

Introduction

It is an altogether plausible tale: the Orient, once upon a time, was *there*, over yonder where the sun ascended to the heavens each day. Tasting the true flavors of the Orient, then, meant arduous journeys over mountains, oceans, and deserts. No longer. Today, the peoples of the Orient¹—be they Saracens or Celestials—reside by the multitudes in major metropolises and minor townships beyond the geographic Orient, including across the breadth of the United States. And, of course, found alongside these outlanders, no matter the country, region, or neighborhood, is an endless assortment of exotic delights, the culinary first and foremost. The Orient—or at least the gastronomic Orient—is now global, as diners far and wide need only walk down their own streets or make a quick phone call to make a meal of it.

Not everyone is pleased, however. Culinary purists protest that Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's old reliable adage, "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are," is now sadly obsolete, as anyone anywhere can at any time eat just about anything. As a consequence, to say that Chinese, Indian, Japanese, or another *cuisine orientale* is global might be stating the obvious, but to contend that kung pao, vindaloo, or sushi everywhere is equally authentic is, for many, a cause for alarm, if not an invitation to a quarrel. Blame it on the masses of ignorant diners who neither know better nor care, the purists say. And blame it also on lax culinary and unscrupulous business practices of food professionals who prey upon them. Complicating matters further is the unavoidable condition of modernity—or was it postmodernity?—characterized by shifting geographic borders, transnational flows of labor and capital, fluid ethnic identities, and flexible cultural citizenships. The stench of fear—the fear

for the demise of the authentic Orient—sours the air breathed by both venturesome epicureans and homesick immigrants alike. A shared longing for a return to a more delicious past, a gastronomic golden age just out of reach, makes these otherwise strangers unusual dinner guests.

The Battle Begins

The tale continues: nourished by the milk (soy milk, of course) of nostalgia and nauseated by the bitter taste of industrial globalization, the armies of the gustatory right wing, the defenders of culinary authenticity, with the marketplace as battleground, dig deep their trenches. The rumored destabilization of discreet traditional identities and the declining significance of the nation-state as cultural arbiters of the authentic, mourned and elegized by a litany of fashionable cultural theorists, are greatly exaggerated, they argue. As cuisines around the world undergo the inexorable process of transformation, amalgamation, and fusion that has been the hallmark of human gastronomy since the dawn of the species' digestive history, the indefatigable knights of authenticity don their aprons, sharpen their cleavers, and season their woks. A procession of indignant voices cry out:

“Not on our watch.”

“Give us the unsullied food of your ancestors.”

“Give us the foods enjoyed by *real* natives not yet compromised by technological innovations, standardized recipes, and surrogate ingredients.”

“Oh, woe is me, woe is me, why so fake must my kimchi, *dosa*, and *harissa* be?”

The lament does not end here, and neither does the tale: the battle for the future of authentic foods is now afoot. Up against the army of gastronomic authenticity stands the phalanx of the apocryphal. Unlike the other side, which subsists on the elixir of transcendental certainty, this group feeds on the ordnance of the interpretative, derivative, ephemeral, and hybrid. In unison, they taunt and provoke their foe:

“Wake up and smell the coffee!”

“Give up your dream of culinary Shangri-la.”

“The authentic Orient is a figment of your overheated imagination and authentic food of your overindulged palate.”

And the most cutting of all: “The apocryphal is the new authentic.”

This conflict, as with all momentous conflicts, demands that each diner, aka consumer, choose a side. You are warned: if you’re not with us, you’re against us. The battle, however, is not limited to the kitchen. The zones of combat extend far and wide: atop restaurant tables, in grocery store aisles, in corporate offices of the food and advertisement industries, in cookbooks, in travel and tourism literature, on television cooking shows, and in the hands of industry lobbyists to the back pockets of politicians. Authenticity is big bucks, and when it comes to matters of food, authenticity is always supersized, especially when so-called ethnic, native, regional, or national cuisines are on the plate.

Today’s postindustrial, cosmopolitan diners fear the McDonaldization of the globe will lead to the suppression—and ultimately extinction—of diversity and integrity of traditional fare. Thus they demand that the marketplace, first and foremost, satiate their desire for pristine culinary experiences with a steady supply of newly discovered and sufficiently authenticated autochthonous foods. Business-savvy ethnic entrepreneurs, be they humble immigrant cooks supported by measly family savings or classically trained chefs backed by big-money financiers, are ready and willing to comply, as are mammoth transnational hotel and travel conglomerates. “Welcome to our authentic restaurants,” they say with a wink and a smile; “come taste the true flavors of the Orient.”

