Recently, a librarian colleague shared with me an image on social media (see fig. 1). The image captured an actual sign from the Young Adults section of a library with the suggestion that patrons “[t]ake out a good book today!” in what can be described only as “Orientalized” roman lettering. The caption accompanies an image of a take-out paper food container featuring a pagoda pattern stamped in red ink. Jennifer Ann Ho, whose study *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (released in hardcover in 2005 and in paperback in 2012) is the focus of this review essay, comments on the ways that this particular kind
of Orientalism is both offensive and unsurprising. With this simple poster, young people are interpellated into an Orientalist position that conflates literature and “Asian” foods (and by extension cultures) as things that can be obtained and consumed easily.

As Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin Manalansan, and Anita Mannur note, “Asians in the United States have long been associated—often reluctantly or against their will, as well as voluntarily or with pleasure—with images of and practices regarding food” (3). Ho elaborates on this idea:

Asian Americans continually [are] portrayed in terms of their consumptive practices. From 19th century pamphlets depicting Chinese men as vermin-eating opium addicts to contemporary media portraits of Asians in subservient positions as cooks and waiters, the conflation of Asian Americans with preparing, eating, or serving food reinforces their marginal status. (15)

Indeed, these are the tropes to which numerous Asian/Americanists fasten their scholarly interventions. From Sau-Ling Wong’s foundational literary study of “Big Eaters” and “Treat Lovers” entitled Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance and Wenying Xu’s

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**Figure 1:** “New For Teens: Take Out a Good Book Today!”
Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature to Anita Mannur’s impactful book Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture, literary scholars have found ample fodder in this growing field. Cultural theorists have offered significant studies as well, from Lily Cho’s Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada to Martin Manalansan’s chapter “Cooking Up the Senses: A Critical Embodied Approach to the Study of Food and Asian American Television Audiences.” These examples demonstrate that critical works showcasing the centrality of food in the construction of Asian/North American identities are numerous and address diverse topics.

Where Ho’s contribution differs from these is in her deliberate focus on Asian/American youth in her analysis of the “integral connections between ontology and food, linking adolescent emotional maturation with ethnic identity development” (11). Ho does not engage critically with scholarship on childhood and adolescence, but she does study Bildungsromans with protagonists who are young people moving toward adulthood, and she focuses on youth in her discussion of food issues often represented in Asian/American literature. While Ho’s study does not include Asian/American literary works directed to young readers such as Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese, Laurence Yep’s Golden Mountain Chronicles series, or Anjali Banerjee’s Maya Running, she focuses on representational issues related to what Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee contend is the struggle among Asian/American young people to resist being “neglected or at best homogenized into a social group . . . deviant from ‘normal’ teenage Americans” (1). “These young protagonists’ relationships to food,” Ho explains, “represent their struggle to embrace an American identity, forcing them to acknowledge their bi- or multi-cultural status as hyphenated peoples in a country that historically has dealt with race in black and white terms” (3).

Ho’s book links important themes in Asian/American literature (such as intergenerational conflict, assimilation, inter-ethnic and pan-Asian experiences, and “Asian Americanization” [5]) through analyses of young people’s alimentary and cultural consumption practices. Analyzing six novels from the Asian/American canon, Ho argues that her chosen writers “use food metaphors, images, and tropes to convey the process of ethnic identity development in ways that counteract negative Asian stereotypes promoted in mainstream American culture” (19). She highlights four important ways in which consumption is represented in these works: “historical pride, consumerism, mourning, and fusion” (3). Ho’s categories also elucidate the patterns of other similar literatures. I emulate Ho’s framework in the structure of this essay, in which I review a selection of Asian/Canadian coming-of-age texts. In doing so, I aim to take up Eleanor Ty’s important imperative to move “self-consciously . . . beyond national boundaries” in
the recognition that a “cross-border comparative reading is fruitful . . . especially in our transnational and diasporic world” (29).

