

Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

Title: Review of “Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader” edited by Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur

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research and field interviews with forays into linguistic origins, literary theory, ethnic history, and textual analysis, extrapolated for an increasingly complex time in which food culture has assumed a place in the populist pantheon.

Matching his culinary focus to the borders of the United States, Ji-Song Ku redeploys Asian-Americans from a position of cultural isolation to one defined by a “discursive fellowship” in their constant role as guardians of culture and politics for their native cuisines. There are three distinct sections in *Dubious Gastronomy*, and each examines a different aspect of “the dubious” through a case study and ethnographic exploration of a single aspect of Asian-American food culture. The first discusses “inauthentic gastronomy,” using California rolls and Chinese takeout as subjects; the second, “disreputable gastronomy,” focuses on kimchi and dog meat; the third, “artificial gastronomy,” tackles monosodium glutamate and SPAM.

Deep, ethnographic histories of his subjects are a strong feature of Ji-Song Ku’s work. He traces the historic development of the California roll, unpacking different creation myths and their meanings. American hegemony in culture takes center stage, as do discourses of authenticity. In his ode to kimchi, Ji-Song Ku traces the creation and path of a bottle of the fermented cabbage pickle that his parents gave him to take the reader to the extremes of the Korean homeland, through the history of the New World exchange of ingredients (most importantly, the chile) and to his childhood haunt of Flushing, Queens, the most diverse place on earth. He gives kimchi context as a product of certain ingredients; as a chile-laden dish; and as a food once considered shameful and stinky. He documents the dish’s battles with Japanese conglomerates at a CODEX hearing (meant to establish parameters for what can be called kimchi), tracing its path as it becomes a celebrated Korean national treasure with its own museum and a present-day superfood in the United States. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) follows a similar redemption trail, beginning with a Japanese scientist’s discovery and later finding its way into *Vogue* magazine and an enormous percentage of American foodstuffs. Once derided, he notes, MSG is now available as a table condiment in a generation of hipster-run, chef-driven restaurants.

If there are weaknesses to Ji-Song Ku’s approach, they tend to emerge from the same areas that are also his obvious strengths. His exclusive focus on a handful of Northeast Asian foodstuffs from three cultures excludes the dimensions of regional cuisines—fiery Szechuan food or delicate Kyoto cooking and tea culture, for example. Some of the East’s most celebrated cuisines, from Thailand to

India, are entirely without recognition here. What Ji-Song Ku’s book accomplishes, however, is not so much identifying questions and providing concise answers. His is a gesture that invites the likes of food adventurers, home cooks, professional chefs, and academics all to take a seat around a common America table—one on which Asian cuisine is served and constantly changing.

Bibliography

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BOOK REVIEW | LIZ BADA

Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader

Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur (Editors)

New York: New York University Press. 2013. 210 pp.

Eating Asian America addresses the question of why Asian and Asian-influenced food is an integral part of the American foodscape. Common posits for this are that Asians are naturally good cooks, Asian food is intrinsically delicious, or Asians are more devoted to entrepreneurship than other immigrant or ethnic groups. The editors of *Eating Asian America* consider a different, more complex answer. The overwhelming Asian presence in the American foodscape is the result of external forces and inequalities that have restricted and defined Asians into an alimentary role. Food is a permissible realm for Asian advancement and visibility in America, whether as indentured workers, famous chefs, or business owners. *Eating Asian America* works around the premise that food is a way to facilitate the process of racialization. This process essentializes Asians into a single gastronomic body and subsumes national and regional differences under generic headings such as “Chinese,” “Asian,” or “foreign.” This results in the term “Asian” being “not merely a descriptive category for a people and nation . . . [but] a commodity to be bought, possessed, and ingested” (3). The authors of *Eating Asian America* refute the idea of a generic multiculturalism that uses food to simultaneously and superficially celebrate diversity and unity. They argue that Asian American foodways are not the sole product of culinary tradition but

result from a combination of “racial, gendered, sexualized, and classed hierarchies” (6).

