

# UC Santa Cruz

## UC Santa Cruz Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Making to Taste: Culinary Experimentalism in Asian Pacific American Culture

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97j698rf>

### Author

Chan, Stephanie H.

### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**MAKING TO TASTE: CULINARY EXPERIMENTALISM  
IN ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN CULTURE**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

**Stephanie H. Chan**

September 2014

The Dissertation of Stephanie H. Chan is  
approved:

---

Professor Rob Wilson, chair

---

Professor Christine Hong

---

Professor Karen Tei Yamashita

---

Professor Chris Connery

---

Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Copyright © by  
Stephanie H. Chan  
2014

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. PAPERS AND PROVISIONS: CULINARY REVISION IN SAN FRANCISCO CHINATOWN NARRATIVES.....	25
“Fry Me to the Moon”: Wayne Wang’s Early Chinatown Films.....	34
Forging Papers, Foraging for Family: San Francisco Chinatown Narratives at Mid-Century.....	45
Eating Secrets: <i>Steer Toward Rock</i> .....	52
<i>Eat Everything Before You Die</i> : an Indigestible Assimilation.....	62
II. FEEDING THE REVOLUTION: COOKS IN <i>THE BOOK OF SALT</i> AND <i>I HOTEL</i> .....	82
Master Chef and Kitchen Boy.....	86
California Dream Cuisine.....	100
III. OUT OF THE ARMCHAIR: WANDERING ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN EATERS AND FAILED SATIATION.....	125
Consuming the Conceptual in <i>Pamela</i> .....	130
“Refusing Food”: The Search for Food Habit in <i>The Fifth Book of Peace</i> .....	137
An Island of Strangers: “Hawaiian Cowboys”.....	146
CODA	
Re-localizing with Race: Imagining Alternative Consumption.....	161
Next Courses.....	185
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	193

## ABSTRACT

### MAKING TO TASTE: CULINARY EXPERIMENTALISM IN ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN CULTURE

by

Stephanie H. Chan

This project studies works by Asian Pacific American writers and artists that respond critically to the widespread enthusiasm for ethnic food and multiculturalism which arose in the United States during the late-twentieth century. This enthusiasm reflected popular hope that food culture's welcoming of ethnic cuisine was a sign of racism receding into the past. Yet consuming palatable ethnic food representations as a surrogate for racialized bodies encourages the disavowal of past inequities' pressure on the present, and disassociation from unsavory racist histories of exclusion, labor exploitation, and biopolitical regulation established in the decades preceding.

Observing how celebratory discourses of liberal multiculturalism and world citizenship invoke appreciation of ethnic cuisine while obscuring structural inequities still embedded in food culture, this project demonstrates ways in which Asian food remains tethered to histories of inequity that have not been overcome.

To illuminate these inequities, this study considers how contemporary artists expose what becomes elided in multicultural consumptions of difference, namely, congealed labor, unequal exchange, and circuits of domination. Central to the study

are the works' "culinary experimentalism" – literary tactics of representing food, designed to re-engage race by conjuring obscured histories of Asian exclusion, and by challenging Asian food's exemplarity as a deracialized signifier of multiculturalism and globalization. Using parody, mixed languages, and imaginative re-telling of neglected histories, these works refigure food representations to assert political linkages disappeared during the rise of culinary multiculturalism, and to suggest more race-conscious forms of consumption.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Pop!” was the theme of the first conference held by UC Santa Cruz’s Asia Pacific American Research Cluster, a vivacious group of graduate scholars dedicated to exploring transpacific cultural linkages. My first experience giving a scholarly paper at this gathering, focused on popular culture, was so enervating that it set me on the path to earning a doctorate, and completing this dissertation. This resolve gelled after meeting Rob Wilson, who offered me a chocolate Milano as the proceedings ran over, and who, not long after suggesting Gramsci would bolster my study of Asian American chick-lit, became my adviser. Rob has nurtured my intellectual growth throughout, welcoming my questions and scattered bunches of half-baked leads, and teaching me how to trust my strengths. His courses on global-local poetics routed across the Pacific, and on the pastoral, inspired many of the readings within these pages. I am grateful for his scholarly works which model deep concern and compassion for the mixed and marginalized, and for his wry, spry, poems which issue from the self-conscious and courageous heart. Thanks to his epigram jukebox, his aloha beat generosity, his poetic manna and hilarity, we have made it.

Christine Hong’s presence kept me from the deep end of second thought, and the throes of academic protocol, as I crafted this project. Her keen eye and fierceness as a critic imbued this work with a level of rigor beyond what I could have imagined on my own. I continue to draw inspiration by observing her inexhaustible dedication as a scholar, activist, and educator. Christine’s graduate seminar on Asian Americans

and the Law was generative for my study of Chinatown narratives. Her dissertation writing group has also been a valuable space for developing ideas. I relied on her mentorship as I faced increasingly heavy teaching loads, and contributed to other projects, while building this dissertation. I thank her for her faith, her excitement for this work, and for being welcomed under her wing at several eleventh hours.

It has been my privilege to have Karen Tei Yamashita as a committee member in this endeavor, and an even bigger privilege to have been in her presence these years. Her works and teachings in Asian American literature offered light and provocative questions as I shaped this study to highlight innovative approaches to history and language. Many thanks go to Karen for puzzling through these ideas with me, for her mentorship in creative writing, for mind-body nourishment (including adobo, Iron Chef battle reading panels, and preserved Meyer lemons), and for being the cook behind Felix.

The food focus of this project owes to Chris Connery and his graduate seminar on *The Ocean*. Chris's courses on Chinese history and literature also deepened my understanding of diasporic culture, and at his encouragement I embarked on Mandarin language study in both Santa Cruz and Nanjing, China, which enabled my readings of hybrid-language texts. One of the most serious gourmets and thinkers I know, Chris has been a crucial champion and collaborator.

Several other teachers and allies at UC Santa offered me encouragement, and welcomed me in the spirit of community: I thank them all. Special appreciation must go to Lissa Caldwell, for inviting me to participate in the multi-campus groups



focused on food, the body, and work, as well as to make editorial contributions to *Gastronomica*; and to Jim Clifford, who sat on my qualifying exam committee and was an important catalyst for my work in cultural studies. For teaching me, and for guiding my own development as an educator, I am grateful to Micah Perks, Lisa Rofel, Susan Gillman, Kirsten Silva-Gruesz, Vilashini Cooppan, Sharon Kinoshita, Jody Greene, and David Keenan. Julie Kimball's teachings trained me to pay attention to micro-movements and to my big toe, which in turn deepened this project's attention to play and experiment. I would not have gone past the first day were it not for Carol Stoneburner, Emily Gregg, Hollie Clausnitzer, Amy Tessier, Roxanne Monnet, Stephanie Casher, Julie Brower, and Sandra Yates. Warmest thanks to them for their kindness and expertise in keeping us all glued together.

My graduate compatriots and friends at UC Santa Cruz cared for me with the utmost generosity and faith throughout this endeavor. They read drafts, responded, offered support through exams and writing phases, listened to teaching challenges, shared stories and food. I am privileged to have spent this time learning and working alongside them. In particular, PacRum, including Fritzie de Mata, Tim Yamamura, and Melissa Poulsen, has been an incredible buoy, a pod of powerful minds and local players, with whom I have grown at home. In moments of compression, and in moments of celebration, they have been with me, always offering fellowship, and fuel to weather The Wall in its various forms. The Snickers-SPAM imaginary continues. I am glad for Troy Crowder, whose expansive knowledge of world history, popular culture, and transcendent cuisines I have long enjoyed and admired. His presence

brought the times great lightness. Calvin McMillin, Jimi Valiente-Neighbours, Shelly Chan, Surya Parekh, Christy Lupo, Jasmine Syedullah, and Sherwin Mendoza, gave this journey special lift and gravitas.

The Literature Department, Graduate Division, and Graduate Student Association at UC Santa Cruz generously provided funds for me to attend meetings of the Association for Asian American Studies, at which I presented parts of this work. They also supported research excursions to the Fales Collection at New York University, and to the Pacific Collections at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa.

Warm gratitude goes to my friends and coaches off campus who provided good company, space, and sanctuary for rest and for making sense of what I was doing. Through the years they have helped me balance. Cheers, especially, to Jo Kearley et al., Mimi Yen, Grace Liao, and Kerena Gordhamer-Saltzman.

To my Chan and Lam families, to the Wongs, Lees, Cheungs, and Onos, go love and humble thanks for patience and curiosity.

Most of all, I thank my parents, Hedy and Howard, for love, and for teaching me about endurance. As they watched me go through the steps of this unfamiliar journey, they never stopped their support and encouragement. I thank them for weekend coffee mornings, and for their deep respect for food and travel, which grows daily. Because of them I was able make a project out of reverence for Chinatown speak, good eats, and jokes that are ours. Mom and Dad, this is for you.

S.C.  
Santa Cruz, August 2014

## INTRODUCTION

### Making to Taste: Culinary Experimentalism in Asian Pacific American Culture

Look at all the brand names!  
Aren't they really grand names!  
Continental Can Corporation of America  
has arranged that to be!

Pepsi Cola, Coca-Cola,  
Rice Crispies & Del Monte  
Best Foods! Best Foods! Best Foods!

Everything is wrapped in plastic.  
Everything begins to look like it came from L.A.  
and they/deal out the pineapple Dole/  
to better enable you to meet your role

as customer  
of the big new supermarket  
where we take our car and we park it...

– Lew Welch, “Supermarket Song”

Because of our openness and the dynamism of the food vendors, in the United States in recent years consumers have learned about hummus, falafel, bagels, “designer” coffees, coriander, basil, arugula and radicchio, Jerusalem artichokes, jicama, quinoa, buck wheat groats, new rice varieties...lactose-free milk, scones and other sweet breads (not sweetbreads!), breads baked with ingredients such as tomatoes or olives, a staggering variety of capsicums, soy milk, tofu and dried soy products, previously neglected seafoods such as monkfish, “artificial” crabmeat (surimi), and many subtropical fruits, such as mangoes, soursops, red bananas, and star apples, and a dizzying number of packaged foods designed to relieve our worries, especially about fiber and fats.

– Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*

“Making to Taste” is a study of works by Asian Pacific American writers and artists that respond critically to the widespread enthusiasm for ethnic food and multiculturalism which arose in the United States during the late-twentieth century. This enthusiasm reflected popular hope, if not belief, that food culture’s welcoming of ethnic cuisine was a sign of racism receding into a distant past. Yet, as this work will show, focus on consuming ethnic food representations obscures past and present structural inequalities which remain embedded in Asian Pacific American food culture. To bring these inequities to light, I consider how contemporary writers and artists expose what becomes elided in multicultural consumptions of difference, namely, congealed labor, unequal exchange, and circuits of domination. Unlike popular works whose presentations of ethnic food remain unencumbered by views of racism, these works self-consciously stage confrontations with power inequity through representations of the culinary.

Belief in multiculturalism as a progressive American virtue reflected widely in 1990s social discourse and popular culture. Mainstream television shows, films, and novels featuring ethnic subjects and dramas related to ethnic American cultures drew audiences at a higher rate than the decades following the 1960s civil rights struggles. For instance, works of fiction and film put forth by artists like Amy Tan and Ang Lee enjoyed widespread mainstream attention for their tales of inter-generational conflict, complicated by transnational migration, and encounters with racial and ethnic difference, outside of the family unit. This unprecedented appetite for the stories of Asian Pacific Americans, as well as other U.S. ethnic minority groups, represented a

vested neoliberal interest in encountering the histories and dramas of non-white Americans. Now in the wake of the Cold War and the war in Viet Nam, and with immigrants from Asia arriving in greater numbers, American consumers seemed curious to engage Asians and Asian culture, particularly in cosmopolitan areas where immigrants tended to settle. Moreover, U.S. economic expansion efforts, exemplified by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, increased contact with Latin American immigrants from the south. The civil rights consciousness prescribed just decades before was tested in the 1990s; the American public was faced not only with the ongoing challenge of reconciling slavery's brutal legacies, but also with the rapidly changing demographics brought on by war, and by accelerated forces of global capitalism, in the Asia Pacific region. The forms of difference Americans would encounter, in other words, multiplied. From the confrontation with this vast array of differences emerged a virtuous response of tolerance for all, a response which effectively erased the particularity of injustices and historical inequities shouldered by each group. Food emerged as friendly ground upon which general acceptance, in the face of such disparate forms of experience and difference, could be measured. Popular perception held that one's friendliness toward the other could be expressed through the acceptance of the other's food. Yet this belief in tolerance through the culinary naively suppressed views of systemic injustices and social antagonisms, both past and present.

In the most prominent narratives about diasporic or ethnic minority communities during this time, the culinary fueled this faith in understanding through

food; and, as Anita Mannur and others have observed, these multicultural minorities began to co-create the misguided faith. The food the narratives profiled offered numerous delights to seduce audiences: tantalizing images and descriptions of comestibles; rare glimpses into the ethnic kitchen wherein an elder dispenses secret recipes to a young apprentice; and interpersonal dramas whose ups and downs could be detected in the quality of meal preparation. In potentially thorny encounters with narratives of inequality or cultural difference, food served as social lubricant: audiences could engage otherness not through the ugly portraits of anti-Asian discrimination and systemic violence, but through pleasurable experiences of taste. Prominent narratives invoke food to symbolize relations between family members, and to develop conflict or reconciliation across generations. Inter-generational or inter-personal conflicts cast with comforting food backdrops won the most popularity. And as ethnic American food narratives rose in reception, so too did narratives from outside the country which demonstrated this combination of difference, backed by the comfort of food images and tropes. Films like *Eat Drink, Man Woman* (Taiwan, directed by Ang Lee, 1994) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (Mexico, directed by Alfonso Arau, 1992; based on Laura Esquivel's novel, *Como Agua para Chocolate*, 1989) extended mainstream interest in food and ethnic/cultural difference to the global stage.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheng-Mei Ma discusses how Lee's film was crafted for consumption specifically on the global market. See "Ang Lee's Domestic Tragicomedy: Immigrant Nostalgia, Exotic/Ethnic Tour, Global Market."

This period in which the United States had seemed to intensify its commitment to tolerance and diversity (virtues won from the Civil Rights era) occurred amidst other key cultural patterns, most notably the way consumption was tied to individualism and niche marketing in an era of late-capitalism, as well as U.S. culinary expansion in the global arena. In a candid analysis of her own love for global cuisine in the United States, philosopher Lisa Heldke employs the term “culinary colonialism” to describe the simultaneous respect with which she approached ethnic food, and the spirit of self-expansion, which she came to realize, resonated disturbingly with imperialist attitudes. “I could not deny,” she confesses, “that I was motivated by a deep desire to have contact with -- to somehow own an experience of -- an exotic Other as a way of making myself more interesting” (177). Seeking the food of the Other, which we might frame here as a type of novelty, exceeds a simplistic quest for delicious taste, and becomes tied to the eater’s sense of self. “Novelty,” Heldke argues, “is also attractive to adventuring food colonizers because it marks the presence of the exotic, where exotic is understood to mean not only ‘not local’ but also ‘excitingly unusual’” (181).

Famed anthropologist Sidney Mintz theorizes such a draw toward novel foods to be part of an individuating project, a project extremely common in our era of consumerism. In contrast to American culture prior to the rise of consumerism, where one’s individual identity was determined to a greater extent by one’s adherence to codes and etiquettes belonging to local networks like family and community, the late twentieth-century has ushered a shift towards the market: “As an older social

system becomes dilapidated, one's individual identity is called into question more.

The use of consumption as a means to define oneself becomes commoner; the market emerges as a mirror of what one is, and what one can become" (81).<sup>2</sup> The American consumer's appetite for ethnic food and ethnic narratives is intimately bound up with perceptions of self, and projects of self-making. Heldke's momentary interpellation as a culinary colonialist on the one hand highlights the personal discomfort of feeling anonymous in the world, and on the other hand, shows the trouble with seeking comfort through consuming global food networks. However uncomfortable it might be to take responsibility for the colonialist echoes, the anecdote serves as an important model for building consciousness of one's privilege as an eater, and of the uneven dynamic underlying the enjoyment of the other's food. To invoke a term developed by Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lesbesco, the more "culinary capital" one possesses, the more one may assert how consumption *should* happen.<sup>3</sup>

Although the will to experience ethnic cuisine in order to make oneself more interesting presumes openness to all forms of difference, both national and global, it also bears noting that this process is far from democratic. American eaters, and American culinary culture, select which cuisines to make themselves with, to a large extent based on the context of international relations and politics. Anthropologist Richard Wilk observes that:

---

<sup>2</sup> Mintz theorizes about food and late-capitalism, in conversation with anthropologists Eric Wolf and Thomas Friedman.

<sup>3</sup> Naccarato and Lesbesco assert that culinary capital supports middle-class identity (7). Although "Making to Taste" does not present a formal analysis of class and readership, the desire for culinary capital applies to mainstream culinary culture as it is described here.



In making choices about cuisines in the international arena, each group has its own “significant others,” which tend to overshadow the unknown thousands of “insignificant others.” It is not hard to see why modern types of mass-produced fast food, having originated in the United States, would arouse so much passion around the world, at a time when that country seeks to extend its economic and political power to new levels. (29)

The kinds of Asian foods that have enjoyed “significant other” status in the United States correlate with the United States’s relations with individual Asian nations. For instance, American publishing houses put out notably more Chinese cookbooks than Japanese cookbooks in the decades surrounding World War II – a reflection, no doubt, of U.S. political alliance with China, Japan’s enemy status, as well as veiled shame for Japanese American internment. American mainstream culinary culture, thus far, has been slow to celebrate Filipino, and to a lesser extent Korean, cuisine. The vexed and persistent U.S. imperial presence in the Philippines (which, as we shall see in Chapter Two, resulted in legalized discrimination, and confused identities for Filipino immigrants and nationals alike) reflects in the scant mainstream attention given to Filipino food.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, less attention to Korean cuisine is consistent with the current U.S. conflict with North Korea, and the unresolved Korean War.

---

<sup>4</sup> I note that U.S. political relations do not solely determine which cuisines become anointed “significant other”; other forces to be recognized include the rate of immigration, where migrants settle, and the extent to which they were involved in food businesses to make a living. For instance, historian Yong Chen notes that Chinatown’s presence as a physical settlement greatly enabled Chinese food’s localization among non-Chinese eaters.

Although it recognizes difference, culinary culture remains highly selective about whom it brings together at the American table.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that since the 1990s, expressions of racial hostility have continued to mount against both domestic subjects and subjects abroad. It has become disturbingly evident that the touting of multiculturalism has not ushered in an era of tolerance, despite its mantras of equality and diversity. The decades following brought no shortage of tragedies of race and war which brought to light tacit, or at least unofficial, forms of racism and systemic inequality still endemic in American culture and state apparatuses. The aftermath of 9/11 conjured latent anti-Arab discrimination, made manifest in national surveillance and legalized profiling policies following the collapse of the Twin Towers. In more recent history, the cases of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, both young black men whose murderers were tried and acquitted of racially-motivated manslaughter, raised American public outrage. Although many Americans detected a pattern of racial profiling across these cases, the courts ruled that racial motivation could not be proven, revealing the lack of legal definitions and languages available for quantifying racially-motivated acts. Then too, was the 2014 case of Elliot Rodger, a young mixed-race man who murdered six college students on a killing spree in Isla Vista, California. Rodger, who made public his frustration with engaging white women romantically, sought retribution along lines of race. All cases highlight disconnects between the high

---

<sup>5</sup> Satirists like Chris Fair play on current liberal discourse by positing culinary alliance with America's current antagonists. *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States: A Dinner Party Approach to International Relations* reveals the desires and the absurdities of turning to food to heal the nastiest military conflicts.

commitment to diversity, and a fantasy of equity. Diversity and multiculturalism, as David Palumbo-Liu reminds us, reinforces hegemonic assumptions about racial difference, if it means disengaging with the very idea of racism – its historical forms, its evolution (2).<sup>6</sup> The first three events evidence a general inability to detect what a racist act might look like, in the moment it happens. In the latter case, Rodgers’ horrifyingly misguided dependency on racial markers to reconcile social ostracism negates the values of multiculturalism, and moreover shows how Rodgers was unable to account for his own status as mixed-race.

More specific to the food arena was the 2013 lawsuit filed against restaurateur and cooking show celebrity Paula Deen, who was accused of creating a hostile environment in one of her restaurants in Georgia. Among her accusers was head cook Dora Charles who cited Deen’s use of the “N-word” while referring to other restaurant staff; Deen did not deny her use of the slur, only defended her intention as not malicious. Although the lawsuit ended in settlement, Deen’s contract with the Food Network – on which she had established her reputation as a force in the industry – was not renewed. While many were sympathetic to Deen and quick to dismiss the action as a mere reflection of harmless Southern speak, critics saw her attitude as representative of the deep disconnect between the current moment and histories of black inequity in the South. As one New York Times reporter put it: “The relationship between Mrs. Charles and Ms. Deen is a complex one, laced with history

---

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to *The Ethnic Canon*, Palumbo-Liu posits that “a truly critical multiculturalism,” in contrast, is possible if it theorizes points of opposition and resistance to de-politicized, ahistorical discourses. (2)

and deep affection, whose roots can be traced back to the antebellum South.

Depending on whether Mrs. Charles or Ms. Deen tells the story, it illustrates lives of racial inequity or benevolence.”<sup>7</sup>

It is in light of these tragedies and media controversies, which indicate widespread confusion around race, that I devote critical attention to the culinary, as a site which has, at least since the 1960s, been marshaled as a symbol of multiculturalism and the valuing of tolerance as a cultural practice. In liberal discourses invoking ethnic food, dispensing with unsavory issues of inequality is possible, and even encouraged, in order to preserve an inadequate, Pollyannaish ideal of progressiveness, and past racism overcome. Consumers of ethnic food, or ethnic food representations, are commonly invited to indulge in exotic taste, but removed from the context of the food’s production, labor, or violence enacted upon colored bodies who produce or eat the food. In a study of South Asian diasporic food narratives, Mannur notes “the way in which the culinary foodways of South Asian diasporic populations make palatable the inclusion of selective aspects of South Asianness,” and asks “why culinary practices are enfolded into the image of multiculturalism, when South Asian bodies so often are not enfolded into the same vision of inclusion?” (7). This work asks similar questions, extending the discussion to include histories of racism involving Asian Pacific Americans.

Works of liberal multiculturalism, and especially culinary multiculturalism, replace such critical consideration of the violence borne by marginalized figures, by

---

<sup>7</sup> Kim Severson’s article appeared on July 25, 2013.

tying ethnic other-ness to ideas or tropes that are more popular and less political.<sup>8</sup> Mannur argues that “culinary narratives fall within the range of ‘acceptable’ interventions –safely ethnic, and nonpolitical because they figuratively serve up marginalia on a platter” (21). Narratives that do gain popularity – the mother-daughter tale, or the “tale of displaced immigrant’s nostalgia” – do so precisely because they hold mainstream appeal. For instance, Sau-Ling Wong points out how Amy Tan’s success struck at a moment in which interest in feminism rang strong in mainstream culture; *The Joy Luck Club*’s (1989) focus on female resistance to patriarchy, she writes, promoted “sugar sisterhood” – an alliance that suspended any sustained consideration of racial difference and instead focused on uniting sisters in a universalized feminist cause – between feminist-leaning readers and the Asian women featured in the novel. Sheng-Mei Ma’s critique of Tan’s *Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), furthermore, locates the novel’s popularity in its ability to relate to popular American fascination with holistic and spiritual development:

Writing in the post-civil rights era, influenced by the multicultural milieu of the United States, Tan realigns the animalistic and the spiritual with the ethnic. The Chinese ancestry of her protagonists in *Secret* allows them to access the magical realm à la New Age, to be reborn as whole and wholesome human beings. (“Chinese and Dogs” 30)

---

<sup>8</sup> The forgetting of bodies of color is akin to the forgetting of animal bodies, as novelist Jonathan Safran Foer explores in his journalistic expose of the current meat industry, entitled *Eating Animals* (2010). Foer, à la Jacques Derrida, discusses the willful amnesia needed to consume animals in our age of hyper-industrialization and factory farming; citing the enormous violence enacted upon animals in the food industry, he claims that forgetting is now, more than ever before, a requirement for those who eat meat.

Here Ma points out the particular community interests Tan's novel dials into, but she also emphasizes the cost with which this community forms, namely that realigning the animalistic with the ethnic is a continuation of mystical Orientalism. Ma goes on to write that "Tan's ethnicizing of the primitive contributes significantly to her success among white, middle-class, 'mainstream' readers living in the climate of the New Age" ("Chinese and Dogs"). The popularity, and avid consumption of ethnic narratives among such a readership continuously circulates, and thus perpetuates, the view of Asianness as inherently exotic, and mysteriously different and strange by nature.

As tempting as it might be to envision the acceptance of Tan's Asian characters as evidence of ever-improving, progressive attitudes towards difference, this hopefulness comes with the price of preserving Orientalist logic. Yet perceiving this price requires us to withhold the pleasure of acceptance – a task which becomes especially difficult when it involves the pleasures of food. Resisting the impulse to turn away from the violence that goes on in the making of Asian cuisine, as the editors of *Eating Asian America* point out, requires that we consistently "interrogate...the image of Asian Americans as being from 'elsewhere' and how, through culinary contexts, they have been assimilated into the national fabric of normality and whiteness" (6). Overcoming the limits of de-politicized, liberal multiculturalism requires interrogation of ethnic food representations, and awareness of the selection processes at work in creating them. It requires vigilance in assessing

omissions (which often relate to histories of inequity and systemic failure to accept difference) made in the interest of widening readership.

Several studies of Asian Pacific American food in literature have focused importantly on how food illuminates the social negotiations undertaken by Asian Pacific American subjects (as racialized others, marginalized figures, etc.). Wenying Xu's study illuminates sites of ambivalence, and the various psychic spaces produced by culinary tropes and representations. Jennifer Ho examines consumption as a theme in the Asian American coming of age novel, tracing its connection to identity formation. To this body of scholarship, "Making to Taste" shows how contesting the essentializing forces of food culture importantly happens at the level of form, in addition to theme. The works gathered in these pages are distinct in their willingness to use food representations at the same time that they experiment with and critique them. Not only do they critique the basic ability of a food representation to communicate an entire experience, they also critique other writers, and readers, who have thought as much. These works self-consciously draw attention to the way food writings are read in order to unsettle habits and assumptions embedded in popular food culture.

### **Culinary Experimentalism**

To trace racism's effects and transformations across the Pacific, I turn to texts which engage key twentieth-century moments including global migrations of food workers from Asia in the 1930s, McCarthy era witch hunts in San Francisco's

Chinatown, and more recent experiences in multicultural American urban spaces. In considering how the works dramatize these moments by paying attention to food, I demonstrate that the textures of racism's legacies become visible and palpable through a culinary lens. In this study, food workers up and down the chain of production illuminate U.S. histories of labor upheld by layered systems of alienation (ranging from the state to familial) and barely-legal employment practices. I consider eaters whose awareness of self, community, and difference inheres in eating and interacting around food; but importantly, they suffer the uneasiness of encountering inequality in the very act of eating. In studying the various levels of discomfort, as well as the histories of inequality providing the setting for these tales, I gather a set of occluded perspectives to counter the obfuscations of multicultural and culinary discourse.

Yet I also read how these works do more than supply correctives to historical lacunae using food representations. Simply replacing dominant narratives by declaring the authority of occluded perspectives, as numerous cultural critics have observed, merely replicates the binary system of inequality (us/them, etc.) it wishes to combat. Moreover, declaring the authority of occluded perspectives prevents us from examining important entanglements between dominant and non-dominant groups – it is precisely these entanglements that shape food, and food culture. Each artist featured in this study acknowledges the inadequacy of dealing only in counter-narrative, and in the same sweep, the inadequacy of conveying counter-narratives through representations of food. And while they deal in culinary representations to



elaborate Asian Pacific American histories, their works ultimately refuse to default to tropes of apolitical multiculturalism. Beyond merely asserting counter-narratives as new authorities, in other words, the works in this archive interrogate the very mode of conveying ethnic difference: the food representation itself. Through various literary and formal means, which I explore in these chapters, they tell occluded histories at the same time that they reveal food representations' limited ability to convey the story of the other. In some cases, the occluded histories become unveiled through the critique of food representations.

In this way, my approach differs from Sau-Ling Wong's intertextual consideration of food images in Asian American literature. The common food metaphor, for Wong, serves as a node around which tensions regarding ethnicity, gender, and class, become illuminated *across* literary works. While the texts I look at certainly affirm ambivalences across Asian American experience, I also want to suggest that their formal innovations invite us to see how popular food culture essentializes through repeating food metaphors. In other words, intertextual reading undoubtedly promotes appreciation of how heterogeneous Asian Pacific American experience can be, but if we consider the way food culture anoints certain types of food narratives to appeal to a broad audience, the question of *which* complexities are permitted visibility compromises that heterogeneity. This project shows how experimental works make apparent the kinds of ambivalence and complexities that Wong's intertextual model advocates; but I am more interested in the political stances they take against popularized Asian Pacific American food writings. The distinct

interventions they make, as I will show, is to acknowledge the popularization of Asian Pacific American identity narratives cast in culinary terms, and then to desubliminate the logic of these narratives through stories where identity does not become more legible if one considers food.

Key to what I call these works' culinary experimentalism is that they rely upon food representations at the same time that they destabilize the representations' authority. My readings show how this measured skepticism toward food representations prevents Asian Pacific American histories from collapsing into tidy expressions of culinary difference or racial tolerance. The texts in this archive, as I will show, fiercely admonish against overreliance on enjoyment as a proxy for understanding the other, however seductive this equation might be. My use of "experimental" aligns theoretically with Timothy Yu's understanding of "avant-garde" in his study of post-1965 Asian American poetry and its position relative to the major twentieth century American poetic schools and movements. Specifically, I borrow Yu's sociological focus on Asian American poets' search for artistic modes befitting of their struggles as marginalized American subjects:

For all the talk of roots, history, and Asian cultural heritage, many Asian American writers confronted what they saw as the task of building a culture from the ground up with whatever tools were at their disposal. The task could not simply be one of filling extant cultural forms with Asian American content; the struggle to describe an Asian American consciousness was also a struggle to find appropriate and distinctive forms for that consciousness, one

that led Asian American poets to draw from a wide range of styles and traditions... (77)<sup>9</sup>

While my project argues that a distinct set of “styles and traditions” related to the culinary has emerged among Asian Pacific American writers since the 1990s, interestingly, this literary innovation in Asian Pacific American food writing has occurred predominantly in prose works. Thus, I depart from Yu’s specific focus on American poetic tradition and adopt the “experimental” rubric to consider the food-based interventions across both fiction and verse. I argue, however, that regardless of genre, the formal innovations are similar: in exploring the differences between palatable apolitical works, and unpalatable politicized works, they demonstrate a common interest in staging moments of inaccessibility, and denying the reader of the pleasures of easily-consumed, linear narratives. In other words, these artists deliberately withhold the straightforward experience and enjoyment of Asian food that popular works, mostly from the 1990s, delivered. And in so doing, they draw attention to the very business of using the food representation to describe a pan-ethnic, globalized, late-capitalist moment. I take the common interest among these works to engage popular food representations’, and to contest how they encourage apolitical attitudes among readers vis-à-vis Asian Pacific American individuals, to be a distinctive, collective effort to articulate an “Asian American consciousness.” This consciousness, specifically, takes the dual form of a rejection of food to represent this

---

<sup>9</sup> Yu invokes the work of Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger in defining “avant-garde.” Poggioli’s concept contains, in Yu’s words, a “sense of profound connection between the social and the aesthetic”; Bürger’s concept of avant-garde is that it imagines “a social life that is itself grounded in art...an attempt to create a community by aesthetic means” (Yu 6).

experience, and a re-making of food representations to more accurately describe the inequities suffered by Asian Pacific American subjects. The distorting and re-imagining of the 1990s food representation is, for this study, what defines culinary experimentalism.

Taking us from the streets of 1930s' Paris, to San Francisco of the new millennium, each work re-engages Asian Pacific American history in order to imagine the effects of past inequities upon current multi-ethnic spaces. I concentrate specifically on this archive's experiments with parody, mixed languages, and imaginative re-telling of neglected histories, using a set of occluded figures – behind-the-scenes cooks, invisible laborers, and thinking, travelling APA eaters. In reconnecting readers with parties who have been made to shoulder inequalities while producing Asian Pacific American food culture, as well as those who continue to struggle with racial anxiety in an age of purported tolerance, the works assert political links prematurely disappeared during the rise of culinary multiculturalism.

This study also considers representations of eating and food in Asian Pacific American literature as elaborations of the entanglements between global routedness on the one hand, and re-localization efforts on the other, in the contemporary moment. Each chapter examines moments in which Asian food becomes re-localized in multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan communities of San Francisco, Paris, New York, and Hawai'i. These patterns of integrating Asian food into local food culture are often drawn into multicultural discourse, lauded as friendliness toward tolerating, and even enjoying, difference. Yet in interrogating celebratory notions of localization, these

works signal and meditate upon the incommensurate aspects of localization: how, for instance, localizations are made possible precisely because of capitalistic or colonial forces. In this way I draw from Allison Carruth's *Global Appetites* which attends to the changing dynamics between global and local forces in American food history. In tracing "the interchanges between regional communities and the global networks that not only fulfill appetites for exotic foods but also circulate the knowledge and resources that advance alternative food movements, from organic agriculture to urban farming" (8), Carruth echoes the "global/local" concept, elaborated in works by Rob Wilson, Wimal Dissanayake, and Arif Dirlik, and sees the relation between the global and local as one of dynamic exchange, rather than as binaries locked in antagonism.<sup>10</sup> I build upon these works in my discussion of how re-localizing Asian food often results in celebratory multiculturalism, but that hidden behind these praises are histories of exploitation, racism, and other forms of othering which have accompanied diasporic efforts to localize. The following chapters will demonstrate how the term "local," in the realm of Asian Pacific American food, has entailed both antagonism and inclusion.

