

Eating Asian:
Listening to Asiatic Femininity in the Kitchen
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To Jayoung Choi
And her mother
And her mother

and Khôi Nguyên Trinh

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Preface

My mom was a stay-at-home-mom. But the ‘stay-at-home’ part always felt inadequate, because she never stayed at home. She was at hospitals - nursing her parents and inlaws, banks - taking care of finance for our family and my grandparents, stores - planning and shopping for any aspect of our lives that required merchandised items, laundromats - getting laundry done and dry cleaning for my father, schools - meeting teachers and planning for my and my brother’s education, her car - driving me, my brother, my father, her sisters, and my grandparents, and ultimately the kitchen - cooking.

But my mom never really liked cooking. She did not hate it, but who loves their job after two decades? Perhaps that’s why when she needed to eat, there wasn’t much cooking involved. Her favorite meal was white bread, peanut butter, and a glass of milk. She ate these curled up in her chair in front of our family computer, watching all kinds of tv shows, especially on home renovation or female friendship. Cooking was about necessity; whenever she got a chance not to cook, she took that. She grew up in a household where every meal was thoroughly planned out in nutrition and taste, all made

from scratch. Consequently, her cooking style resulted in more one-pans, no banchan, and big dish meals, a direct opposition to what she saw and supported in her childhood.

I returned to the U.S. 15 years after being in Korea, and this time, on my own. Trying to replicate a familiar place on my tinier dining table, oceans away from where she was, I asked my mom questions about the other side of the dining table and particularly her memories of the U.S. as a young mom. In a suburb in Arizona, she struggled to find familiarity, always substituting with new ways to ground herself as a foreigner, mother, and wife. This was when I learned that she never really liked cooking.

The 13 hour difference phone calls allowed me to ask what her life was beyond the obligations she designated under the role of a ‘mother.’ What was her life with food beyond cooking for her dependents? What songs did she listen to alone in the car waiting for my classes to end? What did she do after everyone was asleep?

The Kitchen Project is an oral history project recording stories of diasporic Asian mothers, daughters, and non-binary children about their relationship to food and maternal figures. The project stems from a period of time when I started spending a lot of time in the kitchen, seeing reflections of my mother in myself. It is rooted with the desire to not view my mother with pity as a woman who gave up her career due to parenthood and a misogynistic society; it is more complicated, she said. Nor with reverence. Nor through an infantilizing ‘cute Asian auntie’ lens of American media. It’s my attempt to remember her as this person:

After one school day, my mother came to pick me up. She got out of our old but shiny Hyundai Trajet and slammed the door. She leaned on the door as she waited

for me. She was wearing tight jeans, a leather jacket, big sunglasses, and her usual short bob. This was her signature outfit, something in the mix of the early 2000s. She waved big with her arms, yelled out my name out loud, and I ran down the hill to her. This is 최자영¹.

She's also this person: she read my diary when I was young. I wrote that I hated her.

She was shaken during my meltdown, triggered by an eating disorder and plentiful body image issues, after visiting my grandmother's. She asked, "did I ever harm you?"

She loves bread and a cup of latte with a few ice cubes for breakfast. Pizza and chocolate milk for hangovers. Cold noodles on a summer day.

She professed to me, one day on a walk after dinner, "I think this society is sexist." I said, "probably," as she continued to tell me stories of her childhood of educated women, poets, five weddings, my grandfather, a dreamlike snowy province in North Korea.

She wanted to be an architect.

¹ She spells her name as Jayoung Choi in English.

The project also came from the aftermath of the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting, coincidentally when I found my love for cooking. A gunman drove up to three spas with a gun and a vengeful heart towards those who ‘sexually tempt’ him. The project started as a personal escape hole to cope with the shooting. Feeling the weight of grief for blatant Asian hate crime, I posted on my personal Instagram, offering to cook for people who were in a similar state as me—exhausted, resourceless, and needing to be taken care of. I asked, “what dish reminds you of home?” In a few days, I was sharing tupperwares with friends and acquaintances who didn’t have access to kitchens or were too exhausted to nourish themselves. At my doorstep or in my DMs, I was offered recipes, and stories of childhood and maternal figures. Those nourished me more than the actual food.

Apart from its relevance to my personal life and growth, those few days of cooking inspired a framework of an oral history project that centered around an identity I held close in the kitchen: a daughter, Asian, a person somewhere in her immigration journey to, from, or within the United States. I started to record stories from those who also held that identity, but expanded into Asian (however the particular person defined this wild term), femme, and diasporic to embrace the complexities of immigration, gender, and race.

However, as soon as I hit the audio recorder, I started to question where these stories would land. While these stories were held in reverence by me and those who share similar identities, there was inevitable pressure to consider those not in affinity. Perhaps in my nightmares, I was imagining a white man sitting in an archive alone, who listens to the audio, says “there is nothing of value here,” and eats away ‘Asian food’ for dinner.

My conflict in recording these stories emerged when I decided to be in conversation with the invisible listener, who is not physically present in the room with my narrator and I, but waiting for us in the future. Who will listen to these stories and how? Can I maintain the complexity my narrators are offering? Then the question came down to: what methodology is required in audibly recording stories of diasporic Asian mothers, daughters, and non-binary children on their relationship to food and care at this time, in the remains of Covid-19, in the United States?

