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Asian American Food Blogging as Racial Branding

Rewriting the Search for Authenticity

LORI KIDO LOPEZ

Asian Americans have become enormously successful and visible within every aspect of the online foodosphere—sharing daily reviews of their favorite restaurants, running hundreds of blogs that focus on cooking and dining, and posting mouth-watering photographs of every bite. *Hyphen Magazine* found that 15 percent of reviewers on Yelp (an online business rating review company) are Asian American, prompting the question, "What is it about the chance to review the newest Mission Street food cart or that downtown Italian-Haitian-Inuit fusion restaurant that brings out our inner Anthony Bourdain?"[1] Similarly, an Asian American food blogger called kevinEats penned an entire blog entry with the title "Why Are There So Many Asian Food Bloggers?"[2] in which he attempts to explain the reasons behind the unusual abundance of Asian Americans in the world of food blogging. While kevinEats conjectures that the answer has to do with the cultural significance of food and a propensity for conspicuous consumption, among other factors, I do not purport to have any explanation for this trend. Nevertheless, these blogs are deserving of analysis for what they convey about Asian American identities, communities, and foodscapes. Within these descriptions of meals, stories about eating, and details of recipes, Asian Americans are clearly using food to explore the rich contours of cultural expression within Asian America.

Food blogs provide a fertile ground for exploring transnational identity formations, as many of the writers who focus on Asian food have complex relationships to their countries of ancestry and the places they call home. As Nancy Pollock argues in her discussion of the mobile communities of Pacific peoples, "Tracing transnational influences through foodscapes enables us to highlight the cultural continuities and innovations, choices that communities make to enhance their identity."[3] Researchers have long theorized the connection between food cultures and identity, but these blogs provide a unique space for exposing the changing shape of these relationships as they are lived out in daily activities and interactions. Unlike pricey cookbooks, Food Network television shows, glossy food magazines, and other more traditional food media, blogs give their readers a peek into the everyday culinary adventures of Asian

American food lovers. Bloggers tell their own stories using the format of regularly updated posts that are readily accessible to their online communities—a format that is both intimate and personal yet carefully constructed for a public and even global readership.

In particular, the global identities embodied within Asian American food blogs provide a space for examining and untangling discourses of authenticity and their relationship to hierarchies of cultural value. For Asian American bloggers who blog about Asian food, a key "selling point" of their blogs—meaning a draw for readership, but also the potential to monetize their labor—is that the blogger's racial or ethnic heritage is invoked in order to frame his or her take on this kind of food as *authentic*. This is a cuisine they grew up with, or have experienced among natives, or have been taught to cook by immigrant family members, or otherwise understand with a high degree of authority. While these invocations of authenticity reflect hegemonic assumptions about cultural value, the blogs themselves simultaneously work to challenge and disrupt such notions. In this chapter, I perform a textual analysis of Asian American food blogs in order to illustrate the way that national identity, ethnic identity, and discourses of authenticity are contradictorily invoked and destabilized in the blogosphere using the logic of racial branding. In examining explicit and implicit invocations of authenticity as part of the work of creating a marketable brand, I argue that Asian American food blogging may seem like an act of individual expression, but these bodies of writing cannot be disentangled from the economic forces and cultural hierarchies that contribute to our understanding of the value of race as a brand.

Although the different genres of food blogs each offer interesting sites for investigation, for this study I focus on individually authored blogs that primarily share recipes. Given my interest in identity, branding, and authenticity, the creation and sharing of recipes provides a more fruitful site than foodies who report on their restaurant dining experiences. I specifically focus on the contents of twenty Asian American[4] food blogs that have been active for at least two years, providing me access to hundreds of entries to read and assess.[5] This sampling of blogs was selected because they represent a wide range of identities within the Asian American community—writers of different ethnicities, living in geographically dispersed areas, with different kinds of stories to tell. Despite their differences, they share a few traits in common that make them particularly useful for this study. The primary function of each blog is to share recipes, but most blog posts contain introductions that explain the food or tell a story about the food. It is these details, stories, explanations, and commentary that I explore in my analysis. Together they can be read for the way in which they mirror the shifting relationships that Asian Americans have to their own food cultures, to the way that they are perceived by others, and to their own sociohistorical positioning. Although I argue that authenticity clearly provides a kind currency

for these blogs that relies on racial branding, a nuanced reading of their actual content reveals food blogs as a site for both invoking and dismantling the stability of such a concept as meaningful for Asian Americans in relation to their culinary identities.