In Chapter One, "Papers and Provisions," Jeffery Paul Chan's *Eat Everything Before You Die* (2004), Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* (2008), and Wayne Wang's early Chinatown films, reveal how diasporic laborers' flexible survival tactics in periods of exclusion in San Francisco Chinatown directly influenced the

---

<sup>10</sup> See *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*, Wilson, Rob and Arif Dirlik, eds.; and *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake, eds.

development of American Chinese food culture. I first trace the depiction of Chinatown as a heterogeneous space in the films *Chan Is Missing* (1982) and *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984), showing also how the shifting significance of food in the works defies attempts to reduce Chinese subjectivity to culinary symbols. Then noting the blockbuster status of Wang's film rendition of the *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) – which presents Chinatown in a less textured manner than the earlier two films – I turn to consider the recent novels of Ng and Chan which counter such simplified depictions of Chinatown with their narrative focuses on the 1950s. I argue that concentrating on this period, in which anti-Communist rhetoric of the McCarthy era dovetailed with Chinese exclusion, and in which major food networks operated out of Chinatown to serve local eaters (Chinese and non-Chinese), enhances the culinary experimentalism of these works. Not only do they elaborate the exploitation of paper sons conscripted into the Chinese-run food networks, they craft food representations to perform the particular forms of suffering borne by these figures, namely betrayal and forced secrecy. Food, in other words, does not just appear as an ornamental symbol of family or conviviality; it proves to be much more central to the description of the historical period, and thus a way to contest dehistoricized culinary invocations.

Chapter Two, “Feeding the Revolution,” considers cooks in Monique Truong's *Book of Salt* (2003) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* (2010). Bearing witness to artistic and avantgarde movement of 1930s' Paris, and the yellow power movement of 1960s' San Francisco, these cooks speak from behind the scenes to

deliver alternative views, and unexpected imaginings, regarding revolution. Although speaking from the kitchen space, they importantly emerge from behind the traditional role of servant as visionaries with insights that distort and stretch these canonized histories. In Truong's novel, I read the ways in which the Vietnamese cook, Binh, hired to cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, appropriates Steinian poetics – including her food play – to articulate a more race-conscious vision of the scene in Paris. Specifically, I show how Binh makes use of Stein's strategy of repeating to proliferate meaning, in order to accrete meaning onto himself. Yet, even as he acquires more specificity, because of Binh's established narrative unreliability, he remains what David Eng calls a "dim" presence. Yamashita's manong cook, Felix, shares a propensity for unreliable storytelling, spinning tales of hob-nobbing with famous figures and being present at historic events. Felix's unreliability, although humorous and seemingly benign, is in fact a creative response to systemic inequity shouldered by Filipinos of his generation: his fantasies make evident withheld opportunities to citizenship and partnership. In the face of these limited rights, food remains one of the few sites in which pleasure can be attained, and withheld opportunities imagined. The lies of both cooks layer new tensions on well-established accounts of both movements. From the kitchen, they observe these struggles' racial exclusions and imagine more inclusive revolutionary philosophies.

Chapter Three, "Out of the Armchair: Wandering Eaters," discusses Asian Pacific American wanderers who seek out culinary diversity and ethnic belonging by wandering around new environs. The protagonist of Pamela Lu's *Pamela* (1998),

notices that she lacks the experience of ethnic belonging that she has encountered in her education, and sets out in search of this feeling by eating in San Francisco.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *Fifth Book of Peace* (2003) presents the continuing journey of Wittman Ah Sing, who travels to Hawai'i in search of a new way of belonging in a mixed community. And the protagonist of John Yau's "Hawaiian Cowboys" (1995) similarly travels to Hawai'i in search of belonging, but is on a quest to allay his anxiety of being racialized. Tracing how these characters attempt to find belonging through acts of eating, I show how all three experience unsatisfying eating experiences, which signals the failure to connect to ethnic communities through consumption. These works, I argue, critique notions of easy consumption in multiethnic spaces; moreover, they show that even Asian Pacific American figures who are savvy to their own histories of othering, cannot rely upon this knowledge, or on the act of eating ethnic food, to guarantee belonging in other groups.

Following the main chapters, which explore how the pleasures of consuming Asian food become disrupted to interject histories and occlusions, the coda thinks through these moments of disrupted eating, indigestibility, and frustration, to consider what alternative, race-conscious forms of consumption might look like, as local food networks increasingly reflect global influence. Eric Chock's *Last Days Here* (1990) describes forms of eating which honor Hawaiian history and the local Hawaiian ethos of conscious sacrifice in the face of mindless, cannibalistic consumption and mainland imperialism. Alan Chong Lau's, *Blues and Greens: A Produce Worker's Journal* (2000), offers revealing observations of the diverse, working-class clientele



in Seattle's International District. Both poets show how ritual and careful observation of the local environment can to help critique the reckless consumption of global capital in the food system. The study concludes with a reflection on future directions for food-based literary intervention and provides a survey of Asian Pacific American works which are engaging the changing demographics of food labor.

As this study brings language and aesthetics into closer contact with politics of race, consumption, labor, and sustainability, I hope also that it will tend to what Julie Guthman and others have seen as a gap in food studies scholarship. The literary works gathered here demonstrate innovative ways to think about food histories in order to enervate efforts to address labor, activism, uneven food access, and mainstream consumption at the present moment. Examining experimental culinary representations, figured to point out histories of power inequity, allows us not only to trace the ways in which histories of racism drop out of popular food discourse, but also to highlight alternative and imaginative re-figurations of food connected to race.

This study contributes to existing food studies in the humanities by arguing for literary experimentation, in particular, as a crucial asset to building race-consciousness in American food culture. The focus on experimentalism expands upon previous studies of Asian American food culture, most notably, Mannur's *Culinary Fictions*, which reads culinary narratives as discursively consolidating national belonging. Extending Mannur's observation that structures of power fashion food culture to support state interest, this project ultimately asks how aesthetic innovation can inspire historically-accountable consumption. I argue that literary

experimental works do more than replace state-produced histories with counter-narratives: they, more importantly, suggest new modes of consumption which confront power inequities on one hand, and which deliver the pleasures of literary play on the other.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Papers and Provisions: Food in San Francisco Chinatown Narratives

“Chop suey! Good and bad, intelligent, mad and screwy!”

– Oscar Hammerstein II, “Chop Suey”

“Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California, USA, looks down from Chinatown, over a foggy bay... You can eat if you are in the mood, shark’s fin soup, bean cake fish. The girl who serves you all your food is another tasty dish!”

– Oscar Hammerstein II, “Grant Avenue”

Known for being one of the earliest popular works to place Chinatown and the lives of Asian Americans at its center, *Flower Drum Song* drew attention to San Francisco Chinatown’s heterogeneous mix of denizens, and the ways in which different kinds of Asian Pacific American subjects related to popular American culture. Thanks to Rogers and Hammerstein’s 1961 musical film rendition of the Broadway production (opened in 1958), C. Y. Lee’s story drew mainstream attention as the public encountered a narrative focused solely on Asians and Asian Pacific Americans. Although contemporary critics have since noted how American musicals featuring Asians – including *The King and I* (film, 1956) and *South Pacific* (film, 1958) – reflected U.S. desires for Communist containment during the Cold War, *Flower Drum Song* nevertheless asserted a vision of Chinatown that defied reigning

stereotypical characterizations of the enclave as strange and un-American.<sup>11</sup> The comical tenor of “hula hoops and nuclear war, Doctor Salk and Zsa Zsa Gabor,” sung to a square dance in the “Chop Suey” number, contrasts with more polemical attitudes toward Chinatown at the turn of the twentieth century. Historian Yong Chen writes that for many white Chinatown visitors at this time, “part of the pleasure of visiting Chinatown was that it provided the easy revelation of binary opposites: progress vs. stagnation, vices vs. morality, dirtiness vs. hygiene, and paganism vs. Christianity. Seeing the vice and evil in Chinatown allowed some to get the sense of ‘I am holier than you’” (190). *Flower Drum Song*, the musical, softened these binaries by celebrating the amalgamation of American and Chinese culture, without imposing the superiority of white Americanness; Chinatown was now viewed as a liberating “screw” space where yellow peril paranoia was no longer necessary.

David Henry Hwang’s 2002 reworking of the original Broadway production sought to honor Lee’s depiction of Chinatown, while at the same time creating a new book for his version (departing from the book written by Hammerstein II and Joseph Fields) in order to add critique of Chinatown labor and capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Focused now on the challenges of rooting a Chinese national in San Francisco rather than a happy

---

<sup>11</sup> Bruce McConachie and Sheng-Mei Ma both note that the Asian characters in these works conform to the model minority stereotype and thus did not illicit the kind of anti-Asian attitudes that circulated in legal policy of the time, the most notable being legislation that barred miscegenation and restricted immigration from Asian nations.

<sup>12</sup> *American Theater* reviewer, Mishra Berson writes: “Hwang’s book directly confronts the enticements and pitfalls of such cultural accommodation, while also cramming in allusions to poverty and labor conditions in Chinatown and the American obsession with the almighty dollar. ‘Nothing buys respect in his country like money,’ Madame Liang observes. ‘We’ll give tourists what they want, but we’ll have the last laugh...Explains Hwang, ‘If the first act of the show is the bright, glossy side of the American dream, I wanted the second act to be about some of the more problematic things.’”

combining of cultures, Hwang continued to refine the portrait of Chineseness begun in the original. These efforts highlighted the various phases of American policy towards China and Chinese immigration – a vision of heterogeneity that would resonate with force among American audiences of the new millennium.

Interesting to note, however, is the way in which Hwang's reworked musical enjoyed far less attention than the original Broadway musical and film. Hwang's efforts to draw out the idea of intra-Chinese culture clash, as well as to poke fun at the original scores' over-the-top Orientalist moments only drew crowds for six months before the production closed. One Asian American cultural critic attributed the production's short run to audience disappointment that Hwang's reworking had not preserved enough of the feel of the original by Rogers and Hammerstein.<sup>13</sup> Despite Hwang's efforts to update the show, it appeared that theater critics and audiences still longed for the less politically fraught, and more positive, portrayals of Chinatown that the musical film had canonized.

I begin with *Flower Drum Song* to introduce this chapter's focus on representations of food in San Francisco Chinatown narratives, and the ways artists employ food to describe the various effects of racial exclusion upon people living there. Food in the musical helps to create satire around old Orientalist stereotypes (with references to "screwy chop suey" and the Chinese waitress as a "tasty dish"), yet it still preserves a celebratory sense of cultural mixing that remains untroubled by systemic inequalities produced during the Cold War, and in the wake of exclusion.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Terry Hong's commentary in *AsianWeek* which notes lackluster reviews in major East Coast publications in the *New York Times*, the *New York Post*, and the *New York Daily Times*.

Rogers and Hammerstein envision Chinatown food to simply, and symbolically, represent the mixing of Chinese and American culture (“living here is very much like chop suey”). By contrast, in Hwang’s rendition of *Flower Drum Song*, food helps trouble this celebratory view of Chinatown. In one interview Hwang explains his production’s update to the “Chop Suey” number, which features a spectacle of women clad in take-out boxes, and which added the lines: “Feeling hungry yet? I know I am, and I just ate an hour ago.” Hwang remarks:

Nobody nowadays thinks, “oh, if you eat Chinese food you’re going to be hungry an hour later.” ...it ends up serving a different function now, because you don’t end up laughing at Chinese people per se, you end up laughing at the fact that the society at a certain point actually believed that if you ate Chinese food, you’d be hungry an hour later. (interview with Jeffery Brown)

Hwang’s attempts to reveal more of Chinatown’s struggles with capitalism and labor follow similar efforts to paint Chinatown as a more contested, contradictory space in U.S. history. In the 1980s, director Wayne Wang (née John Wayne Wang) produced several Chinatown films, including *Chan Is Missing* (1982) and *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984), which challenge the desire for representations of a simple Chinatown, in part, by presenting Chinatown food as an inconsistent force. Chinatown food in these films does not always convey the excitement of cultural mixing, as this does not reflect the realities of Chinatown eaters. Instead, Wang shows how food representations are as unreliable as those portraits of Chinatown which rely upon a simple binary of Chinese versus non-Chinese. Food, in other

words, helps to construct a more historically-textured sense of Chinatown as a heterogeneous space.

Yet reflecting the varied receptions to each version of *Flower Drum Song*, reception of Wang's earlier films shifted momentarily with his work on *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). While *Chan Is Missing* enjoyed popular reception among art house film viewers, *The Joy Luck Club* was a project of much larger scale and budget, and attained blockbuster status. The volume of production and reception in the 1990s indicates how both film producers and audiences were most interested in animating the stories of Chinese Americans whose tie to Chinatown was mostly nominal, in comparison to *Chan Is Missing*. More viewers in the 1990s seemed interested in Asian Pacific American-focused narratives that presented a more unified vision of Chinatown – and Chinese food – rather than the contradictory, vexing portrait delivered in its earlier counterparts.

*The Joy Luck Club* entered American culture at a moment of pronounced interest in multiculturalism. Food and setting helps the film attempt to capture “quintessential” Chinatown experience. According to the storytellers, Chinatown living involves drama between immigrant Chinese mothers and American-born daughters: specifically, mothers shielding daughters from Chinese patriarchy, war, and over-assimilation, and daughters buckling under expectations of high achievement and success. Food, sometimes used as narrative device, stands in for the mothers' Chinese principles; and it is through the simple invocation of food metaphors that the mothers communicate these values to their daughters.

In a now famous scene, for instance, food represents the Chinese mother Suyuan's belief in "best quality," the principle of yielding the best provisions to others, out of respect, and taking the worst for oneself. At the dinner table, the best quality crab, according to the principle, ought not to be taken for oneself. The drama of the dinner table involves Suyuan's daughter June, who feeling great pressure to attain professional success, is humiliated when her mother quips to the guests that she has no style. After the meal, the daughter breaks down into tears in front of her mother, pleading for her approval. June's breakdown prompts reconciliation – her mother, referring back to the crab, deems that June has in fact mastered the best quality principle – via her food etiquette. Suyuan explains, "That bad crab, only you tried to take it. Everyone want best quality. You, you seeing different. Waverly took best quality crab, you took worst. Because you have best quality heart." The food here symbolizes mother-daughter reconciliation, a palatable story to accompany a representation of crab.

However crab may symbolize the mother's principles in this scene, it only nominally speaks to Chineseness, or Chinatown, and the entrenched racism and otherness. The crab is associated with the Chinese mother, yet the distinct Chineseness of it remains vague – is the "best quality" principle Confucian? Is it an indicator of the family's class? Of the conditions of their arrival from China? The viewer must simply take on faith that the "tradition" of crab is Chinese, passed easily to the next generation. Chinatown, and the crab, merely help to create a sufficiently different space in which universalized multiculturalism can happen.



Narratives such as these remain detached from long histories of food in Chinatown, from which we can understand the challenges of living in this space at mid-century, beyond an over-simplified notion of assimilation. Chen describes Chinatown historically as a “food town” to emphasize the centrality of food both materially and culturally in that space. Two crucial characteristics of Chinatown illustrate this centrality. First, Chinatown was a space for the community to consume and commune around the cuisine of the old country. It is a food town inasmuch as it formed, sustained, and transformed through Chinese food: “Its physical shape and location as well as its roles in Chinese American life have changed in response to changing socioeconomic and cultural conditions facing Chinese America” (186).<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, Chinatown shepherded the localization of Chinese food in the United States: “The physical settlement, in addition to opportunities afforded by the expanded American economy, including restaurant businesses in the 1850s, is what fostered the steady popularization of Chinese food, as opposed to the foods of other immigrant groups” (185). Chen notes, furthermore, that although Chinatown was known (at least in the first part of the twentieth century) as the “embodiment of alien unfamiliarity for non-Chinese outsiders,” Chinese Americans learned how to appropriate this othering for political gain:

Chinese Americans successfully appropriated white America’s orientalist curiosity, politically. In the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago,

---

<sup>14</sup> Chen further elaborates: “The popular image of Chinatown as a physically isolated and culturally exotic ethnic settlement found almost exclusively in the American metropolis conveys its importance as an embodiment of alien unfamiliarity for non-Chinese outsiders. For the Chinese, however, Chinatown has always meant their community. ” (186).

a Chinese American company produced a seemingly ‘orientalist’ Chinese exhibit and used the opportunity to fight for Chinese Americans’ political rights (Ngai 2005). During the Chinese Pacific War in the 1930s and 1940s, they launched a national public relations campaign against Japanese imperialism and American racism at the time by staging various public events in Chinatown, which featured their distinctive traditions, even food. It is during this period that Chinese American restaurants started to teach white customers how to use chopsticks and enjoy Chinese food. (192)

The exchange between Chinese and non-Chinese, then, was not a story of unilateral appropriation, but rather a continuum of appropriations enacted in response to perceptions of race-based difference. These perceptions, which focused on vilifying Asians based on race rather than celebrating them for their ethnic culture, were spurred by anti-Asian legislation and U.S. political antagonisms with nations across and around the Pacific. This proves a stark contrast to the picture of Chinese Americans in the most popular Chinatown narratives of the late twentieth century.

Against the backdrop of mainstream interest in a vision of Chinatown that was exotic enough to uphold the values of liberal multiculturalism, but tamed of its contradictions (interest that persisted from mid-century on), novels written in the early 2000s responded back to this reduction of Chinatown with force. Fae Myenne Ng’s second novel, *Steer Toward Rock* (2008), and Jeffery Paul Chan’s expansive *Eat Everything Before You Die: A Chinaman in the Counterculture* (2004), speak back to perennially over-simplified views of Chinatown by engaging the 1950s – a moment in

which U.S. legal structures bore down on Chinese Americans with particular intensity, inciting many to modify traditions, professions, and affiliations in order to cope. Being Chinese American, in other words, was becoming increasingly complicated. And to boot, food allows us to trace the gravity of intra-enclave diversity. Ng and Chan speak back not only to crude understandings of Chinatown that seem to inhere in our moment of Hammerstein-nostalgia; but because their choice of the 1950s necessitates representations of food networks which were so central in Chinatown of the time, they also gain the opportunity to critique current culinary multiculturalism's fervor for ahistorical, de-racialized food representations. A far cry from the gleeful portrait of Chinatown in *Flower Drum Song*, these novels chronicle the immense psychological and emotional damage inflicted upon Chinese Americans through anti-Asian legislation during the Cold War period. Furthermore, these works show how this damage is not borne uniformly across all Chinese; workers, and those with tenuous legal status are more vulnerable.

The films of Wang and the novels of Ng and Chan show food circulating through Chinatown as part of transpacific networks, formed by Asian Pacific Americans to skirt around legal exclusion. Food, shown at once to be an exchange commodity, a way to provide labor, and an object of table communion, illuminates the economic and social layers of Chinatown. Food thus proves to be as complex as those who deal in it. It is local, global; a counter-exclusion tactic, an exploitation tactic; it feeds the picture bride and the bachelor; it employs the blood son and the paper son; it is Jack Kerouac and the Chinatown cook who could care less about Beat

Buddhist quests; it is sweet and sour and it is dim sum. It is the appropriations between fake and authentic.<sup>15</sup> These works are experimental in their respective nods to reductive visions of Chinatown, and in their play with the food representation (its reliability and unreliability) to illuminate the shortsightedness of such visions.

### **“Fry Me to the Moon”: Wayne Wang’s Early Chinatown Films**

In contrast to *The Joy Luck Club*, food in Wang’s earlier Chinatown films is purposefully difficult to define. Refusing to reduce food to a symbol of assimilation without touching upon links between U.S. racism and Chinese food, these films present food with more variety, requiring a flexible conception of how food operates in Chinatown. With sweet and sour pork, there is sweet and sour with a milk chaser; there is apple pie, booze, pizza, fish, greasy take out boxes, dim sum brought home. Yet the variety of Chinatown food does not constitute a happy multicultural table: in its variety and multiple forms, it eludes reduction into multicultural parlance. Food in these films serves as an indicator of Chinatown heterogeneity, and appears as contradictory and vexed as the individuals found within.

Wang’s *Chan Is Missing*, released in 1982, has remained a landmark moment in Asian American history and artistic production. The film, well-received in arthouse circles, combines the styles and tropes of film noir, detective film, and documentary film, to tell a fictional story of two San Francisco Chinatown cabbies, in search of a partner who has mysteriously disappeared, along with a hefty sum of

---

<sup>15</sup> See *Dharma Bums* (Kerouac), *Tripmaster Monkey* (Kingston), and *Donald Duk* (Chin) for a sampling of this variety.

\$4000. Concerned about the well-being of their partner, Chan Hung, and their hard-earned money, the cabbies – Steve and Jo, both American-born – embark on a gumshoe investigation around Chinatown, stopping to inquire with all of Chan Hung’s connections as to where he might be.

The film shows Chinatown as a heterogeneous site, and Chinatown denizens to be so varied in age, class, political leanings, and gender consciousness, that the rubrics of ethnicity and culture seem nearly irrelevant. As film scholar Peter Feng notes, the film articulates Chinese American subjectivity as this continuous process of destabilizing – not of being, but of always becoming. Feng asserts that the film “emphasizes the process of becoming [Asian American]. The film affirms through its textuality the impossibility of being, the insistence on becoming – in its refusal of closure and by questioning identity, appropriation, narrative, and temporality” (96). The interrogation of what is essentially Chinese American, Feng asserts, opens up to the expression of a more capacious political concept of “Asian American.”

The film dramatizes this process in part by invoking food. Two key scenes demonstrate how Chinatown food appears differently, depending on who is eating or preparing it. The first exemplifies the fantasy of multiculturalism. One lead brings the two cabbies to interview the director of the Newcomers Language Center, where their disappeared partner, Chan Hung, was a student. The director, George, informs Jo that as a new immigrant, Chan Hung was not interested in assimilating, but had a problem of wanting to stay Chinese. Advising against trying to stay Chinese on one hand, and on trying to assimilate and be white, on the other – the director, who has

forgotten about Chan Hung and gets carried away in a diatribe about Chinatown politics – advocates a method of making a life in Chinatown by combining “the best parts” of Chinese living, and “the best parts” of being in America. Using an apple pie as an analogy, he says:

GEORGE. Sun Wah Kue’s apple pie. It is a definitely American form, you know. Pie, okay, and it looks like any other apple pie, but it doesn’t taste like any other apple pie when you eat it and that’s because many Chinese baking techniques have gone into it and when we deal with our everyday lives that what we have to do.

The apple pie, for George, represents a happy compromise between Chinese cooking knowledge, and American forms. He describes a process of localizing the apple pie, although his detachment from the process of modifying the pie to suit Chinese taste does not convince Jo, who shrugs off the comment. Interestingly, the pie story does not sit well with Feng, who takes umbrage at the privileging of the American form over the Chinese immigrant’s hand in appropriating it:

The apple pie cannot be Asian American because it does not manifest the process of “becoming” – it is an expression of the uneasy encounter of two cultures, not revealing the process of accommodation so much as revising Asian techniques to produce American goods. To be Chinese American is to be constantly in the process of becoming, to negotiate the relationship between cultures. (94)

In the process of illuminating the pie's meaning to George, Feng interestingly layers more significance on the pie representation and contributes another perspective on what Chinese Americanness is. In keeping with the film's theme, Chinese food, and its significances, are highly contested.

Another lead takes the gumshoes to the kitchen of the Golden Dragon, run by an eccentric aeronautic engineer, turned cook – known in town for “that wonderful, beautiful formfitting Samurai Night Fever shirt with that bod” (37). The cook outwardly assumes the position of the socially marginalized Chinese immigrant, forced into the restaurant industry to serve sweet and sour pork:

HENRY [translated from Mandarin]. This kitchen isn't fit for humans to work in. Let me tell you, your barber goes in circles around a chair for money.

And so what about us overseas students? Overseas students fool around a stove with a wok spatula for money! Haha! His mother's!

After coming to America, what happened? [Chan] couldn't find a job, couldn't find a job – you know about that. When no one wants you, you don't have any way out. So, what do these Americans want? He doesn't want people to let you do any work in aeronautic engineering...He just needs you to make all those egg rolls, egg roll, sweet sour pork, won ton soup, these little tricks. (83)

In the interview, Henry highlights his wasted talent and resentment at having to join the restaurant business to make ends meet. But what makes Henry's case interesting – what makes him, and Chan, different from other working immigrants – is his

training as an aeronautic engineer. Accounting for the historical-political context of his tale, it is likely that Henry was barred from pursuing aeronautical engineering as a Chinese diasporic during this moment of Cold War anti-Communist sentiment. Suspicion of Chinese nationals and defense concerns were likely explanations for his restaurant fate. His tie with food illuminates the state-sanctioned hostility that met Chinese students upon arrival to the United States.

In spite of his educational capital, Henry, as a cook, identifies with marginalized workers. Interestingly, the workers with whom he allies are those overseas, as we learn from a conversation between the two gumshoes, and another young Chinatown resident, Amy:

STEVE. Have you ever heard Henry rap about China? How he identifies with all those people?

JO. Yeah, rock me to the moon?

AMY. Oh yes. Help the poor and needy. (37)

The scene cuts to an earlier interview with Henry:

HENRY. If they don't recognize us, they don't want to recognize us, and they will not recognize us. You know what I mean? We will only live this life once. That's a great pity. One lives one life, and should do something more significant. You...you only live once. So we should do something more...more significant. (87)

Here, Henry's frustration with racist antagonism in the United States becomes expressed through solidarity with class-struggles in China. The discrepancy between



the two struggles becomes deeper when we learn more about Henry's situation in Chinatown:

AMY. You know, that guy is so filthy rich, man... Yea, that's how he can afford to help the needy and the poor.

STEVE. That's just a front, man. Whenever anyone comes in the restaurant. That guy might have a dirty smock, man, but he's got a face of jade. That guy is loaded –

AMY. Face of jade?

STEVE. -- just like all those new guys coming in from Taiwan and Hong Kong with all that money. They're buying up all over the place. They don't care about –

AMY. That's why he can afford to want to help. He has eight restaurants and three of them are within two blocks of Clement Street. (40)

Noting the inconsistencies in his position, Steve and Amy provide reason for us to dismiss Henry's earlier interview as performance, in dismissal of his character. Yet what we take away from these developments is a view of the cook's flexibility in the face of U.S. racist policy. Denied the professional opportunity because of Cold War hostility, Henry skirts around this barrier and creates an alternative path to riches by way of a restaurant empire. At once a wealthy Chinese immigrant, a long-distance nationalist, and the subject of U.S. racist policy, he both embodies and defies the simplistic trope of an immigrant simply trying to fit in by working in a restaurant. Yet he uses food, and a kitchen persona, to conceal the flexible tactics. The film

shows how Chinese diasporics used food to obscure parts of their lives in Chinatown – themes which both Ng and Chan pick up in their portrayals of Chinatown. Wang’s cinematic focus on food in these films helps to uncover these complications for the viewer, and to provide a richer account of Chinatown life.

Wang’s *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*, released shortly after *Chan Is Missing*, showcases the instability of Chinese Americanness in a single family. Unlike *Chan Is Missing*, which registers heterogeneity across several players, individuals in *Dim Sum* are shown to contain this paradox within themselves. Food, once again, serves as a site from which to articulate this idea; like the characters, food is surprisingly difficult to pin down. Dim sum, in particular, defies the status of “traditional symbol,” or “symbol of Chineseness.” Whereas *The Joy Luck Club*’s crab represents the principle of “best quality,” which then gets transmitted to the younger generation, dim sum in *Dim Sum* initially symbolizes Chinese tradition, but then its symbolic qualities fall apart in the transmission from old generation to new. Food proves unruly material for constructing a symbol of anything definitively Chinese and traditional, and instead, affords a view of the characters’ competing concerns. These concerns, as in *Chan*, relate to exclusion, visible in daily experience – in the presence of old bachelors, the fractured-reunited immigrant family, and the effect of diasporic success on the Chinatown-born. The film insists that tradition, food, and Chinatown experience are more fraught with loneliness and disjuncture than what popular food narratives might tell us.

At the heart of *Dim Sum* is the Tam family: Mrs. Tam, a widowed immigrant mother; Mrs. Tam's brother-in-law, Uncle Tam, an old bachelor barkeep who has lived in Chinatown the longest, making him a Chinatown expert for the family; and Geraldine, Mrs. Tam's thirty-something American-born daughter – her most reliable and doting child. The family is composed of discrepant groups, each experiencing the relics of exclusion differently. Uncle Tam's long-standing history in Chinatown reflects a wave of bachelor immigrants who would have arrived earlier than figures like Mrs. Tam, who retains a closer tie to China. Geraldine, having been born in the United States, experiences Chinatown more like Uncle Tam than her mother, able to speak English and interact more fluidly outside of the home. The family reflects the variety of Chinatown's constituency, at the same time that they observe ties to Chinese tradition, and kinship with each other.

*Dim Sum*'s drama pivots on the dynamic between the mother and daughter, caught together in frustration over Geraldine's potential marriage. The aging Mrs. Tam, preparing for her own passing which was predicted by a fortune teller, makes it her final tasks to return to China once more, and to see that Geraldine marries her long-time boyfriend. The fortune teller and the return to the homeland reveal the mother's tie to Chinese tradition, and her interpretation of Chineseness to mean spirituality and Confucian fidelity. In making Geraldine's marriage into another final wish, Mrs. Tam codes the marriage also as traditional. And marriage, while not an exclusively Chinese tradition, acquires a distinctly traditional significance in her eyes.

Yet the very idea of tradition becomes called into question as the characters struggle to reconcile how principles of marriage and family tie apply to Chinese families in the diaspora. However much they recognize the marriage as traditional, both Geraldine and Mrs. Tam have trouble committing whole-heartedly to this path, for fear of Mrs. Tam's loneliness – a reason that Geraldine cites each time an elder prods her to marry. While this tacit hesitancy to do what is traditional lingers between the mother and daughter, Chinatown friends and family continue to interpret the task before them to be a simple matter of following Chinese tradition.

Food frequently becomes referenced to convey this sense of tradition, although it is through food that the flimsiness of the tradition itself – as a monolithic idea of Chineseness – becomes exposed. Cake, for example, represents the competing desires. To celebrate Mrs. Tam's passing the citizenship test, Geraldine buys a flag cake:

GERALDINE. This is a congratulations cake for Ma.

AUNTIE. Geraldine, when we eat your cake?

GERALDINE. Don't you like this cake?

AUNTIE MARY. No, Geraldine. We want your wedding cake. The one that smells so good and makes your mama so happy.

Mrs. Tam does not goad Geraldine to marry, revealing her hesitation to let her daughter go; but she allows her friends to communicate this part of her desire. While the citizenship cake represents Mrs. Tam overcoming outsidership, the wedding cake – the upholding of Chinese tradition – for the auntie takes greater

priority. The scene demonstrates the tenuousness grounds on which tradition is determined: although mother herself attempts to cast the marriage as an act in keeping with tradition, the cake reveals that there remains a hidden desire to keep her daughter around. Traditional Chineseness, as she has imagined it, does not account for the anxiety of living in the diaspora, as evidenced by her dependency on Geraldine to provide translation and company in Chinatown. Mrs. Tam's struggle as a diasporic Chinese becomes visible as the cake reveals the new, challenges she faces – challenges that are equally Chinese, though not yet understood as traditional.

The struggle against loneliness prompts Uncle Tam's efforts to intervene on behalf of the contested tradition. In taking Mrs. Tam's encouragement towards marriage, and "decoding" it for the daughter, he introduces a new possibility to Mrs. Tam:

UNCLE TAM. You and I should get married... This is going to help Geraldine to decide. If she knows someone gonna come and take care of you for the rest of your life. It'll free her to marry with Richard and move to LA. It'll be good for all of us. It's like an old Japanese movie. Where the widowed parent get to pretend to remarry so the daughter won't have to keep sacrificing herself.

Mrs. Tam playfully acknowledges Uncle Tam's gesture of support, but does not agree outright. Uncle Tam's loneliness, a condition to which he says he has fallen

“casualty,” conjures the lasting effects of Chinese exclusion.<sup>16</sup> His interest in freeing up Geraldine has the dual effect of creating space for a new companion for Mrs. Tam. The convergence of these forms of loneliness inspires the bachelor to make creative combinations of their respective diasporic conditions: the aging widow provides a convenient spouse for the lonely bachelor; the lonely bachelor provides a convenient caretaker for the aging widow. Thereafter, Uncle begins to approach Mrs. Tam in a more romantic light, while encouraging Geraldine to marry. His “encouragement,” appropriately enough, takes the form of food symbolism. The dish of choice: dim sum, at a meal when Geraldine’s boyfriend comes to town:

UNCLE TAM. Here is a little bit of dim sum: a little bit of heart for both of you. You get the hint? Oh, you know what the name of this dim sum is? Lin yong bao. Lin saang gui ji. You know what that means? “Several precious sons.”

RICHARD. Several.

GERALDINE. Being subtle, hah, ma?

[Ma smiles, cautiously.]

UNCLE TAM. You’re lucky you have me to decode for you. Otherwise they won’t get your message. So, when are you guys gonna get married?

GERALDINE. When are *you* gonna get married?

---

<sup>16</sup> See historical accounts by Judy Yung, Him Mark Lai and others for details on Chinese bachelor societies prior to 1965. Also Fae Myenne Ng’s essay on her experience of the Confession Program’s legacy is enlightening and reveals her novel’s interests in lies and consumption.

RICHARD. Yeah, when are you gonna tie the knot?

UNCLE TAM. Oh don't count me out. I got my eyes on someone.

Uncle Tam references the traditional symbolism of *lin yong bao* to coax Geraldine to marry at the behest of her mother – but also, to further his own hope to marry.

Although dim sum is initially meant to symbolize Geraldine's marriage according to "Chinese tradition," the symbol registers differently for all parties at the same time.

Food and tradition pass between characters in the diaspora, but in the transmissions, the meanings of food get compounded and spiral away from any original, singular meaning. *Dim Sum* interestingly preserves the unresolved quality of Chineseness and Chinatown by pointing out desires both revealed and concealed by food on the table.

### **Forging Papers, Foraging for Family: San Francisco Chinatown Narratives at Mid-Century**

"Families are a confusing, seductive occupation."

– Jeffery Paul Chan, *Eat Everything Before You Die*

In the early 2000s, writers continued Wang's early interests in revealing the diverse political and social groupings in Chinatown, whether among Chinese Americans or other ethnic American groups. Since mid-century a substantial body of work exploring Chinatown life has emerged: Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, Louis Chu, and Karen Tei Yamashita, writing at various moments, have depicted San

Francisco (New York, in the case of Chu) Chinatown of the 1960s and 1970s; poets like Genny Lim, Nellie Wong, George Leong, have given voice to their experiences of 1970s' Chinatown; Fae Myenne Ng's first novel, *Bone* (1993), and of course Tan's works, have portrayed the late-1980s to the 1990s; and the collection, *Island* (1991), has recovered Angel Island poems from 1910-1940. Of these works, I turn to two novels – Ng's second novel, *Steer Toward Rock*, and Chan's *Eat Everything Before you Die* – both of which continue to add texture to existing portraits of Chinatown with the use of food representations, in the vein of Wang's earlier films. Notably these works reach back further historically to figure in the 1950s' context of the Cold War, and Joseph McCarthy's campaigns to contain communist threats at home in the United States. Chinatown was a prime target of these campaigns, and denizens, of varying legal status, conducted life under the constant threat of criminalization and deportation. Both novels describe transpacific food networks which emerged from this often hostile, anti-Asian environment, in order to sustain powerful Chinese American families. In the novels, food appears in descriptions of laborers – what they touch, serve, and fuel upon.