These are fighting words. Both sides stand ready with their onions diced and nerves on edge, their *mis en place* fully prepped for the clash. All that is left now is for Chairman Kaga of *Iron Chef* to shout (in his odd pidgin French): “*Allez cuisine!*” In this battle of gastronomic authenticity versus gastronomic apocryphal, whose cuisine reigns supreme?

Linguistic Analogy

Admittedly, the above is an overly dramatic and purposefully exaggerated rendition of what I believe is the primary binary that dictates much of the current discussion of the globalization of Asian food: either it is authentic, meaning as the “true natives” know it, and therefore delicious, or it is

apocryphal, meaning altered by alien forces, most notably via “Americanization,” a process often construed as coercive, if not corrosive, and thus rendering food unpalatable. This book is an attempt to challenge the absolutism of authenticity by considering the cultural politics of the dubious, with the hopes of demonstrating that authenticity is both an illusion and a trap. To believe in authenticity is to rely on transcendental means to answer questions posed by a reality deemed untidy and undesirable. Authenticity, in a manner of speaking, is a coping mechanism.

The field of cultural linguistics proves instructive here by way of analogy. So-called authentic cuisines are to standard languages (e.g., Standard American English or middle-class Parisian French) as apocryphal foods are to pidgins and creoles (e.g., Hawaiian Creole English or Haitian French). As any self-respecting linguist will concede, however reluctantly, the belief that a standard language is inherently more proper, superior, or pure is spurious at best. As argued by Peter Trudgill, James Milroy, and many others, standard languages, by definition, are simply dialects within the category of languages to which they belong—no more and certainly no less.² The high status enjoyed by standard languages is not a function of inherent linguistic endowments but of cultural and political prestige and power. (Hence the quip generally attributed to Max Weinreich: “A language is a dialect with an army and navy.”) Standard British English, for example, is the dialect of the privileged class in the United Kingdom; it is a variety of English native to perhaps less than 12–15 percent of its inhabitants.³ Those who insist that Standard English is the correct, proper, pure, or authentic English betray their ideological dogma—one that favors a uniform, standard nation, a place where cultural differences, heterogeneity, and hybridity are viewed as undesirable. By stigmatizing alternative forms of English—a notable example is African American English Vernacular—language purists, aka prescriptivists, attempt to discipline the nation by punishing the tongues of its heteroglossic citizenry.

What is true for language is apparently often true for food. Arjun Appadurai reminds us that “all cuisines have a history: tastes shift, regional distinctions go in and out of focus, new techniques and technologies appear.”⁴ He could very well have been describing a linguistic process. In both instances, the tongue is the legislator—if not the dictator—of taste, not only within the nation, but also, as I hope to demonstrate, increasingly across the diaspora. Consider the immense variety of Englishes that exists around the world.⁵ In *English as a Global Language*, published in 1997,

David Crystal estimated that some 2.1 billion people in the world employ English in one significant fashion or another on a daily basis. He estimated as a lowest estimate “a grand total of 670 million people with a native or native-like command of English.”⁶ Of course, it does not take a linguist to know that the English utilized by these masses of native users is not linguistically uniform. A whole host of factors, including class, education level, national origin, regional particularity, and ethnic affiliation, contribute to the global diversity of English. And it is not just the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand that boast unique expressions of English. The countries that are now either primarily Anglophone or becoming increasingly so are legion: Barbados, Belize, Cameroon, Dominica, Eritrea, Ghana, Guyana, India, Ireland, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe constitute a mere tip of the global English iceberg.

Just as London is no longer—if it ever was to begin with—the linguistic center of the English language, Asia is not the standard bearer of all “Asianness,” least of all of food. Rather, Asia, like the rest of the world, is in a state of continual flux and perpetual mutation, hybridization, and transmogrification. Moreover, today one need not necessarily reside or travel to the geographic Asia in order to *be in* Asia. Communities of Asians, a multitude of them, in fact, live in a vast array of locations. They not only reside in Beijing, Manila, Mumbai, and Hanoi, but also Toronto, Berlin, Los Angeles, Durban, and São Paulo. If it can be said that the health and vitality of a cultural practice are directly connected to innovation, adaptation, and progress, then the changes to food culture taking place in, say, Flushing, Queens, are just as significant as those taking place anywhere in Asia proper.

