

Introduction: Food Matters

It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of immigrant Indian existence in the United States without at the same time thinking of Indian food.

—KEYA GANGULY, *STATES OF EXCEPTION*

CARRIE BRADSHAW: *When a girl gets backed up against a wall she can't afford, she has to consider renting others (sniffing through open window). Do . . . Do I smell curry?*

REALTOR: *There's an Indian restaurant downstairs.*

CB: *Delia, I ask you, how can this apartment be \$2,800 a month? I pay \$750 for something that's twice the size and it don't smell like takeout.*

REALTOR: *You have a rent-controlled apartment. I suggest you stay there.*

CB: *Unfortunately, that's not an option. Now what other shit holes are you showing me today?*

—“RING A DING DING,” *SEX AND THE CITY*

I was looking for some kind of symbol which would represent the success of Indians abroad, something that would symbolize what they have gone through in their long history . . . But look at it metaphorically. Indians have gone abroad, have lived in the most challenging environments in the world and they have done well. Indian coconuts have done very well abroad. Now, what is the coconut famous for? It grows on sandy soil, requires very little water, and requires virtually no maintenance. In other words, send an Indian anywhere, just let them be, with minimum nourishment and watch the tree grow taller and taller until it dominates the landscape. That is what I think the Indian Diaspora is like.

—LALIT MANSINGH, “THE STORY OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA IS COMPELLING AND INSPIRING”

On December 12, 2003, Lalit Mansingh, former Indian ambassador to the United States, delivered a speech to a crowd of Indian Americans at the annual awards banquet of the weekly news magazine *India Abroad*. During his speech, Mansingh spoke in no uncertain terms about the lofty achievements of the Indian diaspora, especially the strand of the diaspora located in the United States. In speaking about the purported resilience of the Indian character, Mansingh suggests the coconut is an apt metaphor for Indians because “it grows on sandy soil, requires very little water, and requires virtually no maintenance” (S16). Here, the co-

coconut stands in for all that rings stereotypic about Indian Americans: the notion that the community is uniformly flourishing and has made the better of often hostile environments. Mansingh's narrative, to be sure, privileges the experiences of upwardly mobile and middle- to upper-class Indian Americans, ignoring the experiences of those Indian Americans who do not flourish in the United States—Indian Americans located on the lower rungs of society's ladder: the working class, the undocumented, and the disenfranchised.

Mansingh's use of the term "coconut" is intriguing. Typically used to reference assimilatory moves among Indian Americans and South Asian Americans, the term "coconut" is more colloquially used to name individuals who might identify as "white." With its hints of a racial ontology, the term suggests there are authentic and less authentic ways of being Indian. Looking Indian, being brown on the outside, and having a particular set of tastes and preferences that don't necessarily correspond to predetermined notions of what it means to be Indian may lead to one being labeled a coconut—white on the inside and brown on the outside. Other communities of color frequently apply culinary metaphors to speak of similar forms of racialized performance. Within the African American community, the favored term is "Oreo"; among East Asian Americans, the terms "banana" and "Twinkie" are analogues to the Oreo, and for Native Americans, the term "apple" serves a similar function. Woven through each of these metaphors is a narrative of ethnic betrayal: the notion that one might be colored brown, black, yellow, or red on the outside, and act in a way to suggest one is "white" on the inside.¹ To capture the sentiments of South Asian youth who do not identify with whiteness, but choose instead to mark their alliance with Blackness, KB, a member of the hip-hop Indian group Karmacy, presents the term "rotten coconut," brown on the outside but black on the inside. Nitasha Sharma argues that such seemingly simplistic metaphors are actually more complicated; while bananas and coconuts are healthy fruit, connoting positive identification with whiteness, the image of rotten coconut carries a negative stigma. While these metaphors are context-specific, they hint at the dynamic nature of racial categories, deconstructing the idea that race is "something 'natural'—whether biologically or culturally so" (Sharma 30–31). Surprisingly, Mansingh's speech seems ignorant of this complex and sullied history behind the term "coconut," whether in a state of presumed "freshness" or "rotteness": instead, he identifies the coconut in the most positive terms as a symbol of potent upward mobility, one which would ignore the appalling effects of race and class discrimination

that are more salient for those without access to the education, social services, and adequate language skills necessary for survival in an increasingly monolingually driven cultural and political economy.

Underlying Mansingh's glib assertions about Indianness is a rather simple truism: when it comes to thinking about South Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far. Outside of Mansingh's assertions, much of the positive valorization of Indianness is linked to the growing popularity of Indian food and the popularity of India-inspired clothing, fashion, and commodities within spaces and communities that have become South Asian diasporic sites. Discursively the terms by which "Indianness" is imagined almost always mobilizes a culinary idiom; more often than not food is situated in narratives about racial and ethnic identity as an intractable measure of cultural authenticity. While Mansingh's assertions may take on a unique character insofar as he actively seeks out the realm of the culinary to metaphorize U.S.-based Indian diasporas, he is by no means the only political figure to link food with cultural and ethnic identity, particularly as it relates to Indian bodies.

Only two years prior to Mansingh's speech, another political figure—this time on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean—connected culinary symbols with race and ethnicity. In the now infamous "chicken tikka masala" speech, Robin Cook, then foreign secretary for Britain, famously claimed chicken tikka masala (also popularly referred to as "CTM") for Britain, proclaiming the popular spicy chicken dish as Britain's national dish. The speech, not surprisingly, spurred wide interest among the British public, food critics, and Indians around the world. Purists among the critics decried chicken tikka masala as an inauthentic imitation of a culinary item with no antecedent in India, while activists among Black British communities were aghast that a British political leader might so willfully ignore the complex historical conditions which have led to Indian restaurateurs creating CTM for consumption in their restaurants.