I won't say more about my mother throughout this writing, because she absolutely refused to do a recorded oral history with me. But as I will explore, my mother is the majority of the fabric of myself, seeing myself reflected and distorted in the mirror in front of me in the form of a maternal figure, who is also Asian, daughter, woman, and once a foreigner to this country. In between the mirror and the subject, I crave to understand the continuous, convoluted circle of mother as child and child as mother. Entangled in stereotypes—fighting, rejecting, destroying or agreeing with them—this is the life of a human living within Asiatic femininity. This is my attempt to somewhat find truth in that life, within and outside of the kitchen.

Terms and Conditions

Throughout this writing, you may find Korean words that are phonetically written in English. Some things have to be in the Korean alphabet because my mother did not speak English. Some have to be in the English alphabet because of my own wistful longing of the Korean language. The curation of these alphabets is bound by my own subjectivity.

But you won't find me guiding you through translation or italicization of these words. This conversation came up in a class at Columbia's Oral History Master of Arts on the topic of transcripts. When we italicize non-English words that are used by multilingual narrators, who are we considering the transcript to be in service of? By the slightest angle, the italicization visually differentiates the non-English word apart from the English words, centering English speakers' experience above the narrators' intended audience. Throughout this paper, I show my struggle in challenging 'best practices' and seeking for relational practices. I wanted to incorporate that principle with my overall writing. I extend this invitation to you too. Maybe my selection of alphabets can teach us more about your relationship to me and mine to you!

I. Asian/food and the *yellow women*

On a vertical screen, Saara Chaudry is looking down at a book, presumably studying, in front of the camera. Her dad appears in the background, playfully presenting Chaudry a small platter of assorted fruit. A warm smile appears on her face as she receives the platter. She grins at the camera. The caption² says, “i swear...cutting fruit is all asian parents’ love language.” This pinned³ video is 5 seconds long with 63.8k likes and 722.5k views. Mae Belen pretends to cry in front of her camera, with text on the video: “right after getting emotionally traumatized by my Asian parents.” The video seamlessly cuts to Belen with a glamorous makeup filter on her face, as she flips her head dramatically with a cut mango in her hand. The top of the screen says “*gives me freshly cut fruit instead of apologizing*.” The video has 80.6k likes.

² In TikTok, ‘captions’ are words that accompany the video and are separated as a text. ‘Subtitles’ are words that are audibly captured by TikTok’s software or the content creator’s input and shown visually on top of the video. ‘Text’ with video is words that are written visually on the video by the editor of the video. The more TikTok content has developed, these three mediums have evolved in its subtlety and playful usage in satire and humor.

³ Because TikTok mostly operates on short-form content (30 seconds), content creators make multiple videos a day, making it difficult to find a particular post in their feed that shows up chronologically from the latest uploaded. TikTok has a feature to highlight up to three videos at the top of the feed so that content creators can select their most famous tiktoks.

In the last couple years, the term ‘cut fruit’ rose to the surface of dominant digital Asian narratives in North America. Mostly popularized in digital platforms, the image of cut fruit became a binder between Asians across the country.⁴ The narrative portrays an Asian parent, and at most times an immigrant, offering a platter of peeled and cut fruit to their child instead of expressively saying the words “sorry” or “I love you.” The term signaled two things—an immigrant parent’s inability to verbally express their love for their children, and food as a substitute for those words.

It’s difficult to say where ‘cut fruit’ exactly came from. While the popularization of the narrative is new to mainstream media, the connection between food and affection is a familiar concept within the Asian community; it has existed in tropes like the question “have you eaten yet?”⁵ substituting direct verbal forms of endearment with food-related matters. However, it is new in popular culture.

The possible answer to this shift from private to public is not entirely about the content of the narrative but also in the mediums in which the narrative has become popular. One aspect that is significantly different from other narratives that talk about affection and food and cut fruit is that the cut fruit narrative became popular amongst Generation Z on TikTok, a short form content platform. With social media’s ability to

⁴The symbol of cut fruit became even more known when an AAPI grassroots organization based in the San Francisco Bay area named themselves Cut Fruit Collective. The organization has been successful since 2020, bringing not only digital activism through food culture in Asian communities but also prosperity focusing on Chinatowns. See *Cut Fruit Collective* for more information.

⁵ Sayaka Matsuoka writes on mental health and race, elaborating how food is centric in her Asian American identity. She writes, “for those that identify as Asian or Asian American, the concept of food as love is as old as the box of expired sauce in my mom’s pantry.” Citing an Asian American psychotherapist who specializes in AAPI mental health Ivy Kwong, her writing shows how prevalent narratives of food are in relationship with showing affection and care: “Food is an Asian love language...It’s the cut fruit, sharing dishes, and sending you off with containers of leftovers” (qtd. In Matsuoka). Cheuk Kwan has also written a book *Have You Eaten Yet: Stories from Chinese Restaurants Around the World*, interviewing diasporic Chinese kitchens, centering the ‘have you eaten yet’ question as a form of endearment and care.

lead with user-generated content and to create personal algorithms, communities who echoed the narrative found each other across time and space in a public domain, disrupting mainstream media on how 'Asian food' is presented.