By exploring the other side, as it were, of what is generally understood as authentic Asian gastronomy, I wish to suggest that expressions of Asian food cultures taking place in “far-flung” locations such as Los Angeles, Honolulu, New York City, or even Baton Rouge are no less critical to understand the meaning of Asian food (provided such a thing exists) than the culinary expressions that took place (or perhaps took root) in the Orient, say, Tokyo, Seoul, or Shanghai, centuries ago. In other words, just as a cultural linguist might argue for recognizing the legitimacy of a non-standard language vis-à-vis the stigmatizing and repressive process of language standardization, I argue for the legitimacy of Asian identities, experiences, and cultural forms *beyond* the geographic and political

imaginings of Asia. When it comes to culinary matters, diasporic Asia—including Asian America, the principal site of this book—matters a great deal more than most mavens of gastronomic authenticity are willing to concede. But instead of vying for the equal legitimacy of Asian culinary practices beyond Asia, I wish to challenge the saliency of the very notion of authenticity, a concept I find troubled, troubling, and troublesome.

Dubious Gastronomy

As the title suggests, this book meditates on foods that belong to a gastronomic category that I call dubious Asian foods, especially as they are manifested, consumed, discussed, and contested in the United States. I devote individual chapters to six specific edible subjects: the California roll, take-out Chinese food, monosodium glutamate (MSG), dogmeat, factory-made American kimchi, and the canned meat product called SPAM. Several notable features bring these foods together.

First, each is strongly associated with Asians and Asian Americans. California roll is a type of sushi, which is arguably the best-known Japanese food outside of Japan. With avocado, a fruit unknown in Japan until recently, serving as the signature ingredient, California roll is generally assumed to be a Japanese American invention. Take-out Chinese, of course, is self-evidently Chinese, and in the United States it is almost exclusively Chinese immigrants who are in the business of selling it. Often considered synonymous with bad Chinese food, MSG was in fact invented by a Japanese chemist a century ago and widely marketed in Japan and its colonies (principally Korea, Taiwan, and China) during the first half of the twentieth century. Although dogmeat is an idiosyncratic part of the diet of a relatively small number of people in Southeast and East Asia, its culinary significance as a traditional Asian food looms much larger in the popular American imagination. Kimchi is perhaps the most representative Korean food and is widely considered the “national dish” of Korea. Finally, SPAM is a highly regarded and sought-after commodity in parts of Asia (especially in Korea and the Philippines), the Pacific (most notably in Guam and Hawai‘i), and among Asian Pacific Americans (especially those of Korean, Filipino, Japanese, and Pacific Islander backgrounds).

Second, each is commonly found beyond Asia, and in the United States in particular, if not materially in any significant way, then certainly as a topic of contentious conversation or debate. California roll is undoubtedly the most popular type of sushi in the United States; its wide appeal is due largely to the absence of raw fish, which most Americans equate with sushi itself. Chinese food is arguably the second most popular “ethnic” food in America, trailing only Italian. Although invented in Japan and powerfully linked to Chinese food, MSG appears on the list of ingredients of umpteen numbers of food products sold in the United States; nearly all canned soups and frozen meals contain it, often under various aliases. While widespread rumors of Asian immigrants feasting on their American neighbors’ dogs have been proven entirely spurious, the fact that such canards comprise a documentable category of urban mythology indicates that the specter of the dog-eating Oriental has much currency in the United States. Kimchi is now a hot global commodity; a 2011 PBS series called *Kimchi Chronicles*, hosted by Marja Vongerichten, is one indication that the fermented product has begun to enter the US culinary mainstream. And despite SPAM’s immense popularity in some parts of Asia and the Pacific, Americans are the largest bulk consumer, especially during times of economic downturn, when SPAM production typically increases to keep up with the rise in demand.