As legend has it, the dish was born to satisfy the bland palate of an English diner. Iqbal Wahhab, a journalist and restaurateur, suggests that CTM was invented by a Bangladeshi chef in an Indian restaurant. As the story goes, upon being served chicken tikka, a traditionally dry preparation of meat, an irate customer demanded to know where the gravy was in the dish he ordered. To placate the customer, the chef whipped up a sauce made of Campbell's cream of tomato soup and some spices, and thus was born chicken tikka masala. While the origins of the dish are certainly elusive, especially for its purist detractors, the debate around chicken tikka masala is fascinating for it chronicles the ways in which

food becomes indelibly grafted onto the national psyche, at the same time that the larger debate functions as an index of apparently changing cultural norms. In its current usage, CTM is more frequently consumed as post-pub fare: a spicy concoction to satisfy the appetite of inebriated individuals. But while the consumer market may have legitimized CTM as a “British” dish to the point that it, along with a number of other Indian foods, has “arrived” and been packaged for the frozen-meal market, one cannot overlook the role played by entrepreneurial innovators such as Indian immigrant Ghulam Noon. His company, Noon Products, specializes in prepackaged frozen Asian meals and is widely available in supermarkets. The products are so popular that some credit Noon for making CTM a household name in Britain. And yet a more clear history that might account for how an immigrant of Indian origin might have been able to successfully foment a career by selling CTM to a largely white public, a brilliant entrepreneurial move by most estimations, does not emerge in Cook’s speech.²

For Robin Cook, chicken tikka masala represents a new form of multiculturalism, notably one in which the British national character is praised for its ability and willingness to “absorb” from and adapt the culinary histories of its immigrants and formerly colonized subjects. Left out of Robin Cook’s praise is the notion that the CTM version of Indianness is malleable enough to be reinvented by Britons without any rigorous interrogation about what enables British consumers to have access to CTM in the first instance. Indeed, the very conditions of colonialism that brought Indians to Britain, the conditions of race and class in Britain which made it necessary for South Asian immigrants to enter into the business of making Indianness palatable to Western tastes, and the question of who, or what, is responsible for making Indianness available to the mainstream British palate form a narrative that is wholly submerged in Cook’s fantasy of British-style multiculturalism. Put another way, what makes CTM acceptable on British tables when the same Indian bodies that produce CTM are not welcome to sit at the table with the British?³ Whatever the origins of the dubious dish might be, one thing is certain: the CTM debate has ceased to be (if it ever was) exclusively about food. The CTM debate is as much, if not more, about anxieties about cultural admixtures, race, and ethnicity as it is about accurately chronicling the etymology for a dish comprised of tandoori-style meat drenched in masala sauce: something that seems so quintessentially “British” that British persons may claim to know good Indian food better than Indians, for instance.

Read together, Mansingh's and Cook's speeches speak to the cultural continuum linking migratory subjects from South Asia. The "contributions" of South Asian bodies, separated by oceans, can be made to best resonate if apprehended through culinary metaphors and symbols. Left out of both their glowing statements is any sense of how the culinary practices and preferences of the South Asian diasporic subjects they both celebrate might also be connected to the racism and tension that South Asian bodies with ever greater frequency experience on a daily basis. Where, for instance in either of these celebratory utterances is a sense of how food odors, often indelibly grafted onto bodies of racialized subjects, serve to negatively racialize South Asian bodies? Here, various forms of popular culture in the United States and the United Kingdom illustrate the multiple complexities and conflicts enmeshed with culinary rhetoric. One might recall the scene from the hit television series *Sex and the City* in which Carrie Bradshaw turns her nose up at an apartment that, to her, reeks of Indian food; something that identifies the apartment to her as a "shit hole." The 2007 racial controversy emerging from the British reality show *Celebrity Big Brother* offers yet another example of South Asian food carrying a negative stigma. When one of the contestants, Jade Goody, entered into a protracted argument with Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, the former launched her tirade against the actress in culinary terms, calling her "Shilpa Poppadom," referring to the customary appetizer served in Indian restaurants. While the British and Indian publics quickly came to Shetty's defense, lambasting Goody for her racism couched in culinary terms, it quickly became apparent how seamlessly Goody's racism dovetailed with a negative rendering of Indian food. Amid Cook's and Mansingh's rhetoric of culinary multiculturalism, where are the narratives that bear witness to the often horrifying work conditions of those who labor in restaurant kitchens in the United States and Britain to serve CTM?

Take, for example, a powerful scene from the film *The Guru*, in which familiarity with Indian food buttresses a stunning moment of racial abjection in the otherwise unspectacular film. A Bollywood-inspired film that hit North American screens in early 2003, *The Guru* centers its narrative on Ramu, a young Indian immigrant who arrives in New York in search of the American Dream. Ramu, a stylish young man who makes a living instructing middle-aged women in India in the techniques of the macarena dance, discovers his first days in the United States to be anything but dreamlike. Like many immigrants who find themselves ethnically "downgraded," upon his arrival in the United States Ramu is

unable to procure employment and finds his first viable job opportunity as a waiter in an Indian restaurant. Early in his days of working at Gandhi, a nondescript Indian restaurant in New York, Ramu finds himself confronting obnoxious customers who find fault with the food Ramu delivers to their table:

(Scene setting: Gandhi, an Indian restaurant in New York)

Ramu, a part-time waiter, approaches a table of three white male diners who are jovially chatting. He places the platter of chicken tikka masala down:

MATT: What is this? I ordered chicken tikka masala.

RAMU: That is chicken tikka masala, sir.

MATT (*affecting a stereotypical Indian accent*): That is *not* chicken tikka masala.

RAMU: That is *definitely* chicken tikka masala.

MATT: Dude, I know chicken fucking tikka masala, and that's not it. So how about you take your skinny brown ass back down to the kitchen and get me some?

Friend's voice in background: Come on, Matt . . .

RAMU: Yes, sir (*pauses as he takes the dish back*). I'm sorry (*pours the dish over Matt's head*), Dude.

