

Review

Wenyng Xu. *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature.*

Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2008. Print.

In one of the first book-length studies of food in Asian American literature, Wenyng Xu offers an illuminating set of readings which detail how gender, diaspora, class, and sexuality come to bear upon Asian American subjectivity through food tropes. Abundant in connections which affirm the centrality of food in Asian American experience, as well as in the writing of experiences, *Eating Identities* focuses on how these social categories shape the psychosocial dimensions of Asian American subjectivity.

Working with diaspora, class, and sexuality, Xu expands the terms upon which the relationship between food and subjectivity has been commonly articulated in literary studies – namely ethnicity and gender. The additional categories make space for a wider array of issues affecting Asian American subjects to come to the fore, a gesture which reflects sensitivity to the wide-range of geopolitical and social circumstances affecting “Asian American subjects.” The texts studied, from John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) to Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* (2003), sweep broadly across history and geography, and encompass fiction and poetry. Along with Okada and Truong, Xu examines food-inflected works by Joy Kogawa, Frank Chin, David Wong Louie, Li-young Lee, and Mei Ng. The historical and formal range of these texts invites discussion of food in the periods surrounding Japanese American internment, the yellow power movement of 1970s San Francisco, anti-West campaigns staged in China and Indonesia, and colonialism in Vietnam. Impressive in its scope, *Eating Identities* forms analyses around events which have been especially defining in Asian American history.

Food in these texts, Xu shows us, serves as an index of psychic struggles at each historical juncture. Some struggles imply unfathomable complexity, as she expounds in Chapter Five, on food and colonialism in *The Book of Salt*. The meticulous reading elaborates how Truong stages the culinary as an ambivalent site: on one hand, the Vietnamese cook and colonial subject, Binh, exercises resistance by manipulating the food served to his employers, Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein. The resistance, on the other hand, is always only partial, for Binh must appeal again and again to the good graces of his “Mesdames,” effectively diminishing the agency exercised in the kitchen. Food, then, only offers the colonized subject a taste of liberation from colonial power, and ultimately nourishes the colonizer. Xu importantly notes that the conditions of Binh’s subjectivity produce a particular psychic state, inflected by melancholia and

Stephanie Chan is a doctoral student at UC Santa Cruz and holds an MFA from San Jose State University.

hysteria. The other four chapters examine food tropes to ascertain the psychic effects of internment (Okada and Kogawa), compromised masculinity (Chin), class negotiation (Louie), exile (Lee), and negotiating sexual identity (Ng).

In addition to thinking about figures in the works, Xu also considers the psychosocial ambivalence demonstrated by select authors. Her discussions of Okada and Lee examine moments in the works which expose the authors' struggles of forming identities within racializing apparatuses. Though Xu just lightly acknowledges this sociological dimension of her work, adopting such a multifaceted approach in a study of Asian American subjectivity holds intriguing possibilities. In the case of Lee, for instance, Xu ventures beyond readings of the poetry's ethnic food tropes and examines the tension between Lee's food tropes and his proclaimed transcendental desire to disassociate from race, ethnicity, and "to render cultural differentiation meaningless" (126). A sharp analysis of the transcendental poem, "Cleaving," alongside Lee's statement suggests that Lee's alignment with the transcendental poets does not in fact free him from ethnic differentiation. Instead, we find that in an effort to respond to racial hostility among other transcendental poets, Lee conjures ethnic food images to "avenge himself and the Chinese by subjecting [the transcendental poet] Emerson and his racist remark to the trope of eating" (123). Xu insightfully argues that Lee's "poetic journey toward the transcendent turns out to be a cornucopia of cultural particularities such as Asian food" (126). In doing so she lays ground for understanding the specific negotiations undertaken by those who, like Lee, are shaped by conditions of exile.

Xu's study is dynamic and energizing in its vision. As it offers up its keen readings, however, there are moments when its broad reach overshadows its critical vigor. Conjuring topics as various as semiotics, enjoyment, diaspora, exile, mourning and melancholia, hysteria, queerness, feminism, and orality, for instance, sometimes overwhelms the analysis. The discussion, furthermore, frequently halts to draw out the psychosocial dimensions of the works, and to contextualize thematic and historical concepts. These portions of the discussion feel linked, but unruly and loosened from the central assertions.

A tighter synthesis of the study's critical methodology would also prove useful when reading Xu's comparative chapters. Chapter One, for instance, strikes a contrast between internment narratives and their figurations of food and the maternal in the development of self-affirmation. Whereas Kogawa portrays self-affirmation forged in positive relation to the maternal and Japanese food, Okada features a protagonist who arrives at self-affirmation by destroying the maternal. Through this textual pairing, Xu compellingly shows that a range of attitudes toward the maternal and food exists in different post-internment narratives. But what ends up being more central to Xu's analysis is Okada's tough sacrifice of the feminine. Xu is sensitive to the "degradation" of the maternal in Okada's text: a worthy concern, if only it did not distract from the broader focus of the study. Immediately following is a consideration of *Obasan* as a text which delivers what *No-No Boy* does not. This juxtaposition, while full of potential for exploring questions of history and internment stories imagined in different times, perhaps unwittingly suggests that *Obasan* more skillfully handles the question of identity formation. Xu ends up placing much emphasis on these differences, which, without further reflection on the chapter's critical aim, makes for an uneasy comparison.

Eating Identities attests to the challenges of addressing the bounty of concepts and ideas to consider regarding the culinary and its Asian American subjectivity. Through a visionary effort marked by an attentive and sensitive set of readings Xu makes a courageous and generous offering which will no doubt serve as a landmark for studies to come.

---Stephanie Chan
University of California, Santa Cruz