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Introduction to the Special Issue: Teaching Food and Foodways in Asian American Literature and Popular Culture

In the last several decades, an increasing number of Asian American scholars have acknowledged the significance of food narratives and food culture in Asian American studies. While numerous anthropologists and literary cultural studies scholars, such as Mary Douglas, Mary Weismantel, Barbara and James Shortridge, Carole Counihan, Harvey Levenstein, Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace, to name a few, have offered various studies of foodways and their relationship to identity and social formation, the signification of food and eating in Asian American studies has yet to become fully developed. [1] Several Asian American scholars such as Merry White, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Frank Chin and Sheng-mei Ma have published articles about food and Asian American cultural and literary production.[2] Recently, book-length works by Wenying Xu, Jennifer Ann Ho, and Anita Mannur about food and Asian Pacific American studies have contributed to the growing scholarship on food criticism and Asian American studies. Asian American communities have begun to recognize the interests and the need for more critical examinations about best practices for analyzing and teaching food writing, cooking shows, and other types of cultural consumptions.

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[1] In conceptualizing this volume, I am indebted to the following scholars in their work in food and its culturally related activities: Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Mary J. Weismantel's *Food Gender, and Poverty in Ecuadorian Andes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvanian Press, 1988); Barbara and James Shortridge's *The Taste of American Place: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Carole Counihan's *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge. 1999); Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace's edited volume, *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); and Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Sidney W Mintz., *Tasting Food, Tasting Feedom: Exursions into Eating, Culture and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1996).

[2] White, Wong, Chin, and Ma have contributed chapters to the concept of food tropes and consumptive practices in the context of Asian American literature and cultural studies: Merry White's "Ladies Who Lunch: Young Women and Domestic Fallacy in Japan" in *Asian Food: The Global and the Local*, eds., Katarzyna Cwiertka and Boudewijin Walraven (London: Curzon Press, 2001); Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Frank Chin's "Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy" in *Bulletproof Buddhists and Other Essays*, ed, Frank Chin (Honolulu: University of Hawai'I Press, 1998): 65-199; Sheng-mei Ma's *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Jennifer Ann 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, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

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This volume joins in the growing dialogues and inquires about the representation of eating, cooking, and food in Asian American literary productions. Relationships between ethnic subjects and food are never simply about consumption. The acts and objects associated with food reveal a complex, at times, contradictory cultural economy that links identity politics to the production of labor and the exchange of commodities for social values that the body performs. Implicit in the roles of the cook and the eater are the embodiment of cultural enterprise: they are not only symbolic bodies that assign meaning and value to their work, but also bear information for developing personal and communal identities.

The essays in this volume connect complex issues about consumption, commodification, body images, Orientalism, colonialism, bio-ethics, multi-raciality, and capitalism. They challenge binary paradigms about fulfillment and satisfaction, consumer and producer, and subject and object positionings. The authors in this volume are interested in the ways in which the cultural, emotional, and physical aspects of hunger and appetite become discrete but pervasive markers of ethnic, gender, and sexual identifications, and explore how different Asian American writings negotiate private and public conflicts through consumptive practices. The essays focus on specific places where cultural and political identification take place: the kitchen, the dinner table, the mouth, and the body. The final goal is to demonstrate various critical and pedagogical approaches to food narratives that can be useful tools to teach, interrogate, and be engaged with Asian American cultural studies through foodways, in that they refuse to allow us to give into an all too comfortable consumption of food narratives. The volume hopes to continue the dialogues about eating, literary practices, and popular culture and show that food narratives are fruitful venues for theoretical interrogation of ethnic and gender paradigms—they can be useful pedagogical tools in the classroom to explore concepts of Asian American ethnic subjectivity.

The volume begins with "Eating, Reading, and Writing: An Interview with Andrew Lam." Lam recently published the non-fiction collection, *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres,* which depicts the cross-cultural intersections between food, globalization and cultural consumption. His conversation with Noelle Brada-Williams explores a range of issues from the prevalence of cultural negotiations to the role of ethnic literature in the classroom.