But beyond depicting food as part of everyday life's material conditions, both authors imagine food as a governing force in the language and the psychologies of Chinatown denizens. Embedded in the articulations and the consciousness of the characters, food takes on figurative dimensions through which Ng and Chan deliver critiques of liberal multiculturalism. In particular, although food in the novels is shown to be mobilized in Chinese individuals' efforts to trump racist policy and



orientalist curiosity, this ultimately comes at the expense of the most vulnerable parties in Chinatown: new immigrants with forged papers.

With the exception of Louis Chu's now-canonized *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), narratives set in 1950s' Chinatown remained few until Ng's and Chan's recent works.<sup>17</sup> But the 1950s period interestingly exemplifies the vexed relationship between China and the United States, as reflected in the paradoxical treatment of Chinese Americans. Although the 1882 legislation barring the entry of Chinese immigrants had been lifted, for instance, the spirit of early exclusion remained in the strictness of policies establishing quotas in both 1929 and 1943; and this strictness would only intensify as the United States entered the Cold War, and Chinese Americans at home became subject to suspicion regarding anti-American, communist politics, and espionage.<sup>18</sup> As historian Mae Ngai observes, "In a few short years the dominant image of Chinese lurched from despised oriental 'other' to wartime ally to dangerous Communist threat" (203).

Suspicion of Chinese Americans writ large became so intense that U.S. political forces invested in apprehending Chinese who entered America fraudulently during the Exclusion period. Community historian Him Mark Lai writes that between 1882 and the 1960s, many Chinese sought to skirt U.S. exclusion by "claiming derivative citizenship...many were individuals who had assumed the identities of [already named] applicants, thus becoming substitute or 'paper' offspring; family

---

<sup>17</sup> Chu's novel is also set in New York Chinatown, though many of the themes concerning bachelor societies and immigration from China are shared among the three novels.

<sup>18</sup> In place of blanket exclusion were conservative quota systems, the first established by the National Origins Act of 1924, which was replaced by the Magnuson Act of 1943.

units became known as substitution or ‘immigration families.’” Efforts by the U.S. government to expose fraud cases escalated with the advent of the Korean War, and included the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s Confession Program, instituted in 1957. Chan’s and Ng’s novels reflect on a generation whose experience in the “shadow of exclusion,” as Chan calls it, comprises a crucial perspective in American history. Ngai remarks that “the vast majority of confessors successfully received legal status, but some were found ineligible for relief,” which explains the discomfiting uncertainty surrounding confession (221). Furthermore, Ngai writes, the FBI had identified several “left-wing activists” in New York, and on these grounds, targeted them for deportation. Two activists were revealed, not by their own confessions, but by the testimonies of other confessors (221). Ng’s and Chan’s works explore what it might have meant to live as a citizen with forged identity; to be employed in a network of paper people; to endure government raids and the constant threat of deportation; and to go about daily life eating, and producing Chinese American food.

Unlike the suspicion tied to Chinese bodies, Chinese American food for the most part enjoyed positive reception at this period in the United States. The embracing of Chinese food, as historians Christina Klein and Madeline Hsu observe, marked a moment in which the negative focus on racial difference gave way to enthusiasm for ethnic difference among “middling” eaters. Noting how in this period, American ideologies of containing Communism became entangled with ideologies celebrating integration, Hsu explains how Chinese bodies could be subjected to

racism, at the same time that Chinese food could be celebrated in a spirit of tolerance and friendship:

As minorities whose ethnicity could now serve to bolster American democracy, Chinese Americans gained social and cultural acceptance even as they faced the considerable risk of racialization as enemy agents working on behalf of Communist China. This confluence of opportunity and danger shaped the choices made by Chinese American entrepreneurs who developed strategies for marketing their ethnicity in ways that affirmed America's democratic and capitalistic ideals. (175)

Indeed, the success of Chinese fine dining establishments – Hsu writes of San Francisco's landmarks, Johnny Kan and The Mandarin – are prime cases of savvy Chinese restaurateurs marketing their ethnicity to make a healthy profit. Though the food enterprises undertaken by the Szeto and the Wong families in Ng's and Chan's novels do not involve fine dining, each operation does enjoy success for its ability to satisfy mainstream appetites for Chinese food. The other side of the coin – the race-based hostility towards those making the food – remains submerged as eaters enjoy the feeling of alimentary alliance. As eaters in the novels may not notice the racialization afflicting the Chinese bodies producing their food, so too might this escape the readers outside their pages. Ng and Chan thus incite the reader to confront acts of racialization while at the same time encountering enjoyable Chinese food.

One of the key effects of racialization explored in these novels, for instance, is the splintering of Chinatown communities through the development of global food

networks. These networks reflect a form of global capitalism, which as Arif Dirlik has observed, involve technologies that “have endowed capital and production with unprecedented mobility, so that the location of production seems to be in a constant state of change, seeking for maximum advantages of capital over labor, as well as to avoid social and political interference (hence, flexible production)” (29).<sup>19</sup> The flexibility and mobility of the family networks in both novels enabled Chinatown community members to come together against racial exclusion by providing employment and familiar food. But this very idea of belonging (specifically family belonging), because it was premised on maximizing profits, began to stratify the community even as Chinese food circulated through Chinatown. The novels show us that although the Chinese collectively suffered racial exclusion, this initial sense of collectivity created a class of exploited, though complicit, paper sons, co-opted into these networks which adapted as necessary to thrive. The protagonists, both young men called to participate in large-scale family food operations under false names, discover that satiating the hunger for inclusion requires that they relinquish all hope of learning who they were before becoming “substitute sons.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Aihwa Ong’s notion of “flexible citizenship” is helpful for understanding the families’ maneuvering of U.S. immigration law in order to create flows of goods and labor from China and Southeast Asia to Chinatown. Also, David Harvey’s discussion of capitalist logic (Spaces 107), especially *Spaces of Global Capitalism* for extended discussion of late-capitalism and global capitalism.

<sup>20</sup> What looks like a Chinese diasporic victory over anti-Asian U.S. law actually registers differently among diasporic subjects, as James Clifford observes: “The political and critical valence of diasporic subversions is never guaranteed. Much more could be said about class differences among diasporic populations. In distinguishing, for example, affluent Asian business families living in North America from creative writers, academic theorists, and destitute ‘boat people’ or Khmers fleeing genocide, one sees clearly that diasporic alienation, the mix of coercion and freedom in cultural (dis)identifications, and the pain of loss and displacement are highly relative” (257-258).

While food images and tropes accompany virtually every Chinatown story (Chin's *Donald Duk* and Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* immediately come to mind), what is distinct about these works by Ng and Chan is that their food representations flesh out Chinatown histories while, at the same time, announcing the perils of historical erasure. Specifically, they demonstrate how this erasure occurs easily, if Chinatown food is inadequately historicized. And what should be most disturbing to contemporary readers, perhaps, is the result of this dehistoricization, namely that in detaching our experiences of Chinese food from the knowledge of mid-century systems of inequality, we remain desensitized to forms of disenfranchisement and exploitation that might still inhere in the systems. To be sure, the transpacific economies established by powerful Chinatown families at mid-century laid the ground for our current experiences of Chinese food.<sup>21</sup> In dramatizing the dynamics within these families, and the accomplishments they gained for San Francisco Chinatown, Ng and Chan entice readers to ask: if those food systems depended upon a labor force, exploited in a peculiar fashion based on legal vulnerability (tenuous U.S. citizenship status) and desire for kinship and Confucian interdependency, what are the vestiges of this history? Do they remain in the current Chinatown landscape, and in Chinatown food? Both authors ensure that readers consider food as a vexed and vexing topic – a social intervention for the current moment, when Chinese cuisine is coveted in metropolitan spaces like San Francisco, but not always served up with specific histories of its Bay Area localization.

---

<sup>21</sup> See discussions by anthropologists Jack Goody and E.N. Anderson which detail the specific characteristics of Chinese food's globalization.

These works make a project of imagining San Francisco Chinatown one generation past, and specifically the languages and social logics of Chinatown's food networks. The novels strip food of romanticized ties to community, family, and ethnic identity, to offer a more troubling view of hierarchized food networks and exploitation at a tumultuous juncture in American history. Choosing to imagine these histories' details through a culinary lens, they establish a link between the politics of eating during exclusion, and the politics of eating in the current moment. In delivering stories of those victimized by corruption and deception while struggling as food workers, they disrupt expectations of Chinatown food as something to celebrate.

**Eating Secrets: *Steer Toward Rock***

“Soup fog misted the big window, so I could not see her face well.”

– Fae Myenne Ng, *Steer Toward Rock*

Ng's second novel delivers the history of the Confession Era through a drama of a reluctant paper son. Through Jack Moon Szeto's narrative, the realities of anti-Asian policy of the 1950s come to life as we see him struggle with the tenuousness of being an immigrant with fraudulent papers; with the self-damaging kowtowing demanded by his paper father; with the temptation to confess in order to be released from his paper family and pursue love on more “true” terms; and with the physical and psychological damages incurred whether he confesses or not. Ng dramatizes Jack's conscription into the Szeto empire – an operation intricately organized to skirt

tight U.S. immigration laws and anti-Communist raids, in order to maximize profits by means of a transpacific food network. Provisions for Jack are literally and figuratively bestowed upon him by his paper father, Gold Szeto, an earlier arriver from China and shrewd transpacific businessman. An intimidating figure reminiscent of mob bosses, Szeto's assorted "sons" help him to discipline the workforce to mask his illicit operations, especially from the INS whose frequent visitations to Chinatown create a constant surveillance presence in the story.

Jack is placed as a butcher; and his cohort of butchers enjoys the benefactor's luxurious food celebrations. Partaking in this food culture, however, requires that the butchers perform unconditional obedience in exchange for their provisions. Jack's condition of paper son-hood is that he must legally marry a woman from China, who in fact, comes to be companion to Gold Szeto (whose legal wife is back in China) in America. It does not take long for Jack and his friends to recognize that such obedience to the patriarch does not equal the nourishment they get back; but what keeps the workers in line is that they are fed in the form of employment, legal protection, and food. Additionally their heavily-Confucian sense of family loyalty keeps them ideological held in the Szeto family. Whereas the Szeto empire is forged to overcome the limitations of racist U.S. laws, it does so at the expense of its work force.

For Jack, the paper identity is shameful, requiring him to lie to those outside Szeto clan, including Joice, the Chinese American woman with whom he falls in love.

His desire to build a family with Joice, he reasons, will be attainable if he can extricate himself from the fraud:

I was willing to risk whatever I needed to get free so I could have a chance to be a family with Joice. Though she said she didn't want me, I believed that if I could do something to show her my sincerity and intent, she would change her mind. I trusted she would see the sense and logic and return my love, I wanted her love in the family way. (36)

Desperate for love in "the family way," as opposed to the transactional duty demanded by the patriarch, Gold Szeto, Jack risks exposing the Szetos' unlawful employment practices by entering the INS's Confession Program; yet the decision invites retribution from his employer. This tie to the Szeto family haunts him and he must live with the constant presence of secrets and suppressing the secrets by eating.

*Steer Toward Rock* layers and juxtaposes different voices and languages to perform secrecy and hidden meaning through its structure. Hiddenness, as a theme, develops through the novel's narrative and linguistic structure. For instance, Jack's first person voice interchanges with his daughter Veda's, as well as his legal wife, Ilin's; the multi-perspectival structure allows for gaps in Jack's narrative to become evident, but then to acquire new context through others' accounts. The novel also intersperses legal language, including that of Jack's official confession transcript, as well as Gold Szeto's testimony upon arrest, alongside the subjective narrative accounts. These shifts bring to our attention the various ways in which Jack is



inscribed or perceived, and the ways in which he consciously must decide to reveal or to hide information.

Linguistically, the novel's play between Chinese and English reinforce the notion of hidden meaning. Chinese and English fuse in ways that elevate the feeling of incomplete comprehension. Take, for instance, a conversation between two of Jack's co-workers, gossiping about Jack's confession: "Heard-told, Old Chew exclaimed, that it was his own son Jack who ruined him by going into the Confession Program" (128). The phrase "heard-told," while awkward in English, is a direct translation for the term "tingshuo" in Chinese, a common phrase meaning "I heard." Preserving the literal translation in English creates a slightly jarring feeling for English readers, yet Ng insists on reminding us that these figures are speaking Chinese. More than a gesture to representing Chinatown language more accurately, however, the awkward English signals to the reader that perhaps the other parts of the narrative, in like manner, do not make meaning in the way that the English-speaking reader expects. And indeed, this proves consistent in other formal aspects of the novel.

*Steer Toward Rock's* sub-section titles, finally, drive forward the novel's play with hidden meaning, as well as its theme of relationality. Each sub-section title appears twice, once in Chinese, and once in English: 報告 (bàogào)/Report; 報答 (bàodá)/Reciprocate; 報應 (bàoyìng)/Requite; 回報 (huíbào)/Return; 報曉

(bàoxiao3)/Release.<sup>22</sup> The subsections focus a various form of exchange between parties. While individually they signal a general give-and-take action, when considered in sequence, we see the notion of *uneven* exchange implicitly threaded through. “Reciprocate,” for instance, stresses even exchange, to “make equivalent,” or to “return in kind” (OED); but when placed next to “Requite,” the concept of exchange, in some senses of the word, gains added emphasis on the debt to be paid, as in the definition, “to get revenge or retribution.” “Return” dispenses with the idea of evenness altogether. “Release,” in the context of the other relational terms, suggests a situation in which one party can no longer participate in the exchange.

Ng demonstrates poetic virtuosity by selecting words to convey the explicit and implicit aspects of relationality, in both English and Chinese. At once we see how the representation of both languages reflects the language mixing that would have been found in Chinatown, establishing veracity in terms of voice. But Ng has gone to additional lengths to strike deeper equivalencies – for one, she retains grammatical consistency between the two languages, such that the repeated prefix/sound “re” parallels the repeated word/sound “bào.” The sonic consistency lends a feeling of regulation and authority (this builds the feeling of legal authority hovering over the action), but the selected recurring sounds actually intensify the implicit meaning – namely, the idea of cyclical movement and repetition involved in social relations.<sup>23</sup> The prefix “re,” affixed to actions “sometimes denot[es] that the

---

<sup>22</sup> I furnish the pinyin to emphasize the repeating sounds; pinyin does not appear in the novel.

<sup>23</sup> The idea of repetition serves as a theme, as in a scene in which Gold Szeto confronts Jack with a warning to protect the family from legal exposure. Jack defies Szeto, prompting the paternal figure to

action itself is performed a second time, and sometimes that its result is to reverse a previous action or process, or to restore a previous state of things” (*OED*). On the Chinese side, the repeating *bào*, defined as “report-announce-declare; reply-respond-reciprocate; recompense-requite-return evil for good; bulletin” (Pinyin Chinese-English Dictionary), not only reinforces the idea of cycles by dint of its repetition, but also adds the subtle presence of “revenge,” which is present, but perhaps more muted in the English sequence. More than acting as a simple statement about the presence of both English and Chinese in Chinatown, the section titles together evoke a more intense notion of the sinister and cyclical aspects of social relations, than could be achieved by one language on its own.

Establishing the feeling of hidden meaning through these structural innovations, Ng draws food into this calculus to parallel the hiddenness required of Szeto’s eaters. Descriptions of the food in this story reflect the minefield-like conditions of Jack’s experience; meals and work scenes, for instance, feature food prominently but with a shroud of something secret or hidden protruding just beneath. The novel’s “Confession Era language” is also food language. Rather than showing food as a universal community maker, the novel’s food language is crafted to signal that which always lies hidden. Rather than obscuring the particularity of Jack’s experience, in other words, food draws our attention to it. No scene exemplifies this better than Gold Szeto’s banquet.

---

repeat his admonition to “heed”: “That’s when I knew I had a small victory. Repetition was his mistake. Repetition highlighted his true fear” (40).

The dynamic between Szeto, the benefactor, and the indebted subjects follows a wax-wane pattern throughout the novel – resentment-forgiveness, resentment-gratitude. Szeto’s control of the employees’ desires and truths is apparent to the employees, but they must try hard to remind themselves of the lies the patriarch orchestrates. When Jack’s fake wife arrives, Gold Szeto feeds all his indebted at a “family” banquet which, on the surface, celebrates the legal union between Jack and Ilin, but which below the surface marks the arrival of a partner for Szeto himself. The scene casts the dynamics between Gold Szeto and the indebted in food terms. As the crew of butchers enjoys food and feeling of inclusion, they are seduced into believing the lie. Jack says, “The official story was the first course served: *I went to the son's wedding banquet, I toasted their hundred-year happiness. I was a witness.*” (74, emphasis original)

The pace of the scene, which weaves together the banter of the butchers, and luxurious descriptions of food, illustrates the seduction of food:

The kitchen doors swing open and waiters streamed out with tureens of soup. The butchers were seated by the kitchen so that the swinging doors and the fast moving track of waiters would drown out their raucous commentary.

Master Cleaver tasted the shark fin soup and admired the clear broth. Top grade fin! he said.

Mankok poured scotch into his bowl and said, Top grade means top secret.

May Gold Szeto have many sons! Gorman said, ladling himself a second serving.

Grandsons! Mankok corrected. (74-75)

The butchers' commentary, particularly Mankok, initially addresses the truth behind the spectacle of the wedding banquet, the falseness of the union. But once the food arrives, they are easily seduced back into believing the lie behind the shark's fin soup and scotch. The food imagery intensifies:

The waiters were leaving the kitchen so quickly the electric doors never fully shut and there was a continuous buzzbuzz and the red-vested waiters fluttered by like hummingbirds. A plate of prawns was presented and a dozen chopsticks pinched and clipped into it. The two indulgences arrived.

Between happy bites, the men exclaimed, Gold Szeto has a generous heart, Gold Szeto deserves happiness. (76)

At moments which could potentially compromise the patriarch's position of power, food swoops in to interrupt and divert the conversation. The language itself is swept up in the explosion of food imagery; here Ng shows how tempting it is to forget the questionable position suggested just a moment before.

One additional moment which gives them pause is the appearance of the Irish white woman, Pegeen, who enters on the shoulder of their colleague, Louie Yue. At that moment "Silence was the new rare dish. There was no more chewing, no more swallowing, no more slurping," and "A quiet brewed like an herbal tonic, each man pondering his own loneliness" (77-78). The startling fact of Louie with a white

woman gives each pause, as the white-nonwhite hierarchies to which they are accustomed grace the scene and cause them confusion. Here Ng interrupts the fluidness of the performance and culinary seduction to re-assert the problem of racial stratification – the very problem that has led to the creation of the Szeto empire, and also to the butchers' exploitation. Yet even in the face of this surprise, the only one who holds out suspicion of the day's proceedings is Mankok, who admonishes the group that they are complicit in a farce. Despite this knowledge, he warns them not to be seduced away from loyalty to the patriarch:

Be careful, Mankok said as he poured the last of the scotch. We eat Gold Szeto's food, we eat his lie. Be ready to spit out Gold Szeto's truth when the INS comes around. If they want to know if he owns the Universal, we answer No. When they ask if he owns 850 Jackson, we answer No. When they ask about the gambling houses...we answer, we don't know. No problem, no problem No. No. No. We don't know, don't know. (78)

Food, Mankok understands, is a contract, not a gesture of goodwill or unconditional nourishment. It is precisely the appetite for this nourishment that inspires Jack to refuse Szeto's food.

The language of eating and hiding remains with Jack, even after he confesses and after Szeto is arrested. With the continuing linguistic slippage and structural tactics in play, Ng shows how Jack's suffering as a paper son continues even as he breaks away from his paper family. Jack, who has confessed in time for his daughter Veda to arrive, then becomes the target of retribution. Szeto's men cut his arm off.

And despite Jack's moral resolve to give up his paper name for love, he does not attain the desired results. When Joice rejects him even after he has confessed, he becomes lost, forced to live without an arm, a partner, with a missing history, and an American daughter.

Refusing the food of Gold Szeto, he is fated to move on, but remains burdened by his unknown childhood, and the problem of not being able to "return" to a former life. He becomes worried about his blood daughter coming to know his history as a paper son: "Telling bound; telling deepened aloneness. I never wanted my daughter bound to my history so I will never tell it to her" (114-115). Even after absconding from the Szeto empire, he cannot escape from the need to keep secrets. The desire to confess, to lay completely bare, he realizes, is a myth.

Just after Gold Szeto's men hold him down to cut off his arm, Ng shows how deep the mark of confession continues to run. Ever fusing the language of eating to the language of secrecy and hiding, Jack flashes back to a moment where he met an "Old Traveler" at the orphanage from which he came in China. The man made a gift of a lotus bean cake, which the boy, Jack, bit into and crumbled "like new soil." The Old Traveller dispensed advice that Jack realizes he wants to pass on to his daughter:

Some secrets are better left untold, some stories have been lived beyond telling. For optimum health, consume only seven parts out of ten. In eating, always leave a morsel. In sorrow, leave one memory sacred. In anger, leave one step untaken so that the other may descend the stage. In love, leave one

word unspoken. In telling any story, exercise caution. An uttered word is not wind but bone. (115)

For a generation of paper sons, throwing caution to the wind as Jack did created physical repercussions. Though the flashback produces a lyrical and wise sensibility, it is fraught with the kind of paranoia that marked his experience working as a butcher. Fulfillment and satiation, he concludes, is too dangerous to pursue.

***Eat Everything Before You Die: an Indigestible Assimilation***

“Fifty years, a hundred years later, the shadow the Exclusion casts over the new Chinatown malls teeming with pregnant families is quite pale, nearly transparent. The old migrant bachelor society is dead... Life is rich; the markets, abundant. We are all of us forgiven... – all forgiven by those who have trespassed against us.”

– Jeffery Paul Chan, *Eat Everything Before You Die*

Like Jack Szeto, Christopher Columbus Wong, the paper son protagonist in *Eat Everything Before You Die*, spends his formative years conscripted into a large-scale, transnational, family-owned food operation, run out of San Francisco Chinatown. He represents one in a group of “American born children of pre-WWII Chinese immigrants [who] were taught by China-born children of the Christian missionaries...while growing up during the Exclusion in Chinatown’s missionary ghetto” (5). An orphan child at the time of his adoption in the 1950s, Chris’s legal father is the aptly named patriarch, Lincoln Wong, a businessman with a fabled history of growing up second generation Chinese among native Americans; Lincoln’s



partner in business, Mary, is the family's matriarch, and also a mastermind in strategizing the family's new global ventures in food and real estate. The Wongs come together to survive the conditions of restricted immigration, but the cunning Lincoln and Mary – the veterans of exclusion, having lived through its more stringent forms – have learned how to successfully engineer their business practices to make racist policy work for them. The diasporic survival systems thus do not dissolve after exclusion laws get repealed; rather, the family keeps on going, flexibly adopting new methods of extracting labor, expanding the business overseas, and furthering the economic gain of the Wong empire.

To further complicate the family network, the Wongs include other local players in their business, most notably Reverend Ted Candlewick (Wick), the white operator of the Haven, a ministry with connection to Hong Kong. Wick, a constant and personable presence in Chris' childhood, is himself integrated like part of the Wong family; but in the course of helping the family, he also becomes enamored, and questionable involved, with the young boys he mentors in Chinatown. The savvy Wongs, however, spin his reputation as a potential child molester, to their advantage. They "adopt" Wick to act as a buffer to divert attention away from their own legal trespasses. Chris explains that his adoptive family is:

known for its connections to the immigration trade and their use of the missionary house to hide their business. It have all been exposed except for the scandal that so dramatically distracted from the traditional disguises and strategies illegal entries require. Poor Wick, reduced to the funny guy who

liked little kids. (25)

Wick's hearsay reputation as a child molester provides just enough leeway for Lincoln and Mary to take advantage of opportunities to bring into their network Asian refugees displaced from war at home (57). Also in their repertoire are international real estate ventures, food businesses catering to hippie countercultural tastes, and a cooking show featuring their own son, Peter – whose on-air performance is reminiscent of television personality Martin Yan.

In contrast to Jack Szeto's story, where an already-grown man breaks from the paper family as one might break a business contract, Chris's story is one in which a young man struggles to come to terms with his place within the "fictive" family, rather than attempting to leave it altogether. As critic Jeffrey Partridge observes, Chan portrays the Wongs as a family, in which the trappings of emotional attachment and caretaking are very much present. (The Szeto family is, in comparison, exceedingly detached and business-like.) Moreover, "this "solid rock" family [as Chris puts it] made up of unrelated and related people of various racial and cultural backgrounds stands as a microcosm of the ideal nation the novel imagines" (245). The family/nation that Chan envisions is not simply predicated on capitalist greed and exploitation, but also holds together along the principles of community and emotional attachment sought especially by the paper sons, and also Mary. And the family members also participate in the current culture of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll, showing that they too, in some senses, subscribe to community and free love.

Chan's satirical representations of eating reflect the chaotic, confusing whirlwind of conditions affecting this cast of characters, rendered "orphans," in various way, by exclusion. He illuminates this wild heterogeneity by tracking Chris' coming of age, which itself involves coming to consciousness of the family's mantra: "Eat everything before you die."

Caught within this swirl, in which efforts to capitalize on bipolar U.S. attitudes towards Asians mixes with the rapidly changing popular culture of the 1960s, Chris looks to food for stability. Well aware of his orphan status in the Wong family, he constantly soothes the anxiety of not knowing his own pre-Wong history by eating – a gesture that even Lincoln, the patriarch, makes in the later stages of his life. Chris recognizes that "we eat and drink and repeat the lies that console us in the waning years, the drift of our lives" (45). The language with which Chris describes the family packs together reverence for taste and his family, with confusion about the sporadic displays of ruthlessness dealt by the relations that feed him. The mix of sarcasm and flippant irreverence in his descriptions of food reflect Bay Area speak during the 1960s and 1970s' counter-culture, but they also demonstrate Chris's desire to hold onto family reverence, in spite of discovering the extreme measures they take for economic gain:

I only knew then, as now, as it will be on earth as it is in heaven, fresh watercress floating in plastic buckets on the sidewalk, muddled coriander, scallions bunched with fuzzy twine, their tips gleaming albino spiders on a plank, onion grass that's grown without sun to capture a pale sweetness for the

soup stock, stalks of chard, baby chard, mature chard, flowering chard, leafed, unleafed, dried chard, then spinach, the roots, the fruit from the tropical diaspora, all at home in Chinatown America... The Chinatown emporia teems with such bounty that only a necromancer like Auntie can encompass, manipulate, and control it. (39)

The characterization of Mary (“Auntie”) as a necromancer rings harshly – and indeed, there is potential to view Mary as a sort of scavenger in her opportunism. But Chris, willing to overlook this, immediately after proclamations that Mary’s food is “intoxicating.” And in light of his reverence for this mother figure throughout the novel as the one figure with whom he feels nurtured and safe, his comment is more ironic statement of affection than condemnation. Catholic influence also shows in his speech, as the Lord’s prayer introduces his descriptions of food; jazz speak joins the prayer rhetoric as he gets ready to eat a meal with Mary: “‘Amen.’ I feed the body, I am the body, I consume myself. Where should I start, what shall I do with my clothes, my toes, my woes?’” (55).<sup>24</sup>

Despite the woes of being only a son on paper, Chris nevertheless seeks out an idealized vision of family. His desire to participate in a loving network is most evident in a kitchen scene where Lincoln, Mary, Wick, Peter, and he, banter before going to a restaurant. Peter and Lincoln, who are both cooks, experiment with new recipes while discussing how dried squid had in earlier decades become a lucrative

---

<sup>24</sup> Other writers, not surprisingly including Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin, incorporated Chinatown speak into their novels in much the same way. Chinese dialect (Cantonese, Say Yup, etc.) hybridized with English which itself was popularly infused with jazz and Afro-American cadence.

transpacific business. Chris notes how each comment reveals the individual's interests: Lincoln admires the ingenuity of the entrepreneurs who made their fortunes by tapping overseas markets and skirting taxes on salt; Wick, on the other hand, prefers a more pastoral perspective of how the Chinese diasporics had "transformed the world, clever and inventive agricultural scientists who crossed fish and fowl, animals, flowers, the Bing cherry" (115). Peter steers clear of the business aspect of the conversation and fixates on the food itself: "I still love the perfume of *mui heung* steaming in a pot of rice. It always reminds me of Grandma. Or steamed pork hash" (116).

Enervated by this exchange, Chris shows affection for this family that is at once sincere and vulnerable, as he moves into a fantasy about overcoming his childhood fear of being abandoned. Before they depart to eat, Peter offers one of his newest culinary experiments – cereal burger. Basking in the glow of the convivial squid conversation, Chris notably responds in Cantonese and not English:

My rapidly fading Cantonese leapt magically to my tongue, and I said in perfect dialect, "Thank you, but I've just eaten." It was wonderful. I'd formed the absolutely perfect repartee and made everyone laugh. And now we would go to a restaurant well after my bedtime and I would never be sent from their company again, listening alone to their elusive banter from the next room. (117)

The surprising fluency Chris manages to conjure sends him back to a childhood moment, when he had a bedtime, and heals the lingering pain of having been

excluded from the family conversation. This moment, although tied to a childhood memory, reveals an earnest desire to belong to the Wongs unconditionally, and without secrets. The desire to overcome exclusion fundamentally ties to food, which is so important to the family.

The “lies” that come with being a Wong, however, become a source of anxiety for Chris as the plot advances. He begins to develop suspicion that the ethics of the family, and their attitude towards him, by tracking the discomfort he experiences while eating: how the food conceals secrets and lies, while in another way, providing a comforting feeling that the concealment is alright. As the narrative moves forward – and as Chris becomes obsessed with a white American woman named Melba, whose free love spirit tramples his romantic aspirations – we see Chris slowly form an ethical stance towards the Wongs’ *modus operandi* in the global business arena. His idealism towards the elders, and the whole operation, unravels gradually as he realizes that there seem to be few limits to the measures the Wongs will take to advance their ideological or economic situations. Beginning with Christian ideology, and ending with the cannibalistic strategies the family adopts to retain their economic clout, he gradually forms a stance which objects to the trespasses conducted in the name of nurturing him.

With Wick, a man who acted more like a father than Lincoln in bestowing the boys with affection, and in teaching them “fellowship with gusto” (108), Chris feels connection, yet also comes to see how the reverend’s benevolence reflects imperialist arrogance. Wick is driven by a desire to “invent the new man, a chimera to challenge

traditional injustices, to cure the incurable, speak the unspeakable,” an enterprise that begins with the eradication of old country habits:

Demographically segregated by the Exclusion Laws, [Chris and his cohort of paper sons] are condemned to an indigestible assimilation. The traditional homeopathic regimen of our ancestors is denied entry at the Angel Island immigration station. We are poisoned by the four food groups, our chi exploding out our butts in a miasma of indigestion fueled by lactose sugars. It begins with food. Out of settlement houses, the English schools, the citizenship classes, the fight is joined to reform the diet of the Chinatown bachelor society, to exterminate all vestiges of the high salt, sugar and lard, polished rice regimen we are told will inevitably stunt our growth. (110)

Ever sensitive to that which becomes stamped out beneath acts of good will, Chris shows that Wick’s good intention hides the violence of dietary reform, as the white, Catholic American disciplines Asian diets, deeming them “indigestible” and unhealthy.<sup>25</sup> Wick, in many ways, embodies the neoliberal belief in tolerance and community, but in his hunger/fetish for this romanticized view, he replicates Orientalist attitudes. Interestingly, in including Wick as part of the family, Lincoln and Mary demonstrate a way of managing racial difference that is markedly different from the binaristic, white-versus-nonwhite forms of discrimination exercised in U.S. law: instead of othering, and cutting ties with the white man to establish solidarity among the Chinese, they embrace him, at the expense of the younger Chinese. The

---

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower echoes in measures of dietary reform.

most vulnerable and exploitable party in Lincoln's network, turns out to be the paper sons. When it is later revealed that Wick had abused Chris as a boy, the family does not shun Wick completely, and neither does Chris; but Chris' tie to the reverend loses the timbre of unabashed loyalty it had earlier.

Coming to this critique of white missionary benevolence in which the desire of the dominant group quashes the particularity of the other's experience (which resounds with neoliberal multiculturalism discussed earlier), Chris is able to speak back to this uneven dynamic through the authority of his family's food habits, and their lucrative businesses. The Wong world bustles with opportunities, including opportunities to peddle food to an American 1960s counterculture. Their tactics include capitalizing on the current appetite for healthy food, which, as Warren Belasco reminds us in his analysis of white bread's fall to brown grains during this period, reflected a widespread desire among eaters to combat consumerism through their food choices. Having enjoyed success delivering Chinese American cooking shows – a program called *WokTalks* featuring Chris's adopted brother, Peter – the Wongs continue to serve the counterculture by bringing macrobiotic "Chi Bars" to the American public:

Chi Bars took Peter directly into the counterculture of food that had begun during the Vietnam War and really took hold as the entire country sat down to break bread together. Acts of revenge require reconciliation. Where else but in the backwater diasporas outside the traditional centers of culture and authority could people learn to serve on unmilled grains and soy products?



Peter added a dash of soy and sea salt, a dollop of organic honey to the Chi Bar mix and sprinkled it on top of a drug culture that stretched from Humboldt County to Thailand. (157-158)

The Wongs are clearly uncommitted to the moral-ethical dimensions of the countercuisine, and in their prioritization of profit, they mirror the corporate appropriators of wheat bread in Belasco's analysis.

It bears noting here that Chan's reference to the American countercuisine satirizes the moment of the narrative, and since Chan writes from the early 2000s, it also comments upon the current moment when questions of American food production, including organic agriculture, farming, and sustainability have resurfaced. As critics in food studies have returned to the 1960s moment to diagnose current problems with overweight, and the environmental politics of industrial food production, Chan's de-romanticized portrait of this profit-driven health food enterprise forces readers to confront the position of Chinese American subjects in the countercuisine.<sup>26</sup> At a time when many Americans were forging eating habits to be in imagined solidarity with brown bodies across the Pacific (as Michael Pollan surmises, through the imbibing of brown foods), Chan calls attention to other, perhaps obscured, racialized bodies participating in the network. Here Chan provides the perhaps unsightly view of exploited Asian laborers and capitalists helping to fuel the countercuisine.