The significance of the content of the cut fruit narrative comes from the point that it does not directly satisfy the non-Asian perception of Asian food. Most of these fruits are not what would be considered 'Asian' like ramen or curry but largely available to many different parts of the world, like an apple. It is not 'Asian food' but it is Asians' relationship to food that is centric to the narrative; it is how Asians consider food—and largely nutrition—in their lives that make the highlight of these stories. Along this cut fruit narrative, a plethora of positive content around Asian food has appeared, manifesting in the popularity of Asian food amongst Asians and non-Asians. This narrative shift aligns with an overall shift of Asian food representation from disgust to desire particularly in the United States. If Asian food is desirable and not disgusting, are Asians safer? This chapter investigates the history of Asian exoticization through the public perception of 'Asian food.'

Asian Food? Or Food that Asians Eat?

But why food and Asian Americans?⁶ Before we jump in, it is crucial to understand that my predilection for food is not only a personal one but also a political one. Wenying Xu introduces the significance of food in Asian American literature with her book *Eating Identities*, warning her readers that to consider food as an essential product of Asian American culture more than other cultures is simply a false idea. Rather, food is a crucial figure to understanding any culture as a visceral medium that connects the most intimate and foreign. Traveling inside and outside of bodies, it sensorially delineates the difference in people. How we prepare and consume food viscerally forms distinctive identities.

But even with the comprehensive importance of food in any ethnographic work, the overwhelming amount of Asian American literature suffused with references to food and ethnicity stands out. Inspired, Xu asserts that food is a distinctive factor in “the formation of Asian American subjectivity” because of its historical role in the survival of Asian immigrants and racialization of Asian Americans (8). In this chapter, adding onto Xu’s argument, I focus on how food prepared and consumed by Asians is presented and

⁶There are many terms in this writing that may look similar but have slightly different nuances: Asians, Asian Americans, diasporic Asians, etc. This has been influenced partly by my own crisis with my identity as someone who has lived in the United States for a significant amount of time (and grew up here), but is not a naturalized citizen. I have always been uncomfortable if someone has identified me as Asian American because of my lack of papers to verify that I am legally American. Rationally I understand there is much more to an identity than a paper, but I am scared that I may be deceiving people; I am still an alien by law. So here is how I embraced the difference. I use ‘Asians’ when I am entirely referring to a race, or the idea of people who have ancestry in the continent. I use ‘Asian American’ when I am specifically talking about Asians who hold history in this country. I use ‘diasporic Asians (in the US)’ to largely talk about Asians who are in some sort of an immigrant journey and embrace the fragility of borders as identities.

perceived in the United States' contemporary digital culture. It is food's viscosity that so honestly articulates the two affects that racialize Asians: disgust and desire.

Disgust and Desire

Before the narratives of cut fruit or care and affection within those in affinity, the more common public food narratives that bonded Asian Americans were of disgust and alienation. For example, it was common to hear about Asian children and parents struggling with packing lunch for school. This familiar story told a core collective memory among diasporic Asians who lived in predominantly non-Asian spaces—schools, workplaces, etc—becoming conscious of how their food from home differs in its shape, color, smell, and taste compared to their peers' food. The alertness ultimately extends to how their bodies stood out as the Other.

Ligaya Mishan, a food writer for *The New York Times*, conducted interviews with Asian-American chefs in their late 20s to early 40s in 2017, reviewing the rise of 'Asian-American cuisine,' often in high end restaurants. She recalled encountering the lunch box narrative with most of the chefs.

Almost all had stories of neighbors alarmed by the smells from their families' kitchen or classmates recoiling from their lunchboxes. 'I was that kid, with farty-smelling food,' said Jonathan Wu, the Chinese-American chef at Nom Wah Tu in New York. 'I still feel that, if I'm taking the train with garlic chives in my bag.' (Mishan)

The possession of the food odorizes Wu's body. The sensorial experience of smelling the food extends to Wu's body, othering him amongst other smells. This narrative followed

these chefs throughout their formal training, public competitions, and workplaces where their food was most outwardly called *disgusting*.

Did it matter what kind of food these kids packed? Let's say, would a tuna sandwich help these Asian children assimilate? Anita Mannur, an Asian American Studies scholar with a focus on food studies, and Geeta Kothari, an Indian American writer, also bond over their common experience of bringing a tuna sandwich to school as an expression of 'American' (and in the case of Manuur, white Australian) food and assimilation. Manuur reflects on the first day her mother packed a tuna sandwich instead of dahl and rice, and her excitement leading up to that day.

But upon opening my lunchbox, I found something entirely different. My mother had 'Indianized' my lunch and created a bright yellow tuna fish sandwich filling spiced with green chilies, cilantro, chopped onion, and turmeric. ("Food Matters: An Introduction " 209-210)

Despite finding a tuna sandwich in her lunchbox, ultimately the filling was different. Poetically the bright yellow filling speaks to the core of Manuur's ethnic identity, or her Otherness from her white peers, even if the difference was simply having a variant of a tuna salad recipe.

Perhaps it does not matter what is in the sandwich anymore. Kothari finds this pervasive Othering in her tuna sandwich even before it is completed. She writes

The tuna smells fishy, which surprises me because I can't remember anyone's tuna sandwich actually smelling like fish. And the tuna in those sandwiches doesn't look like this, pink and shiny, like an internal organ...I see their sandwiches, yet cannot explain the discrepancy between them and the stinking, oily fish in my mother's hand. (6-7)

There is no spice that changes the sandwich. Even when eating the same food, in the hands of an *Asian*, the food changes; it is colored, smelly, and ultimately consumed by the Asian. The Asian is the spice itself.