Wenying Xu's psychoanalytical reading of the body in Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Bhuddha's Dinner* which underscores the ontological manifestation of identity and narrativity in a food memoir. Xu's piece underscores the signification of consumption as acts of self-intervention and self-invention. Using the language of desire and identity, Xu offers a nuanced reading of a culinary text without forcing identity politics into oppositional paradigms. Her work reveals the complexity of a productive ambivalence in food narrative that defines ethnic identity as expansive and multiple.

In a similar fashion, Melissa Poulsen's work engages in a dialogue about the ontological drama of mixed race identity formation and ecocriticism. Her essay examines the construction of multiraciality and multiculturalism as bio-diversity in Ruth Ozeki's *Pastoral Heartlands*. Poulsen shows the narrative slippages where racial, cultural, and sexual hybridity become visible and definable in the construction of a food-related eco-narrative, suggesting that food writing can represent a venue in which racial diversity is complicated in the discourses of ecology and bioethics.

Like Xu and Poulsen, Stephanie Chan grapples with ethnic subject formation and political ramification of the consumption and hunger in Maxing Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The food anxieties expressed by Wittman, the protagonist in culinary crisis, lend Kingston's text an experimental quality that resists easy assimilationalist perception between food and ethnic subject. In fact, Chan argues that Wittman experiences a kind of culinary disjunction that produces a space of ambivalence that defies easy essentialist association. Chan's essay links Asia Pacific American political resistance to food discourse in nuanced ways in which one must move beyond the local and the familiar to acquire a multiculturalist vision, or remain forever hungry.

Likewise, Roxanne Rashedi explores this relationship of excess and class identity in Elaine Mar's *Paper Daughter*. A close examination of Mar's disordered eating shows readers how her behavior stems from a class inferiority complex. Mar's protagonist—female, immigrant, and working-class—struggles against an intersecting network of socio-political ideologies as a bi-cultural subject. Her eating disorder stems from wanting to attain self-autonomy as Chinese-American and bourgeois. Rashedi's study of the narrative construction of eating disorder—or disorderly eating—further highlights the complex paradigms between gender, race, class, and the Asian diasporic experience.

The final essay in the volume raises complex issues about Asian American subject position and food shows. Among the various practices of cultural citizenship—a way to find association and identification with a cultural, ethnic, and/or racial community, the writing about the preparation and eating of ethnic food represents a fundamental and complex paradigm. In her study of food shows—which she calls "food adventures"—Jacqui Kong argues that despite the shows' apparent focus on food, it is in fact the issue of 'difference' which underscores the messages and the narratives of the programs. Her essay theorizes "difference" as a precious cultural commodity that can produce cultural narratives. She explores how "consuming" and experiencing the Other's cuisine and culture confirms as well as disrupts the binary oppositions of Self and Other. Kong offers a deconstructive approach to teaching TV food narratives as a way of re-imagining bi-cultural positionality.

As Anita Mannur articulates well in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, "Thinking about race, gender, and ethnicity begins with food, but thinking about food also ends with race, gender, and ethnicity" (221). There is a dynamic relationship between the political and the cultural aspects of food narratives that propel us to rethink strategies about reading and teaching them in the classrooms. The essays in this volume are reminders that cultural productions about food are not always about palatable multicultural consumption, but they go beyond an analysis of culinary stories as they introduce to us our own critical and political practices.

Finally, I wish to thank the authors in the volume whose interests and commitment to continue the dialogues on food and Asian American Literature provided the opportunity for this publication. This volume would not be possible without the support of the Faculty Development Fund from the University of San Francisco and the dedication of the editorial board and the outside readers for AALDP. Their patience and efforts in the process, especially needed for a young journal such as ours, provided constant support. My gratitude also goes to Nancy Smith, our cover designer, for the beautiful "word clouds" cover, and Aysegul Savas, who tirelessly copyedited the essays. Without their skills and professionalism, none of this would be possible.

Lastly, the impetus of my project stems from my own mouth: my hunger and appetite that have been aroused since childhood. Growing up in a family who saw our life in Taiwan as an exile, I was haunted by my grandparents' perpetual hunger for the "right" food. Eating has not always been an act of fulfillment but a grievance against loss, exile, and nostalgia that is now turned into an active agent for my academic and teaching interests. I thank my grandparents whose unremitting storytelling about cooking and eating led to a steadfast appetite for me, showing how foodways and food writings can be a meaningful discourse for engagement and revolution.

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