---

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006).

But while Chris is a willing participant in these ventures, his enthusiasm for drumming up food in the name of profit gradually wanes. Specifically, he comes to experience the depth of Lincoln's lifelong mantra, captured in the novel's title. Through his upbringing he struggles with this saying, remember how "Uncle's words come to me in Cantonese, in English, without any bidding on my part, and leave as abruptly...Eat everything before you die. Eat everything before somebody else eats it. Eat everything before it goes bad. Eat all you can eat" (35-36). Lincoln's consistent credo is to seize all possible opportunities for profit before he dies, before "someone else" takes the opportunity, or before the opportunity dissipates, or "goes bad." There is urgency in the call to eat everything before it is too late, before life expires, or before one is bumped out of position; in a kind of *carpe diem* fervor, it compels focus on the present and the future, as well as suspicion of others' appetites.

The saying would repeat throughout the story and eventually comes to signal the possibility of patricide. Returning to the conversation over squid, we see Lincoln acknowledging to Chris that his advice does not foreclose the possibility of the younger generation killing the older one, in order to get ahead. Wick also acknowledges this as he remarks on the methods of curing squid which can sometimes turn deadly:

"The mineral salts, like arsenic, make for a lethal gourmet morsel"

Wick said, winking too broadly at Peter, then me.

"Yep. That's why you want to eat everything, try everything, kid.

Before you croak, right?" (116-117)

Here, Uncle's insatiable appetite takes on added urgency, as the suggestion of patricide passes between Wick and the two sons. Aware of the threat of being poisoned, Lincoln spins the threat into a lesson for Chris: acquire as much as possible, in case your fate unexpectedly changes. Lincoln's mantra explains his ability to thrive after eviction, and numerous family and legal entanglements on two continents. Having culled this wisdom from his own father, who was also not an affectionate figure but more of a survival artist, Lincoln does the same for his successors. Chris recognizes that for Lincoln, as perhaps for other Chinese Americans trying to get by during the period of legal exclusion, "being a father wasn't a matter of the heart, but of loyalties, of oaths sworn and broken, of experiences that had taught him to be responsible to himself alone since in this mean country he had very little opportunity to care for more than himself" (50).

Although he is reminded of this mantra in his whole upbringing, Chris does not develop an ethnical response to it until deep in the narrative, when Lincoln's business savvy results in the family abandoning Twig, another adopted son, and Peter's ex-lover. A Vietnamese refugee (an orphan of another kind) brought over by Lincoln from a camp in Hong Kong (56), Chris sees in Twig an ally as a fellow orphan.<sup>27</sup> At the behest of the Wong family, Twig pursues a stint as a rock 'n roll musician under his previous identity, "Baba Lan" – a name he adopted at the Displaced Persons camp in Hong Kong. While "test[ing] the persona of the

---

<sup>27</sup> "Painted nails and flesh, worked bone, the infectious languor, the food, all dress me, prepare me. But for what I don't know -- to eat or be eaten? The garden is a jungle. Cannibal stew. I'm giggling" (205).

abandoned guerilla tribesman – dressed by the CIA, right down to the black raincoat and cowboy boots” (188), Twig refashions himself as a reborn child of war. His dark complexion, thin build, tattoos, and eclectic array of beads draw eager crowds to his performances.

While on Hawaii to market Chi Bars and to move Wick out of the public eye for a while, the family builds up Baba Lan’s music career, noting his ability to draw crowds who would fetishize a brown, refugee performer. Melba, Chris’ sometimes-lover, is one such party; in her vulnerability for the exotic and for free love, she develops curiosity towards Twig. However, when the two of them run into a confrontation with racists on the island, Melba accidentally fires off a gun in attempt to threaten them. Desperate to stay out of jail, Melba allows Twig to admit to the shooting, which lands him in jail.

Although Chris expects the family to come to Twig’s aid, he soon learns that to do so would put the family at risk of legal prosecution for their now-extensive network of paper people. Especially vulnerable are Lincoln and Mary who would likely be penalized if they were found to be importing illegal immigrants; the scrutiny of Twig’s documents would lead to the deportation of Twig’s family, which Peter quickly notes would be difficult now that the Vietnam War was over: “There’s no place they can send [Twig] or anyone anymore...The war’s over. They lost. We lost” (245). Although the logistical business of deporting South Vietnamese migrants back to their home country would be difficult to manage, the family still chooses to dart around legal prosecution.

One additional rationalization for letting Twig remain in jail – and indeed what might prompt Chris to ultimately disagree with the family’s collective decision – is the justification of abandoning Twig for Chris’s benefit: “Melba had two jealous guardians. And for my sake, they were going to send the other one to jail” (245). While the family chooses Chris over Twig in an ostensible affirmation of his status within the family, Chris is still uneasy about the fact that they will “lose a son,” and he begins to recognize that the family appropriates his desire for Melba to justify their abandonment. Although Lincoln has momentary trouble with the guilt – he is unable to eat, and moves straight to sipping liquor – and the rest of the family struggles to move on in spite of the fateful decision, the reigning principle stands.

To divert from the guilt of the betrayal, they begin to eat. The family mantra sounds: “Of course. Let’s eat. Eat everything, let’s eat it all before we’re all dead and buried and then someone comes along to eat the remains, and so on, ad infinitum.” (247). “Eat everything” repeats again, this time on Peter’s lips, as he acknowledges that this time, Twig has been “buried.” The small commemoration of Twig’s death comes with a moment of consciousness, but quickly transitions into a re-fueling session to continue the self-serving work of the remaining family members. Peter at this moment channels Lincoln, and it seems apparent that the Wong family will continue to thrive by dint of their moral flexibility.

And yet, while Lincoln’s cutthroat sensibility transfers to Peter, it is not so with Chris. When Lincoln dies, Chris eventually defies Lincoln’s logic by speaking up for the history rendered irrelevant when he became a Wong. Addressing Wick and

Lincoln in an imagined conversation, he proclaims: “I have forgotten more than you two will ever know, spilled it, left it uneaten, and so much undone. You were nothing” (227). Now casting his history in food terms, he argues that the two fathers who knowingly withheld the details of his adoption in order to carry forth with the family’s business, prevented him from fulfilling the Wong family mantra.

Lincoln’s legacy also becomes called into question in Mary, whose objections to Lincoln’s cannibalistic attitude become evident to Chris while she is birdwatching. Observing the opportunism of the gulls: “Thieves and beggars have the best taste, the greediest appetites, but no manners. I shoot at them to keep the pretty little babies near me” (257). As if metaphorizing the greed of the Wongs, she makes clear her concern for the babies, the younger generation who are vulnerable to the lack of decorum and morals of thieves. As soon as she makes this general statement, she takes this belief further by antagonizing one particularly pesky bird:

But that guy I want to kill, make him dead. Too old, too smart now.

Doesn’t know how to find food for himself. And he won’t eat garbage. He hides near my house. I watched him eat a small baby. So he deserves it...

I want to get that bird for my own satisfaction. I saw him do it. He made me mad. He eats everything and wants to live forever. (257-258)

Echoing Lincoln’s language – “eats everything” – she strikes a stance toward the bird that parallels her thought about Lincoln; and to push the metaphor, she strikes the bird with her slingshot, killing it. Mary, who keeps the operations going, but with attention to keeping the players together as a family, eviscerates Lincoln’s philosophy

of relentless, cannibalistic greed. Her love for the “small baby” suggest that the network will proceed under a new reign.

The food representation in Chan’s wild and expansive chronicle warns against the seduction of food and family, especially if that family has acquired flexible survival tactics in the face of legal exclusion.

As a final note, the debunking of food’s reputed healing power in Chan’s novel occurs also in one of its predecessors, Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. A narrative about families built by Chinese bachelors at mid-century (pre 1960s). Set in New York, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* imagines how the restrictions placed on immigration, and upon immigrants who had already arrived in the United States, affected the development of families in the Chinese diaspora. The story’s main character, Wah Gay, constructs a vision of family - involving his son wedding a girl from China - which he attempts to realize through his son Ben Loy. Although the father and son succeed in finding a young woman to marry Ben Loy, the couple encounters snags in their quest to carry through with the father’s vision, the major snag being Ben Loy’s impotence, which then catalyzes the couple’s attempts to correct the situation.<sup>28</sup>

The two plots form around Chinatown bachelors orchestrating a legacy that involves the conscription of various players shuttling between the United States and

---

<sup>28</sup> Chu’s impotence theme echoes in *Eat Everything* in a scene where Chris is unable to perform in the bedroom with Winnie, a girl from China whom he has married out of convenience, to allow her a greencard, and to provide legal grounds for her to remain in the U.S. to take care of the aging Lincoln. Describing their intimate moments, Chris explains his cluelessness: “She surprised me in the bathroom with Miss July early on a Sunday morning, and she immediately incorporated this activity into our lovemaking for the next few nights until I just couldn’t perform for her any longer. Somehow the private intimacies I imagined for myself had lost all of their heated immediacies with Winnie looking on. I had reached the end of my rope and she wanted to tie another knot.” (67)

China. In the midst of the sons' efforts to appease their fathers, the younger generation gradually becomes conscious of the way Chinatown's demographics and social life are changing, despite the golden rules of their fathers; they question how to take hold of their own desires.

The two novels also strike similarity in their representations of food. While both tales foreground the food - their titles immediately promise a culinary slant - they each ultimately withhold the expectation of food as having healing property, especially as comes to binding Chinese families closer. For instance, although tea is recommended as a potential cure for Ben Loy's impotence, it does not in the end perform this function. Tracing the appearance of tea in the novel, Ling argues against other scholarly readings of tea as a symbol of healing:

in the textual system of the novel, tea is not so much an enabler of sexual potency as it is a ritual substitute for sexuality itself. Significantly, an early recommendation by an herb doctor that Ben Loy use tea as a remedy for sexual incompetence does not yield results...just as a medical physician's recommendation that Ben Loy attempt to restore his sexual capacity by temporarily moving to a different location [away from Chinatown's meddling gaze] fails to effect any permanent change. (48)

Ling shows us how the novel does in fact make reference to the potential of tea as a healing agent, but that the plot, strikingly, does not play out to this conclusion. In like manner, Chan's novel makes plenty of reference to the healing power of food, and to its ability to shore up silence and seemingly irreconcilable differences within the



family -- but it is in fact the rejection of the food given him that allows Chris to move forward.

### **Same Tastes, Different Racisms**

In addition to illuminating the confounded and emotionally scarred position of the younger paper generation, coming of age in the 1950s, the novels demonstrate how easily histories – particularly those premised on racial exclusion – can be covered up, even in Asians’ responses to racial exclusion. In this case, they are covered up not only by mainstream fixation on Chinese food over the conditions of production, but by Chinese subjects themselves. Food, for them, smoothes the tensions between loyalty and exploitation in *both* legal and family systems. To get out from underneath forms of inequality constructed in response to legalized exclusion, exploited parties must reject the sedating feeling of food.

Both novels ask the reader to confront the ways in which the production of Chinese American food culture, American countercuisine, and global food networks has depended on APA networks with their own hierarchies and systems of exploitation. One of the most vulnerable parties – the paper son worker – must not only provide labor for the economic gain of adoptive elders, but also remain steeped in the psychological/emotional turmoil of not fully belonging within the family, and within the nation. Thus both novels reveal the technologies which make Asian Pacific American food available. Moreover, they stretch the boundaries of food representations by making them highlight detrimental forms of consumption. A

paradoxical act in the context of culinary multiculturalism, their formal innovations with food representations derive through the thematics of swallowing lies, and eating everything. The protagonists ultimately refuse to imbibe that which nurtures them – the very idea of food – in order to break the cycle of inequality initiated by legal exclusion; so too, the novels argue, must we remain vigilant of our own participation in these circuits, whether through the consumption of Chinese food, or of representations of Chinese food. The novels specifically address contemporary readers here in their references to the eating public. These works, released in a moment of culinary multiculturalism, cast doubt on hopeful food writings, and compel the reader to refuse the simplified stories regarding food which seem to nurture a sense of racial tolerance in equality.

From these stories we might take away a warning about what we inherit: food, in the past, has functioned as a Chinese American coping strategy, protection against legalized racial exclusion. One side effect of this coping strategy, however, has been that the younger Chinese American population of the 1950s was trained to attend more to food than to investigating their histories, ties, and the conditions of their belonging. From these stories we might be warned: overemphasis on food and its implications of community obscures other power structures and ideologies which continue to reconfigure and recreate other forms of exploitation. While anti-Asian racism produced the conditions for certain Asian Pacific Americans to survive, opportunities to pursue economic gain through increasingly globalized networks spurred other forms of race-based exploitation: the dominating Chinese patriarchs

took advantage of the paper sons precisely *because* the sons were Chinese. Thus food, while initially tied to resisting U.S. legal exclusion was eventually used to manipulate other parties whose racial difference, in the face of exclusion and its aftermath, and within the new systems of flexible global capital, became doubly burdensome.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Feeding the Revolution: Cooks in *The Book of Salt* and *I Hotel*

Decades after the Modern avantgarde movement of 1930s' Paris, and the Yellow Power movement of 1970s' United States, narratives of resistance to hyper-industrialization, to U.S. involvement in wars across the Pacific, and to racism domestically became canonized as landmark struggles against American hegemony. Gertrude Stein's writers' salon in Paris is commemorated in literary history as a hub for the Lost Generation – literary innovators whose disenchantment with the state of affairs at home was captured in works later held up as luminary.<sup>29</sup> The Yellow Power movement is recalled in the context of Civil Rights struggles, and its contours are often traceable by association with high-profile activists, including Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Caesar Chavez, and with now-iconic events, including the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* (2012) narrate from within these momentous periods whose art and politics profoundly changed American letters and social consciousness. These retrospective narratives consider the voices of cooks, figures occupying marginal positions of each movement by dint of their occupation, and of their race. Binh, a cook from Viet Nam, whom Truong imagines to be employed by the Steins in 1930s Paris, is a composite of two “Indo-Chinese” cooks featured in Alice B. Toklas'

---

<sup>29</sup> Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1951) provides an account of the Lost Generation.

cookbook memoir (1954). Through Binh, Truong draws attention to the lower class of domestic servants whose labor enabled the salon's function, and whose presence had important and unnoticed bearing upon the white-dominated avantgarde space. The kitchen perspectives offered by the manong cook Felix, in *I Hotel*, forms one more Asian Pacific American perspective placed alongside popularly recognized perspectives like those of Black Panthers Party members. Felix, a former agricultural worker and labor activist, helps to illuminate less-recognized union figures like Philip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong, whose collaborations with Cesar Chavez helped to win Filipino workers' rights in Delano, California.<sup>30</sup>

Both novels present occluded histories through the eyes of an often overlooked figure. Unlikely and unassuming contributors to a grand narrative of social resistance, the cooks in both novels speak from the outer corners of revolution, providing perspective, for instance, on the replication of power hierarchies and inequities even within the resistance movements. Yet the cook, as this chapter will explore, is an interesting perspective from which to re-view the struggles in the early 2000s, nearly a century after Stein's salon, and half a decade after the Yellow Power struggle. The novels explore the ways in which cooks and food preparers, historically, have held a slippery relation to structures of power.<sup>31</sup> The relationship does not conform to simplistic patterns of dominance and servitude.

---

<sup>30</sup> Itliong's activist legacy in the Delano grape strikes, many scholars agree, was eclipsed by the celebrity of Chavez.

<sup>31</sup> Apropos to Binh's discussion of cooks and poisoning, and Felix's desire to poison Samut Songkhram, Lily Cho presents a gripping account of bread poisoning in colonial Hong Kong. The Ah Lum Affair, as it came to be known, symbolized a failed attempt to wrest colonial power away from

The fact that cooks are intimately acquainted with what enters the bodies of those they serve means that the relationship between cooks and their eaters is always ambivalent. The domestic cook figure in one sense is hierarchically situated beneath the eater; yet in controlling what the eater ingests, the cook potentially poses a threat to the eater's body. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins notes about the authority cooks derive within the kitchen space:

The kitchen is not only where the cook performs [her or his] designated labor; it is the space from which the cook, that servant-figure so broadly stereotyped over the past two centuries, threatens to speak. In doing so she threatens to infuse the food she produces – that her employees will eat – with the stifled political affect that the walls of the kitchen are supposed to contain. (17)

The kitchen, Tompkins goes on to say, “becomes the central space where the threatening porosity between bodies – most specifically between ruling-class and subaltern bodies – is most apparent” (17).

Porosity manifests in the counter-narratives each cook delivers, wherein the subaltern figure appears as a participant in history. Yet Bình's and Felix's respective treatments of these historical junctures are, decidedly, not straight re-tellings of historical events. In fact, the instant that each cook asserts a counter-vision of history, he meticulously undercuts the authority of his own counter-vision, calling into question the veracity of his contribution, even his presence. Food, in particular, reinforces the narrators' unreliability. In terms of preparing food, each cook has the

---

Great Britain. Although not one person died, the event was deemed an “affair,” which Cho analyzes in the context of rumor circulation and the management of power in Hong Kong. (20-33).

ability to command and craft food according to rituals and traditions, but also to perform manipulations at his behest. The propensity toward manipulation, modeled in the literal act of cooking, carries over to the act of storytelling (or more specifically, telling history) – another practice involving transmission of existing narratives, re-interpretation, and appropriation. Each cook, aware of his ability to tamper with “tradition,” “authenticity,” and “expectation,” wields this authority by making food taste a certain way, and by giving spin to an historical account.

The relation between the reader and the cooks is also importantly drawn into this calculus: the cook’s refusal to deliver a straight, authoritative counter-narrative trumps desires for accessible culinary works. Each written in the 2000s, in the wake of liberal multiculturalism, the novels strike an aggressive stance towards previous works which align food with stable narratives and comforting, reconciliatory themes. Although the reader expects the racialized domestic subject – subaltern in many senses – to speak back to hegemony by providing counter-narrative, it is not pure counter-narrative that they deliver. Furthermore, both cooks meditate at length on the very process of manipulating food and history, such that it could take whatever shape they desire. Constantly provoking the reader to question the veracity of their reports and observations from the kitchen, they halt the narrative flow strategically. These cooks resist easy consumption by the reader who, herself, is likely to encounter Asian food in the novels and instantly believe that unquestioned truth and authentic experience is perceivable, and that she is receiving it through the text.

Truong and Yamashita disrupt the expectation of reading food as a social suture – between characters, or between themselves and the reader – but they do not simply disrupt simply by exchanging positive descriptions of food, for negative (disgust, indigestion, etc.). Beyond simply subverting expectations for palatable narratives of reconciliation by emphasizing the negative outcomes of consumption, these works toggle back and forth between the two forms. Refusing to settle on one attitude towards food, they show how the expectation of a single attitude, itself, is problematic, a faulty expectation when reading culinary representations in Asian Pacific American literature.

The tension between culinary tradition and manipulation in these novels serves as a formalistic strategy as it performs the act of interrogating the authority of canonized narratives, including counter-narratives. The novels' refusals to assert stable counter-history shifts emphasis away from the tactic of speaking back to hegemonic power by insisting on a corrective, and places emphasis instead on the act of remembering these moments as a more potent form of resistance. By intervening at the level of how one remembers, the works call attention to occluded narratives, and also to the fact of occluded narratives encircling even the most compelling and progressive counter-narratives.

***The Book of Salt: Master Chef and Kitchen Boy***

“Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite, where I am the village elder, sage and reverend. Every kitchen is a familiar



story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender. In their heat and in their steam, I allow myself to believe that it is the sheer speed of my hands, the flawless measurement of my eyes, the science of my tongue, that is rewarded. During these restorative intervals, I am no longer the mute who begs at the city's steps."

"“Slip your own meanings into their words,’ [Bão] said, a bit of advice that has saved me. Language is a house with a host of doors, and I am too often uninvited and without the keys. But when I infiltrate their words, take a stab at their meanings, I create the trapdoors that will allow me in when the night outside is too cold and dark.”

– Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt*

"It was a peculiar bin a bin fond in beside."

– Gertrude Stein, "Salmon," *Tender Buttons*

Around Bình, the cook from Vietnam, hired to cook at the famous salon of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas at 27 Rue de Fleurus, we become familiar with a constellation of figures whom Truong imagines might have been present as Stein steered the avantgarde movement and created a literary legacy. The major figures, including African American artist Marcus Lattimore, Nguyen Ai Quoc (more famously known as Ho Chi Minh), and minor figures who have contributed to Bình's trajectory – including his shipmate Bão, his parents, and his brother Minh the Sous chef – form a network of witnesses and ancillary actors just to the side of Stein. Bình's position in the Steins' household draws these figures into the salon network, although they are not direct participants. As the cook who is hired help but who also

develops intimate knowledge of the Mesdames' tastes and backroom vulnerabilities, Binh holds authority as a witness. His awareness of this authority grows until it culminates in his resignation – his refusal to participate any longer in imbalanced intimacy.

Critics have tended to focus on Truong's contribution to building race consciousness by exploring the subtle forms of Orientalism eschewed by progressive literary figures of the Modernist moment. Binh, of course, is a composite imagining of Trac and Nguyen, two cooks whose scant depictions in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* render them as ornaments in the Stein household. Others interested in the alimentary dimensions of the novel have concentrated on food's thematic connection to sexual desire, melancholia, and the anguish of betrayal.<sup>3233</sup> Still others consider the formalistic strategies by which Binh's status as a subaltern subject becomes more knowable. By imagining the many ways in which Binh is subaltern, the novel calls attention to the problems, challenges, and the very likely impossibilities of recovering such a perspective. For one, the forms of subordination that Binh embodies are multiple: they abound from French colonialism in Viet Nam and his experience of training beneath French chefs de cuisine; from the oppressive Catholic-inflected

---

<sup>32</sup> Toklas writes: "Trac was my immediate choice. He was a person with neat little movements and a frank smile. He spoke French with a vocabulary of a couple dozen words. He would say, not a cherry, when he spoke of a strawberry. A lobster was a small crawfish, and a pineapple was a pear not a pear. The Chinese cooking was delicate, varied and nourishing. To see Trac, immaculate in white, slicing in lightning quick strokes vegetables and fruits was an appetizer"(186). Toklas noted that her Indo-Chinese servants were "insecure, unstable, unreliable, but thoroughly enjoyable" demonstrating that she found her cooks' behavior unpredictable, but charming. Their alterity, for her, was palatable.

<sup>33</sup> Wenying Xu elaborates on food's thematic connection to sexual desire, melancholia, and the anguish of betrayal. She writes: "Truong juxtaposes two cases of diasporic gay existence in Paris in the 1920s and 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 heavily depends on one's race and class. (127)

patriarchy of his father; from the heteronormativity imposed both in France and Viet Nam; from the trends of racialized domestic labor in Paris. Yet in the process of depicting this confluence of subordinated positions, Truong makes us aware of how tentative such descriptions are, referring often to the inability to name, with accuracy, the details of shadowy historical events, or the quality of Binh's affective states like melancholy, as Xu has written. By focusing foremost on the tentative nature of the subaltern's memory, language, and ability to represent these layers of subordination, the novel does more than supply correctives to a false history. In his study of how even the names of the novel's Asian diasporic figures are indeterminate, David Eng notes that the novel "is less an instance of the subaltern writing back than an exploration of the limits of such writing for the politics of history" (1481). He goes on to qualify their presence as "dim," and this dimness symbolizes that which we do not know when we construct historical accounts.

To build on Eng's analysis of the centrality of the unnamed, and of queer desire in Truong's story of race in history, this reading considers how Binh calls his history into focus by playing on the mistress's desire for excellent food, and by adapting her artistic ethos and innovations. The cook role places him in a position to absorb and appropriate the mistress's desires and artistic tools, which he does in defiance of the racist hierarchy of the household, but also out of a perennial longing to be integrated on equal footing, and for a place, as he puts it, to satisfy his "craving for the red, raw need to expose all my neglected, unkempt days" (20). Listening to Gertrude Stein's literary experiments with food and repetition, Binh himself explores

the possibilities of “making it new” – a notion Stein famously drew from Ezra Pound.<sup>34</sup> Bính employs this repetition himself, playing with Gertrude Stein’s language and linguistic inventions, and in so doing he creates new potential significances for himself. The meaning of Bính, in other words, becomes enriched through Steinian language; but it is importantly not Stein’s hand which enriches his presence. With the echo of Stein’s repetition lending meter to Bính’s thoughts, his internal interludes themselves associate and meander, suggesting new ways of understanding his experience. Repeating Stein’s innovations, he “slips his own meaning into their words” (155) and reveals more details from his past. His culinary-inspired poetic play creates new possible meanings of the “avantgarde” and of France in the 1930s, specifically in terms of racial hierarchies, and the availability of language for subaltern political expression.

Bính plays on Gertrude Stein’s language and food habits with the bravado of a master chef. In these moments he speaks back to authority freely, without care. Bính luxuriates in being a master chef and offers a host of sumptuous descriptions which show off his worldly culinary prowess, despite his low social status. So intense is his confidence in his skills that he defies the stereotype of the subaltern laborer by expressing pride in his own vanity. In an early scene where he fails to summon the French word for “pineapple” in a conversation with Toklas, appearing ineloquent and unskilled, he assures the reader that the genius of his cooking was at work in his mind:

---

<sup>34</sup> Pound elaborates this concept in *Make it New* (1935).

I wanted to tell [Miss Toklas] that I would cut the first pineapple into paper-thin rounds and sauté them with shallots and slices of beef; that the sugar in the pineapple would caramelize during cooking, imparting a faint smokiness that is addictive; that the dish is a refined variation on my mother's favorite. I wanted to tell her that I would cut the second pineapple into bite-sized pieces, soak them in kirsch, make them into a drunken bed for spoonfuls of tangerine sorbet; that I would pipe unsweetened cream around the edges, a ring of ivory-colored rosettes. And because I am vain and want nothing more than to hear the eruption of praises that I can provoke, I wanted to tell her that I would scatter on top the petals of candied violets, their sugar crystals sparkling. (34-35)

Going on at length about his intentions with the pineapple, Binh illustrates how fastidious and ambitious he is in the kitchen. Interestingly, he takes great pains to delight his employers, yet this act serves his own pleasure more than it demonstrates loyal servitude. So the outward appearance of Binh's labor as commodified becomes inadequate; we learn that he cooks in the service of his own pleasure and vanity, a sign of his hidden agency. Acting as the master chef, Binh makes known that he is aware of his potential for disrupting power structures even as they bind him.

For instance, as he describes his growing reputation among Parisians for his excellent cooking, he boasts, "They all believe in a 'secret' ingredient...a magic elixir that anyone can employ to duplicate my success. Its existence downplays my skills, cheapens my worth... If there is a 'secret,' Madame, it is this: Repetition and routine.

Servitude and subservience. Beck and call” (154). Here Bìn objects to commodification of his labor and especially his talent, but he also acknowledges that keeping his kitchen genius sharp requires “repetition and routine,” that the craft demands hours in the kitchen. By naming “repetition” as an empowering secret, the key to his prowess as a master chef, he recodes the mundane labor of the servant who has no agency. “Repetition” gives him opportunity to hone his culinary authority, and to continue delighting eaters, which he admits he adores. Although the scheme also binds him in a system of commodification, here he adapts the mode of repetition so delightful to Stein, to build his own agency.

Bìn’s interest in repetition eventually spreads from the culinary to the linguistic – Steinian repetition in particular. Translating between thought and language, and between Vietnamese and French (and sometimes English), Bìn’s prowess with linguistic nuance parallels his skill in the kitchen where he hones his awareness of how power relations nestle in languages used in the kitchen. French, English, and Vietnamese jostle in his ears as he struggles to assert his cooking skill, gain appreciation for his mastery, and yet stay within the boundaries of taste and behavior imposed upon him by his employers. As he is sensitive to these power registers in the kitchen, so too is he sensitive to GertrudeStein’s experiments with repeating nouns and negatives. Their shared status as foreigners in France, Bìn notes, makes them “coconspirators” in language (34); the fact that they are both, moreover, invested in the production of meaning suggests kinship. Yet the outcomes

of their experiments with language – nouns, specifically, and Steinian technique – while akin to each other, could not be more divergent.

True to Stein the real-life figure, Truong's Gertrude Stein innovates with nouns, which critic Michel Delville reminds us, was a primary way in which Stein sought to reanimate the English language. Dissatisfied with the inability of contemporary English to deliver a relation between the signifier and signified that was not stale and reified, Stein experimented aggressively with nouns in her famous repetition-with-variation. Attempting to draw out new relations between the noun and the object existing in the world (36), Stein was interested in representing the transformation of still objects into sensory experience and knowledge: "Stein's vignettes thus focus on the physical properties of objects at the same time as they insist on their potential for being ab-stracted from the world of matter and transformed into sense impressions" (45).<sup>35</sup> Stein's concern for the sensory steered her attempts to imbue nouns and objects with new valences that engage sensory experience – sexual rhapsody and frustration; physical and moral constraint and liberation; tastes in the mouth. And she sought this linguistic refresh through repeating sounds and referents. *Tender Buttons*'s "FOOD" section is famously known for its use of culinary language to evokes sexual desire, only fitting since Toklas, Stein's prime love object, commanded the kitchen space.

Throughout *Tender Buttons*, which Stein understood to be the product of this experimentation with the noun, conventional meanings of food objects associate and

---

<sup>35</sup> Delville quotes Stein's 1934 lecture, "Poetry and Grammar," in which she states: "poetry is doing nothing but losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (36).

activate (through innuendo, homophones, ekphrasis, sensory linkages) themes of lesbian sexuality, erotics of taste and other sensory experience, Victorian patriarchy and constriction. In the above line from “Salmon,” for instance, Delville highlights the sexual innuendo suggested in the word “fond,” which plays off the French word for “bottom.” Salmon, elsewhere, refers to the color of female genitalia. “Bin,” in this proximity to “bottom” seems connected to containers, perhaps the lower orifices.<sup>36</sup>

Truong imagines her GertrudeStein to fit the bill, and GertrudeStein’s experiments with nouns and repetition become especially animated when Bìn arrives. Upon being hired at 27 rue de Fleurus, Bìn notes how GertrudeStein delights in his French, what she perceives as the “elemental, bare-knuckled breakdown of a language” (34). Bìn’s frequent errors in French vocabulary, and his reverting to negatives to correct the mistake – as in his blundered pronunciation of pineapple – become for GertrudeStein, materials with which to imagine the linguistic possibilities of her experiments in the English language. Truong imagines GertrudeStein playing with Bìn’s name and making clever associations between the sounds of Bìn’s name in Vietnamese and English words. Yet Truong doesn’t imagine GertrudeStein doing this in order to explore Bìn as a more complicated figure, to rescue his individuality from being reified (say, in a stereotype of a coolie

---

<sup>36</sup> If we were to consider GertrudeStein’s “Thin Bin” in this calculus, we could perhaps make further associations with the norming of homosexuality in the Stein’s household. Catherine Fung plays with the possibility of “Bin” connoting for GertrudeStein a container, whose presence diminishes, or “thins” steadily (101). But the “peculiar bin,” if we were to link Truong’s play on Steinian language, might activate for us Bìn’s queerness, the perceived peculiarities of gay sex, or an otherwise hidden pocket fond/found to the side.



wherein racial hierarchy is normalized). Instead, GertrudeStein here plays with the name to advance some other, more self-serving artistic aim: “‘Thin Bin,’ says GertrudeStein, merrily mispronouncing my name, rhyming it instead with an English word that she claims describes my most distinctive feature, declining to share with me what that feature would be” (32). The repetition of Stein’s moniker, Thin Bin, does not work toward a better approximation of Bìn’s inner desires or identity beyond servant; rather it replays and reinforces the knowledge gap between the Mesdames and the servant. It highlights the master’s gleeful ignorance on one hand; but on the other hand, we are also reminded that Stein’s willful ignorance might spur on her artistic innovations, though without ever having to recognize that she butchered Bìn’s name for inspiration and her own gain.

In defiance of being reduced to artistic inspiration to delight his mistress, Bìn scrutinizes GertrudeStein’s language, as she has his. While GertrudeStein merrily riffs on Bìn’s utterance, Bìn, in turn, plays with GertrudeStein’s moniker. In a kind of counter-poetic gesture, he appropriates her mispronunciation, and in a curiously Steinian fashion, proliferates associations which elaborate his own presence. “Every time she says my name,” Bìn says, “I say it as well” (32): in repeating Stein’s language, he establishes new meanings that lie outside of Stein’s ability to perceive. His Steinian treatment of GertrudeStein’s work, in other words, produces yet another repetition, and with it, a new set of meanings surrounding “Bìn” the name, and the person the name “Bìn” signifies. Rather than using the noun to invigorate pallid English, as GertrudeStein does, Bìn uses Stein’s language as a point of entry into an

exploration of his shadowy subjecthood.<sup>37</sup> Puzzling over GertrudeStein's word "thin," for instance, he conjures "stupid," and "handsome" as possible definitions. On the surface, these thoughts appear as inconsequential attempts to grapple with Stein's play, but we quickly learn that these associations connect to some part of Binh's experience. The first, "stupid," he imagines to be the guess of his oppressive father, the Old Man, whose aggressiveness towards his sons and wife haunt Binh even when Binh is away, across the Pacific. The second guess, "handsome," reveals Binh's taste for flattery, and more to the point, his vanity. Trying on the word, he begins to express his deep longing for attention, and for "another voice to say my name, punctuated with a note of anticipation, a sigh of relief, a warm breath of affection" (32).

Also in keeping with Steinian poetics, the presence he elaborates for himself in this brief moment is only provisional, tangential, ancillary – they appear only as fleeting thoughts, their relevance hard to detect. How we should read these observations is left ambiguous: are they details offered in earnest to be read literally, or are they casual musings upon a name which is foisted upon him?<sup>38</sup> Binh's Steinian associations perform in between the literal fact and the tangential musing. Through

---

<sup>37</sup> In her analysis of Binh's use of Steinian negation Denise Cruz writes that Binh's limited French skill prompts him to respond to GertrudeStein in negation (much to Stein's delight), but that Binh's reflections upon his performed language indicate "the shifting connections between the Vietnamese laborer and his employer, between the 'other' represented, and the modernist writer who attempts to represent him." For example, "Binh refuses to submit to Stein's attempt to learn more about his carefully guarded past, her desire to taste what he has previously called the bitter fruits of exile" (364). In her reading of Catherine Fung's study of 'metaphysical puns,' Cruz concludes that "The novel disrupts presumptions about origins and reverses dynamics of colonial mimicry" (364).

