

“Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels”  
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This inter-disciplinary dissertation examines the theme of consumption in Asian American *bildungsromane*, connecting representations of cooking and eating with ethnic identity formation. Using four discrete modes of identification as my organizing categories—historic pride, consumerism, mourning, and fusion—I examine how Asian American adolescents challenge and revise their cultural legacies and experiment with alternative ethnic affiliations, through their relationships to food. My analyses of Asian American texts will attend, in particular, to the tensions between Asian stereotypes, often found in popular culture—film, television, advertising—and more “authentic” portrayals of Asian American consumptive practices.

The introduction draws upon a diverse range of scholarship, including theories on consumption (from the fields of literature, anthropology, psychology, and sociology); the psychology of adolescence; cultural criticism; and Asian American history, in order to frame a method for exploring Asian American coming-of-age novels. My introduction both lays out the basic terms of my synthetic method and tests its applicability to specific examples from popular culture (songs, cartoons, T.V. shows, and films) that identify Asians and Asian Americans with rituals of consumption. From the nineteenth-century through to our own time, popular culture images of Asians preparing and consuming food have shaped American perceptions of the group as a whole. This analysis of popular culture images sets the stage for my subsequent exploration of the twentieth-century Asian American novel.

Chapter One focuses on the role of history in Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk*. Food, both Chinese and American, serves as a medium for the eponymous character Donald Duk’s growing knowledge of Chinese American history and proves essential to his positive ethnic development. By claiming pride in Chinese American history and by portraying Chinese men in a variety of empowering occupational roles, Chin directly challenges the legacy of Hop Sing, the pidgin-speaking Chinese cook on *Bonanza*, as well as the general 19<sup>th</sup> century depiction of passive Chinese coolies and kowtowing Chinese houseboys.

Chapter Two investigates the inseparable definitions of consumerism, as both eating and buying, through an analysis of the consumptive habits of Lovey Nariyoshi, the adolescent protagonist in Lois Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*. The edible commodities—Coca Cola—identified with white culture and craved by Lovey are set against the homemade food—wild turkey and deer—consumed by the Nariyoshi family. The trademark items symbolize the white world Lovey wants to exchange for her Japanese roots.

Chapter Three shows the relationship between rituals of mourning that use food and consumption imagery and the longing for an ethnic motherland in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*. In both novels, the process of grieving and identity formation become intertwined with scenes of eating and rituals of mourning, as food consumption becomes a means of compensating loss.

Chapter Four looks at the theme of fusion in Gus Lee's *China Boy* and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*. The adolescent protagonists in these works by Lee and Jen demonstrate the vital possibilities of identifying across ethnic and racial boundaries, where food becomes the primary basis for the framing of multiethnic identities.

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