Asian American Food Cultures

We can begin investigating Asian American food blogs by considering broadly the social role that they play and what function they serve to their writers and readers. Most bloggers explicitly state their motivations for creating and maintaining their recipe blog on their "About" page or within the text of their daily entries. These generally include a desire to create a collection of recipes for posterity, to document their process of learning about food, or to simply record their regular food activities. Such motivations are likely supplemented by the same reasons that people blog about any topic—to document their lives in a broadcast medium, to experience the intellectual pleasure or emotional catharsis of sharing their opinions with others, and to participate in a community of like-minded individuals.[6] In addition, each of the blogs included in this study has reached a level of popularity in reader hits (a kind of visibility that begets increased visibility through the algorithms used to discover the blogs on Google)[7] that contributes to yet another motivation for blogging—to gain a large readership and its associated benefits. These benefits can be intangible, such as feeling that one has successfully shared his or her creation with a wide audience, or tangible, such as being asked to author a cookbook or take photographs for a food event because of the blog's success.

Regardless of what purpose bloggers intend for their blogs to play, it is important to consider the way in which Asian American food blogs fit into the larger food landscape of the Internet. In particular, we must acknowledge the way that Asian American food blogs can be taken up by readers as "culinary tourism," which Lucy Long theorizes as the kind of encounter in which people intentionally explore culinary systems that are not their own.[8] Although culinary tourism is a common practice for "foodies" and other cosmopolitans, the specific histories of Asians in the United States do bring up some troubling questions for such practices. Asian Americans and other racial minorities have a particular relationship to the act of sharing food with the public. For many white Americans, eating at restaurants has served as an opportunity for acknowledging the existence of Asian immigrant families and for interacting with them. Although Asian Americans represent only around 5 percent of the entire U.S. population,[9] Americans in every city engage with Asian America through dining at Chinese restaurants, Thai restaurants, sushi bars, or any number of other readily available Asian eating establishments.[10] These encounters notably do not provide a neutral meeting ground; rather, Asian Americans are in the position of serving

and providing a satisfying experience for the patron or the consumer, who is in the position of evaluation and compensation. Further, Asian eating establishments in the United States have a long history of deliberately catering to non-Asian customers. By altering their menus, décor, and service, they often seek to provide an experience that is suitably exotic and yet still comfortably palatable for Americans who may not have previously had meaningful interactions with Asian culture.[11]

This history of culinary tourism is an indelible element of Asian American cooking blogs. As Mark Padoongpatt argues in his analysis of Thai cuisine communities in Los Angeles, "It is imperative to continue to investigate the intersection of food and race, because race has been and continues to be the operative category for ethnic groups in U.S. society, whether we wish it to be or not."[12] Given the potential audience for food blogs that includes Americans who consistently view Asian food as "exotic" and "other," these collections of food writing must be read as contributing to a larger discourse on Asian cuisine, cultures, and social positioning. Even if the concept of "Asian cuisine" does not exist in reality, given the extreme diversity of food cultures within the broader region of Asia, food blogs work to continually reinscribe connections between geography and eating practices that preserve the illusion that such a term has meaning. Thus, although individual food blogs may focus very specifically on a single ethnicity, or even a single regional cuisine, it is still important to connect these disparate blogs together under the category of Asian American food blogs. Even if the bloggers themselves are not attempting to speak to a larger Asian American experience, the politicized collective identity of Asian America demands that we read such individual experiences as connected to one another in both their histories and their treatment by their audiences. If these blogs use food as a way of reflecting the position of Asians within our global society, I argue that their insistence on being viewed as authentic offers a starting point for understanding the way that national, cultural, and social identities are constructed and intertwined through this form of food writing.

Constructing Authenticity

Within the Asian American food blogs sampled for this study, the concept of authenticity stands out as a common topic of discussion. Recipes are first and foremost positioned as authentic through the framing of the blog and its author. Their "About" pages often explicitly characterize the blog's recipes as authentic, as in Bee Yinn Low's description that her blog *Rasa Malaysia* "offers easy, authentic, and tested recipes that work, plus mouthwatering and gorgeous food photography. [*Rasa Malaysia*] is about preserving authentic Asian cooking, narrated through easy-to-read articles."[13] Makiko Itoh's "About" page, on her blog, *Just Hungry*, states, "My recipes are authentically Japanese enough to satisfy my harshest critic—me!"[14] The authors of *The Ravenous Couple* state in their own introduction that "our mission is to show you how authentic Vietnamese food is simple, fresh, and delicious,"[15] emphasizing an educational goal that begins with the showcasing of authentic cuisine. The word itself is generously applied to a wide variety of food descriptions—a search for the word "authentic" among the recipes on *Beyond Kimchi* reveals 160 entries, with most simply tacked on to the beginning of a dish's name, such as "authentic bibimbap" or "authentic Korean beef." The blogs also repeatedly discuss the concept of authenticity within their posts, offering thoughts on what makes food authentic, the challenges of authenticity, and the efficacy of using authenticity as a metric for evaluating Asian or Asian American food. Through these, we can begin to see a preoccupation within Asian American blogs on the topic of authenticity, both in evoking an aura of authenticity about their own work and in actively shaping our understanding of what that term means.