<sup>38</sup> All instances of Binh's get called into questions, as he notes: "All my employers provide me with a new moniker, whether they know it or not. None of them – and this I do not exaggerate – has called me by my given name. Their mispronunciations are endless, an epic poem all their own. GertrudeStein's just happens to rhyme." (32)

them, he asserts himself into what Eng calls a dim presence, at once more apparent and yet unfixed. The more associations he makes, the more possibilities we have to apply to grasp him, but all possibilities are provisional.

From the kitchen, Binh's Steinian repetition enables him to speak back to his mesdames in a spirit of jest. Puzzling over Gertrude Stein's assortment of pet names for Ms. Toklas, he says, "I have heard them all. I do not have a favorite. I do not know what they mean. Though 'Cake' sounds to my ears like the English name 'Kate.' A 'Kate' who is good enough for Gertrude Stein to eat is a 'Cake,' I say to myself and smile" (155). Yet in other moments, the repeating sound or memory of a culinary encounter, leads him into internal meditation, and to shift from the brazen master chef, as discussed earlier, into the role of the kitchen boy. When Ms. Toklas teaches him how to slaughter and prepare pigeons, he repeats the image of cutting in his mind, reminiscing to his duties at the Governor General's mansion in Viet Nam, and then to his childhood, cutting scallions with his mother:

My mother is humming at a small piece of pork that will make the bowl of scallions into a feast. She is humming, and I think that I am hearing birds. I look up just to be sure, and I thread silver into my fingertips for the first time. Silver is threading my skin. Weightlessness overtakes me moments before my vision clears, my throat unclogs, and my body begins to understand that silver is threading my skin. (72)

Here, linguistic repetition extends to repeating images in the mind, and reveals parts of Binh's life that he does not perform outwardly. His attachment to his mother, as

well as the first instance in which cutting himself felt empowering, are new aspects of Bìn̄h that connect to vulnerability and uncertainty. In contrast to the self-assured maestro, the kitchen boy is unstable, and reveals painful details related to the abuse of his father in Viet Nam, his desire for a lover, or longing for earnest conviviality with the Steins.

It is a de-stabilized position from which he confesses to unreliable memory, and with it, the unreliability of the Bìn̄h he has presented to us. As Bìn̄h repeats his way to memories, he becomes what Fung calls an “absent referent” (95), a figure onto whom elisions accumulate and become embraced.<sup>39</sup> The absence, never fully expunged, is here represented when Bìn̄h himself cannot conjure a definitive truth:

It is difficult to remain objective when I am alone in my memory. I place undue trust in my recollections of the past because there is no one here who cares to contradict me, to say in defiance, No, *that* is not true. The truth for me has become a mixture of declarations, conjectures, and allegations, which are all met by a stunning lack of opposition. (105)

Reading Bìn̄h specifically as a linguistic innovator, on par with, and in contrast to, Gertrude Stein, is crucial to understanding Truong’s experimental intervention – specifically in calling attention to expectations that the subaltern speak (and in particular, to speak through food and the power of the cook over the eater), and the ways in which those expectations are limited. In certain moments, it seems as if those expectations are met, but in others, they are rendered irrelevant. In the end,

---

<sup>39</sup> Fung, drawing from Eng, puts it eloquently: “for Truong, recognizing an epic embedded in a footnote is not an exercise in filling absences in historical narratives but one of embracing them” (96).

expectations related to subaltern agency articulated through food is only a provisional possibility, whose political forwardness often becomes contradicted by other aspects of diasporic experience (queer desire, Catholic conditioning, patriarchal Viet Nam). It allows us to see that beyond offering a counter-narrative in the form of details he cannot utter to the Steins, Bình poaches Steinian poetics and uses them to advance his own project of bringing himself into dim presence<sup>40</sup>. This response, not to, but with Stein, is a dynamic that is both intimate and aggressive. At the same time that he is indebted to Stein, his tale contains a critique of Stein's privilege. Her poetics might be politically democratizing in spirit, but on the other hand, Truong notes that GertrudeStein's fierce reluctance to relinquish her audience's attention (a quirk that Bình shares) limits this interest in elaborating the experience of others.

Although GertrudeStein delights in shocking her the audience, she does not do so in innocent attempt to describe the experience of others. We encounter a prime example of her self-centered focus on the other when she speaks of her brother, a figure much overshadowed by his sister's fame. It is a surprising, revelatory moment to learn more about Leo, yet Bình is aware that GertrudeStein refers to her brother in the novel, not in effort to draw out his individual qualities, but rather as a ruse for shocking the listener: "A brother is not interesting, not interesting enough to displace her from the center of her own conversation. But if [the listener]...is able to resist the tantalizing reference to the brother Stein, then Miss Toklas and I are certain to see his face again at 27 rue de Fleurus" (203). Thus, Stein's – or rather, GertrudeStein's –

---

<sup>40</sup> I use Michel de Certeau's notion of "poaching."

poetics reach an upper limit when finding new meanings, and in the case of Bình, defining the experience of figures who border on her life. She appreciates others, approaching them in a spirit of queerness and appreciation for undiscovered and strange meanings; yet she consumes them for her literary gain.

Although contesting Stein's self-centeredness, Truong marshals her poetics to presence Bình's, and in so doing, she explores the enervating, subversive possibilities of Modernist poetics, beyond those imagined by their creators. Steinian poetics can actually be made to make structural inequality more present. The novel serves as an experiment in appropriating canonized poetic modes, and canonized food writing, and using them to presence the kitchen boy and other historical aporia.

*The Book of Salt* signals the dangers of reading the subaltern, and Asian Pacific American food narratives as straightforward accounts of subverting old systems of power inequity, or as corrective accounts of diasporic experience delivered accurately through food description. Dispensing momentarily with the idea that the subaltern cook delights in the power of feeding the master (power subversion), and moreover that the subaltern cook can become more generally knowable through an account of his relation to food and what he eats, Truong's work self-consciously parts from modes of reading ethnic narratives and food which have recently gained traction in both popular and critical circles.

### **California Dream Cuisine: *I Hotel***

"In time everything else vanishes, but the dish can be recreated."

Bình's dubious reliability as a storyteller makes us question the ability of memory and language to represent the subaltern subject. The fogginess of his narrative shows how the limitations of historiography relegates such a subject to a liminal space, perceivable, but unknowable if relying upon the dominant mores of history making. For Felix Allos, another thinking cook in recent Asian Pacific American fiction, narrative unreliability similarly disrupts the tyranny of history's canon. His stories of cooking for Richard Nixon, Imelda Marcos, and John Steinbeck, though fraught with implausibility, provoke us to consider the status of Felix, and those like him, in relation to these historical figures and events. The questionable details of his personal narrative are part of an act to widen common visions of activism – in Asian American activist history, and more broadly in 1960s Civil Rights history – by asserting the presence, and the civic aspirations, of Filipino food workers and activists. There is little question that Felix's fabrications did not happen in the way he specifically recounts – unlike Bình, he is not portrayed as physically interacting with major historical figures. Yet as we move deeper inside the hotel, it becomes clear that Felix most importantly functions as a populist figure: if the events of his embellished history did not happen to him specifically, then perhaps they happened to someone like him.<sup>41</sup> Or perhaps a related version occurred.

---

<sup>41</sup> In the afterword, Yamashita explains that revealing parallel narratives is one of the novel's central aims: "The people I spoke with had definitely been in the movement, but often times had no idea what

By using his own history as an occasion to suggest the presence and participation of manongs, Felix gestures to the vast range of occupations, political attitudes, and inequities borne by those of his generation. Dreaming them into the dominant narrative, he imagines history without racial barriers to freedom. Both Yamashita and Truong are less interested in exploding existing accounts, so much as they are in exploring the synergies, the past impossibilities, *and* future possibilities for performing acts of race-conscious storytelling and history-making, from the ground – which here means from the kitchen-margin. Felix’s storytelling and cooking are creative, improvisational, and provisional acts which use memories and lessons as ingredients (literally and figuratively) to fortify the bodies and spirits of present day players.

In contrast to Binh whose narrative achieves foggy-clarity through solitary linguistic play with Steinian poetics and the innovations of the avantgarde, Felix’s foggy-clarity in history comes from communal, culinary play with the artistic and activist innovations of the 1960s. In its interaction with lessons culled from experiences of anti-Filipino and anti-Asian U.S. climate, cooking in Felix’s way draws inspiration from past romances (halo-halo), days in the union (coffee and natto-rice), and friendships (pig roast). Cooking, as a form of intellectual engagement, avoids the limitations of other, more visible forms of Asian Pacific American resistance at the time, notably in-fighting, exclusive politics, physical violence

---

others had been doing. Their ideas and lies often intersected, but their ideologies were cast in diverse directions. Their choices took different trajectories, but everyone was there, really *there*.” (610)



inflicted on self and others, and disengagement with the sustained suffering shouldered by elders.

The “kung fu cooking master” manong in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* is the master of re-creation among the novel’s cast of student activists, artists, and militants in 1960s’ and 1970s’ San Francisco. A hyper-imaginative cook who makes use of available ingredients, substituting in order to achieve a specific taste, Felix’s goal in feeding the community around him, is always to catalyze an interaction with the past – to re-create the past in a new form, befitting of the current politics and players. Pushing beyond sanctified notions of “authentic” Asian food – a concept which, we might pause to think, has circulated with vengeance since the 1990s to bespeak gourmet credibility – Felix’s flexible fidelity to original cuisines incorporates attentiveness to the present moment. Although his awareness of food is rooted firmly in traditional, an awareness we get as we watch him create traditional Filipino, Japanese, Hawaiian, and Chinese dishes, Felix takes liberties when narrating about the origins and significances of these dishes. His tellings, and his dishes, are recreational in two senses: they re-animate the past in a new form; and they are forms of sport and play for the teller (and the eaters, and the readers).

Through Felix, Yamashita brings to light a form of intellectual practice and activism that is distinct from the academic or militant efforts of the students found in the novel’s other hotels. In contrast, his political efforts issue from acts of creative storytelling and creative cookery, both of which stage a reckoning with a part of his past experience. Although he shares having been educated briefly at Berkeley as a

“fountain-pen boy.” unlike his young allies, including Macario and Abra, Felix has struggled through military service including imprisonment at Bataan, withheld citizenship, exploited labor, and lifelong bachelorhood (426).<sup>42</sup> A figure who has accreted<sup>43</sup> decades of experience navigating state-sanctioned symbolic violence against Filipino subjects – namely the withholding of U.S. citizenship, U.S. policy restricting migration, and the exploitation of agricultural laborers – Felix perceives the contemporary problem of the I-Hotel using his gathered “knowledge” from struggles for civic rights and racial equity (441).<sup>44</sup>

His dishes and stories re-play and re-create the bipolar treatment of manongs and their allies, in which key freedoms are in one instance made available, and in another, withheld. When discussing his food, Felix figures the availability of food in contrast to the unavailability of citizenship, labor rights, and other forms of state support. Re-creating the play between what is available, and what is withheld, he puts forth a new vision of Asian American activist – a vision which honors what has been withheld from the past, and using the tools available (e.g., the rights gained, including the right to create Asian American food), pursues those freedoms which continue to be withheld. Cooking in the novel appears as a form of intellectual

---

<sup>42</sup> Yen Le Espiritu elaborates this history of Filipino migration, noting that mostly-male populations who arrived in the United States to attend universities, some on government scholarships, some not (3).

<sup>43</sup> I invoke Bordieu’s notions of accretion and symbolic violence.

<sup>44</sup> Filipinos’ legal status in the U.S. was tenuous through this period, though their service in the U.S. military during WWII, and their labor in agriculture and canning during the U.S. Depression, were welcomed. The Philippines came under U.S. control first as a territory at the turn of the century, at which time Filipinos were classified as “American nationals,” but not entitled to citizenship because they were not white. The Tydings-McDuffey Act (Philippines Independence Act) in 1934 transitioned the Philippines temporarily to commonwealth status, and thus re-classified Filipinos in America from “American nationals” to “aliens” and limited immigration to 50 per year.

practice which is unbound to institutions, which is distinctly grass roots, and which runs on experiential knowledge.

Ever blurring distinctions between what happened and what was not possible, Felix uses eating to envision race-consciousness and historical awareness in the present moment. Because each meal is temporary and tailored to the needs and tastes of the current eaters, Yamashita impresses upon us how useful it is to think of Asian Pacific American food as always changing. More essential than any ingredient or authoritative recipe, is overcoming the staleness that inevitably comes with rote fidelity to the past (a myth in itself), and instead working to marry together current needs and questions with accumulated wisdom and tested techniques.<sup>45</sup>

### *Grapes and Girls*

Felix's penchant for embellishing the truth is a habit that many of his listeners come to shrug off as an old manong's oddity. With claims to preparing Richard Nixon's famous dinner in China, pancit and pork for Pat Nixon and Imelda Marcos, and strawberry tarts for his friend and Berkeley classmate John Steinbeck, there is little wonder why most of his audiences listen with good-natured skepticism. And yet, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that because Felix has lived through many more experiences, the "truthfulness" of each articulation is not as easy to pinpoint.

---

<sup>45</sup> Felix comments on different kinds of knowledge and seeks to fuse younger forms and older forms together: "I know the problem. How many old tenants we got left? Used to be fifty. Now, maybe thirty. Every support group attached to one or two tenants, hauling him around from rally to rally like the real thing. I don't say nothing because what's an old guy got besides this kind of family, this kind of attention? What does he know about party lines? But he is not stupid. Didn't survive all these years without learning something." (484)

On the road to the I Hotel to move against eviction, for instance, Felix travels with the young Filipino activist Macario, who listens to Felix's rendition of history doubtfully, but still with respect:

"Did you come to Delano before or after RFK," [Felix] ask[s].

"After. He was already dead. Assassinated in L.A."

"Robert and Ethel try my soup. Thin soup with handmade bread. That's how Cesar breaks his fast."

"Felix."

"Thin vegetable soup. Cesar is vegetarian."

"I don't believe it."

"What? I no lie. Strict vegetarian. No dairy even. Guy like that." (435)

In this exchange Felix avoids admitting that he fabricated the Kennedys' tasting his soup by focusing on Chavez's well-documented vegetarianism. Rather than disprove Macario's suspicions of his having even known the Kennedys, he skirts around the implausible and even reinforces his commitment to the truth. The moment that Macario dismisses his story, with the embedded fabrication, is one moment (among many where Felix remembers hob-knobbing with famous figures) where "truthfulness" must be recalibrated: rather than testing whether Felix actually knew Chavez, we consider instead whether it was possible that *some* figure, marginal and undetected like Felix, might have existed in the same proximity as Chavez. The historical plausibility of Felix's actual presence in Chavez's kitchen, is less important than reflecting on the presence of Filipinos in Chavez's orbit.

Felix's liberties with telling history are more than just character quirkiness; they play the important role of priming the grounds for conveying the symbolic violence experienced by Filipino American men, and the effects of this violence in the contemporary moment. We see this particularly in the way Felix's fabrications are closely related to his dreams – of women, of food, of freedom. Frequently, the hopeful outcomes of these dreams become woven into his history-tellings, as if events had in fact transpired this way. Although the veracity of his historical recollection remains constantly in question, his dreams at the very least show how his life has been a struggle to cope with U.S. policies which outlawed miscegenation, and which left a generation of manongs without the ability to form legal unions with white American women. Felix shows how food is a desire he can satisfy, a dream which can come true, whereas female companionship remains a fantasy:

At night I'm dreaming menus. O.K., I'm dreaming beautiful women too, but all I remember in the morning is the menu. Think about it. Beautiful menu like a beautiful woman: refreshing, delicate, sophisticated, succulent, juicy, spicy. Take your breath away. You die happy. So if I give the menu to Wen, one day we go shopping. Half of my dream comes true. What you think?

Fifty percent is pretty good for old guy like me. (106)

Perhaps Felix reveres food so passionately because it has served as a life-long coping strategy. It is a way of sublimating a situation marred by systematized inequality. Abiding anti-miscegenation laws and the limited presence of Filipinas was, of course, just one of the many challenges of being Filipino in America during the early- to mid-

twentieth century. His struggles with loneliness are the product of the changing, but always-tenuous status of Filipinos in the United States during this period. U.S. presence in the Philippines determined the status of Filipino American: whether classified as “American nationals” as they were until 1934, or as “aliens” as they were until 1946, they were consistently denied American citizenship and civic protections; yet throughout the twentieth century they were welcomed to serve in the U.S. military (as Felix did in Bataan during World War II), and to provide cheap labor – especially in food production, in the fields and the canneries – through the Great Depression.<sup>46</sup>

Felix preserves the experience of denied citizenship within his present experience of eating; food for him always appears connected to wartime, to labor struggles, to activist moments, or to women, from the past. Keeping women in close association with food, as he does above, he carries the memory, and the daily experience of aging in loneliness, into the present. The plight of the manong, denied partnership and family, is thus granted an afterlife, a present-day application, which resides within every subsequent invocation of food. In day-to-day interactions with friends, Felix tantalizes with descriptions of food and with stories of romance. Above all, he emphasizes satiation. Daydreaming, for instance, about his short affairs with various women in dance halls and in tours of army service around the world, Felix thinks of the halo-halo he would prepare for one of his dearest sweethearts, Lucy.

---

<sup>46</sup> Yen Le Espiritu reminds us that Filipino soldiers, both in the U.S. and in the Philippines, were conscripted to aid U.S. military forces in the Philippines during World War II. (*Filipino American Lives* 17)

Knowing that his buddy, manong Frankie, also had his eye on Lucy in those days, Felix shows off his culinary prowess to his rival of the past, and now, of the present:

“O.K., most tropical fruits not available at the time. But I don’t go with no can of fruit cocktail. Substitute succulent peaches for mangoes. Peeled grapes for macapuna. I make the sweet beans and corn myself. Maybe banana. A dollop of tapioca. Squares of lime Jell-O. Shaved ice. Make it rich with thick sweet dream. Top it off with maraschino cherry. You make it to the bottom of the parfait glass, could be a surprise of rum or brandy.”

Frankie says, “Felix, we talking women or food? Lucy or halo-halo?”

“All the same thing. When I think about those dancing days, I think halo-halo.” (438)

Although there is nothing new about associating food and sex, this instance is remarkably politicized in the way it calls out past racist policy, and forces a personal confrontation with its after effects.<sup>47</sup> Felix’s invocations of halo-halo, its seductive textures and deliciousness, might be read as male objectifying of female bodies, or else nostalgic – they are both of these. But his articulation must also be considered within the context of sexual repression resulting from anti-immigrant, military-imperialist policies. If anything, Felix’s desire is condition by the policy. Furthermore, the loneliness of this condition has stayed with him for decades, with only the memory and the freedom of halo-halo to act as a surrogate.

---

<sup>47</sup> Warren Belasco provides an analysis of the food and sex connection (35).

Ever-renewing appetite for halo-halo (and for noodles, roast pig, adobo, among other comestibles) tows the pain of historical injustice into the present, and sounds off a lingering imperative to address or correct it. We see such an attempt to recover denied opportunities later: Felix's multiple proposals to the struggling younger Abra, reflects his long-withheld dream of a family. Attempt to realize it now, he offers to take care of her and her twins. Outraged, but understanding, she refuses and reminds Felix of her age and homosexuality; and though this proves to be one inequity that Felix does not manage to overcome – a painful reality he tacitly acknowledges if “fifty percent is pretty good” – he still pursues ways to realize the dreams, to recover the way history could have been were it not for racist-imperialist policy.<sup>48</sup> Enfolding dreams and imagined dream-fulfillment into his stories, Felix shows the injustices of being denied freedoms, while at the same time creating mind-space to play with possible ways to address what can be done in the present.

Felix's stories articulate from spaces of denial, and produce history differently than traditional narratives: from listeners, they demand attention to verifiable history, but also to the fantasies of a more race-conscious history. The first part, roots in verifiable history, is easy to apprehend through the historical figures Felix invokes, several of which lie on the margins of popular memory. Felix returns to his “grass roots” of Delano to rebuild a retirement community for his fellow manong grape harvesters at Agbayani Village (“the home where [Paolo Agbayani] should have lived” (426)], he calls attention again to Chavez, and also to the largely unsung Larry

---

<sup>48</sup> It is useful to think of his offerings, in temporal terms, as past conditional.



Itliong, a key leader in the strike. Felix recalls the two with familiarity, but he pauses longer to narrate his coffee conversations with Philip Vera Cruz, yet another union organizer who lingered in Chavez's shadow, and who actually resigned his leadership post in the Delano union due to differences with Chavez. The two union brothers mull over the departure of Cesar Chavez and Larry Itliong from Delano, following the monumental strike. Though they acknowledge that each "had his reasons for leaving" (432), they are disappointed with the withdrawal of the movement's most visible figures. Cruz stepped back from his leadership role due in part to Chavez's agreement to visit with President Marcos in the Philippines.<sup>49</sup>

As Cruz steps back from his leadership role, Yamashita creates space for considering a Filipino worker's perspective on the interethnic alliance, the union victory, and the moment of disarticulation as the leadership, and popular attention, disbands. Felix throws into question the status of the movement going forward. What does it mean to be the last worker standing, after the celebrity has blessed the movement and gone on his way? How does one remember? These questions stem from the historical presence of both Chavez and Itliong; Yamashita imagines the aftermath of their momentary involvements, and through Felix's disappointment, fights against the common idea that the outcome of Delano was wholly satisfying and complete. He reflects: "Finally, Cesar Chavez comes to Filipino Hall, and the rest is history. Maybe that's the last lesson. You could be starting something someone else has to finish. And maybe it is never finished. And maybe down the road they forget

---

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of this history see Matthew Garcia's article, "Labor, Migration, and Social Justice in the Age of the Grape Boycott."

everything. Who started it? Why did it start in the first place?” (431). A more complete vision of the historical event – an event with an unresolved afterlife – comes to light. Felix invites us to encounter a more flexible, capacious mode of history-telling, and with enough verifiable scaffolding to keep us grounded in common notions of history, we agree to Felix’s imaginative rendition as a more complete, ongoing version.

Yamashita thus bids us to track the dreams of the subaltern, first to document the absence of subalterns from history, and second, to marshal the sensibility of the dreams to combat this absence in the contemporary moment. This two-pronged, generative attitude toward history (inhabiting history, speaking from its potentials) enables authority from the ground by figures who continue to bear the discomfort of racial inequality established decades prior to the 1960s civil rights struggles. Remaining present after the famous activists have departed, Felix’s experiential authority becomes undeniable. He not only establishes himself as an important presence in the food production chain, but moreover makes more clear the depth of manong devotion to this adopted country, and to their work:

When grapes are ready, there’s nothing more beautiful and luxurious. I don’t say this like I’m the grower. I say this because who cannot appreciate the miracle of planted food comes back every year with your encouragement?

These grapes are my grapes, my children. The small, sour, purple ones crushed for Gallo wine. Large, green, seedless Thompson for Dole fruit cocktail. The reds for Sun-Maid raisins. (441)

With the care of a parent seeing his children off to perform a great service in the world, Felix imparts love and feelings of kinship upon the fruits he picks. Food again becomes a surrogate for the family he wishes he had. The hyperbolic storytelling ethos gives way to a perspective with unexpected social authority; his dream of family, tucked in his relation with grapes, marks the unregistered plight of the manong, at the same time that it carries forth to inform the struggle to save the I-Hotel.

After a time we come to understand that Felix's satirical and grand visions serve a populist function. In drawing broad strokes and taking imaginative liberties he shows that Asian Americans in twentieth century history impacted American literary production, social movement American war efforts, and of course, American food culture and production. Whitman-esque in their democratic vision, and in their linguistic cadence, Felix's internal monologues combine the language of dreams, of everyday work, and a universal "I," to test the limits of history's treatment of manongs:

In my long life, there's no work I don't do. I do everything. I been everywhere. If I don't do it with my own two hands and my back, stooping with my legs, walking with those old feet, I do it with my head. I fish up in Alaska. I do canning work. I do stoop labor and cut asparagus, artichokes. Pick tomatoes, strawberries, grapes. I carry a gun for the U.S. military. I build houses. I plant flowers. I build bridges. I sell grocery. I am a bartender. I work the dock. I organize for the union. I gamble. I bust some

butts in my time. Short time I do acting jobs in Hollywood. Dance with Fred Astaire. I play the ukulele in Honolulu with Don Ho. And all the time, I got the women. You write that down. (109)

Toward the end of the list, the specific claims to dancing with Astaire become suspect. But perhaps what is most important in passages like this one is that we see Felix training readers to continuously check for veracity in the seemingly outrageous. Questioning and playing with the narrowness of dominant histories, as a practice, often reveals that manongs were present.

As the voice of the occluded, Felix makes them speak. He embodies the dream of speaking back to the racism and exploitation of American policy and cannibalistic American food systems in passages such as this:

Red orange, slimy grape clusters shudder in your hands. You holding salmon caviar in one hand and the caviar that makes the wine in the other. Holding it like tender babies because this stuff will travel to the man's table. Who's gonna put it there? I'm gonna put it there. Set the caviar on thin crackers with lime zest. Pour a chilled bottle of sparkling wine. Make him look gracious in a room full of beautiful women, tinkling glasses, fluttering candles, and chandeliers. I'm holding my hands out with the open palms of sea and land caviar. Holding them out like offering. Then take it away.

Close the fists and squeeze. Squeeze hard. (442)

Felix's taste for speaking back to power and asserting his position as the provider, the nurturer becomes evident only after he has established his authority. With clarity he

highlights the invisible hand of the manong, capable of providing for wealthy white eaters, and just as capable of destroying the provisions. The option of withdrawing the offering of unreciprocated hospitality, and of labor, is a dream collected from past moments, and it is also only deferred. Withdrawing is an awareness which started with the grape strike, and which can be applied to the current moment.

*Completely Authentic*

“O.K. You buy the ingredients, I make everything.  
Completely authentic. You gonna think you’re Nixon in  
China. I heard he got himself a Chinese cook, but common  
knowledge he’s Pilipino.”

– Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel*

Although Felix’s stories inspire connection between eating and history, the workings of this historical-alimentary connection become fully realized in Felix’s Asian American cookbook, and in a pig roast commemorating his friend, Pio Rosete. Through these creations, Felix makes the act of race-conscious cooking immediate and communal – at once pertinent to the concerns of the community and honoring of the sacrifices borne by those in the past.

At the same time, both creations take to task popular perceptions of Asian food, today representing liberal multicultural parlance and the mainstream commodification of ethnic food. Demand for authenticity and tradition, for example, while flimsy, prove to have great purchase – a fact which Yamashita acknowledges in dubbing one of the novel’s Felix-focused hotels “Authentic Chinese Food.” Her

effort to trump what is now a clichéd and uncritical desire for some pure cuisine echoes in Martin Manalansan's discussion of authenticity and consumer expectation in ethnic restaurants: "Questions about authenticity and the immigrant condition revolve around primordial places, times, and bodily experiences... Being able to 'place' things and persons is a way to legitimize one's own knowledge and to assess the relative strangeness and/or acceptability of the thing or person in question" (290). With the cookbook and the pig roast, Yamashita destabilizes the expectation that the food representation reflect authenticity, at the same time that she reinscribes its relation to the history of struggle.

Though the novel announces "authentic Chinese food" it soon reveals that the expectation of "authentic Chinese" – at least in the sense of a Chinese cook employing Chinese ingredients and techniques – is a myth. Instead, inside the hotel, Felix mixes culinary styles, ingredients, and stories liberally, unfazed by claims of disloyalty to "authentic" Asian traditions. Breaking bread with his new friend, the SFSC scholar Wen, and with his writer friend, Jack Sung, Felix describes the tantalizing ingredients: "Wen, he got a duck smoked in tea, red peppers, cinnamon, and star anise. Then Jack Sung's making lobster Cantonese with black beans. But I got the piece of resistance" (106).<sup>50</sup> The "piece of resistance" is Dongpo pork, also known as "lady's quivering buttocks," beloved by famous Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo, as well as Nixon and Mao Tzedong. Loosening the expectation that

---

<sup>50</sup> San Francisco Chinatown's fare is remarkably reflected in this meal; Cantonese dishes come together with duck smoked in tea, which was a specialty in Cecilia Chiang's fine-dining restaurant, The Mandarin, opened in Ghiradelli Square, 1961. Whereas the majority of eating establishments in Chinatown served Cantonese-style cheap eats and hole-in-the-wall environment, Chiang sought to distinguish The Mandarin by offering gourmet non-Cantonese style fare in a classy, fine-dining setting.

authentic Chinese food must only be prepared by a Chinese, Felix then stakes another claim to authentic Chineseness that subverts the reader's ability to "place" him. The quivering buttocks doubles as a decadent masterpiece and, in loftier terms, a statement of political resistance. Felix's manong Chinatown-speak pun brings "*pièce de résistance*," emphasizing gourmet cuisine and taste, together with "resistance," echoing the political climate in Chinatown, vis-à-vis Maoist China.<sup>51</sup> This plate's connection to Chinese politics, in other words, is what makes it authentic.

To further satirize the popular myth of authenticity, Felix aspires to codify this wild, mixed style of cooking into a cookbook. The three dream up a cookbook to document Felix's dishes, based on a "classic Asian myth" (107) of separated lovers coming together to feast. Felix explains, "My idea for the cookbook is simple. We do Asian American cuisine. American because we use ingredients found in America. Imported is O.K. Ajinomoto. Soy sauce. Wonton wrappers. Then we do ten-course menus in Chinese, Japanese, Pilipino, Korean, you name your Asian American"" (108). To accompany the recipes are the Asian origin myth, which Felix claims is consistent across all Asian cultures, as well as his experience for Jack to transcribe, though Jack protests that much of it never happened. Together, three engage in an act of Allos-ian history-making, inscribing creative histories, myths, and concern for present-day politics, in the cookbook. Felix's Asian American cookbook, neutralizes the obsession with managing difference (as in the pursuit of authenticity), and

---

<sup>51</sup> OED definition of "*pièce de résistance*:" "Most substantial dish of a meal."

repurposes it to stage local collaboration between the veterans of exclusion and withheld freedom.<sup>52</sup>

Organizing the cookbook according to these imagined life events, and political attunements, Yamashita satirizes the mainstream proliferation of Asian American cookbooks following Nixon's visit, and also the slough of cookbook memoirs which so often trace a rags-to-riches journey from Asia to the United States, without giving notice to histories of structural violence towards Asians. As discussed in Chapter One, American mainstream interest in Asian ethnic culture peaked in the Cold War period, even as anti-Asian policy brought on racial hostility. Cookbooks, as Mark Padongpatt observes, spoke to this interest by providing a form of engagement with unfamiliar ingredients and technique related to, but different from, eating at Asian American restaurants.<sup>53</sup> Felix, Wen, and Jack Sung, in stark contrast to this race-blind mode of consuming Asian food and Asian culture, re-engage the struggles that concern Asians and diasporics in the now.

Yamashita also spoofs the conception of history, and of cookbooks, advanced by famous Asian American writers, especially Frank Chin. Jack Sung asks, "Is this a cookbook or a fake autobiography?" (109). Satirizing Chin's objections to the inclusion of autobiography in these volumes (and indeed, the idea of autobiography writ large), Yamashita proposes that perhaps food and history can come together without defending some virtuous version of "true" history; and without defending a

---

<sup>52</sup> I use "local" here loosely, to mean San Francisco Chinatown. The term will be unpacked further in the following chapter.

<sup>53</sup> Padoongpatt discusses consumption of Asian Pacific American food culture among white women during this period, touching upon the growing desire to prepare Asian foods in the home (194).



virtuous idea of “authentic” Asian cuisine.<sup>54</sup> The guiding principle – whether for mainstream Americans demanding authentic cuisine, or Asian Pacific Americans demanding “real” Asian histories – is that the racialized subject’s desire for freedom from denied rights be made visible.

Finally, Yamashita stages a scene in which the improvisational collaboration with players from the present, and from the past, trumps the rigidity of culinary nationalism and turns social stratification on its head. The idea for a pig roast event is devised to commemorate Pio Rosete, an I-Hotel resident who perished in an arson:

Over time we get a committee going to figure out something for Pio. Put his spirit to rest once and forever. Also we gonna honor the other guys who died: Salermo and Knauff. We do a thing on March 16, anniversary of the fire. Everybody agrees. Too late for a funeral. Who’s gonna mourn? We got our own troubles. There’s gotta be food and music. Somebody says lechon baboy. Gotta be authentic pig roast over coals. I say, “What the heck you talking? We gonna burn the I-Hotel down this time for good.”

Alfred suggests, “How about doing it Hawaii style, in the pit? That way there’s no open fire.” (444)

---

<sup>54</sup> In *Chickencoop Chinaman*, the Asian American protagonist, Tam, rails against cook book authors, in the form of his foil, Tom, whom he pegs as an ethnic sell-out and model minority. Chin responds to model-minority stereotype and conjures the history of corporate-sanctioned Chinese Asian cook books and culinary culture. Corporations including LaChoy, Chun King, Kikkoman, etc. published Asian Pacific American cookbooks to help sell cooking products beginning in the early twentieth century. Later, at mid-to-late centuries these companies would recruit Asian celebrities or individual cooks to authenticate the recipes. These figures, and their successors, are the very Asian American culinary sell-outs against which Tam rails. Chin’s indictment of Asian American autobiography and the famous usage of “fake autobiography” appeared in *The Big AIIIEEEEE!*

Layered onto the current struggle to save the I-Hotel, the pig roast represents both a memorial and a protest. Felix, intimate with Pio, as well as he is with the activist parties struggling for the hotel's preservation, is called in to preside. As a bridge between those perished and those present, he underscores the continuity between the two: the elder generation struggled with anti-Asian legislation, joining the younger generation in struggling with inequity's legacies. To avoid in-fighting over the kind of pork to serve at the memorial – Hawaiian style kalua pig or Filipino style lechon baboy – Felix advises that a “democratic” competition between the two roasts is more suitable. Felix reasons that paying homage to the spirit of revolution in the air will tame the inevitable bouts of culinary cultural nationalism.

Although the planning committee embarks on a drawn-out effort to hunt wild boars infesting a farm in Salinas – looking for “free” pigs, but also, one supposes, to adopt a hunter-gatherer ethos – they return empty-handed. Here Yamashita dramatizes the desire to return to culinary origins, and pokes fun at it, as the virtuous hunt ends in failure. Proceeding with store-bought pig, the groups prepare roasts collaboratively under Felix's watch near the Embarcadero. The moment the pigs are hoisted respectively onto a spit, and into a pit, Felix brings his “knowledge,” his view of the past, into the cooking act: “For my part, spit pig gets the same pepper and herb treatment. I slap my hands together, and Pio flies around the pig like pixie dust” (453). With this gesture, Pio's spirit does not remain merely symbolic; with Pio literally in the food, Felix establishes a material linkage between past and present –

indeed a hyperbolic form of historicizing. Yet with Pio dust, Yamashita satirizes forms of eating that honor the dead without consciousness of who they were.