This narrative of disgust morphs and reappears in different shapes: dog eating, MSG, unhealthy, dirty, smelly, etc. Frank H. Wu, a renowned legal scholar, writes on the tabooed question—do Asians eat dogs? Wu introduces the case of Joey Skaggs, a performance artist and prankster, who “sent 1,500 letters to dog shelters around the U.S. soliciting their unwanted dogs for \$.10 a pound,” masquerading as a Korean man named Kim Yung Soo in 1994 (“Dog Meat Soup”). The letter contained languages like ‘Dog no suffer,’ clearly evoking an image of an Asian whose first language is not English.⁷ Skaggs soon received phone calls from people who would call him a “yellow filthy devil and suggest Asians be deported, killed or canned,” showing great animosity towards Asians (Tierney). Here, rather than disgust towards the food, disgust towards the food-eater is directly expressed.

So does it matter if Asians do eat dogs or not? Wu’s conclusion is to not answer the forbidden question because the answer is a dead-end. The asking of the question is already an act of racializing an Asiatic person, leading to a futile answer. He rather turns the question back to the questioner and investigates the intentions behind the question; what does this question actually mean?

Madhavi Mallapragada, a media studies scholar with a concentration in South Asian American studies, specifically names to say that these types of associations are a

⁷ Skaggs later on revealed that it was a hoax and his intentions in highlighting “issues of cultural bias, intolerance and racism” (qtd. in Tierney).

code. For Indian immigrants, curry is a *code*, a “metaphorical and cover form of representation” of the undesirable presence of the humans who eat such food particularly in Silicon Valley (265).⁸ Digital forums are flooded with questions fixated on the lingering smell of Indian food, or curry: “how can I stop a curry smell? Getting rid of the curry smell? My house smells like curry, help!!!” (Mallapragada 264). Like the smell, the Indian immigrants do not go away, whether in business or residential spaces. The narrative of an unwanted presence of an overwhelming number of the Other appears through the viscosity of food. Both the narratives of dog-eating and smelly curry are not much about the truth, but what they represent of the people who eat them.

How did this narrative of disgust emerge? Let’s remind ourselves in these rather disturbing examples that the correlation of disgust and ‘Asian food’ is a fabricated relationship with an explicit objective. One of the clearer juxtapositions is the perception of Chinese food before and after the Chinese Exclusion Act. With the California Gold Rush in the mid-1800s, Chinese immigrants from Canton, at first mostly entrepreneurs who were seeking to invest and trade and then labor immigrants, significantly increased in the West Coast, marking the first major wave of Asian immigrants into the US. Policies like the Foreign Miners License Law which further taxed non-US citizens who were mining pushed Chinese immigrants out of mines and to new sectors, especially those that construct foodways—agriculture and cooking.⁹

⁸ It is needless to say that the word curry itself is already an invented word by imperialism and signifies to such history. See Mallapragada pg. 266 on food imperialism.

⁹ See “From Gold Rush to Golden State,” *Eating Identities*, and *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States*.

Food cooked by Chinese immigrants was popular. Chinese restaurants were valued for their cleanliness, taste, price, and hospitality. These few restaurants gained immense popularity especially amongst non-Chinese laborers and journalists with their food that was adapted to their clientele. Writings on ‘Chinese food’ appeared often in California newspapers; Chinese men were hired to cook at private homes of white American families (Liu 47).

When exclusion of Chinese immigrants became a public agenda with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, ethnic prejudice reached every corner of American society and the perception of Chinese immigrants and their food quickly changed. Racial rhetoric on Chinese food culture even influenced American children. Some of them grew up learning and passing around racist rhymes about Chinese eating rats...at school,

Chinaman, Chinaman,
Eat dead rats!
Chew them up
Like gingersnaps!” (Liu 40)¹⁰

and echoing back in hit musicals and movies—even with famous singers such as Judy Garland. Liu comments that “ironically, Judy Garland was a frequent customer at General Lee’s Restaurant in Los Angeles’s Chinatown in the 1930s” (41). Remember that icky feeling you just had reading that sentence; I will be returning to it later.

On the other hand, the desire for otherness also emerges within food. An intriguing point that Xu makes is that, despite this convoluted relationship with food, food itself is often an entry point to conversation with white people for herself. Xu also

¹⁰ The hit musical and movie that contained the song was *Meet Me in St. Louis*, starring Judy Garland singing the song. The rhyme continued until the 1950s (Liu 41).

observes that some Asian American writers try to capture the readers' sensorial fantasies with images of Oriental food. Judy Garland sang lyrics that directly spoke to the supposed rat-eating habits of Chinese people but frequented Chinese restaurants. Mishan identifies the other end of lunchbox narratives where chefs are outwardly exoticized. Vietnamese American chef Hung Huynh was criticized by a cooking competition judge for not including his 'Vietnamese roots' in his cooking. When Chinese American chef Anita Lo sends recipes to publications, she often receives comments such as "we were really hoping for something Asian." Lo clarifies, "Asian-ish: anything with soy, apparently, will do."