Third, each is (or once was) an object of ridicule, scorn, disgust, and bemusement, particularly to Americans—that is to say, each has been regarded as a dubious Asian food. Deemed the epitome of bad sushi, California roll is dismissed out of hand by sushi aficionados on both sides of the Pacific. In the United States its appearance on a restaurant menu is often regarded as a sign of a subpar sushi establishment. American diners have had a love-hate relationship with Chinese food since the nineteenth century, when Chinese immigrants first arrived on the West Coast. Although among the most popular ethnic foods in America, Chinese food is perhaps the most pilloried; it is the target of endless complaints regarding its sanitariness (or the lack thereof), healthfulness (or the lack thereof), and about the desirability (or the lack thereof) of the people (namely, the Chinese) who sell it. A key part of what I call the “culture of complaint” that surrounds Chinese food in the United States is the obsession many diners have with the possibility that MSG is the root cause of a litany of

bodily ailments—headaches, nausea, bloating, and dizziness, to name only a few of the countless reported symptoms. This has proven to be such a burden on Chinese restaurants that a near-universal requisite of all Chinese menus is a “No MSG” disclaimer. If a single word describes the feeling most Americans experience when faced with the idea of dogmeat, it is most certainly disgust, an emotion that is not limited to culinary concerns but extends to the people who are purported to consume it—Asians and Asian Americans. Although many gourmards now regard kimchi as a “superfood” due to its healthful claims, it was not that long ago that it was largely unknown in the United States; the few non-Koreans who knew of it typically described it in less-than-flattering terms—as rotten, spoiled, dangerously spicy, and, above all, malodorous. SPAM, widely adjudged as the antithesis of wholesome food, is commonly treated as if it was scraped off the pages of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. It is popularly regarded as kitsch, more suitable as a punch line to jokes than an edible object.

Finally, each provides an ideal opportunity to ponder the question of gastronomic authenticity—or, rather, the lack thereof—because each is commonly understood as an example of bad, ersatz, or corrupt Asian food, or not Asian at all. With the possible exception of dogmeat, which most Americans associate exclusively with depraved Asia, each of these foods, in one way or another, is strongly associated with the adulterating apparatus of Americanization. Each is suspect because it either presumably originated in or has crossed over too far into mainstream United States. Both the California roll and take-out Chinese food are considered American inventions that would not be recognized in the country of their supposed origins. MSG and SPAM are both synonymous with artificiality. The fact that the American food supply is currently awash with MSG is taken as predictable, given that Americanization is often equated with artificiality. SPAM, a product of the American food industry, is perhaps the original “mystery meat.” Having only recently gained the attention of American eaters, kimchi is still considered “unsullied”; this, however, is due to change, as Korean food undergoes a process of assimilation similar to that experienced by Japanese and Chinese foods upon their introduction to the United States. Dogmeat, meanwhile, is an example of how something that resists mainstreaming can be considered depraved and dangerous, and serves as a reminder of the limits not only of globalization but also of authenticity.

I argue that the privileging of authenticity serves as a reproof not merely of so-called dubious Asian foods but also of Asian *peoples* who are viewed as complicit in the ruination of their own culinary tradition. In the United States the burden, if not blame, of Asian inauthenticity falls most heavily on the shoulders of Asian Americans, who are construed as human analogs of inauthentic cultural products. Discursively positioned neither as truly “Asian” nor truly “American,” they are read as doubly dubious. The Asian presence in the United States is commonly seen as watered down, counterfeit, inauthentic—at least when measured against a largely mythical if not entirely imaginary standard of people of so-called real or authentic Asia. What I suggest is that the dubious Asian foods explored here share a special fellowship with Asian Americans—an intellectual, cultural, political, and discursive fellowship—that forms the foundation of this book.

Of course, any attempt to address a subject as vast as Asian food (or even Asian food in the United States) must delineate terms and boundaries as well as acknowledge limitations. The category is simply too expansive, too nebulous, too heterogeneous not to. I do this by limiting my discussion primarily, but not entirely, to gastronomy associated with East Asia, specifically Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. These are not without drawbacks, as any bracketing of “Asia” or “Asian America” must take into consideration not merely East Asia but Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and potentially the entirety of the Middle East as well, including North Africa. Therefore, whenever possible, I refrain from remarking categorically about Asians or Asian Americans in general and instead direct my comments to a specific national or ethnic group in question.