At the height of the scene, quibbles over which pig will be judged the tastiest break out, and factions between cultural nationalists emerge. But when a flaming sleeping bag threatens the entire scene, the competition dissolves. The boundaries of cuisine and taste give way to communal safety, and a feast of pork, no longer identified by its style, or its preparers. Felix watches:

I get up, and everyone is dancing around me. The firefighters are eating. The Samoans are eating. The judges are too drunk to eat. For some reason the band never stops playing. Like it's the *Titanic*. The musicians just back away from the fire and keep playing. Play through the whole goddamn fiasco. Jubilant fiasco...

I watch the pork roast slip into hungry mouths. See the happy crunches of the burnt skin and the flaked feathers of meat slip away. Shiny grease coating every lip. Pio's magic making them remember. Remember every goddamn song they ever heard or sang in their lives. And they will sing and sing and sing until the night falls and the fog creeps back under the Embarcadero. (455-456)

Imagining Pio to be the catalyst for the jubilation (maybe in taste, maybe in spirit), Felix surmises that contentment all around will stir memory. Whether the songs sung honor Pio's memory, or the lives of the individual eaters, the point of food, for Felix,

is to establish connection to “every goddamn song they ever heard or sang” – to experience. Then, over time, to knowledge.

The pig roast performance transforms familiar culinary discussions: food as statement of nationalism, the virtue of hunting, food as memorial. By self-consciously alluding to these discussions, and then refusing to replay the usual outcomes – here, creating a hierarchy of national cuisines, successfully hunting wild boar to make a ‘self-made’ meal, or conducting empty commemorations – Yamashita comments on their limitations. The roasting site is a playful and generative space that does not abide the logics of revolutionary theories, or culinary philosophies, when carried to the point of orthodoxy. Without disavowing them altogether, she points out that the energies spent policing boundaries could be refigured to feed the community, in its local struggles.

If one of the novel’s questions is whether grass roots activism is possible, Yamashita responds by imagining revolution that fuses the intellectual and the embodied. Felix represents an attempt to wrest food away from the ideological and abstract, and to re-incorporate elements that escape the academically-sanctioned definitions of Asian Pacific American resistance and revolution.

### **Pleasures and Politics of the Plate**

Although constantly thwarting the reader’s satiation by asserting the unsavoriness of history, the novels do not withhold all the pleasures of consuming tantalizing food representations. In one of his vulnerable moments connecting with a

fellow kitchen boy, for instance, Binh's descriptions of watercress makes one of Truong's most intimate eating scenes more sensual:

Watercress is unmistakable, bitter in the mouth, cooling in the body, greens that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed. I know this dish well. That was not the question. The recipe is deceptively simple one that calls for oil heated till it smokes, seasoned with nothing more than a generous sprinkling of salt and the blink of an eye. (97)

The play between Binh and his meal companion involves a game of taste, and the tension of seduction come through descriptions of the bitterness, the smoke, and the salt.

But what these cooks' stories underscore is that pleasure is not one-sided. Both know how to tantalize with meals, but they also cook to reveal something of the pains they have suffered in the past. The refusal of this information by the eater results in devastation, an experience felt by many chefs, according to psychologist Scott Haas. Being "obsessed with feeding others," he writes, is akin to unrequited love: "It is the customer who determines whether or not they are validated, and that is why chefs are as notorious for their anger as for their love. Being dependent on someone else in order to satisfy one's personal hunger is both frustrating and terrifying" (Haas 39).

In these novels, when the eater does not view the cook's intention, the possibility for race-consciousness and commitment to healing wounds of inequity

merely passes. So it does when Bình tenders his resignation, and when Felix is escorted out of the I-Hotel:

I bend over the gutter, and everything inside me pours out. I cannot stop it. I heave and weep. I know everything is leaving my body: noodles in gelatin broth, Dongpo pork for Wen, lemongrass coconut stew with chili, Sixto's fertility roots, Phil's sweet black coffee, Johnny Bulonglong's fried fish in soup, Cesar's thin vegetable broth with handmade bread, Delano grapes, Alaskan salmon and salmon caviar, halo-halo for Lucy, Hiro's natto chili Spam on rice, lechon baboy and kalua poaa for Pio, Imelda's chocolate cheesecake for Abra and the twins, Joe's cans of Spam and corned beef, Macario's chicken adobo, ng ka py and twenty herbs, local fish, and empty, empty soup. Abra hangs onto me like she's holding on to a waterfall. (489)

The forced removal of the tenants, and the loss of the battle, reflects that all of the activist efforts remain ignored. Met with forces uninterested in conscious consumption, Felix's foods empty onto the street alongside those whom he fed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Out of the Armchair: Wandering Asian Pacific American Eaters and Failed Satiation

“It was not long before R and I developed the habit of clicking on food items, clothing, and abstract concepts in the hopes of receiving instantaneous gratification...”

“I...suddenly became aware of the potential for travel”

– Pamela Lu, *Pamela*

The works of historical fiction studied thus far imagine food’s operation in the past, and through the culinary lens, illuminate occluded histories (Chapter One) while inspiring new ways to understand history in the present (Chapter Two). Still other Asian Pacific American writers, including Pamela Lu, Maxine Hong Kingston, and John Yau, have considered the experience of Asian Pacific Americans eating in urban, multi-ethnic U.S. locales in the 1970s on. They ask: What is the experience of Asian Pacific American eaters who have inherited the histories of exclusion? How do Asian Pacific American eaters, at late century, relate eating to ethnic belonging? Do Asian Pacific American eaters address the inequities facing other ethnic groups when consuming their foods? Focused on the present moment, they ruminate on how Asian Pacific American eaters of more recent times confront questions of connecting to others, either in attempt to build community, or to reconcile their own conflicted experiences of racial alienation.

These works consider how multi-ethnic cosmopolitan spaces in more recent decades – post-1965 immigration act, and post-Civil Rights Movement – present different cultural contexts for consumption. Increased immigration and expansions in global capitalism, as discussed earlier, inspired (mostly urban) cultural pluralism. P, the protagonist of *Pamela* (1998), shows how online technology also came to figure into everyday individual habits and identities, constantly mediating exchanges and consumption. P's comment also points out how computer technology altered individuals' ways of perceiving the world; the constant information flow and accessibility became the expected norm.

But Lu also observes how easily the expectation for instant gratification via online engagement influences individuals' expectations of other kinds of worldly interactions. Here for instance, if instant access to food items and clothing online has become a "habit," R and P would likely apply this expectation of instant gratification to their material engagements with food and clothes (as in shopping malls or restaurants). With this articulation, P presupposes that knowledges and experiences of the material world – food, clothing, abstract concepts – can be substituted for an online abstraction that is valuable precisely because it delivers the expected instantaneous outcome. In other words, P has no hopes for the material objects themselves, but rather for rapid, easy access to information about them.

P's reliance on an established expected outcome, without having to account for the complexities of the material experience, might be described as a kind of "armchair" experience. Deprioritizing the messy process of eating food, in favor of



finding information about the food quickly, P substitutes familiarity with lived experience for pre-determined codes, tropes, and theories. As a representative of the online age, P reflects a cultural shift where established codes and information are called to help navigate engagement with the material world.

Lu's novel critiques this dependency, not only on high-tech, but more generally on the authority granted to existing information. The novel points out that when saddled with contentious issues of race and ethnic belonging, the existing information is helpful, but limited if one is pursuing race consciousness befitting of the current moment. P, who is not only tech-savvy, but college-educated, has grown up acquiring theories and abstractions which she mistakenly believes to be the substance of her experience. This armchair approach to living by relying on tropes and theories to explain the self and the world both comforts and numbs her. Her relation to ethnic belonging, in particular, appears only symbolic; though P has a vague idea that her ethnicity should arouse a feeling of connectedness to a group, she cannot call one forth. Curious about how to break the numbness of detachment from lived experience, P searches for ways to understand her own particular relation to the world. Yet *Pamela* shows how the "habit" of relying on what one has learned in a conceptual sense – of living from the armchair – is hard to break.

The armchair's draw, while particularly stubborn in P's story, also appears in the Kingston's novel, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), and Yau's short story, "Hawaiian Cowboys" (1995). Like P, Wittman and Yau's protagonist are at least one generation removed from immigration, and, hailing from the multiethnic spaces of

San Francisco and New York, they have grown up cognizant, and even overeducated, about histories of struggle against racial inequity and othering in the United States. Yet even having been nurtured in such environments, anxieties over their own racial difference, and dissatisfaction with the management of race in the country drives them to Hawai‘i, for illumination about local belonging. For both characters struggling with hostility on the mainland, social relations on the island seem easier.

Both travelers embark with expectations of integrating easily in Hawai‘i, reasoning that their personal experience with racial othering on the mainland, as well as their conceptual understanding of rituals, will ensure their fit in a different locale. They illustrate the temptation, especially among Asian Pacific Americans, to experience belonging by conceptualizing on the armchair: theories and tropes of eating promote the idea that one can think their way into belonging, if one adopts the correct stance toward the other’s food.

The focus on Asian Pacific American eaters draws out the tensions and contradictions specific to being an ethnic subject who is familiar with forces of otherness and inequity on an individual level, and also a consumer of other ethnic foods and cultures. Superficially, Asian Pacific American subjects might be considered exempt from perils of essentializing or misrepresenting ethnic subjects, simply by dint of being Asian. The oft-rehearsed logic that racialized subjects cannot essentialize, however, is a fallacy, as Michael Omi has theorized regarding race relations in our liberal multicultural moment:

Some scholars and activists have defined racism as “prejudice plus power.”

Using this formula, they argue that people of color can't be racist because they don't have power. But things aren't that simple. In the post-Civil Rights era, some racial minority groups have carved out a degree of power in select urban areas—particularly with respect to administering social services and distributing economic resources. (252-253)

Although Wittman and Yau are not racist, they underestimate the fact that racialized peoples experience racism in uneven ways. The discrepancies between the power enjoyed by Asian Pacific Americans on the U.S. mainland, versus those in Hawai'i, emerge as a point of reckoning for both. They find that the panethnic landscape, although diverse and teeming with exotic-cum-local cuisine, does not naturally foster inter-racial collaboration or conversation regarding forms of structural violence affecting people of color.

Accordingly, the characters' familiarity with otherness, and their training in social theory, enables connections with other groups that are significant – but they are also significantly clipped. The expectation that such an understanding can be had through eating proves seductive, and the writers affirm this by highlighting how this logic propels the respective journeys. Yet, in keeping with Omi's theory, the expected outcome of seamless integration into the culture does not, in the end, become fulfilled. Wittman, though enthused to join the rituals of local fishing in Hawai'i, blunders through the act and ends up showing his lack of belonging. Yau's speaker finds some measure of comfort with being Asian on the islands, yet he is overcome with confusion after discovering the markers of cultural imperialism alive

in everyday experience, including the act of eating.

These works experiment formally with existing theories and tropes which presume that food, coupled with an experiential and theoretical understanding of otherness, ushers in seamless connection to other groups. They acknowledge pre-established culinary symbols and tropes, but then reveal their limitations. Instead of experiencing the fruits of imagined ethnic solidarity and resolved racial differences within a progressively multicultural landscape with them, readers are made to gaze at the figures' frustrations and failed attempts, and to confront the idea that the hope for knowing the other by enjoying a good meal is only a fantasy. Yet in delivering this view of connection's limitations, they do not suggest that envisioning belonging in other racialized subjects is futile; rather, they emphasize that belonging can only, and should only, be partial. To collapse these differences would be to disavow the uneven forms of racial inequity enacted upon Asian Pacific Americans.

### **Consuming the Conceptual in *Pamela***

“Having decided that speaking was suspicious in its very nature, I soon found that I could no longer speak at all, and neither silence nor forced speech could save me from that feeling of being always about to disappear from my situation. Instead, I developed habits of austerity and artificial lighting, and adopted a certain tone in my writing, comforting in its extreme formality.”

– Pamela Lu, *Pamela*

A work which Lu has described as a “preamble to action,”<sup>55</sup> *Pamela* critiques the view of Asian food as symbolic by excavating the gap between conceptual views of food and the lived experience of it in the San Francisco Bay Area. The protagonist, P, exemplifies deep dependency on the prioritizing of information over familiarity with immediate experience – a pattern which is less pronounced, but still present in the narratives of Kingston and Yau. P’s “extreme formality” frames her understanding of diasporic experience and politics, and forms the basis of her sense of identity. P’s situation as a college-educated, young professional in the San Francisco Bay Area, a queer woman, and Taiwanese American, reflects in the formal descriptions of her everyday experience. P employs conceptual language to interpret and describe the quotidian; theoretical concepts, categories, and symbols abound in her accounts of walking around San Francisco, meeting friends, and eating. The very names of the characters, all of which are single or double letters – P (who at times identifies as “I”), Y, R, L, C, YJ, LP, etc. – reflect this formality. While each character is a distinct individual, their generic names downplay their specificity.<sup>56</sup> As Rob Wilson notes, spaces and self take on a “virtual” quality (“Tracking” 3) – befitting of the regional hypertext culture – as P marshals abstractions even in attempts to convey desires, beliefs, and a sense of camaraderie among her similarly overeducated and wandering friends.

---

<sup>55</sup> From Lu’s remarks at Living Writers Series reading event, May 11, 2010, UC Santa Cruz.

<sup>56</sup> Lu also riffs off of Samuel Richardson’s 1740 epistolary novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, which features “Mr. B,” master to the teenaged maidservant after whom the book is named.

P's curiously academic language helps her to communicate the significance of her day-to-day experience; although the formality prevents the reader from gleaning her particular character (her character, desires, etc.), she relies on this system of representation for comfort. In the quote above she admits to adopting the conceptual in order to mask her pathological concern with disappearance, which we gradually learn, means the annihilation of what makes her distinct and individual.

Yet P's formal language becomes unfulfilling, and anxiety-inducing after a time. The thought of existing within established tropes and theories of gender, sexuality, class, and race, continues to bewilder her. For instance, she admits that she and her allies simply rehearse the identities they have been told they possess: "We were using a borrowed language to add more words to our names, and to develop a picture of ourselves, the shape of which we could only infer from our surroundings, since the original exposure had been taken long before we had thought to look..." (18). P surmises that her sense of self is merely conceptual – the self which is constructed abstractly from the armchair, through outdated or second-hand tools: a "borrowed language" and an old "picture." Her understanding of identity and social circumstances derives from old structural conventions, to the degree that what is particular about these individuals remains hidden behind the conceptual.

To counteract the feeling of disconnection from her lived circumstances, early on, P resolves to "break...free of the political habits [she and her cohort] had inherited over the past twenty years" (18). "Habits" appear yet again in reference to her dependency on existing knowledge to explain her way of relating to the world in a

theoretical capacity. “Political habits” are the codified identity markers, and theoretical models for understanding herself – including her ethnic and racial difference. Quitting political habits means departing the abstract interpretive models she knows so well, and journeying forth without the confining scripts of codified theories. But this proves to be a harder habit to kick than she realizes. One of P’s attempts to experience ethnic belonging, for instance, occurs in a failed attempt to establish a personal connection to her ancestry with food. When P first searches for a connection to her ancestry she immediately thinks to the common associations between culinary habit and ethnic belonging.<sup>57</sup> After her friend R embarks on an exploration “into the neglected pool of her cultural heritage until she finally surfaced at the center of Jerusalem” (78), P becomes inspired to go “in search of experiences that might fulfill the growing forecast of accounts within [her]” (79), and turns to food to reinforce her Taiwanese connection:

In this scheme we were always stumbling upon the amnesia of our anticipated errors, only to find ourselves performing corrections from some unknown, ancestral past. Ancestral memory was what compelled R, shortly before her departure from the States, to watch back-to-back videos of *The Godfather*, parts one and two, after which she instantly scooped up her cat, “Kit-Ten” and walked through the house speaking fluent Italian; and ancestral memory was what inspired me to renounce immediate fast-food gratification and

---

<sup>57</sup> P’s reliance on ethnic food to illuminate her sense of cultural belonging is in keeping with cultural theories of food, including: Levi-Strauss’s *The Raw and the Cooked* (1983) which argues that culture is born when food transforms to culture when cooked; and Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (2000) shows how food customs determine social stratifications.

spontaneously cook stir-fry while listening to a recording of an all-girl Taiwanese punk band... (79)

P's earnest faith in performing conventional markers of ethnic belonging – the spontaneous impulse to cook stir-fry, to consume ethnic films and music – is darling, but dubious. Chasing a theoretical culinary connection to ethnic community renders P, a modern Taiwanese diasporic subject, out of sync. Her token gestures to enjoy her ancestry – though she does not register them as token – leave her with a vapid sense of connection. The attempt to rectify her alienation from ethnic identity leads her, once again, to rely on armchair knowledge. With this failure to escape conceptual knowledge, Lu attests to the temptation of defaulting to existing knowledge to explain the new experience.

P's attempts to correct her “amnesia” may move us to consider more subtle forms of searching for ancestry at work in popular food culture, which stem from the same misguided logic. Performing or consuming ethnicity in the form of ethnic food preparation, films, or music are often packaged as providing access to “authentic” ethnic experience or heritage, but emptied of historical or political tie to the present moment. The temptation to access ancestry or ancestral experience through pre-packaged ritual, although conceptually sound, does not fill in amnesia related to historical inequalities. P's frustration compels a different approach to forging a relation to cultural heritage, whether one is in search of group belonging like P, or else relating to Asian Pacific American culture.



P's attempt to understand cultural heritage by eating Taiwanese stir-fry, thus thwarted, she continues to search for ways out of the armchair to connect to her ancestry. In a small breakthrough, she locates a connection to her ethnic identity in the form of "a curse that afflicted both of my lower extremities, manifesting in my right foot as a chronic orthopedic misalignment which grew gradually into a mysterious tumor, and in my left foot as an array of multiple bone fractures resulting from being squashed beneath the double tire of a Mack tanker truck" (79). Lu treats P's desperate attempt with irony, but what is striking about her foot condition as a link to ancestry is that, in contrast to the tokenized form of eating to signify ethnic belonging, the foot pain is an unexpected and personalized form of connection. The genes which foster the limbic misalignment, she (probably) jests, are a more likely connection to the ancestors. Whether or not her stir-frying and music produced any trace of ancestral memory, and whether or not her genes actually were responsible for the foot pain – the resulting pain in the body is enough to de-romanticize the whole business of looking for ethnic identity in food. Moreover, she discovers a visceral and unique connection to her lineage.

Her approach to eating changes thereafter: whereas before she ate in expectation of ancestral enlightenment abstracted from her body, now she must find food while towing ancestral memory in her feet. Ancestral memory literally follows her while seeking meals: "It became natural and even expected for me to limp gracefully through the alleys of Chinatown with C in search of Vietnamese noodle soup, and later to hobble, step by step, up the steep staircase of a city bookstore to the

second floor” (80). “Natural” and “expected,” the hobbling becomes P’s personalized and material (as opposed to abstracted and theoretical) tie to ethnic belonging. It counters her fear of disappearance as a unique condition. And although P retains her naïve perspective on what ancestral connection looks like, imagining it in her foot significantly shifts the idea of ethnic belonging away from the abstracted form she expounds with the stir-fry. Eating as a symbol of belonging, then, becomes an abandoned project: at first it symbolizes ancestral memory, and then it doesn’t, making way for P to consider the body as a stronger point of connection.

Failure to find belonging through food thus ushers P into a space in which improvisation and unpredictable immediacy is allowed in to help constitute identity. The satiation withheld from the stir-fry leads her to reimagine the place of ancestral memory. And while her feet may still not give the experience of ethnic belonging she desires, she is better primed for unexpected experience, or ways of knowing to enter. The armchair eater, here, becomes inspired to travel:

I...suddenly became aware of the potential for travel – how the street tilted east and west in a line which one could follow indefinitely, walking straight into one’s life as if it were one long distance culminating in freedom, leading away from and then back toward one’s starting point in an orbit that magnified (or perhaps restored) the world to spectacular proportions. (50)

The desire for travel and freedom, and the road “leading away from and then back toward one’s starting point” re-prioritizes the immediate and unknown over the known and conceptual. Acting against the theoretical mapping to which she is so

accustomed, P resolves to encounter places she does not yet know and has not yet abstracted. Folded within is the question of how to conceive the relationship of the subject and food, which the novella also suggests will be transformed and made more specific to P's particular experience. The story concludes with P on a plane, leaving the Bay Area and hovering over the Pacific. Lu does not specify her destination, nor does she suggest a critical strategy to replace the outmoded languages upon which P used to rely. Primary importance is placed on breaking free of what one has inherited, allowing for adaptation based on the specificities of immediate experience.

**“Refusing Food”: The Search for Food Habit in *The Fifth Book of Peace***

“Stories warn not to eat anything on the strange land, or else you get trapped, fall under spells. But there are also consequences for refusing food – making enemies, insulting the worth of offerings, going hungry, not becoming part of the place.”

– Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*

In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston shows how even an Asian Pacific American subject as savvy to racial politics and historical inequity as Wittman Ah Sing, will experience moments of frustration when attempting to belong in another multi-ethnic community. Kingston's “Water” chapter features the family, transplanted from San Francisco Chinatown, discovering local Hawaiian food-gathering culture, and also struggling to reconcile their expectations of Hawaiian food culture with the lived experience of it. Through Wittman, Kingston offers an account of a good-intentioned individual's search for new food habits; he is committed to

forming eating habits that reflect sensitivity to Hawaiian people, and their experience of racial othering on the islands. However in some moments, Wittman, like P, has trouble keeping his previous experience, and expectations for seamless integration, from overdetermining his experiences with food on the islands. He discovers that the knowledge he has accumulated from his experience of being Asian in San Francisco, from his literary education, and from his anti-war politics, reaches an upper limit when faced with the task of participating in local communities and food rituals. Kingston depicts both success and failure to connect; in detailing the failures, she debunks the tempting notion that belonging can be attained easily through food and the correct attitude towards the other.

After years of youthful tripping around his San Francisco of “clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn” (*Tripmaster Monkey* 3), in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Wittman Ah Sing, routes his family across the Pacific to make a home in Hawai‘i, and also to dodge the Viet Nam War draft. Violent protests and aggression in San Francisco drive the Ah Sings to leave their loved ones and seek new forms of peace-making in Hawai‘i. Inspired by the poet Lew Welch, who disappeared into the woods once coming to California, Wittman rationalizes that protesting at home is not helping the cause: “Butting heads against the escalating war gives it energy. Don’t think about it anymore. Quit reading the news about it. Curiosity also makes it grow. Let it go. Leave it behind” (65).

At its inception, the move from San Francisco to Hawai‘i is a form of political exile, but as the Ah Sings begin to conceive of adapting to island life and

communities, their migration also demonstrates features of tourism. The Ah Sings' concern about food invokes what scholar Lucy Long calls "culinary tourism:" "the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other – participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one's own" (21). From the moment of arrival, when Wittman's son, Mario, discovers a Dole Pineapple juice dispenser at the airport and bounds over to make his first food experience on the island, it becomes clear that the Ah Sings' journey is culinary as much as geographic and cultural.

By the time the Ah Sings arrive at the airport in San Francisco, Wittman notes that their culinary habits have already shifted toward the other. Wittman's wife Taña initiates this process of questioning when she prepares the family's first meal in Hawai'i, atop Wittman's Gold Mountain trunk. This transitional moment indicates not only what the family ate, but also signals that their food habits are in the midsts of transformation: "Taña set the Gold Mountain trunk for dining. With careful artist's hands, she arranged their three plates, three cups, and three sets of utensils, and the food: Sacramento almonds from the plane, dried fruit, a loaf of San Francisco sourdough bread from SFO, candy bars, and water with Tang crystals" (89). The description of this particular Ah Sing meal comes loaded with the geographical origins of each food item. While the almonds and sourdough are not surprisingly associated with Sacramento and San Francisco, "the plane" and "SFO" (San Francisco International airport) are interestingly treated as geographical sources. By

loosening the food's connection to land, and expanding it to transitional spaces of airports and planes, Wittman shows that along with their physical transition to Hawai'i, their experiences of food are also in transition – they come to Hawai'i bearing food habits formed in San Francisco, but know they must adjust these habits to their new location.

For Wittman, the journey is distinctly culinary because it prompts him to re-examine his attitude toward food and question how he will adapt his tastes while making a new home. Will he, as he ponders in the lines above, avoid new and unknown food experiences and rely on his familiar food habits, in order to stay out of trouble? Or will he attempt to adapt his food habits and integrate in the new environment? Caught between the desire to stay the safe route and rely on established codes of eating (the “armchair”), and the impulse to depart from that route in search of other ways to belong in Hawai'i, the peculiar two-sided quality of Wittman's hunger pangs remains stubbornly intact through the narrative. The novel presents situations where the associations are anticipated, but not delivered.

Engaging in food practices provides Wittman the opportunity to imagine community with individuals who are unlike the aggressive Bay Area protestors he departed. His will to experience the culinary systems of Hawai'i dovetail with several of the reasons tourists frequently yoke food and travel, as Long further elaborates:

People intentionally consume an other because they are curious, and that curiosity stems from any number of reasons: because they are bored with the

familiar, they do not want to be rude to a host, they want to balance their nutritional intake, they want to belong to a specific community of eaters, they feel pride in the heritage represented by foodways, or they want to authenticate an experience... (45)

Viewing Wittman as a culinary tourist allows us to bear in mind the desires and expectations he brings with him to this new locale. While he hopes for nearly all of elements Long mentions, there are definitive moments of failure to connect to a specific community of eaters, or to respect a host. This, Kingston demonstrates, attributes back to the inadequacy of intentions and conceptualizations to guarantee the desired outcome. Casting Wittman's narrative in Hawai'i as a journey of improvisation, Kingston elaborates the possibilities and limits of culinary tourism to connect different kinds of American ethnic subjects.

Wandering around the island, Wittman experiences a series of encounters with locals and food. After enjoying public access to mango, papaya, and guava trees that "belong to nobody" (98), he revels in the freedom of island eating, declaring his comfort: "People living here should always be happy" (99). In his first encounter with local Hawaiian, he is invited to a sumptuous picnic with "more food than the half-dozen people here could eat, as if they were awaiting many people with many tastes" (104). From this scene, Wittman behaves himself by calming the impulse to insult the religious beliefs of his hosts, and is rewarded with the wonders of community and love that he had set out to find. The Hawaiian elders at the table embrace him as a long-lost "Pākē" brother: "'We Pākē too,'" said Calvin. "Long time

ago, Pākē old man all alone, he marry Hawaiian widow with one dozen keikis, and hānai th whole family. Most everybody get one of those Pākē grandfather.’ You have aloha, give and take aloha, you be Hawaiian” (109). Wittman’s commentary shows the satisfaction of fulfilled desire to belong.

Contrasting to the aloha fellowship shared with the Hawaiians in the first meal, Wittman’s fishing journey – his attempt to participate in local food ritual – ends in failure and shows the limited capacity for food rituals to determine belonging. Black Pete, Wittman’s neighbor and a skilled fisherman, invites him on a fishing excursion, with the intention of collecting fish, but also of encouraging Wittman to “dive deeply into Hawai‘i” (150), and to steep in local ritual and work. Approaching the excursion as an outsider and a new participant, Wittman relies on Black Pete as his fishing guide: “A school of silver-gray fish streamed by. Pete followed them, and Wittman followed him. This is hunting” (151). As Wittman tries his hand at hunting, a host of contradictory concerns crash upon him: how to reconcile the relationship between humans and fish, how to provide food for one’s family, how to be comfortable with the taste of the fish, and how to belong as a local Hawaiian.

The fish as a living being weighs on Wittman most intensely. His desire to relate to fish clashes with his desire to hunt it: “A blowfish came toward him, blew up round and spiny, and squirted away. Our human relationship to other creatures: We try to get close to them, and they recede. We’re always catching up to them, and they move away. We have to shoot them to get them to stay still” (151). Here, Wittman’s observation of the human inability to come close to fish, except through forceful



means, suggests hesitation to kill – an attitude that clashes with his desire to hunt like a Hawaiian fisherman. Instead of resolving this dilemma for Wittman, Kingston preserves the tension, even as Wittman attacks the fish: “Another puffer came right at Wittman, looked at him out of round eyes and made an oh-round mouth, and puffed itself up into a spiny round ball. A target. Wittman shot it – in its side when it turned about. Black Pete worked it off the spear and put it in his bag, laughing at the puny catch” (151). Wittman’s frustrations spring from his deepening connection with the fish. While Wittman previously notes his inability to get close to a puffer fish, here the creature “came right at Wittman,” and “looks at him,” an unusual moment of inter-species connection. As his empathy for the fish grows, and as the conflict within him peaks, Wittman gives in to human tendency and shoots to make the fish stay still.

But Wittman’s troubles do not end once the fish is hunted. To top off the anxiety in this scene, Black Pete makes great light of Wittman’s skills as a fisherman. Despite his small success, he has failed as a fisherman. Whereas Black Pete harvests from the sea’s bounty to provide for all, Wittman cannot provide for himself. The scene results in frustration: failure to master fishing, and guilt for brutalizing the fish. When Wittman and Black Pete take the fish back to their families for a dinner together, Wittman must add to his consideration of food his family’s taste. While the gathering of the fish and Wittman’s experience carry a sense of discovery, the momentum is trumped when Taña and ‘Ehukai, their son, do not fully register the difficulty underlying Wittman’s fishing effort. Instead Taña and ‘Ehukai fixate on

the descriptions of how to eat the blowfish, which Black Pete's wife, Mary, offers up at the dinner table:

The blowfish had deflated; the spear popped it. Mary explained, "Black Pete one expert taking out the poison gland. Folks eat da kine, and die in torture but. It tastes so 'ono, worth it. You like try?" Taña and 'Ehukai said no blowfish please, thank you. But Wittman had killed it, he better eat it. Showing his family how round and cute the puffer blowfish had been, Wittman put the backs of his hands on his own puffed-out cheeks, opened his eyes wide, and waggled his fingers like fins. He shouldn't have killed it. It didn't taste so 'ono-licious. (154)

Despite Wittman's role in procuring blowfish for the meal, and despite his own resolve to eat it, Taña and 'Ehukai refuse the fish because they cannot reconcile the risk of ingesting poison. Even when attempting to warm Taña and 'Ehukai to the fish – to make it seem less strange and unpalatable by describing "how round and cute" it had been – he still ends up seeming like less than a skilled fisherman. The story only reinforces his guilt at slaughtering the blowfish. And the guilt, in turn, compromises its taste. What remains is a cute fish which is dead, and not "ono" at all; and there is not one person convinced that Wittman is on his way to becoming a fine fisherman of Hawai'i.

Wittman embarks on the fishing excursion in attempt to learn how to adapt his food habits in Hawai'i, and to experience belonging, but his journey does not reinforce the idea that participation in food rituals guarantees this belonging. Nor

does one's experience as a racialized subject. Ending the search on such tenuous terms places more emphasis on the search itself, rather than the outcome. Showing how some of Wittman's desires bring belonging, while still others do not, Kingston undoes the assumption that racialized subjects who bring their own knowledge and tastes to bear on another culture, may integrate with ease. At many turns in his journey, Wittman must retrace his assumptions and temporarily accept the feeling of otherness. Kingston shows that success and failure to satiate are crucial components of tourism and approaching the other. Rather than relying on predictable, desirable narratives of reconciliation to convey the Asian Pacific American subject's relation to food, she serves up tension and incommensurability.

Though he fails to integrate into Hawaiian food culture, Wittman does find himself in quite a different place from when he first departed San Francisco. Showing the process of Wittman's questioning and change, and the critical sensibility it yields is Kingston's main goal. In depicting the family's passage over the Pacific, Kingston calls out the need for broader visions of food which extend beyond familiar knowledge. Wittman's culinary process also broadens the idea of Asian Pacific American concerns, extending the quest for community to the islands. It is fitting, perhaps, that Wittman hails from California's Bay Area, the historic site of Asian Pacific American political resistance, and then departs it. By sending Wittman, the eater, into the world and imagining the negotiations involved in adapting food habits, Kingston invites a revisioning of food discourses, and, at the same time, a revisioning of Asian Pacific American identity, that focuses on processes of self reflection and

eagerness to encounter anew. Through Wittman we learn how to keep the culinary self, critical – an active question of what one eats, and how.

### **An Island of Strangers: “Hawaiian Cowboys”**

“She thinks I’m from here, from one of the other islands.”

– John Yau, “Hawaiian Cowboys”

Like Wittman, the speaker of Yau’s “Hawaiian Cowboys” fantasizes that Hawai‘i holds the key to racial and ethnic belonging yet ends up awakening to the fact that the seamless acculturation and integration he imagines are not so simple. But whereas Wittman does not become thwarted by the awkwardness of being a tourist, which as Doris Friedensohn affirms, is “contradictory and rich in embarrassments” (166), Yau’s protagonist remains ill-adjusted when confronted with the vestiges of systemic inequality still present on the islands. Despite his first-hand understanding of racism, and his appreciation for history and informed travel, he remains unable to reconcile the feeling of alienation he sought to assuage through his journey. The entrenched histories of domination on the islands – manifesting in cultural forms, like food, that are familiar but oddly recombined – shock him into an even more anxious state. Yet another travel tale featuring failure, Yau’s story emphasizes how histories of racism on the mainland and in Hawai‘i are discrepant, and also how the assumption of fellowship between Asian Pacific American in both places is a sign of mainland myopia.

The anxiety of being a racialized subject, and part of an interracial couple in Manhattan, drives Yau's protagonist to the islands, where he intends to excavate what it means to live among other mixed people, in a distinctly mixed Hawaiian culture. Immediately he finds delight in being among other mixed-race couples in Honolulu, and it appears that the islands will help him assuage his anxiety: "I was confused about my Dutch father and Chinese mother. Maybe that's why I was ready to come to Hawai'i. Janet wanted to relax, but I wanted something else, though I didn't know what. It wasn't detective novels, but being a detective. I was looking for answers..." (98). Though he lacks clarity on what he wants from the experience, he is fond of detective work (and detective novels), and as the story unfolds, fond of finding connections. Regardless, the experience of race on the mainland is, in his estimation, more vexed than on the islands. As if unable to tolerate the alienation from the mainland, he depends on Hawai'i to give him answers about why he feels this way. And almost immediately after arriving on the Big Island, the speaker is delighted to be mistaken as a local from Maui or Oahu, by a local shopowner. Ecstatic that he so easily is taken to belong, he confirms his hypothesis that racial difference need not cause anxiety in Hawai'i.

