An Alimentary Introduction

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Understanding and apprehending Asian American food experiences begin and end with the body. The category *Asian American* is a historical U.S. federal census designation that rests in part on the long history of what might be described as the Foucauldian control and discipline around the movement of Asian bodies to America, in part on their toil in various agricultural fields and plantations, fruit orchards, fisheries, and salmon canneries in Hawai‘i, California, the Pacific Northwest, and the South. That these same bodies sweated and slaved over hot stoves and small kitchens to produce many of America’s ubiquitous ethnic take-out food establishments—Chinese, Thai, Indian, Middle Eastern, Japanese, and so forth—is neither coincidental nor incidental.

Many people in the United States, including the students in our Asian American studies and food studies classes, often wonder whether Asians became a prominent part of the American food landscape because of their ancestral homelands’ *intrinsically* delicious foods. Or perhaps Asians are exceptionally devoted not only to eating good food but also to the entrepreneurial aspect of food, that is, to the business of producing and distributing food. Or perhaps Asians are “naturally” great cooks, just as they are popularly perceived as “innately” good at math. Simply put, is the love of food an indelible—and inescapable—part of the Asian DNA?

This book is a reminder that social, political, economic, and historical forces, as well as power inequalities, including discriminatory immigration and land laws, have circumscribed Asians materially and symbolically in the alimentary realm, forcing them into indentured agricultural work and lifetimes spent in restaurants and other food service and processing industries. While race is often popularly understood as a function of skin color and other physical attributes, critical race scholars like Michael Omi and Howard Winant, have demonstrated that racial meanings and the processes of racialization permeate all facets of social discourse. We suggest that this is especially true for most matters related to food. The tendency to equate racial features with gastronomic expressions is so persistent that a person’s race is commonsensically
equated with what he or she ingests. The short—if not apocryphal—version of the nineteenth-century French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s much celebrated and quoted classic dictum, “you are what you eat,” has often been interpreted as meaning that an individual is, first and foremost, marked and signified by his or her food habits.

To define a person or a group of people principally by the food they eat is, however, to uncritically and narrowly essentialize them through the corporeal terms of gustation and digestion. Also, those marked in such a way come to embody the foods and the corresponding values and meanings attached to them. Consider the racialized motives in perpetuating the image of African Americans eating fried chicken or watermelon, as Psyche Williams-Forson points out in *Building Chickens out of Chicken Legs: Black Woman, Food, and Power* and Kyla Wazana Tompkins illustrates in *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century.* Consider also the irksome question Asian Americans often confront: “Do you eat dogs?” When asked of those of Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese, or Cambodian ancestry, this question is rarely posed in good faith; rather, the motive behind such a question is not to know but to accuse. On the one hand, the controversy over the practice of eating dogs—especially in places like the United States where the distinction between what is pet and what is food is understood as affectively stable—is about the taxonomy of different types of humans. On the other hand, this controversy is about determining who is a “real” American and who is not, what sort of cultural practice is “mainstream” and what is exotic, and what sort of food is disgusting and what is palatable.

The problem of equating personhood with food was part of the final episode of the popular HBO series *Sex and the City,* which aired for six seasons between 1998 and 2004. Charlotte—one of the four main female characters in search of white, heterosexual, bourgeois, urban bliss—has been despondent because of her struggles with infertility. One evening for dinner at home, she lays out several unelegant boxes of take-out Chinese food on an otherwise elegant dining-room table. She calls her husband to dinner and immediately apologizes for ordering Chinese instead of cooking the meal herself. Her husband, however, is unexpectedly cheerful as he produces an envelope and announces that he has “something from China, too.” He takes out a picture of a baby—the Chinese baby that the couple has been waiting to adopt. Overcome with tearful joy, Charlotte cries out, “That’s our baby!”

This scene from a popular television show illustrates the slippage between personhood and food. A racialized discourse that renders “Chinese” and “China” as provenance and a stand-in for not only a hasty meal but also an
adopted baby serves as a reminder of the insidious ways in which race has become embedded in our everyday orchestration of bodies, meanings, and food. Not merely a descriptive category for people and nation, China—or things “Chinese”—is also regarded as a commodity to be bought, possessed, and ingested. The prerogative of multicultural cosmopolitanism is such that we can now “order” Chinese food from a Chinese take-out and have it delivered to our home; we can also “order” a Chinese baby from a Chinese adoption agency halfway around the world and have her delivered to our home as well.