This convoluted circle of disgust and desire is an intricate system held up not only by non-Asians but also Asians themselves. In the play *The Year of the Dragon*, a Chinatown tour guide runs into conflict with his sister, a Chinese cookbook author (in "Food" 95). In describing the sister's ambition to use food and orientalism as sources of profit, Chin coins 'food pornography,' a reference and inspiration point for Asian American studies scholars like Anita Mannur, Wenying Xu, and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. Wong defines food pornography as

reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one's otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system. Like exchanging sexual services for food, food pornography is also a kind of prostitution, but within an important difference: superficially, food pornography appears to be a promotion, rather than a vitiation or devaluation, of one's ethnic identity. (Wong 56)

While Wong and Chin focus more on the sister who is an Asian trying to appeal to white Americans' taste buds, I want to dive deeper. What is the underlying algorithm that

makes us do so? What desire is behind those who consume the oriental food with pornographic eyes and mouths?

The dichotomy has always existed; Asian food is disgusted and desired both through the Orientalist. Therefore Asians, those who seemingly prepare and eat those foods, are disgusted and desired by the Orientalist. However, between the representation and the life, there is a gap. There is food that Asians eat—whether that is just peanut butter and jelly, a bowl of rice porridge, or literally anything—and Asian food for the consumption of the Orientalist. To question what it is to eat as an orientalized person is not about the content of the food, but the other eyes and mouths craving the food on top of the orientalized's plate.

Here I spotlight something that is always in conflict. When an apple sits on a table, it is an apple. When an Asian—or to be more direct, an Oriental person—holds and takes a bite of this apple, the apple becomes an 'Asian food' in the gaze of an Orientalist. Therefore we can conclude that 'Asian food' is a perception that fluctuates as Asianness, the racialization of Asiatic people, also morphs. Even the sources I have cited and further cite in this paper cannot unify who counts as 'Asian.' Some count East Asians, SouthEast Asians, and South Asians to be Asian. Or East and SouthEast only. Or including Pacific Islanders. Then what about Central Asians? West Asians? What is considered 'Asian' is constant flux.

Reclaiming the Delicious Asian Food

But now ‘Asian food’ is even more popular. It’s *really* popular. It is common for people to eat kimchi as an appetizer in public restaurants or drink iced chai instead of coffee on the street. Asian food has been steadily increasing in popularity for a while, and some link it to the rising population of Asians in the United States. But can something else be at play? While this increased popularity may have a complex undergirding of international relations¹¹, food culture, business, and technology, one of the industries that showed the most noticeable push was in social media.

With the beginning of lock down in March 2020 due to the surge of Covid-19, people diverted to virtual platforms to maintain a social life. TikTok had one of the most drastic growths in user numbers, increasing by 85% compared to 2019 in the US (“Number of TikTok users in the United States from 2019 to 2025”). As restaurants closed down and eating at home was the only option due to the highly infectious respiratory disease, people started cooking more expansively¹²—in the context of which ‘Asian food’ became a big hit.

Beyond the original recipe sharing videos that increased during the lockdown, there are now countless types of content around Asian food: highlighting mom and pop shops, review of trendy foods, teaching recipes that focus on particular diets (vegan, easy meals, authentic meals, cheap meals, etc), showcasing food centering the ethnicity of the content creator, etc. Some focus on the making of the actual dish, and some focus on the

¹¹ It is important to note that several countries such as Thailand and China have been directly involved with the large number of respective restaurants as part of diplomatic strategies.

¹² See Repko, “The pandemic’s new chefs and foodies: How the health crisis shaped what we cook and crave.”


storytelling aspect of it. There are innumerable niches that content creators adhere to which cannot be elaborated fully here.

Oftentimes, these dishes, restaurants, or recipes become replicable trends, and whether professional content creators or not, users are eager to reproduce what they see on their screens. For example, if one content creator makes a TikTok about a mom and pop shop, giving a review, dozens of other content creators also visit the shop, reviewing them in their own niches. Then casual social media users also replicate and showcase their experience. Often in these TikToks, dishes are presented aesthetically, the audio resembles ASMR videos, and everyone moans as they take a bite of the colorful food in front of them.

But Asians are not the only ones making content on Asian food. While there are casual social media users who replicate the recipes that they want to try out, there are also non-Asian and full-time content creators whose digital identities are buying, making, and eating Asian food. Logan (also known for handle @logagm on TikTok) went viral after cooking Korean dishes from scratch. His one minute video in 2021 of eating kimchi, white rice, and cucumber brought 3.6 million views and 518.0k likes.¹³ This led to his current 2.9 million followers as of 2023 August, and he is presumably represented by a professional agency. In his viral style of videos, Logan does not make any audible comment on the food, but sometimes gives a little smile, or a quiet ‘mmm’ as he approves the food. Eating more ‘authentically’ has brought Logan appraisal from Korean

¹³ It is quite ironic that the soundtrack used in this video says, “What’s something you could eat every single day and not get tired of? And I’m not talking about something you eat sometimes that you just love, but I’m talking about something that you’re *disgustingly* obsessed with” ([@logagm]).

audiences. Even white people like Asian food, and especially those that were too smelly to pack for lunch.

Ophelia Nichols, whose digital identity is Mama Tots, is known for reviewing dishes made by her Filipino neighbor Mrs. Vee. In her playlist titled “Mrs. Vee’s Treats 

The absence of Asian bodies in Logan’s and Mama Tots’ videos is rather compelling. In both of Logan’s and Mama Tot’s videos, there are no signs of disgust nor an over the top desire. The comments in the video compliment them on their cultural appropriateness and willingness to try food that they presumably are not familiar with. But there is not much focus on the Asianness of the food. They are rather agents of multiculturalism. One can only wonder how different it would be if an Asian person was visibly present with the food.