Yet his delight at the locals' comfort with racial difference becomes offset when the speaker later finds that locals also are unfazed by the threat of volcanic eruption currently threatening the island.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the trip, he is aware of natural

---

<sup>58</sup> Although Yau does not directly reference the eruption, the lava in the story is said to be traveling south of the island, destroying many homes. The details correlate with the effects of the 1990 eruption of Kilauea Volcano according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

rhythms and disasters threatening the island, and ponders how local denizens have learned to cope with chronic threats of annihilation. The Hawaiian islands, he says, will eventually consume all forms of difference: “Hawai‘i is an island with an appetite. The ocean, volcanoes, and jungles are like hungry, angry infants. Perhaps this is why everyone who has lived here for a while knows, that they are only guests” (99). His remark here, interestingly, reveals that he is unaware of indigenous Hawaiians who inhabited the islands much earlier than other migrants. Nevertheless, he remains baffled at how those he does perceive to be locals do not worry, do not make immediate efforts to preserve possessions or escape. Noting the calm with which the radio announcer speaks about the destruction of houses by lava, he says, “All through this litany of destruction the woman’s voice was calm and unbroken as the sea. She was one of those people who knew that none of us are in control” (99).

Ever conscious of the locals’ peace with racial difference, and their peace with impending sinkage, the speaker persists in finding out how to allay his racial anxiety by understanding how the island came to be as it is. Staying at a remote vacation home belonging to their friend Diane, an investment banker on the mainland, the speaker ascertains that everyone on Hawai‘i came from somewhere else:

like most people who stay on the island for a few weeks each year, [Diane] imagines that Hawai‘i was once a kind of perfect paradise, a peaceable kingdom where all creatures lived in radiant harmony. The fact is, on Hawai‘i, all creatures, whether man, animal, or insect, came from somewhere

else. Flora and fauna too. Everything floated, swam, flew, or was carried here from there, wherever there was” (92).

The speaker consciously differentiates himself from Diane and “most people” who are in Hawai‘i on a temporary break from the rat race. In contrast to uncritical tourists, he assumes the position of insider, privy to the “facts,” in remarking that if one reaches far enough back in time, one finds that no one can claim belonging completely to the island. The speaker, takes comfort in the idea that everyone and everything on the islands came from somewhere else, that migration, and therefore racial mingling, is how island has always been. Though a visitor himself, he distinguishes himself as an enlightened visitor, who perhaps belongs as much as a local.

The speaker’s fondness for detective work fuels this sense. As soon as he arrives to the islands, he busies himself “learning about who and what were here before any of us arrived” (94). Eschewing a tourist’s attitude, he spends his time absorbing histories of migration, displacement, and appropriation inscribed upon the compressed island landscape. Interested in perceiving the past through the present landscape, he hones in on classical tunes giving way to oldies rock on radio waves, to abandoned houses alongside an island road, to guidebook entries explaining the introduction of the mongoose on the island, and its destructive impact on native bird populations. His affinity for these historical linkages proves him to be different from tourists who delight in commodified island culture.

However, when the couple encounters Asian food on the island, the speaker's ability to find linkages does not reinforce comfort, but rather ushers in confusion and disenchantment. While making their way around the island, the couple stops at a roadside stand, nearby, and are served a Japanese bento containing a strange amalgamation of Japanese and American food. He first seeks to incorporate the meal into his reading of history: "I told Janet that this was the way lunch was served to the people who attended the theater in Japan, and that someone must have transplanted it here" (95). But after historicizing the bento's origins, he quickly moves to grapple with the unappetizing, unfamiliar contents of this Hawaiian bento:

The box had little compartments full of pieces of fish and vegetable tempura, meat that was a mysterious and not altogether appetizing hybrid of fried pork and sweet bologna, rice wrapped in seaweed, and pickled cucumbers. ...it seemed *both completely out of place and the perfect thing* to serve at a rundown roadside stand, near a glassy harbor full of huge oil tankers waiting to offload their cargo into the silver storage tanks, glistening like sunbathers in the bright noon heat." (95, emphasis mine)

Here, the speaker takes pleasure in "extolling the virtues of our lunch," and connecting the bento to its origin, although the displeasure of the bento's taste is an inconvenient, and slightly disorienting accompaniment. Remarking to Janet, "I didn't say it was going to be good, I just said I knew where it came from," he encourages her to enjoy consuming the bento's symbolic substance (much as Wittman does with



his not-so-ono blowfish, and much as many SPAM skeptics do with the product's questionable ingredients), in spite of the taste.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, at the same time, underlying this meal is a feeling of inexplicable confusion for even these two savvy tourists; despite being able to explain where the meal came from, the couple wonders how this bento could possibly taste so strange. The strangeness intensifies against the imposing, sleek oil tankers and storage tanks in the harbor: the materials of global capital stand in place of human bodies (although tanning tourists' bodies, too, represent capitalist consumption). The roadside bento becomes infused with this air of degraded history – what was seen to be a delicious meal by some, is now what Janet calls the strangest meal she has ever eaten. Although not an immediate disturbance to the speaker, the idea of history's unsavory afterlives comes by and by to disturb and disorient him. Though it would seem that the speaker would be comforted being in a site where one can find food that is strange, yet embraced locally, he is befuddled.

Here we might pause to reconsider the speaker's faith in his own answers. While he traces the bento back to Japan and the theater-goers who enjoyed it, he does not reference the local, "hybrid" transformation Japanese food underwent as immigrants introduced it into the Hawaiian plantation context. Bologna and mysterious meat (possibly a reference to SPAM) signal the history of militarization

---

<sup>59</sup> The story plays on the split commonly found between consuming the historical significance of food, and imbibing it. While culinary multiculturalism tends to prioritize the experience of the latter over the former, Yau's eater does the reverse.

and industrial processed food, a vestige of American expansion. Food historian Rachel Laudan sheds light on the ubiquity of SPAM in the local Hawaiian diet:

‘SPAM?’ shuddered an acquaintance from Wisconsin. ‘You mean the SPAM we ate in the War?’ Yes, that SPAM. In Hawaii there is no dodging the question of SPAM (or of other canned meats and fish for that matter). SPAM is an important protein for much of the state’s population... To take on SPAM is to pick at all the ethnic and economic seams of Hawaii. To newcomers, to nutritionists, to those with pretensions to gourmet status, SPAM is an embarrassment, serviceable during wartime rationing perhaps, but too salty, too fatty, too overprocessed to be eaten in these enlightened times. (*Food of Paradise* 66)

The meal is horrible to taste, but it also symbolizes histories of inequality, plantation labor, and militarization. The original Japanese bento adapted to accommodate these events, yet the speaker seems unaware of this history. His knowledge of Japanese food, in this instance, does not account for the bento’s localization on the islands. And this moment reveals that while he is adept at finding answers, and while he has a generalized sense of Hawaiian history, it is limited. This limitation contributes to his mounting confusion as the couple moves on from the shack.

Yau’s representation of the bento demonstrates a peculiar encounter between a member of a dominant, mainland group, and the other, represented here by those who would happily eat and enjoy the bento. The encounter, in one way, reflects liberal multicultural consumption, in which the particularity of the other becomes subsumed

by the consumer's desire for a particular form of difference. When the speaker attempts to write off the bento's strangeness by tossing it out, he shows a desire to retain only the enjoyment of knowing "where it came from." It is a desire to behave as a member of a dominant, non-Hawaiian group, demonstrating "the desire to inscribe the other in a subject position that reinforces the implicit centrality of the dominant group" (Sawhney 210). In such an encounter with the other, Sabina Sawhney elaborates that:

the "otherness" of the other that must be negotiated in any encounter between two people...is...overlooked in favor of constituting the member of the subordinate group as a site for gathering information. Thus, the subjectivity of the other is erased in order to countenance its construction as an object, as an *effect* of knowledge for that subject. (210)

The speaker does reduce the bento in this way; but notable, too, is that the bento remains uncomfortable and unresolved. Through his confusion at the horrible taste, we see that he is troubled by the thought of reducing the bento to an object, a mere representation of his own knowledge. He wonders how it came to be "completely out of place."

The height of discomfort for the speaker occurs when he and Janet stop for a diner refreshment in the middle of "a small town that looks like something you'd see in Wyoming or Texas, or maybe a movie of the west" (99). Although their first point of reference is the mainland West, the couple soon discovers that many of the eaters are, in fact, cowboys: "Asian or Hawaiian. Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Polynesian,

and Samoan cowboys. They're all sizes and shapes" (100). The speaker immediately gets to work placing these figures in history:

I try to see what has been embroidered on [the customers'] denim shirts, a bird-of-paradise flower or a hummingbird, perhaps. I imagine a black Hawaiian shirt with bright red flowers, like the one Georgia O'Keeffe painted when she was here, green cacti, saddles, and horseshoes. Nature mixed with things that might have been brought here a hundred years ago, in the days when the West was still being won by some and lost by others. I feel dizzy and exhilarated, sad and uneasy. (101)

Here the speaker conjures some historical context, but derives limited comfort from knowing where the cowboys came from. The focus on cowboys in Hawai'i – termed paniolos in the island context – serves as a reminder that the American West extended to the islands, especially in the development of ranching culture.<sup>60</sup> But even though cowboys are familiar, Hawaiian cowboys – racialized subjects who descend from histories of U.S. expansion into the frontier, who bear identification with ubiquitous Hollywood representations of the West, and who carry forth from histories of diaspora across the Asia Pacific region – seem to defy the speaker's ability to be satisfied with answers and histories, and to take pleasure in locating histories in spite of the immediate experience. His rationale for becoming "sad and uneasy," however,

---

<sup>60</sup> Fischer further elaborates: "Much of the vaqueros' equipment served to outfit the horses descended from those brought from California. An intricate cattle culture was thus imported to Hawai'i from California in three parts: Vancouver's cattle in 1793, Cleveland's horses in 1803, and Kamehameha's vaqueros in 1832. The culture and environment of Hawai'i changed with each upon arrival, leading to a new and unique cattle culture on the islands by the time Hawaiian society had adapted to manage the wild bullocks' ecological impacts and profit from the animals' presence." (365)

remains unelaborated. Several possibilities lie in the mix: is he sad because he views the Hawaiian cowboy – racialized subjects – as a symbol of a loser, in the struggle for the West? Is he sad because the cowboys, in their fancy alligator boots and embroidered shirts, embody the Hollywood stereotype of the American West – a stereotype he came to love as a child on the mainland? Or, is he sad because all of these icons jostle against each other, producing yet another degraded history – a downward-facing departure from “nature,” from an era before Captain George Vancouver introduced cows to the islands in 1793?

To examine these possible sources of anxiety, the lineage of the western cowboy on the islands briefly bears retracing. As historian John Ryan Fischer and others have written, the presence of cowboys on the islands owes to the introduction of cows and horses by Western explorers. Seeking to bring European values to the native island populations by introducing pastoral culture, eventually the royal Hawaiian government adopted the cattle and horses, though to develop techniques for controlling them and preventing them from running wild and destroying the environment, in the 1830s Kamehameha III “hired *vaqueros*, Indian and *mestizo* cowboys from California who had themselves developed a hybrid cattle culture while herding on mission and *rancho* lands, to deal with the cattle and to train Native Hawaiians.” Eventually, Fischer explains, the native Hawaiians would develop their own cattle culture: “The Hawaiian cowboys that the *vaqueros* trained came to be known as *paniolas* after their connection to the *españoles*, their Spanish-speaking *vaquero* instructors” (363). Yet paniolo culture is commonly elided in dominant

understandings of the American West – in fact, as Fischer notes, even though the paniolos frequently won competitions on the mainland, mainland cowboy culture disavowed the paniolos’ prowess in favor of celebrating white cowboys’ skills.<sup>61</sup> The distinguishing factor here is race: the brown skinned paniolo from the islands were consciously kept out of developing images of the American West.

The elision of paniolos from the history of the American West may be troubling to Yau’s speaker: seeing Hawaiian cowboys forces him to confront the tension between their presence (a comfort), and the historical elision (a source of anxiety). This scene reveals the living vestiges of Western expansion and cultural appropriation: the Hawaiian cowboys in this scene descend from a history of racist American expansion into the Western frontier. This expansion, we might add, ties to the development of the American beef industry, to which the islands were an important contributor. Furthermore, seeing Asians among the cowboys at the diner activates questions of how paniolo culture came to include immigrants from Asia. Yau places the past into conversation with the present to inspire race consciousness; the speaker’s momentary shock and ambivalence in this dining space dramatizes the enormous difficulty (and perhaps unsavoriness) of this confrontation, and of critical consumption.

Yet there is another layer which makes the diner scene more confusing: having to reconcile his own relationship with the Hollywood cowboy, an image

---

<sup>61</sup> Interpreting the language of *The Cheyenne Daily Leader’s* coverage of a rodeo competition, Fischer notes, “the ‘brown Kanakas’ were not ‘real cowboys,’” according to the paper, despite their prowess. This unwarranted distinction persists, and neither Hawai’i nor Native Hawaiians are commonly associated with the American West as it was performed in mythmaking rodeos and shows. (348)

which the other customers might embody, but which is ultimately a category from which they have been excluded. Upon seeing Asian cowboys, the speaker associates his own experience as a child, dressed up as Hopalong Cassidy and Davy Crockett, and wanting to be Wyatt Earp, Jesse James or Daniel Boone. Although he had accepted that being part-Asian forecloses these opportunities in real life, here in front of him were “men in fancy alligator boots, silver belts, and embroidered shirts,” others “in dusty dungarees, leather chaps, sweat stained shirts, and bandanas.” On one hand, recognizing other Asian figures as cowboys is familiar, and he has momentarily found a community with figures like himself. But on the other hand, once he realizes that “None of them are pretending, like when I was a child” (100), the speaker must grapple with the fact that these Asian subjects belong to a different historical trajectory. What was a cowboy to him growing up, is not the fellow diner seated at the next table over. The fellow diner, in fact, has been excluded from the very definition of that cowboy. What it means to be a Asian Pacific American mainlander encountering Hawaiian cowboys of color remains difficult for the speaker to comprehend, given the discrete, but entangled histories and racial politics. In him this illicit excitement, but also dizziness and a general sense of sadness. In effect, none of them embody the image of the official American cowboy.

As both he and Janet order iced teas, the speaker makes clear to us the extent of his disorientation: “What kind of tea do you think it will be?” he asks Janet. “I’m just wondering if it will be American or Chinese, plain teabag or sweet jasmine, cowboy or instant, red zinger or honeyed essence of green hummingbird? I’m

wondering if they give you those kinds of choices” (101). His facetious suggestion that ordinary iced tea might be presented in some strange and surprising way – tea somehow made like cowboy coffee – demonstrates that he has relinquished hope of finding a comfortably familiar food experience or exchange.

Having tumbled into a state of defeat, from which not even Janet cares to save him, the speaker considers the futility of seeking comfort from alienation. Janet does not find humor in his deliberate reference to “cowboy tea,” reminding him that the actual reference is “cowboy coffee.” Deflated, the speaker meditates that “maybe inevitably, Janet and I have become strangers” (102). Although he has come to the islands in search of connection and answers, finding answers has actually produced a heightened sense of alienation, now from even his wife. This moment represents the pinnacle of his anxiety, which lingers until the end of the story.

Yau shows the great extent to which the histories of disenfranchisement on the islands differs from those on the mainland, and moreover, how this history of the islands has remained hidden from the most curious of mainlanders. The speaker’s inability to conjure the kinds of details and “answers” that would explain the paniolo and the bento, for instance, shows how invisible these histories remain. For the speaker, this myopia – which might be a combination of mainland self-absorption, as well as the popular obfuscation of island histories – forces him to confront his own limited knowledge, as well as to accept that there is not a space that can liberate him, once and for all, from his racial anxiety.



The dis-ease of this failure to connect, and to explain his confusion at encountering the paniolos, remains even after the couple departs Hawai‘i. Alleviating the anxiety of difference – of race in particular – remains unfinished business as the speaker returns home, away from the threat of the Hawaiian islands sinking. Yet pushed to the height of anxiety after his failed journey, he cannot help but grasp for a way to belong. Envious (and skeptical too) of how Hawaiians have discovered how to cope with being different, but headed toward the same fate of sinking, the speaker ends his narrative realizing that he is also headed back to an island – Manhattan Island. He remarks, “We may be on an island that’s growing bigger each day, but it’s also sinking into the sea” (102). Growing ever more desperate to find the answers to his racial anxiety, the speaker collapses the differences between the islands and the mainland by envisioning that all will perish soon. The story ends with the (perhaps naïve) invocation to discover how to be comfortable with only ever being a guest, whether as a racialized subject, as a cultural appropriator, or as a privileged mainland traveler.

### **Into the World, Eating**

Despite the three figures’ momentary failures to connect to ethnicity, or to gain acceptance into another group, the writers make clear that they are productive failures. Although the desire for connection does not get sated, interrogating the failure reveals the limits of existing knowledges, perspectives, and tropes regarding racial inequity. This revelation, in turn, can inspire other efforts to address the failure

to connect, whether it be additional consideration of race history, or discovery of racial inequity through observation and experience everyday life.

It bears remembering, too, that although the figures in these works do not have an easy time eating, their interactions with other groups do produce meaningful social connection. Elaborating the thinking of anthropologist Davyd Greenwood, Long observes that “Renewed interest in local culture, appreciation for local traditions, and an improved sense of cultural worth can result” from a tourist’s commitment to engaging with the meaning of activities, rather than a performance of rituals emptied of significance (6). From Wittman’s fellowship with Black Pete, in spite of his puny catch, to the speaker’s empowering encounter with the paniolos in Yau’s story, they demonstrate curiosity to connect in the interest of diffusing the experience of racism.

It is the potential behind each failure, perhaps, that explains why each story concludes with the characters still in motion: P remains hovering over the Pacific Ocean, presumably off to acquire new experiences away from the overcoded identity molds encasing her; Wittman consistently runs into failures to connect, yet throws a party to see if community will return; and Yau’s speaker returns from the Hawaiian islands to Manhattan Island, feeling more alienated, but ever more aware of the shared geographical reality of sinking. These suggest that the failure to belonging through eating need not be the final conclusion. The connection that was gained, although incomplete, is worth seeking again.

## CODA

### Re-localizing with Race: Imagining Alternative Consumption

“They showed us our enormous potential  
And we learned to love it”

– Eric Chock, “Poem for George Helm: Aloha Week  
1980”

“At 3 a.m. you squeeze the grease  
from a billion pre-historic bodies  
to light your own; but every night  
you squeeze a little closer  
to yourself, your time”

– Eric Chock, “3 A.M. Waikiki”

“Photocopied gray shadows of shrimp  
a curved x-ray  
the spine of prehistoric vertebrates  
and a name  
typed neatly on a police report”

– Alan Chong Lau, “Shoplifter”

Hawai‘i for Kingston and Yau prove to be generative sites from which to reflect on deep seated confusions about the continued effects of past racist policy. Wittman and Yau’s speaker do not resolve their personal confusions, and become mired confronting other forms of racism specific to the islands. But out of their failures to find resolution emerge deeper understandings of racist U.S. policies’ various effects. For Kingston and Yau, consideration of inequity in Hawai‘i reveals the invisible effects of racist policy. This escapes even Asian Pacific Americans who

are sensitive to racism's legacies on the mainland. The encounters on the islands provoke difficult questions: although it approaches a century of statehood, what inequities persist in Hawai'i? How have militarized state forces continued to encourage food systems that are detrimental to the physical and spiritual health of Hawaiian people, and land?<sup>62</sup> On the islands, contradictions concerning equity, race, and colonialism are particularly agitated, yet hidden behind the money-driven forces of contemporary tourism, and of course, the attendant desire for (apolitical) multiculturalism.

This expanded view of racism's aftermaths creates continuity between histories on the islands and on the continent – a useful pattern for spurring accountability as food systems continue to industrialize and globalize. What attention will be paid to systemic inequity, as cuisines and ingredients become more accessible to privileged parties worldwide?

Two poets, whose participation in local food networks model race-conscious eating in the context of local community, help to gesture toward the possibilities of alternate consumption. The poems of Eric Chock and Alan Chong Lau register the global-local food circuits which ensnare them in systems of inequity; while they are troubled at the multiple forms of destruction brought on by industrialization and global capitalism as regards food, they nevertheless proceed to expose the uneven power dynamics in the everyday act of eating.<sup>63</sup> By accounting for the impoverished

---

<sup>62</sup>Scholars and artists including Rachel Laudan and Craig Santos Perez engage these questions in recent works.

<sup>63</sup>Wilson's "glocal," which signifies "some mobile, inventive, and synergistic sense of *global/local interaction*" would also apply (*Rethinking the American Pacific* 249).

conditions of working class people of color, for the devaluing of natural (that is, not exceedingly mechanized) and traditional food cycles, and for the environmental havoc wreaked by imperial-industrial food production, they dramatize the erasing current of capitalism and globalization. Their attention to the effects on community help us rethink “local” eating. Understanding the effects of global networks upon local spaces helps germinate an ethics of eating that resists the cannibalistic sweep of global capitalism, and multiculturalism, one of its prime supporters.<sup>64</sup>

The term “local” is slippery, circulating freely in conversations ranging from food movements seeking to reduce the distance between consumption and production (in effort to reduce environmental damage, and in some cases, to politically resist large-scale industrial and/or global food systems), to identity politics. In the Hawaiian context, for instance, it is an essential marker of connection to island history. And as Wilson says of the homegrown Hawaiian artistic production emerging in the 1970s and 1980s around outlets like Bamboo Ridge, local means an attitude: to be “in touch with the traditions, forms, terms, the body and ground of this much-imaged and much-contested place. *Local*, in this contested sense, means the polyvocal enactment of critical regionalism, a strategy of resistance from postmodern

---

<sup>64</sup> Wilson reminds us that “transnational cultural studies can move to articulate and affirm spaces and grounds of local poetics and communities within uneven (at times, unjust) changes of capital reforming economies, nations, localities, and regions in these postcommunist 1990s of the Pax Americana” (*Rethinking the American Pacific* 249), which inspires this reading of local food communities as sites of resistance to cultural homogenization, globalization, and racial inequity. This idea also draws inspiration from Michael Davidson’s “Cosmopoetics in the Age of NAFTA,” in which he turns away from analysis of poetics by schools in favor of considering the poetics of an economic zone. The category of “local,” as it is used on the mainland to denote “locally grown,” could perhaps attain specificity if we considered the ways in which regional food and eating reflect problems in U.S. food systems. Chock and Lau, for instance, both seem to stress attention to slow observation, and repeated action (ritual) in order to perceive inequity.

architecture” (151).<sup>65</sup> Although Chock’s poems specifically embody Wilson’s definition of “local,” as we shall see, both poets more generally portray eating and food procurement within the space of a grocery community, a city, or an island, in order to refuse the social and economic inequity of individuals brought on by national and global forces. Their being “local” means attending to individuals and social practices particular to the place, and unveiling the effects of poverty, cultural evisceration, and environmental degradation affecting the community.

The focus on revealing local inequity distinguishes these poems from another popular food genre which claims the local: what Carruth terms a “locavore memoir,” (with the term “locavore” appearing as the most recent deployment of “local” in food matters<sup>66</sup>). Emerging with force in the early 2000s, the locavore memoir is “a genre of contemporary nonfiction that seeks to integrate pastoral ideas of rural life into a polemic for local food” (18). Common tropes of these works include: leaving the urban rat-race to build a farm life in a rural environment; overcoming the trepidation of departing cosmopolitan eating, including access to a variety of food that can be prepared by someone else; choosing to eat whole foods, rather than highly processed or fast foods. But despite their desire to combat the destructive and manipulative forces of agribusiness and industrial food systems, Carruth argues that the “polemic –

---

<sup>65</sup> In his study of the American Pacific, Wilson defines “local” in three ways: “indigenous cultures of the Pacific not in pre- but in postcontact situations”; “the multicultural and polyethnic community that emerged in the U.S. Territory of Hawai’i around 1920 out of the plantation experience”; and “the literary and cultural movement emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s...that comprises an affirmation of ethnic heritage and regional ground and expresses minor languages of indigenous and subnational difference” (22).

<sup>66</sup> “Locavore” was selected as word of the year by editors of the New Oxford American Dictionary in 2007. The term refers to someone who eats locally grown food.

and practice – of revitalizing local food systems is partly made possible by the very networks of information, technology, and trade that its authors seem to discredit” (18). Touting the local in these works leads to the elision of histories of structural inequity: “the locavore desire to restore agricultural and culinary practices elides the histories of empire, territorial war, and slavery that define food in the era before American agribusiness and that, as a narrative like [Toni Morrison’s] *Tar Baby* show us, continue to do in the era since” (159-160). By contrast, the poems of Lau and Chock show how participating in local eating illuminates historical inequity. In Chock’s work, inequity persists as an effect of war and cultural imperialism in Hawai‘i; in Lau’s work, inequity persists as an effect of racial stratification and poverty. The poems depict communities of which the poet is a part and trace the development of community-inspired sensibility. As Rachel Laudan eloquently argues: “If our vision of the way to have better food is to have less processing, more natural food, more home cooking, and more local food, we will cut ourselves off from the most likely hope for better food in the future” (357). These poems exemplify this hope for better food.<sup>67</sup>

### **Eating to Extinction: *Last Days Here***

The title of Chock’s poem collection resonates interestingly with Yau’s concern for approaching the end of life in the context of Hawai‘i’s mixed culture and

---

<sup>67</sup> Other works which take up this challenge include: the anthology *We Go Eat: A Mixed Plate from Hawai‘i’s Food Culture* (2008); Arthur Sze’s poetry collection, *Quipu* (2005); Albert Saijo’s *OUTSPEAKS* (1997); Caroline Lei Lanilau’s *Ono Ono Girls Hula* (1997).

geological landscape. But while Yau's speaker struggles predominantly with how his own racial anxiety might relate to the cultural and geological shifts on the island, thus tumbling into desperate confusion, Chock's speaker is more familiar with, though no less troubled by, the concept of extinction. Inspired by communal values of respect for the land, for animals taken as food, and for an abiding reverence for social customs and rituals, Chock possesses the sense of confident belonging, and cultural acceptance, that Yau's speaker seems so hungry to acquire.

Chock's speaker is deeply disturbed by extinction and change motivated by careless consumption (i.e. of capitalist-driven development on the island, tourism), but he is more at ease with the idea of disappearance than Yau's speaker. Chock's meditation on the end of life, in fact, leads to thoughts of how the concept of extinction has taken root in his life. Extinction appears in destructive forms, Chock notes, but it also can manifest in profoundly positive forms connected to respect for life and land. This attunement forms for the speaker over a lifetime of living on the islands. Yet Yau's speaker, who descends upon the islands as an inquisitive visitor, has not developed this nuanced understanding of extinction while living on the mainland. Even though he approaches the islands as a potential inspiration for reconciling his mixed race anxiety, he experiences more confusion there, precisely because racial inequity in Hawai'i is difficult for him to see. Native and ethnic Asian communities on the islands have historically suffered co-optations by state and corporate forces in ways that are difficult for the non-local to understand – that is, unless one has cultivated awareness of local history. As Wilson points out in his



discussion of the local Bamboo Ridge Press, which Chock helped to found, extinction is well-known among Hawaiians:

it should come as no surprise that many Hawaiian writers, both indigenous and “local”-affiliated, remain spiritually *blue*: blue as a plantation worker before the war, blue as an oblivion-inducing tourist drink, blue despite abiding an ethnological paradise of flowing mai tais and see-through clothes, blue as the Delta blues of Robert Johnson despite the lure of surf, the call of body bliss, the Pacific way of ocean, earth and sky. (*Rethinking the American Pacific* 149-150)

Hawaiians’ deep familiarity with sacrifice and adaptation is the result of U.S. contact history, immigration, plantation labor, the rise of tourism (all more recent influences), and also older traditions including fishing, and living on an island, surrounded by the sea. Although the poems trace current problems with tourist greed and appropriation, for one, Chock’s reminiscences on childhood reveal a much older, ethical understanding of sacrifice. Germinating slowly through the years as he became an adult, *Last Days Here* chronicles a developing ethos of consumption which quite literally happens through the acts of meal preparation and eating. This ethos stands up to the cannibalistic consumptions of capitalism and imperialism.

The collection’s fish poems depict the speaker’s budding appreciation for the sacrifice of the fish; not only does this demonstrate a general sense of honor, but it ties back to this local ethos in which the ritual of connecting the players in an eating

cycle takes prime importance.<sup>68</sup> Consumption in these poems contrasts with Chock's meditations on other forms of reckless, cannibalistic consumption represented in the collection's mainland-resistant poems. Troubled by the appropriating hand of tourism and development which threaten to eviscerate cultural rituals and ritualistic cycles which honor sacrifice, the speaker shows that he is sometimes left no alternative but to participate in homogenized mass media culture and foodways. Chock's mounting trust in local Hawaiian sensibility models a powerful, locally-produced attitude toward consumption. By remaining attentive to the ritual of eating which ties back to the values of the islands, he forms an ethics of consumption in which sacrifice, power, and inequity, all occur – but consciously. He inhabits this local ethics gradually as his youthful recklessness sublimates into respect and conscious consumption.

Chock's collection devotes ample space to the fish, showing its symbolic heft and its centrality in everyday local life. Tracing the fish across the collection reveals the speaker's maturing process, from reckless disrespect of other bodies, to empathy and awareness of sacrifice in the food cycle. In poems describing the speaker's childhood and adolescence, the fish appears in the sea and represents a challenge to the young fisherman. His attitude in the early years is one of physical dominance. In "The Meaning of Fishing" he relates the experience of hooking a fish, beginning to

---

<sup>68</sup> The press's name, Bamboo Ridge, affirms the importance of fishing rituals on the islands, as Wilson explains: "Bamboo Ridge is a place of daily love, work, and fishing for sustenance, hardly at all like the Hanauma Bay (not so far from the Bamboo Ridge fishing hole) that served as the backdrop for that local tour guide, Elvis Presley, to croon his own moonstruck love songs to while courting a moonstruck tourist wahine and his part-Hawaiian/Tahitian royal sweetheart in *Blue Hawaii*." (*Rethinking the American Pacific* 151)

reel it in, and losing it – also known as “whitewashing.” The poem hinges on “da feeling” of disappointment resulting from losing a fish:

No matter how close you brought em in,  
even if you saw da blue scales  
shining in da shorebreak,  
even if you wen drag em up on da sand,  
still yet – if got away  
you whitewash. (30)

The physical act of landing the fish takes ultimate priority. Otherwise, the speaker is saddled with the dreaded whitewash, the loss of the vibrant “shining blue scales.” Da meaning of fishing in this poem is the catch itself – to hold the fish “in your hands,” to “catch em” even if you let it go. Meaning only appears with the physical catch, despite one’s intentions. The authoritative, goading tone reveals competitive attitude which delights in the demonstrated mastery of a fish body, as in the poem’s last line, “you think you know da meaning of fishing?”

But this emphasis on fishing as physical competition softens later, as the speaker – from adulthood – reflects on his most recent attempt to land a fish in “Still Fishing.”

The last time I even tried  
to catch anything  
that would give itself  
up for me

was so long ago

I can't remember.

But what I remember

is enough for me

to believe

I'm still a fisherman. (38)

The brash voice, and the pidgin, of "The Meaning of Fishing" transitions to contemplation and the internal aspects of the catch in this later fish poem. More concerned with the memory of fishing than the physical act of the catch, the speaker recites the elements of his physical domination in his head:

every night

I hold the hook

firmly in my hand,

the surprised body

frantic with a power

I learned with each cast

more and more

to feel. (39)

The pride of catching a fish carries over from the first poem, as the speaker, every night, fondly recollects his "feel" for fishing. But the memory of his struggle with the fish also marks a moment where the older fisherman develops empathy for the fish. Describing the fish as "frantic with power," the speaker here is more attuned to the

fish's struggle – and also its sacrifice. He is less aggressive towards the fish than in the first poem; yet he is more aggressive here than in “The Bait,” a piece in which the recognition that he is taking life (begun in this poem's first four lines) comes to full term.

Focused not on the fish body, but on the body of the grasshopper used to bait the fish, “The Bait,” pushes the idea of sacrifice to its peak. The fisherman reflects that he had never considered “that I was giving up one life/to get another” – and to add to this carelessness he confesses his unapologetic disrespect for the grasshopper's life: “I even had the indecency/to lay in wait/during mating seasons.” Regretful of the power he had assumed over the grasshopper, thinking that he had no authority to give the grasshopper away, he describes the lack of consequence, and responsibility taken for this life:

So I just sent it along  
with a plea of a prayer,  
hoping it would  
spread its wings this time  
and fly across that wet glass sky,  
no concern for what inspired  
its life, or mine,  
only instinct guiding pain  
towards the other side. (40-41)

Sacrificing the grasshopper, which is linked to sacrificing the fish, is no longer the casual act it was when he was a young man. The local fisherman, he makes clear, is accountable for bringing on death, as much as he is physically adept at taking fish from the water. Although as a young man he had some inkling that his “plea of a prayer” may have been nothing more than wishful thinking, as a more experienced fisherman, he is more ambivalent about his narrative of “instinct guiding pain.”