Shot through with threads of a violent racism, the scene's humor is based on the notion that white bodies have the right to put racialized immigrants in their place for not serving them on the terms they demand. In the exhortation to "get your skinny ass back down to the kitchen," the customer marks his intolerance for the brown body serving his food by offering a variation on the tired phrase which reminds immigrants of their place or lack thereof within the racialized landscape of the restaurant. Here racism and anti-immigrant sentiments emerge against a purported affinity for Indian food, becoming legible through the immigrant waiter's refusal to accept the racial taunts of the customer he is serving. Reading this scene from *The Guru* against Cook and/or Mansingh's assertions, one cannot divorce the racism and intolerance for brown bodies from the seeming ease with which Indian food has been placed at the tables of populations that look askance at nondisciplined South Asian bodies.

An episode of *Goodness Gracious Me*, the Indian-British sketch comedy show, unrelentingly mocks the British public's ritualized consumption

of Indian food in a sketch titled “Going out for an English.” Lampooning the now masculinized British custom of gorging on Indian food after a night of heavy drinking, the sketch focuses on a group of Indians ordering food at an “English” restaurant. Reversing the now familiar pattern of patrons demanding the spiciest dish on the menu, they want to know what “the blandest thing on the menu is.” The brilliance of this particular sketch lies in its ability to articulate the racism in considering Indian food as the means by which to purge after a night of excessive drinking. In positioning the abject immigrant as the subject, the sketch wrenches power away from what Nirmal Puwar dubs “the terror of whiteness” (264) to castigate the forms of consumption rendered normal within the cultural imaginary of English pubgoers such that bland English food, rather than “excessively” spiced Indian food, comes to occupy the space of abject culinary matter.

This overview of the culinary in U.S.- and U.K.-based popular culture signals the multiple ways in which everyday Indianness is scripted within the language of consumption and culinary practices. Such forms of cultural representation also set the stage for what is at stake in this book: how a culinary register becomes the most salient, and often most palatable, index of managing difference in South Asian diasporic literary and cultural production. Rather than affirming the terms of culinary ontology that French gastronome Jean Brillat Savarin proffers—“tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you what you are”—this book seeks to repudiate these benign culinary symmetries in which culinary tastes isomorphically align with bodies. I am less invested in examining the culinary foodways of South Asian diasporic populations than I am in negotiating how narratives about food make palatable the inclusion of selective aspects of South Asianness. This book inserts itself strategically within the gaps and lapses produced in Mansingh and Cook’s collective musings about the South Asian diaspora and food to ask why culinary practices are enfolded into the image of multiculturalism, when South Asian bodies so often are not enfolded into the same vision of inclusion? My contention here is that the culinary idiom mobilized by South Asian diasporic cultural brokers is both strategic and conjectural: the use of food is more than an *a priori* affirmation of palatable difference; it is also a way to undermine the racialized ideologies that culinary discourse is so often seen to buttress. For South Asian diasporic cultural texts, the “culinary” most typically occupies a seemingly paradoxical space—at once a site of affirmation and resistance. Affirmation, because food often serves to mark defining moments in marking ethnicity for communities that live

through and against the vagaries of diasporized realities, marred by racism and xenophobia. Resistance, insofar as the evocation of a culinary register can deliberately and strategically disrupt the notion that cultural identity is always readily available for consumption and commodification and always already conjoined to culinary practices.

In its mapping of South Asian American culinary fictions, this book examines cultural production from the Anglo-American reaches of the South Asian diaspora. While South Asia is politically composed of seven countries—India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives—the cultural and political hegemony of India has often led to a conflation of South Asia with India. This book works against that logic while being mindful of the ways in which the diasporic experience, both in American contexts and elsewhere, is shaped through and against this logic of Indocentrism. While this book focuses primarily on texts and cultural forms produced within the United States, it also examines diasporic texts which travel to form part of the larger corpus of diasporic South Asian texts in North America. This is not to subsume cultural production from Britain, Trinidad, or Canada under the behemoth umbrella of “Asian America,” but rather to recognize the vital ways in which cultural productions from other national spaces have shaped, energized, and refracted the contours of debates around food, race, and ethnicity in a North American context. As Rajini Srikanth so persuasively argues in *The World Next Door*, the “South Asian American experience is one of diaspora. One cannot discuss South Asian American literature without considering the numerous geographical locations this diaspora comprises” (2–3). I take inspiration from Srikanth’s mapping to argue for a definition of South Asian America patently aware of the borders which circumscribe the lives, cultures, and literatures produced within the United States and Canada, at the same time that it takes into account how the workings of the imagination, to borrow from Arjun Appadurai, situate South Asian diasporic cultural production outside of a purely national framework. The imagination, as Appadurai reminds us, is “central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (31). Food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging.

Culinary Fictions situates South Asian diasporic culture within the purview of Asian American studies not to suggest the experience of di-

aspora can be conflated with Americanness or that Asian American narratives are necessarily diasporic, but to more rigorously interrogate the conceptual frameworks we use in theorizing Asian America, especially as the transnational acquires ever greater urgency in framing Asian American cultural critique. At stake in understanding how the culinary shapes the contours of South Asianness in a diasporic frame is a larger set of questions about how—perhaps where—to situate South Asian transnationalisms in relation to Asian American studies. Certainly “Indian American,” “Indian,” and “South Asian” are not overlapping terms, nor should South Asian diasporas be conceived so loosely as to allow for all iterations of South Asian transnationalism to be considered Asian American. *Culinary Fictions* offers a synthetic approach, concerned with the micro- and macroepistemologies of food in South Asian diasporic cultural texts. Part of the more exciting developments in the current state of Asian American studies comes from the multiple methodologies that orient and reorient the field. I do not attempt in this work to conflate British and Canadian cultural productions with Asian American ones but rather to attend to the complex ways in which texts from these diasporic spaces converse with works from the United States.