**Historical Pride: *Yow Jow Gwai* and *Chicken Pot Pie***

In her reading of *Donald Duk*, by “writer, provocateur, and pioneer” Frank Chin, Ho argues that the twelve-year-old eponymous protagonist develops “‘yellow’ pride” by consuming Chinese food prepared for him by his father, King. Ho argues that Chin “reclaims food as a source of ethnic pride rather than a mark of ridicule by using food as a coded language, a series of signs that signify pride in Chinese American culture and history” (24) as opposed to the ways it has been represented in other spaces stereotypically as shameful. “Food in *Donald Duk,*” Ho argues, “communicates identity but it also conveys stories—historical, familial, and ancestral—about Chinese American life” (30). Part of Donald’s coming of age, then, is his transformation from an initial resentment of his Asian/American identity to his appreciation of and even affection for the Chinese and Chinese American cultural histories he comes to devour.

Part of Donald’s coming of age . . . is his transformation from an initial resentment of his Asian/American identity to his appreciation of and even affection for the Chinese and Chinese American cultural histories he comes to devour.

Larissa Lai’s *When Fox Is a Thousand* also reflects acts of historical and cultural reclamation through food in connection to young people’s coming of age. As with Chin’s eponymous young person, initially Lai’s Chinese Canadian adoptee protagonist rejects the Chinese ingredients that appear to be “creepy things that had something to do with her, and that she would have to eat” (32) and begrudges being connected with those foods: “Her mother had made a point of teaching her to cook Chinese. She had always resisted those lessons. She resented them. Her hand
had been clumsy beside her mother’s practiced one. ‘Teach me lasagne instead. Teach me chicken pot pie,’ she would complain, to no avail” (114). Of course, the complexity of Artemis’s rejection of Chinese food and her racial identity is exacerbated by the fact that she is raised by white parents. Her adoption causes additional complications when later she tries to recuperate her missing ancestry and, by extension, a sense of ethnic pride through the consumption of various food items and customs. On a “roots trip” to Hong Kong, Artemis’s “search for shadows makes her hungry” as she wanders in and out of crowded streets, ordering “wonton or fish-ball noodles in a clumsy accent” (124) that betrays her foreignness but reveals as well her effort to make connections with the Chinese ancestry that was taken from her as a child. “Ethnic pride” through eating does not come as easily to Artemis as it does to Donald Duk, despite her hunger for it. Whereas Donald’s culinary role model ties food to historical pride, Artemis’s white mother knows the recipes but cannot provide their cultural and historical context, which is what her daughter craves so much. Nonetheless, Lai’s adoptee protagonist reaches for a connection to her Chinese past and her Asian/Canadian present through acts of consuming Chinese food.

These narratives are not exceptional; consumption practices appear commonly as conduits for ethnic pride in Asian/North American literature, for instance when Jessica Hagedorn’s Rio revels in the private meals shared with her grandmother in Dogeaters or when Amy Tan’s Ruth evokes food memories of spicy la-la turnips in The Bonesetter’s Daughter. Ho’s analysis of Donald Duk, however, hinges on her observation that Chin’s novel also reclaims a version of masculinity through Chinese cooking that had been denied previously. In Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America, David Eng argues that “economic hardships feminize Chinese American men by forcing them into professions typically associated with women: cook, waiter, tailor, and laundry man” (92). Eng’s argument is relevant in this context particularly. Chin’s novel, according to Ho, “challenges both the late 19th century and mid-20th century portraits of timid and effeminate Chinese cooks and affirms the virility of Asian American men through the reclamation of the kitchen as an arena of pride and power” (40). A similar effect is achieved in Diamond Grill, which follows the coming of age of Fred Wah’s memoirist narrator in an Edmonton diner in which Asian/Canadian men are cooks and waiters whose behaviour mirrors Ho’s gladiatorial metaphor that deems Donald Duk’s father a “warrior chef immersed in masculinity and warfare” (45). Diamond Grill begins with Freddy’s observation: “The kitchen doors can be kicked with such a slap they’re heard all the way up to the soda fountain. . . . Shouts in the kitchen. Fish an! Side a fries! Over easy! On brown! I pick up an order and turn, back through the doors, whap! My foot registers more than its own imprint, starts to read the
stain of memory” (1). Conjured as a chaotic space in which workers violently kick the swinging door that separates the kitchen from the dining room into action, the Diamond Grill, at least as it is conceived of by Freddy (Wah’s narrator during his adolescence), is a place in which Asian/Canadian masculinity and history can be reclaimed.