Senses, emotions, and affects constitute the corporeal frame through which the vexed relationship between Asian Americans and food is mediated. In the United States, the racialization of Asian Americans is often expressed in terms of bodily sensibilities and sentiments. The “trope” of the smelly and unwashed immigrant permeates discourses about citizenship and immigrant assimilation. It is telling that when Southeast Asian refugees were relocated to the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the primers given to them to help them adjust to American life included tips on hygiene. Among the many lessons was reducing the odor of their food, especially when frying fish and using exotic ingredients that might offend their American neighbor’s delicate sense of smell.

**Food Studies and Asian Americans**

The study of food, foodways, cuisine, and gastronomy has emerged as an important site of inquiry in fields ranging from literature to anthropology, from sociology to history, and from film studies to gender studies. Journals such as *Food and Foodways* and *Gastronomica* have helped disseminate and promote both discipline-centered and multidisciplinary scholarship on this subject. At the same time, Asian American studies has become an important presence in the academy, with intellectual projects that offer new ways of understanding the social, cultural, political, and economic realities of what it means to be an American and a citizen of the world. This anthology is a collection of new scholarship in Asian American studies that examines the importance of centering the study of culinary practices and theorizing the racialized underpinnings of Asian Americanness. The twenty scholars represented here have inaugurated a new facet of food studies: the refusal to yield to a superficial multiculturalism that naively celebrates difference and reconciliation simply or primarily through the pleasures of food and eating.

Asians in the United States have long been associated—often reluctantly or against their will, as well as voluntarily or with pleasure—with images of and practices regarding food. Starting in the days of the Gold Rush, Chinese
Americans opened restaurants that catered to both Chinese and non-Chinese clientele. Asian Americans have been important workers in American food and agricultural industries: Japanese Americans and Filipino Americans, for example, played pivotal roles in the West Coast’s produce and cannery industry before World War II. Chinese, Thai, Indian, and Japanese restaurants can be found in both small towns and big cities across the country. Words like “chop suey,” “sushi,” “curry,” and “kimchi” have become part of the American popular imagination to the extent that contentious notions of ethnic authenticity and authority are marked by culinary and alimentary practices, images, and ideas. Dishes like General Tso’s chicken, California roll, SPAM musubi, tandoori chicken, and Korean tacos have come to signify the confused and ambivalent relationships between mainstream American consumptive desires and Asian American assimilative dreams.

Although the linkage of Asian Americans and food has been a dominant motif in both American materiality and imaginary, the academy has been slow to respond. In addition, despite the abundance of Asian-themed cookbooks, the scholarly treatment of Asian—let alone Asian American—foods and food practices is relatively rare, at least compared with studies of European food. Moreover, the studies that do exist usually focus on a specific Asian nation or ethnic group rather than the broader categories of regional Asia, pan-Asia, or Asian diaspora. Examples are Lizzie Collingham’s *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*; E. N. Anderson’s *The Food of China*; Katarzyna Cwiertka’s *Modern Japanese Cuisine*; Emiko-Oknuki-Tierney’s *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*; Theodore Bestor’s *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*; Judith Farquhar’s *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*; and Mark Swislocki’s *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai*. (The majority of these, furthermore, concern East Asian—principally Chinese or Japanese—gastronomy.) Most of the examples of diasporic or transnational food scholarship are edited volumes, such as David Y. H. Wu and Tan Chee-beng’s *Changing Foodways in Asia*; David Y. H. Wu and Sidney C. H. Cheung’s *The Globalization of Chinese Food*; Katarzyna Cwiertka and Boudewijn Walraven’s *Asian Food: The Global and the Local*; James Watson's *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*; Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper’s *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*; and Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas’s *Curried Cultures: Globalization, Food, and South Asia*.

Among the few scholarly treatments of Asian American food and food practices, the more notable include Krishnendu Ray’s *The Migrant’s Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*; Andrew Coe’s *Chop


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Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States; Jennifer Ho's Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels; Wenying Xu’s Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature; and Anita Mannur’s Culinary Fictions: Food in South Diasporic Culture. (While Jennifer Lee’s Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food is a valuable contribution to the study of Asian American food, its merits are more journalistic than scholarly.)