I press these connections by weaving together my analyses in each chapter to unearth connections between these texts and to suggest an alternative methodology for reading the South Asian diaspora, one that is cognizant of the dynamic interchange between the United States and other diasporic nodes. We might also conceive of this kind of intellectual work through the rubric offered by Shu-Meh Shih and Françoise Lionnet. Proposing an alternative mode of understanding the transnational in ethnic studies, one that would lead us to conceive of transnationalism outside of the polarities of “homeland and origin” wherein transnationalism is framed in vertical terms, they propose that scholars in U.S. ethnic studies “look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent” (1). Thus, the archive of South Asian culinary texts I draw upon is built upon lateral and rhizomic connections that do not always center on an “experience” that can be discernibly marked as Asian American. A more vibrant, historically and aesthetically relevant way of theorizing the place of the culinary in South Asian American fictions would reach out laterally to works in conversation with another; as such, this book seeks to articulate a vision of South Asian Americanness that is attentive to the crisscrossing networks that connect Sri Lankan–British, Indo-Caribbean, Pakistani-American iterations of subjectivity. Part of this book’s archive, then, comprises texts that are not so easily labeled

“Asian American”; instead, the book also interrogates South Asian transnational texts that situate how an understanding of home, diaspora, and migration become complexly intertwined with food and belonging within gendered hierarchical structures.

Food Studies and Literary Studies

A study devoted to food within the larger field of ethnic studies poses some unique challenges and possibilities for cultural inquiry. For some years, food has been garnering interest as a subject for cultural and literary inquiry. Despite the flourishing interest in foodways, there is a relative dearth of critical analyses of film and literature about food that moves critical engagement out of representational analyses and into interrogative spheres which would trouble the very ways in which food is used to buttress narratives about belonging, kinship, and dissent. Twenty years after the publication of Susan Leonardi’s landmark *PMLA* article “Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie,” some literary and cultural critics remain ambivalent about the status of “food studies.”⁴ This ambivalence speaks more to the anxiety about placing something as seemingly superficial as food into the center of critical analysis (Dunphy, Walker, Schumann et. al 903–8) than it does to the seriousness of food per se.

Equally stringent within the field of food studies has been an almost indignant insistence on labeling the field as “scholarship lite,” a critique lodged within a well-publicized op-ed piece published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. While such charges are crucial, my thinking about food, as someone anchored within literary studies, has led me to follow a slightly different trajectory than have some of my interlocutors in food studies. Instead of countering charges of “scholarship lite” with the response that food is a serious and valid area for academic inquiry, we would do well to attend instead to the contradictory perplexities which animate the doubts leveled against “food studies.” Why, for instance, is it the case that within the academy food scholarship has typically fallen within the purview of anthropology and sociology, and by extension, outside of literary studies? Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, editors of the seminal collection *Food and Culture*, understand this to be a function of anthropology’s status as a discipline that is “holistic by definition” (2). But if anthropology has been a particularly fitting home for what we might schematically refer to as “food studies,” this has less to do with the social sciences being a natural fit with food studies, and more to

do with the fact that literary analysis of food takes multiple forms, with critical analyses often occurring in parallel though nonoverlapping critical spaces. When we think about food, it is often to discern some truthful fictions or fictive truths about group identity. Such interest in linking discourse with cultural contexts almost always leads to an automatic assumption that food studies is exclusively concerned with the material realm of food culture, and more suited for anthropological or sociological modes of inquiry, rather than literary studies. When literature does feature into cultural texts, more often than not it is to buttress theoretical formulations emerging from the social science-oriented disciplines.

While it is not an overstatement to suggest that food poses particular challenges for literary studies, this not for lack of interest among literary and cultural critics. The difficulty of imagining food scholarship to be about the “literary” and thus to be a natural fit for the social sciences can be better understood if we think about historical developments within literary studies that have steered literature away from its moorings within “an ahistorical and largely immanent formalism or thematics” and toward analyzing literary and cultural texts as part of wider discursive formations, to loosely paraphrase the U.S. cultural studies pioneer Cary Nelson (165).

Food studies, which emerged during the 1970s, owes an unquestionable debt to the work of structuralism and to the sociologists and anthropologists at the forefront of that methodological orientation. Since the 1970s, this corpus of critical literature has placed special emphasis on understanding the role of food in social and group relations. Among the most important theorizations are those that consider how taste for certain foods can be seen as to reflect social and cultural patterns and how culture, in turn, shapes food preferences (Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Mary Douglas); the relationship between food, colonialism, and power (Sidney Mintz); the ceremonial uses of food in religion (Claude Levi-Strauss); the development of table manners (Norbert Elias); the symbolic meaning of food (Herbert Gans and Roland Barthes). These theoretical formulations owe no small debt to the popularity of structuralism in the 1970s. Structuralism’s attention to semiotics, thematics, and the formalist dimensions of culture provided a logical script through which to navigate the alimentary symbols and motifs in literature. In 1984, when the literary critic James W. Brown published his seminal study about the function of the meal in the nineteenth century, there was little scholarly work within literary studies devoted to the place of food in literature. Though this is certainly no longer true,

Brown's foundational text, which masterfully maneuvers through the multiple culinary symbols in nineteenth-century French literature, continues to be regarded as the ur-text for what I am loosely defining here as literary food studies, long after structuralist and formalist analyses have been jettisoned for more historically grounded, politically valent modes of textual analyses. I do not mean to suggest that there is not a critical literature on food within literary studies, but rather to emphasize that this critical literature has not adequately emphasized the importance of viewing food as a discursive space able to critically interrogate the nostalgic and affective rendering of food in relationship to racial and ethnic identity. This critical literature, published primarily since the 1990s, has emerged in the footsteps of liberal multiculturalist discourse that sees food as affirming ethnic and racial difference wherein the real import of food derives purely from its symbolic functions in expressing group or cultural identity.

Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's cogent extension of Brown's methodology has for some time now been the only literary map available to literary critics navigating the idiosyncratic and affective culinaryscapes of Asian American writing.⁵ Wong's careful delineation of food as metaphor deftly maneuvers through a wide-ranging selection of canonical Asian American novels to better understand how culinary practices animate the enactment of literary tropes within Asian American literature. She is rightfully wary of the illusory promises of literary metaphors rooted in formalist analysis. Against a literary methodology that might overemphasize the validity and applicability of monolithic images, she cautions, "alimentary images being so context-sensitive, students of non-mainstream literature must guard against too facile a reliance on axiomatic principles" (19). Such an overreliance on this kind of methodology presents culinary literary discursive structures as "immanent," and the overuse of culinary-based literary axioms colludes with the tenets of liberal multiculturalism precisely because it mobilizes a language of inclusions anchored in an aestheticization of difference that too carefully sets the parameters for what can be considered "knowable."