**Consumerism: “You Are What You Buy”**

In another section of her book, Ho considers the ways in which young protagonists consume commercial goods and how their purchases can be connected to both their identities and their eating practices. Drawing on Lois Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, she explores the links between “consumption as spending, consumption as eating and the consumption of media culture” for Asian/American youth. She argues that Yamanaka’s protagonist, Lovey Nariyoshi, strives for American assimilation by consuming a variety of products and images that “enable . . . her role playing of middle-class white fantasies” (55). This behaviour is not unique to Asian/American youth; as Ho points out, other literary texts such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* depict similar iterations of young people consuming race and ethnicity via cultural objects. In her reading of *Wild Meat*, Ho contends that “Lovey’s preference for mass marketed brand name products advertised in mainstream media over organic and more natural food used by her family becomes a critical means of negotiating the different facets of her class and ethnic identity” (51). Lovey’s conspicuous consumption of “American” culture reflects both the conventional assimilation trajectory found in many Asian/American texts and one of its dominant tropes: intergenerational conflict. In this case, the indistinctness of mass-produced American culture is idealized over the Othered and alienating food of the Asian home.

Ho’s analysis of Lovey’s plight for assimilation in relation to her consumption of media culture highlights the teen’s consistent reverence for “light” qualities and her rejection of “dark” ones. For instance, Ho draws our attention to the fact that Lovey worships “[b]lond hair . . . Betty Cooper and Marcia Brady. Barbie and Twiggy” and maligns “[b]lack hair . . . Veronica Lodge, Alexandra Cabot. Serena, Samantha Stevens’ cousin, Big Ethel, Nancy Kwan, and all the evil stepmothers in Walt Disney Movies” (28). Lovey, Ho contends, admires a version of American whiteness that is shored up by the dismissal and rejection of the same darkness that she embodies. Most notable, Ho notes, is Lovey’s early declaration of her love for Shirley Temple—her “perfect blond ringlets and pink cheeks and pout lips” (3), particularly as it connects Lovey to other young people of colour who experience racial melancholia.

Shirley Temple makes a notable appearance in a number of Asian/Canadian coming-of-age literary texts, signifying again the pinnacle of desirable whiteness.
consumed by young people who feel racial inferiority. In *The Jade Peony*, Wayson Choy’s girl narrator imagines herself a “Shirley Temple princess” (38) with tap shoes, curling-iron ringlets, and a “stiff white taffeta dress” she begs her stepmother to buy (41). Jook-Liang fears that her *Poh-Poh*’s proclamations are true—that she is not “Canada” but “China” (37)—and part of her effort to delineate herself as Canadian is to feast on Shirley Temple movies and to perform her idol’s dance steps “as deftly as Shirley herself” (38). Her hopes are blighted, however, when she realizes that she cannot become Shirley:

> My heart almost burst with expectation. I looked again into the hall mirror, seeking Shirley Temple with her dimpled smile and perfect white-skin features. Bluntly reflected back at me was a broad sunken moon with slit dark eyes, topped by a helmet of black hair. I looked down. Jutting out from a too-large taffeta dress were two spindly legs matched by a pair of bony arms. Something cold clutched at my stomach, made me swallow. (43)

Jook-Liang’s fantasy is broken with the realization that she cannot attain Shirley’s “perfect white-skin features” and, as Michelle Hartley observes, the illusion is shattered a second time when, daydreaming that she is sharing a banana split with her idol, Jook-Liang is interrupted by *Poh-Poh*’s insistence that she eat a plate of chicken feet. According to Hartley, Jook-Liang is “pull[ed] out of the dream” of “middle-class whiteness and Hollywood consumer culture” and is “present[ed] instead with chicken feet, traditional Chinese fare” (61). Consuming this food instead of the American treat she daydreams of, Jook-Liang eventually forgets about Shirley and begins ruminating on Chinese/Canadian history.