This digital popularity actualized not only in individuals’ pantries but also in the business of ‘Asian food.’ Joanne Lee Molinaro (former handle @thekoreanvegan), a former lawyer and now full-time food content creator, recently published a cookbook, *The Korean Vegan Cookbook*. Cassie Yeung (handle @cassyeungmoney), a former dancer and now young cook whose videos mostly focus on cooking various Asian food from home, starred in *Next Level Chef*, a popular cooking reality tv show led by Gordon

Ramsay, and will publish a cookbook soon (Hale). Newt Nguyen (handle @newt), self-taught cook, now owns a hot sauce brand. From Asian-inspired seltzers to chili oil, Asian inspired grocery startups are increasing (Barkho).

Even in the restaurant industry, the number of ‘Asian’ restaurants have increased as well as the incorporation of Asian flavors in non-Asian restaurants.¹⁴ Blending of miso, gochujang, fish sauce, or turmeric is easily found in New American restaurants. Enter most cafes, and one can find chai and matcha.

The irony persists.

While Asian food gained its popularity especially during Covid-19, making its way to the pantries and kitchens of non-Asians, 9,081 hate crime incidents were reported to Stop AAPI Hate in between March 19, 2020 and June 30, 2021 (Chen et al. 1). The most recent report published by Stop AAPI Hate in May 2023 shows cumulative 11,000 AAPI hate crimes, even while “only one in five (21%) Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who experienced discrimination said they reported it” (Chan et al. 3). People may love food prepared and consumed by Asians, but that does not necessarily correlate to Asians’ well-being. Frank Wu poignantly points out that “we forget that people can eat Asian foods but still have contempt for Asian peoples...Eating at a Chinese restaurant is

¹⁴ By 2023, “Around three-quarters of all counties in the U.S. (73%) have at least one Asian restaurant of any kind. And in eight counties with at least 15 restaurants of any type, Asian restaurants make up at least a quarter of all food establishments. Half of those counties are in California...Chinese restaurants are found in every state and in 70% of all U.S. counties. Every state and a third or more of all counties also have at least one Japanese (45%) or Thai (33%) restaurant” (Shah and Widjaya). However, I have to note that when working with Columbia Library resources, I had a difficult time looking for the exact quantitative data, except for knowing this by personal experience living in New York City. I was notified by the business librarian that there wasn’t an exact category called ‘Asian’ restaurants. Perhaps there was a miscommunication between the librarian and I, but I use this data with a slight skepticism and curiosity towards the data gathering process.

not the same as ‘breaking bread’ with Chinese people” (Wu 223). We live in the most heightened version of disgust and desire.

Especially at the beginning of Covid-19, Asian Americans who work in the food industry were haunted by reemerging stereotypes that resembled ones from the 20th century. Due to Covid-19’s origin in Wuhan’s wet markets, ‘bat-eater’ reappeared as a reincarnation of ‘rat-eater.’ Cherng et al. finds that the sudden decrease of business in Asian restaurants from January 2020 is connected to the perception of Covid-19, as well as the unexpected increase of health inspections in January and February of 2020 in Asian restaurants. The racist graffiti and vandalism¹⁵ targeted towards Asian restaurants are unfortunately resemblant to voice messages left to Joey Skaggs, or Kim Yung Soo, to let him know the fate of Asians in the country. Even in the *New York Times*, a random picture of Asian elders in Manhattan’s Chinatown appeared in an article associated with articles about Covid-19, subconsciously associating Asian Americans to the bat-eating Oriental (Goldstein, Roy). All that to say, the underlying structures of othering have never disappeared.

Even with this irony, it is strange yet exhilarating for Asians who have been in the country before the popularization of Asian food to witness this complete turn of events. In much of the short form content around Asian food, Kimmy Yam observes that children of Asian immigrants are leading in the efforts to reframe Asian food, changing the narrative of their childhoods of thrown away lunch boxes. They often do so by showcasing actual food that they eat at home or restaurants that were not deemed

¹⁵ Also see Cherng et al.

delicious enough in the past. Some creators are taking it further by shedding light on culinary imperialism such as canceling the word ‘curry’ ([@rootedinspice]).

The amount of Asian food content on Asian American identity is surprising, but it is not completely new. Before TikTok, food blogs were crowded with an “unusual abundance” of Asian American home chefs (Lopez 151). Lori Kid Lopez, whose research focuses on the intersection of race and digital media, investigates the weight of ‘authenticity’ in Asian American food bloggers’ brand identity. While there are unique individual experiences of being Asian American and cooking food in each blog, Lopez also articulates a “symbolic capital” in marketing one’s blog as an expert of the Other’s food.

Within this contentious space, Lopez identifies an imperative observation that happens in the construction of authenticity for racial branding: maternal figures. These bloggers often “*pair* their recipes with stories about a grandmother who made them the dish as a child or about helping their mother in the kitchen as she explained the origins of the dish” (157; italics are mine). Like a garnish, the stories of maternal figures become part of the racial branding of the blogger, making the presented dish more palatable. This brings to the finale of this chapter, the emergence of the *palatable yellow woman*.