While the years since the advent of multiculturalism have given birth to a proliferation of culinary-themed novels in Asian American literature and within the larger American publishing market, even a cursory glance through many recent collections and monographs yields similar results—food is rarely considered a serious topic of academic inquiry within literary studies. Asian American literary studies is plagued by similar anxieties, though for necessarily nonequivalent reasons. With

the notable exception of Sau-Ling Wong's landmark essay, there have been few systematic attempts to map the study of culinary narratives onto studies of race and gender in Asian American literary studies. If, as literary critic Wenying Xu suggests, "a healthy and secure community does not agonize over its cuisine and rituals" ("Sticky Rice" 51), Asian America, cognitively and psychically, is a decidedly unhealthy and insecure community. As a community of scholars, readers, and writers, Asian Americans and Asian Americanists are only just beginning to formulate a critical vocabulary to think through the multiple significations of food and representations thereof within the Asian American cultural imaginary.

And yet ironically, for communities of immigrants who often find that restaurant kitchens, doughnut shops, fruit picking, and working in canneries are their first stops in America, food is more than just a source of psychic sustenance; it also feeds into the literary rendering of Asian American subjectivity. Food provides a language through which to imagine Asian alterity in the American imagination. The recent proliferation of food writing by South Asian authors, including Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* (1998), Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003), Shobha Narayan's *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003), Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), and *The Mango Season* (2003), as well as Asian American and Arab American writers more broadly—Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Linda Furiya's *Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America* (2006), T. C. Huo's *Thousand Wings* (1998), SunHee Kim's *Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love and the Search for Home* (2008), Don Lee's *Wrack and Roll* (2008), David Mas Masumoto's *Epitaph for a Peach: Four Seasons on My Family Farm* (1995), Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), Monique Truong's *Book of Salt* (2003), and David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000)—suggests that a variegated literary idiom, rooted in culinary discourse, has begun to find a foothold within the literary marketplace.

In addition, there are a number of culinary scenes within staples of South Asian diasporic cultural fare, ranging from maligned works such as Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* to the much-celebrated novel *The Namesake* by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri. For *Jasmine*, the title character of Mukherjee's novel, food becomes a cultural conduit connecting her with the white community surrounding her. In almost

celebratory terms, she notes: “I took gobi aloo to the craft fair last week. I am subverting the tastebuds of Elsa County. I put some of last night’s matar panir in the microwave. It goes well with pork, believe me” (19). Jasmine, an Indian American living in a predominantly white American rural area in Iowa, becomes the mediator of all things Indian, disciplining the white community into integrating other tastes into their palatal preferences. At the same time, she chides her Indian American relatives in immigrant enclaves in Queens, New York (where she spends an early portion of her first days in the United States), for taking pleasure in maintaining cultural norms by keeping their foodways alive.⁶ Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake*, on the other hand, poignantly evokes a sense of immigrant nostalgia for tastes of home from the outset of her novel. *The Namesake* begins with a scene in a kitchen in which Ashima Ganguli, the protagonist’s immigrant mother, is combining Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, red onion, salt, lemon juice, and green chili pepper as a “humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks” (1) to evoke the character’s location in United States, as well as her nostalgic connection to India. For Tanuja Desai Hidier and the controversial Kaavya Viswanathan, writers who target adolescent and young adult literary markets, culinary scenes emerge as an easily recognizable index of cultural alterity for the figure of the “ABCD”—American Born Confused Desi.⁷ Though none of these works fall within the genre of “food writing,” food emerges as a vital textual modality, one that becomes a means of articulating one’s sense of ethnic or national identity.

Cursory examinations of many ethnic-themed novels will demonstrate how a visual rendering of food on novel covers is frequently also the means by which publishing houses market Asian Americanness to a readership hungry to consume delectable renditions of alterity even when the narrative may have little to no actual content focused on food and foodways. Increasingly it is also the means by which Asian American authors speak to mainstream reading publics. But this explosive interest in food writing has not been met by much interest in the topic within Asian American literary studies. Outside of Sau-Ling Wong’s chapter on food and Wenying Xu’s and Jennifer Ho’s books, few paradigms exist for navigating the relevance of food in Asian American psychic and material lives despite the fact that food often functions as a multivalent symbol within Asian American literature. Such an omission seems particularly egregious because there is ample historical and sociological research to document how Asian American material, cultural, and political life is closely intertwined with the business of food production and the con-

sumption of racially coded foods. Whether it is the Chinese waiters, cooks, or bus boys who populate restaurants; Vietnamese shrimp boat operators in Galveston Bay, Texas; Hmong meatpackers in northern Minnesota; Filipino and Japanese labor in the plantation economy in Hawaii in the 1930s; Chinese labor in Alaskan salmon canneries; Bangladeshi waiters in Indian restaurants in New York City; or Cambodian owners of doughnut shops in California, Asian American laborers have played a pivotal role in agribusiness, food service, and the food and beverage industry. It is through their labor that Asian Americans have become and continue to be racialized in the political and literary imaginary. Wenying Xu phrases it best in observing, “there is nothing natural or culturally predetermined about Asian Americans’ vital relationship with food. Harsh circumstances made such work one of the few options available . . . they did what others wouldn’t, and did it with pride and dignity” (*Eating* 12). But the absence of any serious engagement with immigrant foodways cannot be understood as an intellectual sleight against the gravity of food studies per se, or similarly, as a refusal to attach primacy to the importance of food as a vector of critical analysis. Within the specific purview of Asian American literary studies, the inattention to foodways can be better understood as an epiphenomenon of several disciplinary anxieties, elisions, and omissions that closely emanate from the ambivalence within Asian American studies toward according an overly important place to food.⁸

Some of this ambivalence is best understood with reference to Frank Chin, one of Asian American studies’ most controversial authors and cultural critics. Within his expansive literary oeuvre, culinary writing—what he dubs “food pornography”—occupies a curiously abject position. Chin’s militations against food writing stem from a desire to banish from Asian American rhetoric any evocation of the culinary—as psychic or real sites. His targets, most typically women authors, are those who deliberately use a culinary idiom to anchor depictions of racialized life for Asian Americans. Despite stringent critiques against Chin’s bombastic rhetoric, a similar distrust of the very narratives he decries can be found within the larger body of South Asian literary studies. The critical reactions against Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni’s novels, many of which deploy “food pornography,” illustrate this point well. I thus delve into questions about South Asian American texts and their relationship to food pornography in further detail in chapters 3 and 4; each chapter analyzes how food pornography operates to both buttress and dismantle narratives of racial abjection.