Authenticity must be understood as a subjective quality that is socially constructed and relational, rather than an inherent quality of food, people, spaces, or media. As Arjun Appadurai argues, the idea that a culinary system can be authentic is inherently suspect, given that it is not clear whose authoritative voice stands to provide the source of authenticity. Moreover, the quality of authenticity is only given to cuisines that have undergone change, making it nearly impossible to characterize what is authentic in the face of shifting cultural tastes and traditions.[16] Despite this slipperiness, the term remains clearly imbued with social value, particularly for food blogs—here, bloggers are seen to encourage the belief that a more authentic blog is inherently more trustworthy and authoritative. This relationship of trust and loyalty seems tantamount to the success of blogs, whose currency often rests solely on page views and a blogger's ability to convince readers to return day after day.

Josee Johnston and Shyon Baumann[17] further explicate some of the different ways that authenticity has been constructed within the gourmet food world. They map out five qualities that are generally ascribed to what we would consider authentic food: simplicity, personal connection, geographic specificity, history/tradition, and ethnic connection. Johnston and Baumann's elaboration of these traits, determined through discourse analysis of their interviews with foodies, provides a helpful starting place for pinpointing the nuances of the concept, which can otherwise remain opaque. Although their work does not specifically mention the discourse of food bloggers, their findings become directly applicable when looking at the way that these qualities are deliberately made visible within this sample of Asian American food blogs. Here I demonstrate the fulfillment of these categories to show, not just that Asian American blogs are clearly upholding and reinforcing discourses of authenticity, but to consider the specific ways that discussions of food authenticity become connected to hierarchies of value that benefit Asian American bloggers.

The first two categories of simplicity and personal connection are inherent qualities of the genre of the food blog itself—writers of blogs tell their own personal stories that provide the connection between the cook and the food, and they tell stories about foods that they have created themselves. Given that most bloggers are home cooks, their writing is suffused with sincerity and handmade qualities that speak to the demands for authenticity through simplicity. We can see each of these traits in the writing on *Indian Simmer*, where Prerna Singh introduces each recipe with sentimental musing about the dish's relationship to her childhood, her experiences as a new mother, her relationship to her in-laws, or other aspects of her everyday life. Her description of shrimp with tandoori masala provides a strong example:

> The recipe I'm sharing today is very simple, quick, and soars with the taste of my mother in law's tandoori masala. This was our go-to summer recipe that paired amazingly well with a bottle of chilled beer. The photos might tell you so, mostly because Abhishek took them back in summer (yes I was nursing them in my computer all these months). We've cooked it while camping, served while entertaining friends at home and whipped in minutes for the butterfly's lunchbox.[18]

In this brief description of the dish we can see how a personal narrative can be deployed to give specificity while also shoring up the dish's utility—it originated from an elder family member, but it can be seamlessly deployed into the varied schedules of contemporary wives and mothers. Even in such a brief description, readers can get a sense for who she is as a person and how her life is intertwined with her cooking. This writing style is pervasive even among the bloggers who have become professional chefs or who sell their food, as they are still in the business of exposing stories behind their food and elucidating how their food is made, offering an authentic personal connection that would be missing in a corporate environment or the world of mass-produced food.

While this kind of authenticity seems inherent within the form of a personal food blog, we can see the other traits of authenticity that are tethered to Asian American sensibilities—geographic specificity, history/tradition, and ethnic connection—also carefully constructed through the narrative database that constitutes each blog. Within descriptions of a recipe the blogger often points out that it is authentic to a specific region or ethnic group. For instance, in the Filipino blog *Burnt Lumpia*, Marvin Gapultos proudly elaborates upon the culinary regions from which his dishes originate:

> Hailing from the Ilocos region of the Northern Philippines (Ilocos son, what?!!), Papaitan is usually comprised of the organ meats found within a goat such as its stomach and intestines, as well as its bitter bile. . . . Us crazy Ilocanos, we'll eat anything. . . . But what's with the Filipino (or more specifically, Ilocano) love of bitter flavors?[19]