Asian maternal figures are continuously invoked in reclaiming mainstream narratives of Asian immigrants. Shaan Merchant, in reviewing Asian-American chefs who work with their mothers, also observes “a nostalgia and *reverence* for the foods of [their] childhood (and the often maternal figures who made them)” (italics are mine). The aforementioned Korean Vegan’s cookbook’s introduction only writes her grandmother

and mother in phonetic Korean, “Halmuhnee” and “Omma” but her paternal figures as Daddy and Grandfather (Lee-Molinaro 12-3). It is imperative to question how this representation of our maternal figures influences our collective and individual memories of maternal figures and, at large, Asiatic femininity.

I am truly guilty. The thought of motherhood, a nourishing person who gives a warm place, is often a site for creativity for myself. I even started the project with the objective to gather more ‘nourishing’ stories at the site of motherhood. I often talk about my mother’s food when I cook or eat. However, when I take steps back into my memory, I truly wonder if her cooking is only a site of nourishment for me. I want to stress that my memories with her in the kitchen are still precious to me and I am not invalidating other femme diasporic Asians’ relationship to their maternal figures’ cooking. But I wonder, is that all there is to her? This is my attempt to complicate my memory of her and challenge how much of my memory is persuaded by the collective memory of us fabricating a story of a nourishing mother that will make our Other bodies palatable.

Let me take you back to where this started. One of the most significant events in the rising hate crimes during and in the remnants of Covid-19 was the Atlanta spa shooting. On March 16th, 2021, a gunman drove up to three spas, shooting 8 people of which 6 were Asian women over two hours. When the police caught the suspect, he stated that he executed the shooting as a “vengeance” to massage parlors who tempt him with his “sexual addiction” (Fausset et al.). Kelly Pau, in her article on Asian women representation in cyborg films, writes, the shooting came as “no surprise” since Asiatic

femininity has always been seen as a fetishized ornamental personhood, part human and part prosthetic.¹⁶

Pau's theory derives from Anne Anlin Cheng's *Ornamentalism*. Cheng, an esteemed scholar in psychoanalysis, race, gender, and Asian American studies, conceptualizes the ontology of Asiatic femininity. Acknowledging the lack of critical theory on Asiatic femininity, Cheng boldly presents the *yellow woman*, an imaginary of Asiatic femininity that is "inextricable from synthetic extensions, art, and commodity" rather than flesh and blood (3). Combining the Oriental and the Ornament, ornamentalism is a "peculiar process...whereby *personhood is named and conceived through ornamental gestures*" (18; italics are original). Through the makings of legal personhood in U.S. judicial fields, fabrication of celebrities like Anna May Wong, Chinese blue willow porcelain, sushi, and cyborgs, Cheng uses animated objects and objectified humans to shatter the illusion of complete independence of personhood from thingness. Most importantly, Cheng shows that the ontology of a *yellow woman* is not constructed only through visibility. It is through taste, texture, vision and all kinds of senses that the epidermis and organs of the *yellow woman* are made to become an ornament to white modern personhood.

'Asian' food is an oriental image, and Asian women live within the *yellow women*. Undoubtedly there is realness and complexity in the lives of people who we would categorize as Asian women, but they are perceived through the lens of Asiatic femininity. In her theories, Cheng demonstrates the "unsettling complicity between

¹⁶ Pau beautifully writes on techno-orientalism, summarized in a short article.

aesthetics and consumption” in the life of living as a *yellow woman*, someone who is perceived as the sliver of a white personhood, an ornament (Cheng 109).

In one of the memorial articles written on the Atlanta spa shooting, Chavez and Chen report on the aftermath of such violence and how it has created despair in the families. For Robert Peterson, son of Yong Ae Yue, they write

As Peterson and his family await a trial, he tries not to feel the loss of his mother at every corner of their home, especially in the kitchen, where he proudly keeps the ceramic bowls and pots that his mother used to teach him how to cook his favorite dish, Kimchi-jigae, a type of traditional stew. (Chavez and Chen)

While well-intentioned, I cannot stop myself from thinking about how the mother is portrayed. I want to once more articulate that I am focusing not on the reality of this family and their affinity to food. I rather focus on Chavez and Chen’s inclination to introduce Yong Ae Yue, next to the ceramic bowls and pots, or in the memories of Kimchi-jigae, “a type of traditional stew.” It is like Cheng’s blue willow porcelain but in a different texture of an ornament named motherhood. Even within our affinities, ‘Asian food’ and the *yellow woman* know one thing in common: how to exist as the fetishized.

So how do we move on from here? In the brief moment I hit the recording button, I looked at the dumplings my narrator made, me, and her. Despite all this analysis on the fragmented relationship between Asiatic femininity and Asian food, I still find comfort in the kitchen. At the end of the day, we need food to survive. The kitchen—physical and symbolic—has been central to infrastructures of survival and flourishing in the Asian community. Then, in this oral history project that aims to record and archive stories that

contain a multitude of relationships to maternal figures and food, as Mannur would ask, “how, indeed, might we conceptualize individual and communal relationships to food practices, confronting the dilemma of diversity without naively celebrating it” (“Food Matters” 211)? And I ask, what are the elements needed in this project to put forward truthful narratives of our kitchens without recreating the orientalizing cycle of disgust and desire?

Two premises.