But while social and labor historians and anthropologists have documented the pivotal role that Asian immigrant labor played in the development of American agribusiness, the place of food in the imagination and the discursive strategy of using food to imagine race have been largely left unexplored. Without a theory to articulate how we discursively imagine those worlds through culinary tropes and alimentary images, we run the risk of replicating this logic that views Asian American literary works merely as portals into sedimented and buried histories and material realities. While there are useful and politically compelling reasons to read literary fictions for what they tell us about histories and stories of marginalized experience, Asian American literary studies too frequently resonate at the level of understanding what Asian American literature tells us about lived Asian American realities and how we might reconstruct fragmented histories through literary narratives. But writing about food, in particular, can never be exclusively an ethnographic project adhering to the principles of mimetic realism. It is seductive and not always misplaced to navigate the Asian American literary landscape by examining how representations are social facts (Rabinow) or contrarily how ethnographies are partial fictions (Clifford), but to legitimize Asian American literature solely on the basis of its ability to uncover submerged histories and fill in ethnographic details about obscured realities is to perpetuate a false divide between the aesthetic quality of “Literature” and the social relevance of “Asian American literature.” We need theory and literary theory to organize how we imagine Asian America and Asian American literary and cultural production.

To frame literary analyses anchored in literary theory—structural, poststructural, psychoanalytic—as inimical to the conventions of material analysis foundational to Asian American studies is to perpetuate a false divide between Asian American literature and “Literature.” To bring theory into Asian American literary critiques, as in much of the recent scholarship in Asian American literary studies, is an ethical-political project for it recognizes that Asian American literature is aesthetic and political; in “refusing the subject/structure dichotomy,” literary critics can complicate the terms by which we understand subjectivity and the notion of “experience.” Histories of the field have been cautious about, even suspicious of, including “high” theory for fear that theory’s obfuscatory language and “gatekeeping” tendencies runs counter to the very tenets at the heart of Asian American intellectual and critical inquiry, but as David Palumbo-Liu succinctly puts it, “one cannot but ‘borrow’ theories and apply them to Asian American studies; however, one has to do so cau-

tiously and critically” (55). My aim is not to supplant the methodologies and epistemological orientation of Asian American studies. Rather it is to supplement these analyses by arguing that discourse is not inimical to the material. Asian American literary and critical discourse cannot gain legitimacy solely because it happens to shed light on the material. How literary discourse epistemologically maps the material is equally important. As Kandice Chuh compellingly argues, “to underscore the literariness of “Asian American” is to argue for studying the ways that it aestheticizes and theorizes the social relations and material conditions underwriting the resistance and racism to which it refers” (28).

Culinary Fictions suggests that food organizes the discursively constructed worlds of the South Asian diaspora in more ways than we have been willing, or able, to acknowledge, either in literary studies, postcolonial studies, or Asian American studies. And yet to fully flesh out the valences of food, I take an approach to reading the place of the culinary that is both thickly descriptive and theoretical. Descriptive, because it attempts to construct a narrative that tells us how we might use food to chart a path through the complex terrain of South Asian American literature and culture, finding on the way moments that confound how we script alterity through culinary discourse. Theoretical, because it also acknowledges how we utilize food as epistemological device to navigate the imagined worlds of Asian America while simultaneously countering the notion that the only productive way to engage with food is to do so while opening a window onto the ethnic and racial lives of minoritized subjects.

I want to be clear in noting that *Culinary Fictions* is not providing an overarching theory about the relevance of food for literary studies, Asian American studies, or the confluence of the two. Instead I take on the challenge of examining the epistemological parameters for defining what is knowable about food in terms of ethnicity, race, class, and gender. The workings of the “culinary,” the production of various kinds of fictions modulated by discourse about cooking, eating, and the relationship of the food to the self and communities become places to consider why it is that Asian American studies is so deeply distrustful of the culinary as mode of representation, but comfortable with thinking about food as an enduring index of ethnicity. Likewise, thinking through food allows us to consider why as critics we are more comfortable with thinking about food through its *absence*. Why, for instance, are we comfortable in theorizing hunger, collective or individual, but less able to think about consumption and desire? At the same time, what is it that as readers we

are hungry for? Why do we find pleasure in consuming narratives about difference, almost as a guilty pleasure, at the same time that we are so ill at ease with navigating the contradictions inherent in the culinary narrative? I am cognizant of the importance of creating a methodologically consistent way to approach the culinary text, but also recognize that to study food, discursively or materially, is to implicitly embrace an interdisciplinary methodological and theoretical formation.