It is not a coincidence that Jook-Liang and Lovey, like Morrison’s Pecola Breedlove before them, are drawn to but ultimately are disappointed by their love for the iconographic Shirley Temple, a figure whose idealized version of childhood exposes how “the symbolic properties and qualities that define the cute in a white supremacist culture (white skin, blond hair, blue eyes)” (Merish 184) form a mode that interpellates and rejects them simultaneously. As such, when Ann DuCille suggests that Shirley Temple represents the “dreams of little girls” (12), in these instances those dreams inevitably include the wish to obtain at least a proximity to an idealized girlhood that is coded as white. In “Wounded Beauty,” Anne Anlin Cheng suggests that characters like Pecola Breedlove are drawn to Shirley Temple not only because they have “learn[ed] racial-aesthetic discrimination” (199) but also because they see Shirley and other white girls being treated with care. Thus, it is not just a white girlhood that is coveted but also the social interactions that accompany that valued version of childhood; Jook-Liang, Lovey, and Pecola

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view with longing the “tender handling of little white girls” (Cheng, “Wounded” 199), in contrast with their own experiences of invisibility, rejection, and even shame.

Like Lovey, who covets a particular image of whiteness that she cannot attain, Jook-Liang’s consumption of Shirley Temple’s persona is represented as a form of childish naïveté that she must outgrow. Ho’s observation that Yamanaka (in Wild Meat) “critiques the consumption of goods as a means of affirming identity” (53) but offers the consumption of food as a suitable alternative can be extended to Choy’s Asian/Canadian coming-of-age text as well. Perhaps too obviously and without subtlety, Lovey and Jook-Liang are both characterized as misguided in their goals, and Shirley Temple becomes an obstacle they must overcome on their journey toward Asian/North American subjectivity.

**Mourning: Loss, Exile, Miso**

Ho’s analysis of Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman and Lan Cao’s Monkey Bridge hinges on the ways that “food mediates both mourning and ethnic identity” in both novels (80). Leaning heavily on Anne Anlin Cheng’s thesis in her critical volume The Melancholy of Race, Ho argues that certain food practices, including the honouring of deceased ancestors with food offerings, express “not only grief but grievances—both mourning and protest” (80). By focusing on the adolescent children of women displaced in the United States as a result of war (the Korean War in the case of Keller’s novel, the war in Vietnam in Cao’s), Ho suggests that food plays an integral role in the recuperation of ethnic pride in the face of brutal dislocation and loss. This is particularly crucial for the young protagonists of Comfort Woman and Monkey Bridge, who are raised in American societies in
which the pressure to assimilate is compounded by their mothers’ “Asian war victim” statuses (81).

Food, particularly “traditional” Japanese food, is a channel for maintaining cultural and emotional pride in the face of a likewise virulent and violent experience of exile in Joy Kogawa’s Asian/Canadian coming-of-age novel, *Obasan.*2 Presented as a series of recollections triggered by the recent death of the *nisei* protagonist’s uncle, *Obasan* recounts Naomi Nakane’s childhood experiences of Japanese Canadian internment during the Second World War.3 When Naomi comes across letters written by her aunt Emily during the initial period of evacuation, it is revealed that the prohibition of Japanese food and ingredients was one of the many ways Japanese Canadians endured forced acculturation. Emily writes: “The mover, Crone, is sending our boxed goods, beds, and Japanese food supplies—shoyu, rice, canned mirinzuke, green tea. I’m taking the Japanese dishes, trays and bowls. Can’t get any more miso now” (129). After the family is interned in a private residence in southern Alberta, their retention of those food items, ingredients, and apparatuses illustrates a desire to maintain ethnic pride in the face of evacuation. The continued preparing and consuming of “Japanese food”—the “misoshiru, smelling of brine and the sea,” the “dried fiddleheads with their slightly rough asparagus texture [that] have been soaked and are cooking in soy sauce sugar base with thin slivers of meat and mushroom,” the “salty, half-dried cucumber and crisp yellow radish pickles” (157)—exemplifies a private subversion of the racialized power systems that sought to make Japanese ethnicity a source of shame.4

These moments in *Obasan* reflect Ho’s thesis, particularly insofar as “food expresses the trauma of [characters’] displacement” (80). In her reading of Thanh in *Monkey Bridge*, Ho makes observations that might also apply to Kogawa’s novel: “[Thanh] uses food rituals to negotiate the melancholia that she endures as an exile, who has lost all that is familiar” (83). In *Obasan*, Japanese food—familiar food from the family’s former home life—is the only way that the characters can cling to the ethnic pride stolen from them through internment. Similar to Akiko/Soon Hyo’s frantic ingestion of Korean soil as her homeland is taken from her in *Comfort Woman*, the Nakanes consume the Japanese culture that the Canadian government has tried to make shameful to them.