It is perhaps important for me to point out that the principally East Asian focus of this book is neither arbitrary nor accidental. Rather, it developed as a result of the specific foods, themes, and questions that materialized as the book came together. When the culinary subjects of this book are considered in concert, it is East Asia that generally, but by no means exclusively, comes into most obvious and lucid shape. The East Asian focus of the book, moreover, is a result of my own personal gastronomic coming of age vis-à-vis geographic journey: birth in Korea, childhood in Hawai‘i, and adulthood in Southern California and New York City. In short, these are foods I have been around all my life—either eating or thinking and brooding about. That said, had I had the culinary experience or intellectual

wherewithal to go beyond an East Asian scope while writing this book, I might have very well included such dubious foods as the South Asian chicken tikka masala (and other dubious curries) and Southeast Asian balut (and other so-called “bizarre foods” regularly featured, say, on the Travel Channel).

Also, I situate the book’s point of departure not in Asia proper, but the United States, where significant populations of Asians, both immigrant and American born, reside. In doing so, I dislodge the very notion of what is or is not legitimately Asian from its dynastic, nation-state, and ethnic myths of origins and relocate it to a place whose name is often synonymous with cultural imperialism, bastardization, and dubiousness—a seemingly dishonorable phenomenon known worldwide, including in the United States, as “Americanization.”

The observations, theories, arguments, and conjectures of *Dubious Gastronomy* are explored using a wide range of narrative strategies. The book is part cultural studies, part political polemic, part food history, part food science, part literary analysis, and part anthropological critique. It is a work that overlaps a number of academic interests, including the fields of American studies (and Asian American studies in particular), Asian studies (especially within a transnational or diasporic context), and literary and cultural studies, as well as the newly burgeoning intellectual field of food studies. More so than overlapping these areas, however, I believe the book fulfills the important task of amalgamating them and putting each of these fields into conversation with one another. In this sense, the book is truly interdisciplinary.

What this book is *not* is a food reference guide, objective history, or detailed description of Asian American food and food practices. It is, rather, a series of critical contemplation of both the “metabolic” and “symbolic” meaning of food vis-à-vis the people who consume it. The narrative voice I employ is a fusion of the scholarly and the popular, the empirical and the subjective, the sociological and the semiotic, and the political and the personal. In other words, the book eschews the linear, rational, and deductive modes of argument that are standard to traditional academic writing for a more multidirectional—if not whimsical or idiosyncratic—exploration of the issues at hand. The novelist Bharati Mukherjee once wrote, “The zigzag route is the straightest.”⁷ In terms of this book’s narrative mode, this is as apt a characterization as any. Thus you might say this book is as dubious as the foods that appear in it. I hope to show that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it might be quite delicious.

The book is organized into three parts, with each part corresponding to three possible meanings of the word “dubious”—inauthenticity, disreputableness, and artificiality. Part I, “Inauthentic Gastronomy,” focuses on a pair of culinary sites that are often treated as paragons of counterfeit or fake Asian food in America: “California Roll” (chapter 1) and “Chinese Take-Out” (chapter 2). Part II, “Disreputable Gastronomy,” meditates on “Kimchi” (chapter 3) and “Dogmeat” (chapter 4) as examples of how foods that are strongly associated with the perceived moral depravity of a particular ethnic or racial group can either become rehabilitated (as with kimchi) or remain permanently suspect (as with dogmeat). Part III, “Artificial Gastronomy,” examines “Monosodium Glutamate” (chapter 5) and “SPAM” (chapter 6), two comestibles that are often seen as synthetic or simulated substitutes for an actual taste (*umami*) or real food (meat).

Narrative Arc

Recalling the creative beginnings of *M. Butterfly*, the Tony Award-winning play about a French diplomat’s decades-long love affair with a Chinese male spy masquerading as a Chinese actress, the playwright David Henry Hwang credits a two-paragraph story in the *New York Times* as the spark that ignited his interest in writing the play. But instead of investigating the “true life” incident further, Hwang opted for a counter-intuitive approach: “I purposely refrained from further research, for I was not interested in writing docudrama. Frankly, I didn’t want the ‘truth’ to interfere with my own speculations.” He speculated that the French diplomat, who claimed not to know that his lover was a man until the bitter end, saw in the Chinese spy not the reality of the actual, but rather the “fantasy stereotype” of Asians as “bowing, blushing flowers.” The spy, on the other hand, “must have played up to and exploited this image of the Oriental woman as demure and submissive.”⁸ Yes, for both the diplomat and spy it was “pretty to think”—to borrow a phrase from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*—that they were in fact what each pretended to be.