Food studies cannot be bound by a set methodology, nor can it be firmly wedded to a single discipline. Whether or not one fully agrees with Counihan and Van Esterik's assertion, it cannot be denied that literary critics interested in food engage in what Brad Epps has termed a form of "promiscuity," turning to anthropological and sociological literature on food for the ways in which it compellingly articulates food and politics while continuing to maintain a commitment to thinking about literary and cultural forms. The scant attention paid to the literary rendering of culinary practices and the popularity of the culinary as a mode of signifying difference, and rendering ethnicity and race palatable suggests that South Asian diasporic and Asian American studies might do well to take a page from African American studies, where works by Doris Witt and Larry McKee have turned to the culinary as a site of racialization, suggesting that such forms of disciplinary "promiscuity" can be vitally transformative. Where Witt hones in on the political contexts of African American material culture to render salient her readings of race and the cultural politics of food in African American culture, McKee's research into the foodways of plantation-era slaves employs methodology from archaeology to "map the range of possibilities available within the system of plantation food supply" for slaves and masters (McKee 219).⁹

Through thick readings of the varied cultural texts, *Culinary Fictions* signals how Asian American literary criticism might tap into the largely unexplored terrain of food writing in order to produce relevant analyses concerning representations about everyday encounters with food, race, and gender, thereby shifting the epistemological and methodological orientation of the existing body of Asian American literary criticism, so that is less about understanding what the literature tells us about how and what South Asians in diasporas eat, and more about how food serves as an idiom to imagine subjectivity while being attentive to the peculiar problematics the study of food poses. In focusing on the fictions of South Asian diasporic culinary works, I am not suggesting that the literary-cultural realm produces "transcendental guarantees" separable from their moments of historical conjecture. Instead, I focus on the culinary as a

space for literary conjecture in order to insist that these culinary works, as fictive texts, are merely one constellation of texts within a wider series of discursive formations that enable us to better negotiate the limits of the knowable, furthering our understanding of how material practices are written about in South Asian culinary-inspired works.

Recipes for Reading

Culinary Fictions argues for the importance of understanding food not as an exclusively sociological or anthropological enterprise and asks how studying food offers insight into the discursive construction of South Asian bodies through its sustained analyses of South Asian diasporic literature and culture. The book deliberately militates against reading strategies which might seek to establish benign symmetries between food and different identitarian vectors. But it also aims to confront the perplexities of difference that animate much of recent South Asian diasporic cultural production. Food, I should stress, is not necessarily the sole focus of this study but a necessary path through which to reimagine the terms by which South Asian American subjectivity has been imagined in the wake of multiculturalism's ostensible interest in navigating "difference"—racial, ethnic, cultural. Taking stock of multiple generic forms—the short story, novel, cookbook, television show, and feature-length film—*Culinary Fictions* navigates through recent South Asian diasporic cultural production produced in the wake of multiculturalism's interest in palatable difference as a first step in better orienting Asian American studies and literary studies toward understanding the centrality of food, as an organizing thematic, as well as a theoretical point of entry into the construction of South Asian diasporic subjectivity within the recent corpus of writings, by and about South Asian diasporic formations. This book is organized into six chapters, each of which engages a particular culinary problematic—nostalgia, palatability, and fusion. Each of these chapters is then organized in pairs placed in conversation. In each chapter, I focus on the fictiveness of these culinary writings to guard against the notion that these works can allow access to immutable cultural truths about immigrant life and foodways, and to emphasize instead how writing about food is always contingent and conjectural: what food offers, I will argue, is an alternative register through which to theorize gender, sexuality, class, and race.

Part 1, "Nostalgia, Domesticity, and Gender," includes two chapters, each of which engages with the notion that the home site produces gen-

dered subjects. Food and cooking are among the rituals most associated with domesticity; as chapters 1 and 2 show, the culinary functions as a site of cultural negotiation: both disciplining subjects into gendered roles and buttressing an alternative rendering of sexuality and gendered performance that cannot be contained by the structures of heterosexual patriarchy. Recognizing that among the most common of the complex emotions food engenders for diasporic subjects is a sense of nostalgia, I begin with a chapter that is centered on immigrant nostalgia, asking what it means, discursively, affectively, and politically, to be nostalgic for foods coded in national terms. As this chapter suggests, the desire to remember home by fondly re-creating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as a reflectively nostalgic gesture; rather such commemorative acts must be read as a commentary on what it means to inhabit different diasporic locations while constantly battling the implications of routing memory and nostalgia through one's relationship to culinary practices. By delineating the varied logic of what I describe as "culinary citizenship," that which grants subjects the ability to articulate national identity via food, I explore how "Out on Main Street," a short story by the Toronto-based Indo-Caribbean author Shani Mootoo, and Pakistani American literary critic Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* use food to chart viable alternatives to "official" and "traditional" models of national definition, ones that question the validity of discourses about authenticity and purity. Toward this end, I explore how each text negotiates related but divergent models of "culinary citizenship," casting food into a complex web of affiliations mediated by class and sexuality.

With greater attention to the figuration of food preparation and sexuality within the home space, I turn my attention in the next chapter to queer diasporic fictions that deliberately reimagine the terms of culinary production to accommodate how a queer vision of kinship might transform the logic of culinary practices within the home. Looking at works such as the novel *Reef* by Sri Lankan British author Romesh Gunesekeera, films like Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, I suggest that the queering of the home space reconfigures the meanings ascribed to culinary practices within the heterosexual home site. By exploring how food plays a role in enabling antinormative relationships to emerge within the sexualized, gendered, and classed domestic space, I argue that the relationship between food and queerness challenges the apparently seamless links between food, home, nation, and (hetero) sexuality. Collectively, these two chapters focus on the place of food in the intimate lives of diasporized

communities, tending to the notion that food evokes a complex set of emotions about home, longing, and belonging.

Following Sau-Ling Wong's point that eating and food cogently illustrate patterns of subjectification and objectification in Asian American literature, I argue that culinary narratives fall within the range of "acceptable" interventions—safely ethnic, and nonpolitical because they figuratively serve marginalia up on a platter. Often, more overtly political forms of writing are less visible on the Asian American literary landscape because Asian Americans must "find a frame of reference accessible and acceptable to 'mainstream' Americans" (Chu 15). In Asian American literature, narratives about food occupy a similar position to the mother-daughter tale, or the tale of the displaced immigrant's nostalgia. Such narratives have been viewed with suspicion because they are an appealing form of writing that appears to be ethnically affirmative and "merely" cultural. Their apparent lack of "hard" political content, and attention to the social and cultural, make these thematic interventions "acceptable" to the mainstream. With this in mind, chapters 3 and 4 focus on the genre—anathema to most Americanist critique—of the "food porn" novel. Chapter 3 examines two such novels frequently omitted from literary studies which have found their way into the hearts of the North American reading public—Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*. Through lush evocation of spices and sugared treats, each novel mobilizes a culinary idiom sweetened or spiced with the taste of otherness. By engaging the texts' use of Orientalism to render race palatable, I ask if it is possible to wrest a novel's surface-level sugarness from the weighty issues lodged within the narratives. My reading of *Mistress of Spices* and *Pastries* suggests that belying the spicy-sugary exterior of these popular novels are surprisingly trenchant critiques of racial politics and capitalism in the United States. I therefore examine the very packaging of novels as "commodity-comestibles" to ask if there are generic limitations to the food novel, and its ability to advance a critique of class and labor.