So what is to be made of Naomi’s older brother, Stephen, and his unwavering refusal to eat Japanese food, his insistence on peanut butter sandwiches instead of sticky rice balls? Ho argues that some Asian/American youth struggle to overcome their racial melancholia and as a result cannot (or will not) consume dishes that represent their lost cultures. As she observes of the young protagonist in *Monkey Bridge*, “[u]nlike other Vietnamese characters, who eat dishes from their former homeland out of exilic longing for Viet Nam or, as in Thanh’s case, as a means of commemorating the dead,
Mai can only detail, not dine on, Vietnamese meals, remaining an outside observer but not a participant to Vietnamese consumption” (88). Ho suggests that racial and ethnic hybridity results in a cultural contradiction that eradicates Mai’s appetite for Vietnamese food. In a more extreme version of this refusal to eat dishes from one’s ancestral culture, Akiko/Soon Hyo’s daughter in Comfort Woman “def[ies] her mother’s diet” through anorexia, an eating disorder that, as Ho argues, “signifies the instability of Beccah’s racial identity” (95).

In Obasan, Stephen does not develop anorexia, but he does rebuff his aunt’s attempts to feed him Japanese dishes. “Not that kind of food,” he snaps when Obasan offers him a rice ball (136), insisting instead on peanut butter sandwiches and soup (182). Whereas Naomi is enthusiastic in her consumption of Japanese food prepared by her aunt as a way to mitigate the loss of ethnic pride, Stephen’s shame over being Japanese Canadian is so deeply ingrained that he rejects any and all cultural signifiers linked to Japan and to Japanese identity. He is, as Wenying Xu implies in Eating Identities, a version of John Okada’s Ichiro in No-No Boy, “vent[ing] his hatred for being a ‘Jap’” (29) by rejecting the food, customs, and people he blames as responsible for his own victimhood. While negotiated distinctly through the consumption or the rejection of Japanese food, for both Naomi and Stephen, food is a cultural object through which they can articulate their differing experiences of Asian/Canadian identity.

**Fusion: “Equal-Opportunity Eaters”**

Ho’s final chapter explores Asian/American youth whose processes of gaining ethnic pride through food does not occur through assimilative practices of consuming so-called American cuisine but instead are enacted by resisting “assimilat[ion] into an American melting pot” (112) and, as a result, by defying the traditionally binary and unidirectional trajectory of acculturation. Ho points out that Gus Lee’s China Boy and Gish Jen’s Mona and the Promised Land feature young protagonists who have “picked ethnic affiliations that combine their Chinese ancestry with their chosen peer groups, black and Jewish respectively” (112); as a result, “fusion cooking comes to symbolize their coming-of-age and ethnic affiliations” (113). In her analysis of China Boy, Ho argues that inter-ethnic consumption offers protagonist Kai the opportunity to survive in the San Francisco Panhandle neighbourhood, where he is the “only Asian, the only nonblack” (Lee 14). Kai adopts a multi-ethnic approach to identity that is facilitated through his shared lunches with friends from many racial and ethnic backgrounds. Ho argues that Kai’s inter-ethnic eating is “a means for him to find, solidify, and renew himself as a multiply identified Asian American subject” (117).

In Mona and the Promised Land, the titular character’s journey is much more intentional: Mona Chang chooses deliberately to identify as Jewish American and, as Ho argues, “Jen demonstrates the
fluidity of Mona’s subjectivity through food tropes, as food, both in its material form as well as its symbolic guise, signals multiethnic identification” (124). In the novel, the narrator describes Mona’s first symbolic and later official conversion to Judaism in connection to food: “before you can say mat-zoh ball, Mona too is turning Jewish” (32). The argument that fusion cooking allows these Asian/American young people to identify as American outside of traditional frameworks is reiterated by Mona herself: “Jewish is American. . . . American means being whatever you want, and I happen to pick being Jewish” (49). Rightly, Ho problematizes Mona’s conclusions: “Mona cannot be Jewish simply because she knows what schmaltz is or because she eats matzoh ball soup” (128). Mona’s coming of age includes the recognition that ethnicity cannot be simply declared but “always requires constant scrutiny and questioning” (128).