To date, this volume is the first book-length collection of scholarly essays to consider how Asian American immigrant histories are inscribed in the production and dissemination of ideas about Asian American foodways. Eating Asian America describes the cross-articulation of ethnic, racial, class, and gender concerns with the transnational and global circulation of peoples, technologies, and ideas through food, cooking, and eating. We acknowledge the critical work by Sidney Mintz on sugar, Gary Okihiro on pineapple, and Andrew Dalby on spices, noting the immense power food production, distribution, and consumption wields.

Food is intimately connected to the histories, cultures, and communities of Asian Americans. While it is true that Chinese food is the ultimate “ethnic” American fast food, the juxtaposition of ethnic “otherness” with mainstream America’s “normalcy” in the figuration of Asian American gastronomy is a telling example of how difficult it is to overcome the marginalized image of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. One notable gap in the literature on food systems is the relationship of food to labor, especially as it relates to Asian Americans. While social and labor historians have long documented the movement of migrant labor from Asia to work in the agricultural fields in the United States as the beginning of Asian American immigration history, food studies scholars have often overlooked this crucial topic. Instead, Asian American labor is related to food service more than to food production, dissemination, and consumption in America. The banality attributed to such persons as “the cook,” “the dishwasher,” “the busboy,” and the “delivery boy” hides the racializing tendencies of such tropes and images. We argue that discussions about Asian American foodways and cuisine are undergirded by questions of power, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

These questions in turn cut across the many approaches to theorizing food in a transnational and diasporic framework. The methods of inquiry into food have traditionally diverged along disciplinary lines. Scholarship in the humanities and social sciences concentrates on the relationship of food, gender, and sexuality. Literary and film studies often analyze particular scenes, with little attention to the larger political or social factors shaping the food’s preparation,
consumption, or production. In contrast, works from the social sciences, particularly anthropology, center on the ritualized significance of food and what food can tell us about the power relations and organization of particular societies, though without explaining how food entered the cultural or social imagination through film or literature. This book brings together food scholars in different fields in conversations about similar questions that arise in different types of texts; it celebrates the inter- and multidisciplinary nature of food studies while at the same time examining its limits and possibilities.

We believe our anthology is the first to bridge the fields of food studies, cultural studies, area studies (Asian studies in particular), gender and sexuality studies, and Asian American studies (as part of the larger project of American ethnic studies, which includes African American studies, Latina/o studies, and Native American studies). We consider and critique the ways in which the immigrant trope pervades and persists in the American imagination and representation of Asian Americans. The twenty chapters of this volume interrogate in various ways 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. Accordingly, this anthology asserts that Asian American foodways are located not in the intersection of culinary traditions alone but in the conjunctures of racial, gendered, sexualized, and classed hierarchies.

The Organization of This Book

Our journey through the culinary landscape of Asian America begins with stories of the labor and efforts of Asian Americans individuals and entrepreneurs who have found sustenance in the food-service sector. Part I begins with Heather Lee’s story of Chin Shuck Wing, a wage laborer in New York City’s service industry, who eventually became a lifelong restaurant worker during the 1930s. Christine Yano (with Wanda Adams) brings to life the voices of Asian Pacific American “cafeteria ladies” from the Ewa-Waipahu school district in Hawai‘i. Through interviews with this now retired group of women, Yano and Adams argue that the “school lunch”—a topic that has come under great scrutiny in large part because of First Lady Michelle Obama’s interest in school lunch programs—was the basis of a locally defined form of “culinary citizenship” predicated on an ideology of America rooted in a Pacific-Asian historical matrix.

In their chapters, Erin Curtis and Oliver Wang analyze the historical and structural foundations of Cambodian-owned donut shops and Korean-owned
Kogi taco trucks in Los Angeles. Samuel Yamashita maps the emergence of Hawai‘i’s regional cuisine in an Asian American framework, establishing a context to understand the contribution of Hawai‘i-based chefs. Collectively, the five chapters of part I set the stage for the story of food in Asian America: about labor and about the pioneering efforts of men and women, refugees, and immigrants.

A picture of Asian American food pioneers would not be complete without an examination of the longer history of food in the context of U.S.-Asian relations, both domestically and abroad. Specifically, when we think about the historical circumstances in which Asian American foods were consumed and produced, we must consider the effects of wars and imperialism on the racialized and often racist contexts of Asian American bodies. In part II, Heidi Kim argues that during World War II, this context was most acutely experienced by Japanese Americans in internment camps. Her discussion of the camps’ mess halls illustrates how the site of communal dining functioned as ideological battlegrounds on which notions of Americanness were negotiated.