There are four sections in *Eating Asian America*, each focusing on a different aspect of the Asian gastronomical experience. In Part I, the authors address the issue of labor and entrepreneurship in food service. In Part II, the authors discuss the processes through which food came to be the primary way for the majority to interpret Asian/Asian Americanness. In Part III, the authors investigate how the category of “Asian American” is constructed. Finally, in Part IV, the authors explore literary and artistic representations of food as a guide to understanding the construction and definition of Asian American identity.

Part I centers the discussion about Asian American culinary labor upon the agency of Asian Americans. In this section, Erin M. Curtis focuses her essay on Cambodian-owned donut shops in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is home to more donut shops than any other city in the world, and Cambodians own approximately 90 percent of those shops. Curtis traces this phenomenon back to the confluence of a culture primed for donut businesses to flourish and a single headstrong immigrant, Ted Ngoy. Curtis argues that donut shops act as a site of cultural negotiation. This is supported strongly by her analysis of how that negotiation occurs, not only between cultures, but within Cambodian immigrant culture as well. Although providing a uniquely American commodity, donut shops also provide a means for creating a unified immigrant culture. The overwhelming presence of Cambodian donut shops has resulted in a network perfectly structured to help maintain and reproduce Cambodian culture. Through constant contact with Angelenos, donut shops provide a safe space in which immigrants can learn to navigate American culture.

Part IV shifts the focus from the experiential to the artistic. In Part IV, Delores B. Phillips discusses the cookbook *Madhur Jaffrey's World Vegetarian* and the way in which it recenters globalization on the South Asian experience. By addressing globalism from a South Asian perspective, Jaffrey's text opposes the presence of hegemonic global corporations, which work to reduce globalization to a set of market forces. Phillips explores Jaffrey's process of describing a cultural space by its culinary practices. This recartography draws the world in a very different shape than maps based upon cultural features such as language or religion. It results in much broader regions, with loosely defined and overlapping borders. “The result of the cartographies that she draws is a sense of place that implies the wideness of the world but is still small enough to fit into a single bite” (375). Phillips also

allows that Jaffrey's text is not without its problems. Jaffrey both highlights and obscures Third World women from the First World reader. She transforms the specific cultural experience of Indian women sorting lentils to a generalized Third World process that the reader can observe but has no investment in or connection to. Third World labor is reduced to a picturesque introduction to First World actions.

Eating Asian America brings a number of new voices into the ongoing conversation about the interaction between food and identity. While the concept itself is not entirely novel, the authors address it from a perspective largely absent from the field. One of *Eating Asian America's* strengths is its exploration of the economic aspects of identity. This book does address the role of Asian Americans in the service economy. However, this book avoids the common trope of slotting Asian American labor into essentialized characters like “the cook” or “the delivery boy.” Asian American labor is discussed not just in relation to food service but also in terms of production, distribution, consumption, and artistic efforts. The relationships between food and labor have not been extensively studied in any arena, but this is a particularly glaring omission in relation to Asian Americans, as Asian American immigrant history is rooted in migrant labor. This book highlights the agency of Asian Americans in the global marketplace, as leaders and creators of economic movements.

Eating Asian America also puts particular emphasis on the expression, as opposed to the formation, of identity. The essays in this book focus not on how Asian American identities are created but rather on how those established identities are performed and received. In addition, this book takes care to include a wide spectrum of voices. While the stories of Chinese restaurant workers or Japanese American internment camps may have been previously encountered, it is unlikely that scholars outside of this field of study are as familiar with the Filipino diaspora or Uzbek communities in Brooklyn.

Eating Asian America does an excellent job of introducing the Asian/Asian American perspective to the discipline of food studies. This book is a highly useful, and much needed, addition to food studies. It is a significant addition to the growing conversation about American foodways; as such, it is important that this book not be considered to explore a niche topic. *Eating Asian America* should be recognized as a vital aspect of American food culture and not relegated to a specialty subject.