My optimism for finding enabling narratives within this much maligned genre is further developed in the next chapter, which maintains its focus on Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni by turning to her poem "The Makers of Chili Paste," anthologized in her largely overlooked poetry collection *Leaving Yuba City*. Long considered one of the South Asian diasporic writers who too easily fabricates diasporic worlds, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni has often been critiqued within South Asian and

Asian American studies. I implicitly engage this body of criticism by considering how the poem triangulates with a series of other cultural forms, inspired by the film *Mirch Masala* (Chili Masala), a film about women employed in the chili trade in India. This same film provides critical fodder for a short experimental video, *Unbidden Voices*, about restaurant workers in Chicago. Placed in conversation with each other *Unbidden Voices*, *Mirch Masala*, and “The Makers of Chili Paste” reveal how a visual aesthetic, geared toward focusing on the conditions of labor, deprivileges an aesthetic of visual consumption in order to advance a critique of the genre of food pornography. Through this deterritorialization of the genre of the “food film,” these works collectively augur a class critique attuned to the exigencies of labor, class, and capital in the business of food production.

In a book that troubles the logic of understanding the relationship between food and different types of conjectural subjectivities for South Asian Americans at the same time that it negotiates how and why food becomes a way to anchor cultural identity, it is fitting to include a section on the meanings food occupies within the social and cultural imaginary of second-generation South Asian diasporic cultural brokers. The final two chapters of the book focus almost exclusively on visual media and literature from the United States. Each chapter is structured around an engagement with legislative acts that have vitally impacted the tenor and nature of immigration from India and concomitant changes in the position of South Asians as we enter an era of increasing xenophobia, marked by ever more punitive forms of legislation against persons of South Asian or Muslim origin. Centering on the types of inclusions that the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ostensibly enabled, chapter 5 focuses on short fiction by second-generation Indian Americans such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Pooja Makhijani, and Geeta Kothari; a cooking show featuring Maya Kaimal; and the film *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. These works are not bound together by content but by an implicit awareness of how culinary identities have been vitally shaped and reshaped for the first generation to come of age in the United States after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.

Consistent with the notion that the second generation of Indian Americans is often represented as harbingers of a new form of cosmopolitanism, arguably even a new form of racial fusion, I examine a version of culinary culture that is often celebrated as the first “postnational” cuisine, befitting the second generation—fusion cuisine. When we consider that historically South Asians have been excluded from psychic, juridi-

cal, and social definitions of citizenship, because they are seen to be too “alien,” or “foreign” or “inassimilable,” how can we interpret the vogue in fusion cuisine that celebrates the coming together of so called “Asian-ness” and “Westernness”? To ground my analysis, I explore several fusion cuisine cookbooks authored by Raji Jallepalli and Floyd Cardoz. In the case of the latter, I also offer a reading of the restaurant *Tabla*, where Floyd Cardoz is executive chef. Within the context of U.S. multicultural and racial discourses about Asian Americans as model minorities who are to be emulated because they have so readily assimilated, what does it mean to celebrate fusion cuisine while the U.S. state apparatuses and governing bodies such as the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) actively foment a culture of suspicion that renders those very brown bodies producing the food so suspect. To examine these questions, I look at how second-generation cultural brokers renovate the concept of fusion cuisine to advance a critique of U.S. multiculturalism. My objects of study here are a novel by Denmark-based Indian author Amulya Malladi titled *Serving Crazy with Curry*. Malladi’s novel, set in Southern California, examines how a version of fusion cuisine takes on a quasi-therapeutic function for a suicidal Indian American. Yet far from viewing fusion as a palliative for cultural schizophrenia, Malladi’s novel stages the difficulties involved in ascribing an ameliorative psychic capability to cooking. I read cooking shows and cookbooks featuring Padma Lakshmi’s versions of fusion cuisine against this novel as a way to suggest that the trope of fusion expands the vision of the second generation to accommodate narratives which speak to moments of racial abjection, produced against the experience of negotiating the muddy and often complex terrain of cultural schizophrenia.

* * *

The widely different contexts evoked by each chapter signal to the ways in which the culinary is imbricately layered into the cultural imagination of the South Asian diaspora. In my attempt to provide a consistent way to think through food, I want to suggest that we need to be careful how we negotiate the terrain of culinary fictions. To merely call for placing food at the center for critical analysis—literary, anthropological, historical, or sociological—is to recast the terms of this age-old debate about the relevance of food studies into a simple dualistic model of “inclusions” and “exclusions” that has arguably worked to the detriment of a politically transformative approach to Asian American literary stud-

ies. Models of Asian American studies that position South Asians at the center of critical analyses in order “to correct for under-representation without critiquing its basic assumptions,” as some have argued, “leads to the replication of the model, with new centers, and perhaps slightly altered margins” (Davé, Dhingra et al. 76). Analogously, it is inadequate to merely call for a realignment of food studies by countering the argument that food scholarship is not serious and by demanding its inclusion within critical conversations about race, gender, and ethnic studies. For that matter, it is not enough to protest charges against food studies as “scholarship lite” by signaling to the numerous texts offering rigorous engagements with food and culture. It is important to examine how food is an equally important vector of critical analysis in negotiating the gendered, racialized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity. It is with this caveat in mind that this book examines the culinary as an enunciative space, one that vitally articulates race, food, class, labor, and culture.