In their chapters, Dawn Mabalon and René Alexander Orquiza Jr. examine the ways in which American colonialism transformed the Filipino diet. Mabalon addresses questions about the kinds of food that sustained migrants who settled in the United States before World War I, particularly the diets of Filipina/o immigrants on the West Coast and in Alaska during the first decades of the twentieth century. Orquiza, in contrast, explores the attempt by American reformers to transform the culinary knowledge and practices in the Philippines during the forty-eight years of U.S. imperialism. Robert Ji-Song Ku and Mark Padoongpatt offer a different Asian American critique. For Ku, the ubiquitous Kikkoman soy sauce and its history in the United States tell a fascinating story about when and where Asian Americans entered the mainstream. Mark Padoongpatt’s analysis of “Oriental cookery” during the United States’ Cold War intervention in Asia and the Pacific similarly argues that interest in Asia came before the arrival of large numbers of Asians and against the backdrop of hostility toward Asian bodies. Through and against the disciplinary mechanisms of anti-Asian sentiments in the United States and Asia, the five chapters in part II discuss where and when food became an index to think about Asian Americans entering the U.S. imagination.

If meanings of America are never stable, then meanings of Asian America are even more precarious. Attending to the varied culinary formations in “Asian America,” the chapters in part III put the category of Asian America itself into crisis. How do foods become marked as “Filipino,” “Korean,” or “Thai”? What makes “foodies” into experts on what foods are “authentic” and
what “fusion” is? Valerie Matsumoto examines how the multifaceted culinary work of nisei women beginning in World War II affirmed ties of ethnic culture and community while demonstrating resilience in the kitchen. Nina F. Ichikawa asks why “American” landmarks like California cuisine, the health food movement, and New York green groceries are not seen as Asian American milestones. Is it due to accidental oversight, intentional exclusion, or self-exemption? Might there be a confused logic that prevents certain kinds of contributions to “Americanness” from being defined as “Asian American”?

If indeed some cuisines are deemed to be discernibly “Asian,” what is it about Filipino food in Queens, New York City (as Martin Manalansan ponders) or Uzbek foods in neighboring Brooklyn (as Zohra Saed muses on) that make us think more expansively about who and what constitutes authenticity within Asian American foodways? More specifically, to what extent does the notion of authenticity become both a refusal to engage difference on its own terms and a form of nostalgia? Taking us back once again to the scene of food trucks, this time in Austin, Texas, Lok Siu asks what Asian Latino fusion and the food-truck phenomenon of the twenty-first century can reveal about immigration, mobility, and the intersecting histories of Latinos and Asian Americans.

Finally, part IV shifts from the ethnographic and historical to the literary and the artistic. The explosion in recent years of novels, cookbooks, and cultural representations of Asian American foodways has produced much critical material. The chapters here look at the possibility of using food to read the multifaceted dimensions of Asian American subjectivity and personhood while also imagining more expansive definitions of Asian America.

Beginning with the organic farmer, Jennifer Ho examines how Don Lee’s novel Wrack and Ruin brings together the ecocritical, gastronomic, and artistic imagination. Margo Machida’s chapter on the visual gastronomies of food establishes how concerns about food politics, access to natural resources, and issues of sustainability have been fashioned into subjects for contemporary Hawaiian visual artists of Asian and Pacific American descent. Denise Cruz juxtaposes a reading of Monique Truong’s Book of Salt with the reality television show Top Chef to consider the multiple meanings of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American chef.

With South Asian ingredients at the center of her culinary map, fabled Indian chef Madhur Jaffrey reimagines the global power and reach of South Asian cooking in Delores Phillips’s chapter. Then, in the last chapter, Anita Mannur juxtaposes two South Asian diasporic texts, Nina’s Heavenly Delights and Bodies in Motion, to examine how a narrative of queerness might realign
the ways in which food and cooking are constructed as an implicitly heteronormative formation.

The twenty chapters of this anthology cover new ground in Asian American food studies. By focusing on the many struggles across various spaces and temporalities, they bring to the fore the potent forces of class, racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities that pervade and persist in production of Asian American culinary and alimentary practices, ideas, and images.

Notes