In what is perhaps the most resonant section of her book, Ho’s readings of these two young people posit them as agents in the conscious construction of ethnicity outside of the foreigner-vs.-American binary that is often at the core of Asian/American works:

Fusion cooking represents the promises and pitfalls of cross-ethnic identification, much like the process of Americanization itself. As such, it guarantees to be a powerful symbol for both the limitless possibilities of identification, as well as the very real limitations for non-white, non-Protestant American children, who are trying to find their place as, in Kai and Mona’s case, Asian-African-Jewish-American subjects. (113)

It is crucial to point out, however, that these positive experiences of racial and culinary fusion are predicated on privilege and choice; as a middle-class, Chinese American teen, Mona has the opportunity to choose another ethnic identity. Comparatively, Kai enjoys race privilege because he is an assimilationist-minded Asian/American youth who is drawn to the African American and Latino American kids who live in neighbourhoods wherein “poverty had become an integral expression of local culture” (Lee 243). By contrast, Harry St. George’s childhood of racial and culinary fusion in Shani Mootoo’s He Drowns She in the Sea is less optimistic. The son of a “strange more-African-than-Indian Indian” (102) transracial adoptee, Harry is raised in the black community of Mootoo’s fictional island of Guanagasar (a stand-in for Trinidad) where his grandfather, Uncle Mako, is a well-known Raleigh fisherman and his mother works for a wealthy Indian family. We learn about the tension of Indian and African race relations on the island:

Unlike the Africans, who had been brought to the islands against their will and enslaved, the Indians had come as indentured labourers, armed with
the promise, the guarantee even, of a return trip to India, or, if they chose, after the completion of their indentureship, a parcel of land, gratis. Still, a century and more later, they bowed before the white-skinned British, yet lorded superiority over those of African descent. (282)

This complicated colonial and racial dynamic is reflected in Harry’s experiences of food and culture. The plot of the novel follows Harry’s childhood romance with the daughter of his mother’s employer. One of their interactions centres on the mimicking of a tea party with Rose Sangha hosting and Harry as guest. But Harry’s mother objects to these games on the grounds of their ethnic differences: “Teatime, my foot . . . people in Raleigh don’t have tea or time for tea time” (127).

Food is used again to fuse Harry’s family and culture with Rose’s when the Sanghas visit Uncle Mako’s fish market one afternoon. Rose is terrified initially by “the black man’s closeness,” but Uncle Mako describes a local recipe (and eating custom) used by the African families that bridges that distance. Speaking to Rose directly, as if she is the one who will cook the fish, Uncle Mako instructs: “With a pinch of thyme, some slice onions, and plenty-plenty salt, for saltwater fish need a goodly amount of salt, and . . . then you drag them in a plate that have flour in it, and then, just so, you fry them up. Quick-quick, because you don’t want them to burn and get black-black like this skin on my body” (148). Throughout Rose’s experience of racial, cultural, and culinary fusion, Harry feels growing shame that culminates when Rose visits his home in Raleigh and his mother serves them “two bottles of soft drinks kept especially in case of visitors” (153) and a plate of cookies that pale in comparison to the fancier ones served at the Sanghas’ home. In his youth, Harry sees his racial fusion, as an Indo-Caribbean raised in a black family and community, as a liability rather than a gain.

As an adult, Harry is an “equal opportunity eater” like the characters analyzed in Ho’s book (119); he grows into a Vancouver-based “foodies,” impressing fellow Canadians with his alimentary knowledge. Differently from Kai’s, his experience of racial fusion through food is thwarted in his childhood by profound legacies of prejudice and racism. Whereas racial fusion in the texts Ho has selected for analysis offers protagonists positive opportunities to push beyond the mainstream and the binaries of Asian/American race relations, in Mootoo’s text, racial fusion between communities does not bridge differences for Harry but exaggerates them instead. In comparison, for Rose, empowered by her race and class, food does offer positive experiences of racial fusion. These differences in the representations of characters’ experiences of racial fusion point to the need to consider the roles that class and race privilege have in these experiences, not just in the texts discussed here but in others as well. The choice to be an equal-opportunity eater seems
most important in these examples and distinguishes these experiences of coming of age through racial and culinary fusion from one another clearly. In all, Ho’s examples of cultural and culinary fusion are idealized experiences that reveal important ways in which food participates in cultural hybridity but also implies class and race privileges that she does not account for fully. Novels like He Drown She in the Sea, however, address the inequalities that undergird fusion eating and that are important to consider not just in literary representations but also in our daily consumption practices.

