a lack which is the subject” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 175).


4. The ancient trade routes “stretched from China to the Atlantic, whose terminals were the Chinese and Roman Empires” (Miller 119). Before the European merchants began to travel to the East Indies, spices, silk, and other commodities reached Europe.
via Byzantium and Venice. For the history of the ancient spice trade, see Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*.

5. For an account of the relationship between the East India Company and the opium trade, and its consequent wars between China and Europe, see Xu, “The Opium Trade and *Little Dorrit*.”

6. What the townspeople might have seen on the Lees’ back porch were probably eels. Two pages later, he recalls a scene in which his nanny in Jakarta chases and kills eels in the grass for that evening’s soup.

7. See Timothy Yu in his “Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry.” He critiques David Mura’s attempt at ethnic identification via commodified ethnic food signs.

8. One may argue that such aestheticizing of eating fish heads satisfies the mainstream reader’s desire for the exotic. I think, however, it succeeds in crossing the threshold of the exotic to the other side of the gross, the shocking, and the abject. In American culture fish heads are often associated with poverty and punishment. Remember Americans’ astonishment and outrage at the story that American POWs were fed fish-head soup in the Japanese camps.

9. Vendler’s notion that “everything said in a poem was a metaphor for something in my inner life” advocates a humanistic universal identification (Soul Says 3). Vendler herself, however, would probably find it gross and hard to swallow that Lee writes about eating fish heads, their brains and eyeballs, with loving detail.


11. In speaking of “the Jewish prohibition to fill out God’s Name with a positive content,” Žižek writes, “[P]re-Jewish, pagan gods belong to the Real: we gain access to them only through sacred jouissance (ritualistic orgies).” See his *Tarrying with the Negative* (190).

12. For a good reading of Lee’s use of Song of Songs, see Hesford’s “The City in Which I Love You: Li-Young Lee’s Excellent Song.”

13. On the strength of the horticultural history of persimmons in China, he deems “grafting” to be a more fitting term in describing Lee’s cross-cultural poetics (Yao 20). Yao’s convincing argument is anchored in a careful analysis as to how English language and poetics override Chinese in Lee’s “Persimmons.”

14. This strategy may further prove Yao’s argument that Lee’s knowledge of Chinese is so meager that English dominates the poetics of “Persimmons.” He writes, “The poem offers the voyeuristic appeal of a seemingly intimate glimpse into Chinese culture, while at the same time compensating for any ignorance on the part of readers about Chinese language or cultural practices” (6).

15. Centered on this legend, there is an interesting intertextuality between two other Chinese American writers. In Maxine Hong Kingston, the words of revenge that
Yue Fei’s mother tattooed on his back become transferred to the back of the female protagonist in “The White Tiger” of The Woman Warrior. Chin, embattled about ethnic authenticity, faults Kingston for feminizing the legendary figure and retells the legend to cement the Chinese heroic tradition (Big Aiiieeeeee! 3). In Donald Duk Chin makes use of this legend in the context of food to cement the adolescent protagonist’s ethnic and gender pride (140).

16. I use “impression” to indicate that Lee is fundamentally opposed to such a notion as ethnic authenticity. This will be made apparent near the end of my discussion.

17. Such as T. K. Seung, Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics (189), and Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (72), who interpret Gadamer’s notion of fusion of horizons as expounding the impossible homogenization of incommensurate worlds of differences. David Hoy, however, points out that the background of a text or a reader is not a substance that can be fully fused together. See Hoy and McCarthy (188–200).


19. Jeffrey Partridge traces the original source of Emerson’s racial remarks. “Emerson entered these comments on the Chinese in his private journal at the age of twenty during a period in which, as Robert D. Richardson Jr. describes, he was in a ‘gloomy and petulant’ mood (55). His information about the Chinese came from one secondary source, a book he had just read called Journal of the Late Embassy to China” (115). Partridge contextualizes Emerson’s remark in the writing of his formative years that he revised or contradicted in his mature writing.

20. Lee uses “face” here repeatedly to make us hear an echo of the words “effaced and effacer” a few lines earlier (City 86).

Chapter 5: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Ethnicity in Monique Truong’s The Book of Salt and Mei Ng’s Eating Chinese Food Naked

1. I define “queer” in the last section of this chapter.
2. Gertrude Stein returned to America on a lecture tour in the summer of 1934.
3. I further elaborate on this in the last section of this chapter.
4. I use “displace” because the old object-choice can never be erased by replacement, for a new attachment is able only to make the loss tolerable.
5. Ho was a kitchen assistant at the Ritz in 1919 when he submitted the petition to the Paris Peace Conference for an independent Vietnam. See http://www.moreorless.au.com/heroes/ho.html for further biographical details.
7. Ho lived in England between 1913 and 1917, and trained as a pastry chef under the legendary French master Escoffier at the Carlton Hotel in the Haymarket, Westminster. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ho_Chi_Minh. Quinn-Judge refutes this particular detail while confirming that Ho worked in a kitchen in London. She writes, “[T]here is no
contemporary evidence that he worked as an assistant to Escoffier at the Carlton Hotel, as is claimed in the Tran Dan Tien book” (25).

8. Quinn-Judge documents that Ho shared living quarters with other compatriots “at 6 Villa des Gobelins” (20).


10. Ho’s significance to Binh is made clear at the end of the novel. When Binh goes to the photographer to purchase the photograph of himself with Sweet Sunday Man, he discovers a picture of Ho hanging on the wall of the shop. He decides to buy Ho’s photograph instead, for he admires him as “a traveler whose heart has wisely never left home” (247).

Epilogue

1. Horace Fletcher (1849–1919) was an American health-food faddist who initiated the discourse of health and mastication. He earned his nicknames The Great Masticator and The Chew-Chew Man by arguing that food should be chewed thirty two times—or about a hundred times per minute—before being swallowed. Fletcher and his followers even claimed that liquids, too, had to be chewed in order to be properly mixed with saliva. Fletcher advised against eating before being “good and hungry” or while angry or sad. He also advocated a low-protein diet as a means to health and well-being. He promoted his theories for decades on lecture circuits. Upton Sinclair, Henry James, and John D. Rockefeller were among those who gave the fad a try. Henry James and Mark Twain were house guests at his home in Venice.