Chock’s theme of taming youthful aggression does not always follow this pattern of repentance. Sometimes his desire for revenge does not smooth over in such empathetic terms, as is the case in his meditation on mainland U.S. forces in Hawai‘i during WWII.<sup>69</sup> But when it comes to food, his respect for the loss of life, as part of the ritualistic cycles of eating, shows in his contentedness at the table. “Tea After Fish” and “Miyo’s Japanese Restaurant” center on the uncanny satisfaction derived from following a routine that involves the preparation and sacrifice of several parties: the food body, the food preparer, and the eater. In the first, he meditates on the many hands that created his meal: how the one who crafted the tea cup anticipated the “patterns of steam” rising from the tea; likewise, the speaker himself – the fisherman – anticipates the fish in his lover’s body:

The fingers that picked the tea

knew that I would smile confidently

---

<sup>69</sup>In “Looking Back from a Small Hill to Downtown Honolulu” (23), the speaker describes torturing ugly white eels and fantasizing that if he were a soldier defending Hawai‘i during WWII (which directly preceded Hawai‘i’s absorption into the U.S.), he would have enacted the same kind of violence on mainland forces. “sometimes I’d pretend/I was a foot soldier in World War II/claiming the beach, for our side, for Hawai‘i./We hadn’t lost it then,/and could drive the black snake home,/up the dirt weed road, to the homestead./Above the harbor full of ships/I’d wash of the knives and spears and poles/with fresh water” (24).

near the face of my lover, thinking  
of the fish in her stomach,  
and the clean taste of tea  
on her lips. (35)

The speaker here marvels at the sequence of connections – craft/labor, intentions and anticipated responses by the tea pickers, and by the fisherman – that made the moment of his lover’s eating possible. The connectedness, derived from an understanding of individual contributions to the experience, comforts him, and he smiles. It is a moment that repeats in “Miyo’s Japanese Restaurant,” the uncanny, seemingly unpredictable wave of satisfaction. A regular at Miyo’s, he sits down to a ritualistic meal. As the narrative of a typical Miyo’s meal unfolds – sashimi served by familiar staff, dipping the fish in shoyu and dabbing it on rice, washing it down with miso – the speaker explains that in each step of the meal, it is possible that he smiled. The feeling of contentment garnered from an intimate knowledge of this ritual tapers off into a vision of hopefulness for the future of the islands:

In any case, long before  
the last drops of green tea  
drain back into my cup,  
I’ll catch myself smiling  
into the void which flashed  
across my table, and while  
nothing in particular

comes to mind –  
even that pushes my smile  
a few seconds more  
into the Hawaiian night. (86-87)

Eating fish for this speaker is an expression of reverence for an entire network of individuals and bodies whose efforts converge in an enjoyable experience. Chock does not dally in sumptuous descriptions of the taste or the presentation of the fish, but instead draws out the satiated feeling brought on by participating in a cycle. For him, this is the object of consumption. The lessons learned from a youth spent fishing locally, paying attention to the force of the fish, and to the various parties in the food network, helps him toward this ethos, and produce the most peaceful moments of the collection.

But this peace is ever threatened by the extinguishing hand of development and cultural homogenization. “Chinese Fireworks Banned in Hawaii” elaborates the hopefulness of the fireworks tradition in Chock’s Chinese family. The tradition activates each member’s wishes and wonder, yet the poem documents the last time they will be able to perform the ritual. Again, the fish returns to signal celebration and respect for natural bounty:

You play the fish till its head explodes  
into a silence that echoes,  
scattering red scales to remind us of spirits  
that live with us in Hawaii. (66)



The fish's centrality to the fireworks ritual draws everyone from eating and merriment and toward the spectacle, inciting "10,000 wishes filling our bodies/and sparkling our eyes" (66). The poem suggests that the stakes of banning the fireworks is the extinction of a now century-old local paké ritual. In effort to hang onto the ritual, the speaker's wife gathers red paper from the ground – essentially the remnants of the fish, which will no longer be making an appearance – and remarks: "This is going to be history.../Let's take some home" (67). Part eulogy for the celebration, part eulogy for the fish, the poem presents yet another example of the loss so familiar to locals, but no less poignant. But perhaps the more worrisome aspect of the loss of the Chinese ritual is that the holiday celebrations become replaced by commodified "to make a buck," and that locals become enticed to trade up the tradition for other "all American" forms of entertainment. In "What? Another Chinese Holiday?", Chock's speaker refuses to participate now that the fireworks have gone, and asks: "Where's a tv?/I wanna watch/the World Series!" (68)

Finally, the poems feature the cooptation of locals' food habits toward the U.S.-led industrialized, global system. "Strawberries" shows the effect of American food industrialization on the islands, as local Hawaiians eat imported produce at the expense of the land's health:

I'm just an ordinary man  
who loves strawberries that come to me  
past striking cashiers at Safeway,  
that come to me in green plastic baskets

that will not decompose, but fill the air  
with toxic fumes as they're incinerated  
in the city dump polluting Hawaii's air and ocean,  
plastic containers, a petroleum by-product  
that the Arabs are processing  
to enable the rich to buy the homes  
of movie stars in Beverly Hills" (69)

A tone of embitterment here, noted in the costs of strawberries, as well as the exploitative actions of the movie stars – bumps up against the speaker's meek defense for having access to strawberries. He would rather not think about the costs on his land, nor about the compromise to his ethos of honoring sacrifice. As if in a gesture of homage, he even attempts to take stock of the many sacrifices required to obtain strawberries; but the list remains devastatingly long, and the sacrifice in no way resembles the cycles of life-death delineated in the fishing poems. The strawberries represent the local's ensnarement in a system of cannibalistic consumption. Yet as we see in "Miyo's Japanese Restaurant," he still seems to retain some hope that honorable sacrifice is still possible.

*Last Days Here* challenges popular perceptions of "local" as a simple matter of being accustomed to mixed food. It even challenges Yau's hypothesis that to be local is to naïvely accept the violence of cultural appropriation. The confusion that Yau's speaker experiences regarding food finds its antithesis in Chock's poems about the grace of routine, and its force in the face of change. Lau presents a different

perspective on routine; his ritual involves the sustained observation and empathetic attentiveness to local players around him.

### **Localizing with the Blues: *Blues and Greens***

Seeing multitudes in the Asian fruits and veggies that he unpacks and stacks up for customers in the International District of Seattle, Lau depicts the routine of working produce and making a buck in colorful light, but mostly in blues. Kindred with Chock, who is blue from observing the steadily changing culture and landscape of Hawai‘i, Lau is blue from the day-in-day-out repetition of underappreciated work. Toiling under profit-driven management, while attending to the often absurd demands of customers, Lau ponders how life passes among produce at the same time that he watches those procuring food – paying or not – deal with their own lot. Asian ladies competing for the best water chestnuts, workers bagging up seafood, an elderly couple caught shoplifting, and homeless individuals collecting scraps to distribute in an underground market: Lau’s blues reveal a microcosm of workers and shoppers carrying out their daily lives together with food. By observing the individuals and their interactions with produce Lau, the speaker, models a form of local consciousness concerning food as it circulates at the present moment. His familiarity with the situation of local players – mostly poor, as well as elderly, people of color inhabiting the International District – reveals that beneath celebrations of ethnic food, ethnic produce, and small mom-and-pop operations in cosmopolitan Seattle, poverty among people of color runs deep. The poems draw out the underappreciated,

unacknowledged, suffering bodies of workers and poor eaters, and show how these parties participate in an American ethnic food operation that superficially evinces devotion to equality.

Lau's engagement with food, locally – from the ground – is helpful for articulating a politics of food that remains conscious of class and race. Although the produce market serves as a communal space in which the shared task of procuring food equalizes the parties, this notion of sameness quickly dissolves as the speaker notices how all procure food differently. Their shopping habits reveal varying levels of vulnerability to systemic inequity in the food system. Through repeated poetic observation on the job, the worker cultivates empathy and awareness of the plight of others around him, even though they might aggravate or puzzle him. And as with Chock's fishing sensibility, the worker's appreciation of struggle gives way to politicized consciousness regarding food going forward. What goes underappreciated in and about the market, these poems assert, is labor, seasonality, and the problem of poverty, borne differently by different people of color.

No stranger to the crowning of customer as king, Lau consistently suffers the obnoxious, sometimes cannibalistic whims of patrons, who themselves have brought their frustrations with kids, work, and money with them to the store. Yet he balances this frustration out with recognition of the shoppers' struggles. The "greens" section opens with an introduction the shoppers who descend, looking for "raw peanuts":

They come from Beacon Hill or rooms in the District. The callused feet and cracked heels show a lifetime of walking put to good use. Knit hats or white

kerchiefs pulled over head shape faces; lively fingers of each hand toting a bag of special treasure. They jostle around the bin as the ritual of shopping gives way to greeting. The produce market is their own private kitchen and we are the uninvited guests. (23)

Later seen rummaging through the piles of peanuts, and badgering the speaker to put out fresher ones, the peanut shoppers' entitlement to the market space renders the workers invisible. And although the speaker, who is reminded by the "Ten Commandments of Good Business" (19) – playfully interspersed in between poems to simulate the constant refrain – that "A customer is not a cold statistic, he is a flesh and blood human being with feelings and emotions like our own" (20), he nevertheless depicts the shoppers with reverence. He seems happy to note that for their lives "put to good use," they will be rewarded with the peanuts, "special treasure." Yet the only one who recognizes this is he.

Many of the moments Lau illuminates are those in which the shopper remains unaware of the work and complicated processes by which their shopping experience is made possible. One of the store's regulars, for instance, takes for granted that the long beans are seasonal items. In "long beans and the maori warrior" he associates diminishing respect for seasonality with an act of graffiti:

As I exit the bus  
I look up to see that  
with a few deft touches of the pen  
someone has transformed

the face of TR the millwright

“Metro Maintenance Worker of the Year”

into a Maori warrior

At my stop

Poy the bus driver

wants to know why

he can’t find long beans

Feet on the sidewalk

I yell back that it’s winter

and they have to come all the way from Mexico (87)

The spare details in these lines make the scene appear unremarkable; yet from these details emerges concern for underappreciating the seasons, and taking for granted the ability to get produce at any time of year. Both TR and longbeans in this poem undergo some kind of transformation: a graffiti pen changes TR from honored millwright to a Maori warrior, while longbeans shift from temporarily unavailable to available via Mexico. The outcomes of both changes are not in themselves negative – in fact, one could take the image of a warrior, and the new availability of produce, both, as positive – yet Lau’s speaker preserves the tension between the integrity of the original form, and the transformation. Although made into a warrior, TR’s specificity

as a millwright is disappeared, as is his recognition as worker of the year. The Maori warrior, grafted onto TR's image, disappears TR's accomplishment.

As the poem turns casually, the speaker's thought of TR's defacement nestles next to Poy's question about longbean's availability. Poy's inability to find long beans suggests they are out of season, though, like TR, this can be modified with modern transportation. Long-distance import from Mexico improves the current situation. Poy, perhaps like many consumers, cares predominantly about availability without having to abide seasonal limitations; the speaker offers the possibility of importing long beans from Mexico as positive. This sense is furthered when we consider that as a bus driver he takes mobility and transportation as a given norm.

But the speaker seems to find loss in both scenarios. His point that the beans "have to come all the way from Mexico" emphasizes the great distance to be covered, and the labor required to correct the scarcity created by the off-season. One might connect to how convenience and taste have come to dominate consumers' knowledge of land and farming cycles, and have been enabled through massive transportation structures – structures which, furthermore, contribute to fossil fuel consumption and environmental pollution. Themes of seasonality and global routing of produce engage the same ideas of manipulation and replacement we encounter with TR.

The final aspect of the market which the speaker feels is unappreciated is poverty among people of color, and especially how poorness is traceable along racial lines. Asian subjects represent the largest racial group in the collection: the shoppers, employees and farmers are, in addition identified by ethnic group: Chinese, Japanese,

Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodian. However, when it comes to those who live on the fringe of the store, the speaker does not speak with the same degree of specificity and knowledge. The language Lau uses to portray scavengers, in fact, relies on racial markers:

These thin dark men  
eyes with the warmth of coals  
that glow under the brim  
of their grease-stained baseball caps  
ricochet directions in Spanish (71)

Observing that these “dark” men are speaking “Spanish,” Lau suggests that the scavengers might be Latino. By identifying them only by appearance, the speaker emphasizes how they are even more marginalized than he, as well as the working-class individuals around him. Although engaged in the same act of procuring food, the speaker notes that “What we know/means nothing to them”:

They search for buried treasure  
we toss without looking  
bruised cheeks of tomatoes  
clusters of greens that  
can be re-bunched into respectability

Registering the shared aim towards “respectability,” and the unshared knowledges, the speaker unapologetically uses a binary to presence the dark men who would otherwise linger in the shadows. The terms “dark” and “they”/“we,” discomfiting



because they reflect anxiety over racial difference, serve as reminders that those in the store do not know anything about the scavengers – and presumably, nor do others who enjoy the privilege of grocery shopping. Being Asian in this network, in other words, is difficult, but not as difficult as being Latino. Not only are they forced to forage for food, Lau highlights that they are shadowy presences, vulnerable to those who would only see dark skin and ostracize them further. Problems with poverty, the poem shows, are yoked to racial difference.

The perspective the speaker gathers in the space of the produce market follows him even after work lets out. At the end of the day, he sees a father and son standing tall under a realty sign – and then, another father and son:

Squatting  
on the slope  
a man feeds his only son  
red grapes  
that are seedless  
one by one  
waits for him  
to chew, then swallow  
this throat of a baby bird  
trembles in the wind

Lau casts class contrast in terms of feeding, with the grapes slipping gently and carefully into the boy's mouth. The grapes' seedlessness hints at the lonely

possibility that no more children will be born, and the trembling of the throat further suggests the boy's fragility. Having observed countless shoppers procuring food, noticing their care and carelessness, the speaker demonstrates a similar sensitivity to class difference outside of the market. In the tenderly detailed description of the grape-eating father and son, he shows his sympathy and his abiding consciousness of how the local food system works, and does not work, in a community. In contrast to the rhetoric of those championing "good" or "alternative" food, as in the locavore genre, Lau's poems show that his local food system needs attention.

Loss abounds in these poems, but not all loss needs resisting. Just as each poet thinks of aging, and the loss of time, they accept – and come to find honor in – the tiredness of hard work, the patience required of ritual, and the sacrifice of bodies for eating. These acceptances grow out of appreciation for the local communities and spaces in which they participate. Far less honorable are the molestation of traditions, the polarization of haves and have-nots, and the self-absorbed attitude encouraged among shoppers leading to the devaluing of workers.

## Next Courses

**CHICKEN** Extremely useful local food. See also EGGS.

**FINGERS, EATING WITH** It's okay to eat with your fingers in certain local situations like: eating poi, pupu parties, luaus, sushi, chicken (of course), malasadas, Filipino food (if traditional), shishkebab an' when yo' moddah not looking.

**KALUA PIG** (Hawaiian) Imu-baked pig, often served shredded and salted.

**KALUA PIG, HAOLE STYLE** Bake the pork in your General Electric stove covered with banana leaves and use Liquid Smoke.

**MACADAMIA NUTS** Small, expensive nuts often found in cans or chocolate shells.

**MCDONALD'S** A restaurant whose mainland outlets do NOT serve saimin or Portuguese sausage.

**SPAGHETTI WITH RICE** Delicious local dish invented with the first local Japanese married an Italian.

– Sasaki, Siminon, Sakata, *Pupus to da Max: the All-Purpose Illustrated Guide to the Food of Hawaii*

*Pupus to da Max*, which is much more than a food guide, reveres local foods in the spirit of a big inside joke. Blending straightforward and playfully flippant descriptions of Hawaiian foods, it preserves a view of socio-political, and economic tensions in its descriptions. For instance, it lays bare how local Hawaiian culture, while mixed, remains discrepantly so. So that while many locals, regardless of race or ethnicity, might cook kalua pig, haole style, the historical division between locals and haoles, between whites and non-whites, stays visible. The entry for McDonald's appropriately takes the local McDonald's, saimin and Portuguese sausage and all, to

be the accepted norm; clarifying that not all McDonald's are local in this way gives more authority to the local, over the mainland. *Pupus to da Max* speaks to the notion of localized eating as elaborated in the poems of Chock and Lau; the description of foods and food habits of this region, are enjoyable at the same time that they name the lingering challenges even in this rich food system – food cost, racial tension, and destructive global technologies. It serves as one more example of how to imagine local eating in terms of engaging local inequities, as we enjoy.

All of the works treated in this discussion model innovative ways of examining social difference through food, while contesting the ways in which food stories have helped to contain and discipline the differences of Asian Pacific Americans. It is a crucial archive for contemporary readers who have grown used to pan-ethnic food, but consume it in environments where ahistorical liberal multiculturalism has been normalized. (College students come to mind.) These works re-attach histories of inequity while participating in culinary culture at present, making the question of inequity relevant to the contemporary moment. In general these works call for reexamination of legal and social apparatuses that continue to produce racial inequity in food systems.

Engaging with currently active food culture makes these works salient to food movements, and scholarship, especially those aiming to critique current U.S. industrial food systems without considering histories of racism. The literary is methodologically crucial to a food movement, and scholarship, that takes seriously the problem of racial inequality embedded even in ethnic food systems. Literature

enables us to track inequities which develop over long periods, and which remain veiled behind more easily quantified forms of destruction (environmental, health, etc.). Literary food writings urge critics to ask how labor and access to healthful food might be managed along racial lines, and how eating customs and traditions belonging to certain groups might be endangered by the norms of a dominant group. Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), for example, mount muckraking critiques of food media and agribusiness, and invite discussions of the racialized bodies exploited in the service of these new global systems. Literary tropes of reproduction, genetic mixing, and betrayal allow Ozeki to put the material problems of deceptive global marketing tactics and unethical meat and plant production, into conversation with long-standing, abstract questions of U.S. racial inequity.

While Ozeki's work has been well-received and widely read, the question remains as to how racial inequity – and not simply a detached, dehistoricized critique of agribusiness and government subsidies – figures into the popular vision of anti-industrialization and other critiques of food systems. Several recent studies of racialized labor seek to contextualize current enthusiasm for organic, sustainable eating. Eric Schlosser's famous journalistic exposé, *Fast Food Nation* (2001), exposes undocumented Latino labor in the meat packing industries, and reinforces the widespread distrust for processed food by showing the industry's exploitation of undocumented workers, predominantly from Latin America. More recently, studies by Saru Jayaraman (2013, labor/activism) and Seth Holmes (2013, anthropology)

challenge alternative eating trends by emphasizing how racism inheres in American restaurants, and in agricultural practices, which cater to “alternative” eaters. Both works uncover how people of color are organized into unofficial hierarchies patterned on bases of race, citizenship status, gender. These individuals remain hidden from the view of “good eating” promoted by restaurants and upscale food purveyors like Whole Foods.<sup>70</sup>

Although few Asian Pacific American literary works engaging the anxieties over industrialized eating and food networks have received the kind of attention Ozeki’s works have garnered, there have been several exciting efforts to grapple with the ongoing problem of racial inequity at the current moment, as the participation of Asian Pacific Americans in food systems changes. The writers of these works have begun to address the changing demographics of the food workforce, and the recruitment of new immigrants – now largely from Latin America – to work up and down the food chain. The story of pan-racial workforces is not a new one, as demonstrated in this study, but at our moment in which labor and food routes remain highly mobilized and transnational (perhaps more now than before, nearly a hundred years after U.S. food technologies became highly industrialized), the need to expose patterns of systematized inequity across racial groupings stands.<sup>71</sup> Such works call

---

<sup>70</sup> Holmes’ analysis of Triqui migrant workers shows how these practices become normalized, and carry through to medical and social spheres in the form of biases and stereotypes of workers. Both authors insist on policy reform to alleviate the inequity in pay, health care, and status.

<sup>71</sup> At this moment in 2014, protests and heated confrontations occurring in Ferguson, Missouri, over the shooting of Michael Brown, a young black man, by a white police officer, have reinforced this need for asserting the histories that have produced tacit racial hierarchies. Then, too, is the controversy surrounding the influx of children from Central America, sent without documents by their families largely to seek asylum, away from drug and gang violence in their home countries.

important attention to the multiplying histories of disempowerment, either overlaid on each other, or else existing side-by-side. Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* (2005) takes this very idea on as it imagines an East Los Angeles meat packing plant to be a present-day purgatory for a conqueror inhabiting the same geography, but a different historical era. Shuttling between the time of Aztec reign in the Americas, to present day East L.A., the fallen Aztec warrior, Zenzontli, represents a working stiff in at least two different worlds, beholden to his superiors to perform acts of domination for the betterment of the empire. Frustrated with the rigid bureaucracy and genocidal tendencies of the Aztek, Zenzon likens the violence and desensitization required of meat plant workers to the racial violence and arrogance demonstrated by the Azteks – and other, perhaps all, major civilizations in history. Histories of cultural domination rub up uncomfortably, and hilariously, against the food networks of the contemporary urban metropolis.

The locavore movement, as Carruth argues, yearns for the pre-industrial family farm – yet small farm romanticism often fails to trace the lines of Asian Pacific American labor from pre-industrial moments to the present. The memories of Jeff Tagami in his *October Light* (1987) – packed with recollection of domestic violence in the family; alcoholism; and hard work in front of conveyor belts, and high in apple trees – contrast sharply with this popular nostalgia. In “The Night I Found Watsonville,” the speaker recalls how the work is so lonely, even walking out of the house, into the night with a friend, brings unspeakable comfort. Noticing the “Mexican music drifting from someone’s back yard,” as natural as the harvest moon

or the smell of apple cider, the natural landscape seems to include the bodies and sounds of these workers of color.

By contrast to the accounts of pickers who occupy the lower-rung of farm hierarchies, David Mas Masumoto's writings describe the experience of being an Asian Pacific American organic peach farm owner, who himself employs migrant farm workers. In *Letters to the Valley* (2004), Masumoto grapples with his experience of having come from a family, which just two generations prior, occupied the lower-level positions on the farm. And having risen to become owner of the farm, he questions his employment practices at the same time that he participates in the middling discourses of artisanal, small farm produce. Ultimately acknowledging the ghostliness of these workers, he does not absolve himself of concern for racial hierarchies, which are a precedent in the industry:

agriculture is still supported on the backs of low-wage earners. The ghosts who help grow our food will always be around... The ghosts of my past, present and future stay with me in the fields. Perhaps my calling is to tell a tale of workers on the land and the story of the silent hands and unseen faces behind our foods. One day, I too will become a ghost. (Masumoto 25-27)

Holmes' study of the Tanaka Farm in Washington similarly considers the interracial dynamics on farms. The hierarchy on the Japanese American-owned Tanaka farm reveals the industry pressures on farm owners – even those sensitive to racial inequity – to utilize organizational systems that render workers vulnerable to racism.



Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), to give one final example, offers a rare view of a Chinese restaurant in which a pan-ethnic cast of young workers collaborate to manufacture myths regarding the old Chinese boss lady. A mysterious force with a reputation for ruthlessness and cleaver-wielding, the Grand Matriarch (as she is known by her granddaughters) demonstrates remarkable savvy for catering to local vegan and pan-ethnic tastes. The employees – including the boss's insolent, sex-obsessed, and loving granddaughters; a Cambodian refugee; a Chinese opera singer; a white surfer dude; a black ex-pizza-delivery boy; and a redhead with a troubled home life – come together from various tiers on the social and racial hierarchy in this suburban environment, and spread outrageous stories about the boss lady throughout the town. The stories give way to rumors and curiosity about the boss lady's otherness; yet the outrageous claims that the matriarch can fly, has murdered dozens, etc., spoof stereotypes as much as reinforces them. Chin depicts the restaurant as a space of mythmaking, with the myths themselves acquiring subversive power only by virtue of local, interracial collaboration. The myth serves as a communal narrative, and its members who have participated in its creation, manipulate it, appropriate it, and revel in their own spin-offs; yet they must always answer back to the old lady.

This study argues that these works of culinary experimentalism offer, innovative ways of tackling the colorblind satiation offered in popular food works. Their formal experiments are evidence that food representations, while not perfect, can provide a much more balanced vision of consumption. In withholding the

pleasures of good taste and easy communion through their culinary experiments, they risk gaining widespread popularity. But if we understand the function of these experiments as critiques of popularized forms of food culture – which cannot escape manipulation to suit the aims of the market – perhaps it is most empowering to view them as minor food literatures, to invoke the language of Deleuze and Guattari, which speak from outside the interests of global capitalism and nationalist rhetoric.

Wilson's argument that local Hawaiian literature ought to remain minor might apply also to critical food literature, "Minor literature needs, in some ways to remain minor and other and need not aspire to national criteria and forms" (*Reimagining the American Pacific* 146). And although we might not always experience immediate enjoyment of familiarity, tasting the plight of the other can indeed be made playful. A bite well worth taking.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, E. N. *Everyone Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*. New York: New York University, 2005.
- Belasco, Warren James. *Food: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg, 2008.
- Berson, Misha. "A Drum With A Difference." *American Theatre* 19.2 (2002): 14.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992.
- Carruth, Allison. *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food*. New York: Cambridge University, 2013.
- Chan Is Missing*. Dir. Wayne Wang. New Yorker Films, 1982.
- Chan, Jeffery Paul Chan. *Eat Everything Before You Die: A Chinaman in the Counterculture*. Seattle: University of Washington, 2004.
- Chen, Yong. "'Food Town': Chinatown and the American Journey of Chinese Food." *Chinatowns in a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*. Eds. Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer. New York: Routledge, 2011. 182-197.
- Chin, Frank. "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." *The Big AIIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. Eds. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. New York: Meridian, 1991. 1-92.
- . *The Chickencoop Chinaman and the Year of the Dragon: Two Plays*. Seattle: University of Washington, 1981.
- . *Donald Duk: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1991.
- Chin, Marilyn. *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*. New York: Norton, 2009.
- Cho, Lily. *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.
- Chock, Eric. *Last Days Here*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge, 1990.
- Chu, Louis. *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961.

- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997.
- Como Agua Para Chocolate: Like Water for Chocolate*. Dir. Alfonso Arau. Touchstone Home Video, 1994.
- Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*. New York: Viking Press, 1951.
- Cruz, Denise. "'Love Is Not a Bowl of Quinces': Food, Desire, and the Queer Asian Body in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*." *Eating Asian America*. Eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur. New York: New York University, 2013. 354-370.
- Davidson, Michael. "Cosmopoetics in the Shadow of NAFTA." *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*. Eds. Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. 115-136.
- de Certeau, Michel, and Steven Rendall. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986.
- Delville, Michel. *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008.
- Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*. Dir. Wayne Wang. Orion Classics, 1984.
- Dirlik, Arif. "Global in the Local." *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Eds. Wilson, Rob, and Wimal Dissanayake. Durham: Duke University, 1996. 22-45.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger; an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Praeger, 1966.
- Eat Drink, Man Woman (Yin Shi Nan Nü)*. Dir. Ang Lee. Hallmark Home Entertainment, 1995.
- Eng, David L. "The End(S) Of Race." *PMLA: Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America* 123.5 (2008): 1479-1493.
- . *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham and London: Duke University, 2010.

- Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Espiritu, Yen L. *Filipino American Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1995.
- Fair, C. Christine. *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States: A Dinner Party Approach to International Relations*. Guilford: Globe Pequot, 2008.
- Feng, Peter. "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: 'Chan Is Missing.'" *Cinema Journal*, 35:4 (Summer, 1996): 88-118.
- Fischer, John Ryan. "Cattle in Hawai'i: Biological and Cultural Exchange." *Pacific Historical Review*. 76.3 (August 2007): 347-372.
- Flower Drum Song*. Dir. Henry Koster. 1961.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Eating Animals*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009.
- Foster, Sesshu. *Atomik Aztex*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Fung, Catherine. "A History Of Absences: The Problem Of Reference In Monique Truong's *The Book Of Salt*." *Novel: A Forum On Fiction* 45.1 (2012): 94-110.
- Friedensohn, Doris. "Chapulines, Mole, and Pozole: Mexican Cuisines and the Gringa Imagination." *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*. Ed. Sherrie Inness. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001. 165-174.
- Garcia, Matthew. "Labor, Migration, and Social Justice in the Age of the Grape Boycott." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*. 7:3 (Summer 2007): 68-74.
- Goody, Jack. *Food and Love: A Cultural History of East and West*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Guthman, Julie. "Bringing Good Food To Others: Investigating The Subjects Of Alternative Food Practice." *Cultural Geographies* 15.4 (2008): 431-447.
- Haas, Scott. "Why a Chef?: A Journey Into the Darkest Regions of the Kitchen." *Gastronomica*, 5:2 (Spring 2002): 37-42.

- Harvey, David. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2006.
- Heldke, Lisa. "Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism" *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*. Ed. Sherrie Inness. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001. 175-198.
- Ho, Jennifer Ann. *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Holmes, Seth M. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2013.
- Hong, Terry. "Going Back to the Great White Way: Eulogy for the New Flower Drum Song." *AsianWeek*. 14 March 2003.
- Hsu, Madeline Y. "From Chop Suey to Mandarin Cuisine: Fine Dining and the Refashioning of Chinese Ethnicity during the Cold War Era." *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*. Eds. Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu. Philadelphia: Temple University, 2008. 173-193.
- Hwang, David Henry, Richard Rodgers, and C. Y. 1917- Lee. *Flower Drum Song*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003.
- . Interview with Jeffrey Brown. *PBS News Hour*. 2002.
- Jayaraman, Saru. *Behind the Kitchen Door*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013.
- Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Fifth Book of Peace*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*. Berkeley: University of California, 2003.
- Ku, Robert Ji-Song, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur, eds. *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*. New York: New York University, 2013.
- Lai, H. Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940*. Seattle and London: University of Washington, 1991.

- . "Unfinished Business: The Confession Program." *The Repeal and its Legacy*. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America and Asian American Studies, San Francisco State University, 1994. 47-57.
- Lau, Alan Chong. *Blues and Greens: A Produce Worker's Journal*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i in Association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Los Angeles, 2000.
- Laudan, Rachel. *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History*. Berkeley: University of California, 2013.
- . *The Food of Paradise: Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1996.
- "Lava covers Kalapana, April 1990- January 1991." *United States Geological Survey*. United States Department of the Interior.
- Lei-lanilau, Carolyn. *Ono Ono Girl's Hula*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1997.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Ling, Jinqi. "Reading For Historical Specificities: Gender Negotiations In Louis Chu's Eat A Bowl Of Tea." *MELUS* 20.1 (1995): 35.
- Long, Lucy M., ed. *Culinary Tourism*. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2004.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University, 1996.
- Lu, Pamela. *Pamela: A Novel*. Berkeley: Atleos, 1998.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 2010.
- Ma, Sheng-mei. "Ang Lee's Domestic Tragicomedy: Immigrant Nostalgia, Exotic/Ethnic Tour, Global Market." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 30.1 (1996): 191-201.
- . "'Chinese And Dogs' In Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*: Ethnicizing the Primitive à La New Age." *MELUS* 26.1 (2001): 29.
- Mabalon, Dawn Bohulano. "As American as Jackrabbit Adobo: Cooking, Eating and

- Becoming Filipina/o American Before World War II." *Eating Asian America*. Eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur. New York: New York University, 2013.
- Manalansan IV, Martin F. "Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Culinary Diaspora." *Eating Asian America*. Eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur. New York: New York University, 2013. 288-302.
- Masumoto, David Mas. *Letters to the Valley: A Harvest of Memories*. Berkeley: Heyday, 2004.
- McConachie, Bruce A. *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing and Contesting Containment, 1947-1962*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2003.
- Mintz, Sidney. *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, And The Past*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.
- Naccarato, Peter, and Kathleen LeBesco. *Culinary Capital*. London: Berg, 2012.
- Ng, Fae Myenne. "My Confusion Program, An Inheritance Of Indecision." *Ploughshares* 35.2 (2009): 116-120.
- . *Bone*. New York: Hyperion, 1993.
- . *Steer Toward Rock*. New York: Hyperion, 2008.
- Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2004.
- Omi, Michael. "The Changing Meaning of Race." *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*. Eds. Neil Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell. Washington, D.C.: National Academy, 2001.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham and London: Duke University, 1999.
- Ozeki, Ruth L. *All Over Creation*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- . *My Year of Meats*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- Padoongpatt, Mark. "Cold War 'Oriental' Food." *Eating Asian America*. Eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur. New York: New York University, 2013. 186-207.



- Palumbo-Liu, David. *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995.
- Partridge, Jeffrey F. L. "Adoption, Interracial Marriage, And Mixed-Race Babies: The New America In Recent Asian American Fiction." *MELUS* 30.2 (2005): 242-251.
- Perez, Craig Santos. *From Unincorporated Territory*. Richmond: Omnidawn, 2010.
- "Pièce de résistance." *The Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Pound, Ezra. *Make It New*. New Haven: Yale University, 1935.
- Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*. New York: Norton, 1958.
- Rodgers, Richard, C Y. Lee, Oscar Hammerstein, and Joseph A. Fields. *Flower Drum Song: Vocal Selection*. New York: Williamson Music, 1959.
- Saijo, Albert. *Outspeaks: A Rhapsody*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge, 1997.
- Sasaki, Pat, Douglas Simonson, and Ken Sakata. *Pupus to Da Max*. Honolulu: Bess, 1986.
- Sawhney, Sabina. "The Joke and the Hoax: (Not) Speaking as the Other." *Who Can Speak?: Authority and Critical Identity*. Eds. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995. 208-220.
- Severson, Kim. "Deen's Cook Tells of Slights, Steeped in History. (Cover story)." *New York Times* 25 July 2013: A1+.
- South Pacific*. Dir. Joshua Logan, 1958.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Tender Buttons; Objects, Food, Rooms*. New York: Haskell House, 1970.
- Sze, Arthur. *Quipu*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2005.
- Tagami, Jeff. *October Light: Poems*. San Francisco: Kearny Street Workshop, 1990.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Putnam's, 1989.
- The King and I*. Dir. Walter Lang. Twentieth Century Fox, 1956.

- The Joy Luck Club*. Dir. Wayne Wang. Buena Vista Pictures, 1993.
- Toklas, Alice B. *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*. New York: Perennial, 2010.
- Tompkins, Kyla Wazana. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: New York University, 2012.
- Truong, Monique. *The Book of Salt*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Welch, Lew. "Supermarket Song." *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems of Lew Welch*. Eds. Lew Welch and Donald Allen. San Francisco: City Lights/Grey Fox, 2012.
- Wilk, Richard. "Loving People, Hating What They Eat." *Reimagining Marginalized Foods: Global Processes, Local Places*. Ed. Elizabeth Finnis. Tucson: University of Arizona, 2012. 15-33.
- Wilson, Rob. *Reimagining the American Pacific*. Durham and London: Duke University, 2000.
- . "Tracking Un/American Poetics in Asia/Pacific Experimental Writing: Pamela Lu and Catalina Cariaga." *boundary 2* 28.2 (2001): 9-12.
- and Arif Dirlik, eds. *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*. Durham and London: Duke University, 1995.
- and Wimal Dissanayake, eds. *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham and London: Duke University, 1996.
- Wong, Jade Snow. *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. New York: Harper, 1950.
- Wong, Sau-Ling. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1993.
- . "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Ed. David Palumbo-Liu. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995. 174-208.
- Wu, Jingrong. *Han Ying Ci Dian: The Pinyin Chinese-English Dictionary*. Hong Kong: Commercial, 1979.
- Xu, Wenying. *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2008.

- Yamashita, Karen Tei. *I Hotel*. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2010.
- Yau, John. *Hawaiian Cowboys*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1995.
- Yim, Susan, ed. *We Go Eat: A Mixed Plate from Hawai'i's Food Culture*. Honolulu: Hawai'i Council for the Humanities, 2008.
- Yu, Timothy. *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*. Stanford: Stanford University, 2009.
- Yung, Judy, Gordon H. Chang, and H. Mark. Lai. *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California, 2006.