Hwang recalls that he came up with the basic “arc” of the yet-to-be written play while driving along Los Angeles’ Santa Monica Boulevard: the Frenchman and his Chinese lover are entangled in a very adult game of pretend in a deconstructed version of Puccini’s *Madam Butterfly*.⁹ The unconventional reshuffling of the players’ parts, each playing the other’s role at different junctures, gives the play the necessary subversive quality

that makes it Hwang's most engaging and entertaining work to date. Hwang felt certain that the audience would instinctively engage the political and sexual truisms of the play, despite its reliance on a diegetic contrivance: "From my point of view, the 'impossible' story of a Frenchman duped by a Chinese man masquerading as a woman always seemed perfectly explicable; given the degree of misunderstanding between men and women and also between East and West, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place."¹⁰ It is worth noting that the entirety of the play is rendered exclusively through the point of view of the Frenchman, who, in isolation, addresses the audience from his private prison cell. The events replayed on the stage, including every word attributed to the Chinese spy, are therefore the Frenchman's version alone. It is left up to the audience to decide whether to accept his ventriloquial performance at face value. How reliable a narrator is he? Apart from his monologic pantomime, are we privy to any other source of information or perspective? Given this dramatic conceit, and even if Hwang may reject this idea altogether, the Chinese spy remains nameless, sexless, and nationless throughout the duration of the drama.

In locating the basic arc of this book's gastronomic stories, I endeavor to enlist Hwang's tripronged dramaturgical strategy: first, the use of speculation in filling in the blanks without relying solely on the factual or veridical evidence of a matter; second, the deconstructivist tactic in blurring powerful discursive binaries; and third, the public scrutiny of private performances in the transformation of the quotidian into the spectacular and translation of ordinary fare into extraordinary epicurean delights.

In *Orientalism*, his 1978 critique of the West's discursive and administrative structuring and control of the Orient, Edward Said stresses that the notion of Orientalism as he defines it means several interdependent things. This includes an academic definition in which anyone who "teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specifics or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism."¹¹ Another definition is more general: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.' Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the *starting point* for elaborate

theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its peoples, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.”¹² To the list of activities that define Orientalism I would add contemporary food discourse (cookbooks, television cooking shows and competitions, food films, etc.) on Asia, in which the East-West binary, expressed as essential differences between the twain, more often than not serves as the starting point for whatever else is to follow.

Where Hwang and I part ways is at the intersection of the East-West binary. While I believe he employs it as a starting point for the dramatic gulf he believes exists between the Orient and Occident, I seek to undermine it from the outset. Does a successful marriage of East and West on a plate presage, harbor, and reflect the so-called real conditions on the proverbial ground? That is to say, does it point in any meaningful way to the relationship between the *peoples* of the East and West? Of course, this question is meaningful insofar as the categories of East and West and the rhetorical binary they engender are meaningful.

Given the immense political, cultural, and representational schisms that separate “citizens” from “immigrants” of a given nation (as Lisa Lowe postulates in *Immigrant Acts*),¹³ as well as between the “Occident” and “Orient” (as Edward Said does in *Orientalism*), the divide between the lofty idea of authentic Asian food and vulgar reality of dubious food is not only inevitable but synecdochical: the semiotics of eating Asian in the United States is emblematic of the larger questions facing the nation in what is decidedly a transnational and diasporic dynamic of the twenty-first century.

Matters of gastronomy are a matter for a nation’s sense of collective self as much as they are for its sense of collective taste. The ambivalence over eating Asian in the United States is reflective of a general tendency, and a considerable irony, in American immigrant history. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued in regards to fin de siècle US encounters with the darker, alien peoples of the world, “Immigrants provided the basis of self-flattering portraits of openness of the nation’s democratic order and yet they bore the brunt of some of the nation’s fiercest antidemocratic impulses.”¹⁴ Asian Americans have always been and continue to be emblematic of the unassimilable American, not only in body politic but in gastronomic culture as well. Asian food is America’s culinary stepchild, technically part of the family but never quite entirely. This, however, does not mean that it isn’t good to think—or eat.