**Conclusion**

*Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* explores representations of food and eating in order to elucidate the themes of “the negotiation of loss and the search for home,” because “food signifies home” in so many of the novels Ho explores (146). “Eating,” she argues, “is a very fundamental way of claiming a home,” and the characters explored in her study are claiming “America as their home” (146). The general conclusion of Ho’s book is that Asian/American youth are represented as using consumption as a way to access ethnic identities, be they “white American,” Asian/American, or inter-ethnic fusions of various subjectivities. She is rightly cautious, however, of the ways in which food and consumption have been used as essentialist fodder in order to “turn characters into caricatures” (145). After all, the challenges of Asian/American subjectivity, particularly in relation to “the difficulties of acculturation,” cannot (and should not) be “reduce[d] to the difference between preferring American fried chicken over Vietnamese phở” (Ho 145). Ho stops short of analyzing the dangers of linking racial and cultural insecurity with youth, a linkage that might be taken to imply that Asian/North American adolescents will “mature” into a clearly preferred state of ethnic pride. Nevertheless, her examples of the ways in which writers counteract negative Asian stereotypes promoted in mainstream American culture while conveying the process of the development of ethnic identity provide patterns that are useful to critics of texts beyond the specific ones she reads.

In the books analyzed in Ho’s volume, literal representations of characters consuming food that represents their (or others’) cultural identities abound. In recent years, however, a number of recent Asian/North American coming-of-age novels have addressed race, ethnicity, youth, and food in provocative and symbolic ways, including Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth*, wherein audio gustatory synesthesia and Asian adoption reflect more nuanced experiences of acc/culturation and consumption, and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, which unfurls when sixteen-year-old Nao Yasutani’s lunch box—containing her diary, which in many ways is her life—washes ashore in the flotsam aftermath of the 2011 Japanese tsunami.
Ho’s book stands as a useful foundation for thinking through these new texts that are dealing with consumption and Asian/American coming of age in provocative and innovative ways. As I have demonstrated in this essay, there are opportunities for her analysis to extend beyond the national and ethnic particularities she addresses. Moreover, numerous Asian/American texts directed at young people could benefit from Ho’s framework. Picture books like Grace Lin’s *The Ugly Vegetables* and Linda Sue Park’s *Bee-Bim Bop!* offer protagonists who glean historical and cultural pride through cooking lessons from their parents. Jenny Han’s recent novel, *Clara Lee and the Apple Pie Dream*, considers assimilation and Americanization through representations of cultural consumption. The inclusion of these works and countless others into a conversation about consumption and Asian/American young people will illustrate the broad opportunities Ho’s book offers to a number of fields and perspectives.

**Notes**

1. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng calls for a “theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject formation,” particularly as it relates to feelings of Otherness and marginalization (xi).

2. Joy Kogawa’s novel not only is ubiquitous in Canadian secondary school curricula but has also been reworked as a children’s novel, *Naomi’s Road*, and as a related picture book, *Naomi’s Tree*.

3. While Benjamin Lefebvre draws our attention to the ways that *Naomi’s Road*, Kogawa’s rewriting of *Obasan* for children, “refocusses the experience of trauma and internment on an individual conflict that can be resolved more easily” and in doing so “retain[s] little of the historical context that in *Obasan* is so important to keep remembering” (161–62), in the following paragraphs I focus on the first novel.

4. Representations of food and consumption in *Obasan* also exemplify the duality Ho illustrates when she reminds us that...
“[f]ood is inextricably linked to survival”: its “importance is not confined to its life sustaining properties—it is among the most important sign systems, affording an extraordinary flexibility of interpretation as symbol, metaphor, code, and language” (10).

While Lee’s narrator points out that Chinatown and the Handle are similar in terms of class, the race privilege of being Asian/American in a nation that continues to believe in the model minority myth as it relates to people of Asian origins (and in opposition to African Americans and Latino Americans) is important.

The colonial presence of tea and the practice of tea parties in Guanagaspar is significant, as are the levels of mimicry and play inferred in this scene.

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Works Cited


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