First: The cut fruit narrative is not perfect. It may stereotype Asian immigrants into people who are not able to express their emotions, like the Inscrutable Oriental. It also fails to provide complex narratives of various relationships to food and intergenerational conflict within the Asian diaspora. However, the narrative is successful in creating distance between the Asian and the Oriental food. The content of the food—or the affect of eating or consuming it—does not matter in this narrative.¹⁷ What could be the difference? In this narrative, the fruit is not a recipe that can be replicated. Because of the lack of focus on what is actually on that fruit platter, the desire for consumption of Asian experience through food tempers. Unlike food content that invites the public to make, eat, or buy Asian food, this narrative cannot be recreated unless one acquires an Asian immigrant child and a parent.

Second: In the first chapter of *Ornamentalism*, Cheng introduces the Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women, the first American Supreme court where an Asian

¹⁷ I am mainly talking about the classic cut fruit narrative that is presented in the preface. Some content creators have customized it to talk about the origin of the fruit (and how it relates to their families’ origins), or why a particular fruit resonates with them, which do not apply to this point.

woman (in this case Chinese) appears. Following the arrival of the *SS Japan* that carried over 600 Chinese immigrants, twenty two women were detained for looking like prostitutes.¹⁸ Chy Lung, one of the women, proceeded to the Supreme Court, where Dr. Ortis Gibson, who spent time in China as a missionary, provided knowledge on Chinese prostitutes. He asserted that the lewd women in China wore flowery, bright-colored, decorative garments, and sometimes under their outer garments. Chy Lung and the other women wore “uninteresting, black, loose-fitting clothes” (34). What was actually visually presented to the men did not matter, because the idea of Asiatic femininity itself was decorative enough to have the women fetishized.

While Cheng further elaborates on how other senses penetrate into the ornamental being’s life, sound is not a big part of her argument. Flipping through her book, I found an endnote attached to the Fourth District Court of San Francisco, the trial that happened before Chy Lung’s trial. There was

a dramatic moment during the trial when Judge Morrison cleared the courtroom and hurriedly retreated to his chambers when he found the women’s “cries” to be too “incoherent and cacophonous.” In short, the demand of real bodies was in fact unbearable to the court. The vocal presence of these women was in fact remarkable. (168)

Something about this endnote fascinated me. Visually, the twenty two women were uncontrollably ornamented with the imagination of the femme Oriental. Despite wearing plain, black clothes in a ship for months, they were imagined to be hiding luscious

¹⁸ This was quite literal. Despite previously having gone through immigration interviews, the women were accused as prostitutes by the then California commission of Immigration Rudolph Piotrowski because, in his visual judgment, the women were alone and their appearances were “perfectly unsatisfactory” (Cheng 29-30).

flowers under their clothes. But if “the demand of real bodies” through sound shattered the ornament even a bit, can this be a premise for my methodology? If we listen to the sounds of kitchens of Asiatic femininity, are we able to listen beyond the spectacles of palatable Asiatics on our plates?

These dilemmas that loomed over the project pushed a critical rethinking of oral history methodology for the project and also complicated my faith in oral history as a medium. I wanted to record life stories of maternal figures and those who see the reflections, while also creating space for them to explore their ethnicity, cultural heritage, gender dynamics, and maternal relationships. I was eager to experiment with oral history mostly because of my preconceptions that a) oral history only used sound, and b) therefore can reduce the sensationalized gazes. Within this process, I discovered that my interlocutors were not only my narrators and myself but also the listeners, who were shaping our conversations. So how do we communicate across time to the listener in the archive? Can a recounting of sound, the medium between my listener and the oral history makers¹⁹ in the kitchen, provide a new answer? In the next few chapters, you will be reading about my misconceptions, my experimentations, and moments I found within and outside the kitchen that continuously challenge me.

¹⁹ I use this term instead of narrators and oral historians for this oral history project. Given my affinity to the narrators' identities and agency I emphasize to give my narrators, it seemed more appropriate to group us together into those who make the oral history together.

An amuse-bouche: canned peas, cafeteria, and *American* food

RATTANA

But then you know entering elementary school, I loved cafeteria food-

ARIEL

Really?

RATTANA

because, it was, like, because it was *American* food.

ARIEL

Ah.

RATTANA

I don't know. It's like um

not that I disliked my mom's cooking or anything like that. But I think maybe just the idea of like, I don't know, you know, like I

still love canned peas. It has, it has a particular taste and it reminds me of cafeteria peas.

And um, and maybe, (I) have it when I was younger, but I love canned peas. Um, but yeah. School lunches I really liked.

And then as far as like at home, trying to remember what my mom cooked. But, um, I don't know, maybe that gets a bit more fuzzy, because I think she cooked a bunch of different things.

Wow.

It's interesting now that I look back on it. I wonder if I didn't have as much Lao food when I was little. Which is really bizarre to think about. Um,

I don't know if it was because I was just really picky, and you know, I didn't mind maybe like the simple Lao food. Like, “okay I'm just gonna dip sticky rice and soy sauce, or something” as a kid. But I- I think, maybe during that time, I wonder if unconsciously between me and my family, I think, we were trying to assimilate. I feel like that word ‘assimilate’ can be such a loaded word in a way. Um, I used to-

I used to define that word to be a certain way, but now I kind of think of it in a different way now. But I think, like, during that time, I think we were just sort of unconsciously trying to assimilate. And so we gravitated, or at least for me, I think I gravitated towards American food.



Figure 1. Google's usage of the word predilection in a sentence.