His discussion of the goat stew papaitan and other bitter regional dishes are laced with boastful swagger about the type of food that is unique to the Ilocos region and those who are capable of enjoying it. Makiko Itoh of the Japanese blog *Just Hungry* takes a different tack, using her regionally specific knowledge as a potential explanation for dishes that might fail to live up to the expectations of true locals. She asserts the most authority on dishes that reflect the Kanto region that encompasses Tokyo, such as her classic Kanto-style sukiyaki, "the quintessential Japanese beef hot pot." When presenting dishes from other regions, such as Osaka-style okonomiyaki, she is careful to state, "This is a fairly authentic recipe I think, or as authentic as a Tokyo born-and-bred girl can get."[20] Both of these kinds of claims to geographic specificity are shored up through personal narratives told about the specific area in which they grew up, having relatives from that area, or from frequently visiting or returning to that area. Food bloggers frequently pair their recipes with stories about a grandmother who made them the dish as a child or about helping their mother in the kitchen as she explained the origins of the dish. As Jun Belen states in the introduction to *junblog: Stories from My Filipino Kitchen*, "I learned how to cook through long-distance phone conversations with my mom, the lady who taught me the love of food and cooking. . . . My questions were endless. Sometimes silly. 'Taste it and you'll learn,' she taught me."[21] These narratives work to uphold the authenticity of the blogger through their close connection to the place and people who originated the dish, as well as through a connection to history and tradition. Authentic food is often characterized by being made in the same way it has always been made, in the place where it is from. By emphasizing stories about the generational longevity and unwavering history of a dish, bloggers reinforce the notion that these qualities are more valued than a brand-new flavor or the cooking of someone who does not understand or connect to a dish's history.

Johnston and Baumann's final element of authenticity is that it is made by "ethnic" people—a concept that is difficult to define and yet arguably present in these blogs. The quality of being "ethnic" often refers (somewhat problematically) to those who are not white or who are not assimilated into mainstream white culture in the United States. Thus many in Johnston and Baumann's study would define a restaurant as authentic when there were many non-white, non-assimilated "ethnic" people eating there or working there. This quality of being associated with a strong ethnic identity has already been gestured to in stories about connecting to a country or culture of origin and emphasizing the importance of family and family history in telling food stories. But another important element of tracing the ethnic identities of Asian American food bloggers

is the literal movement of peoples between the United States and Asia and the transnational food identities that such flows create. Asian Americans embody this category of authenticity through movements that include the more permanent relocations associated with migration and the temporary sojourns associated with transnational travel. Within blogged recipes and their accompanying stories we read about residing in a number of different countries, traveling for work and for pleasure, participating in tourist excursions and homecomings, and otherwise finding ways to physically navigate the borders between the different cultural identities that constitute Asian America. Leela Punyaratabandhu of the blog *SheSimmers* shares traditional recipes and stories from her childhood in Thailand from her current home in Chicago,[22] while others disclose their transnational boundary crossing through tracking their travels across the Pacific. Marc Matsumoto of the blog *No Recipes*, who also goes by the title "The Wandering Cook," documents his favorite eating spots in places like Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Seoul.[23] Here we see how Asian American food bloggers benefit from the mobilities and transnational connections that often characterize Asian American experiences and narratives.

Beyond these implicit appeals to authenticity, many bloggers also directly discuss their own thoughts on the way that authenticity reflects hierarchies of cultural power. Through perceived threats to culinary authenticity, food bloggers are able to express the way that Asian American cultures are so frequently mishandled and misunderstood. On Bee Yin Low's *Rasa Malaysia*, she writes:

> No offense to the authors but your *fill-in-the-blank*-inspired creations are nothing but shallow, soulless, pieces of goo to my native Asian palate. If you intend to make a Vietnamese dish, please create it according to the native way rather than just casually throwing in a few Vietnamese herbs or a few dashes of fish sauce. Would you call an all-American burger "Thai-inspired Burger" by substituting the typical lettuce leaves for say, mint leaves?[24]

She is clearly insulted by the idea that a dish could be labeled Vietnamese when it is not made "according to the native way" or is made in a way that tastes bad to a "native Asian" person. This definition of authenticity emphasizes the role of the authenticator in being able to deem a dish authentic or not. When bloggers take on the role of the authenticator, they render their own opinion more legitimate than any other, privileging their own standards for authenticity and renouncing alternatives.

Racial Branding

In affirming these different tenets of authenticity, these Asian American food bloggers are doing more than simply increasing the value of their food blogs.

Such discourses serve as a form of racial branding—a process in which racial identities are carefully managed and packaged for consumption while simultaneously reifying and essentializing racial difference. Although it is rare to see discussions of financial incentives or economic motivations for blogging within the blogs themselves, it is undeniable that food blogging has led to many full-time careers. For entrepreneurial and popular Asian American food bloggers, we can see a number of success stories from individuals who started their blog as a humble platform for sharing recipes and ended up becoming food professionals. Out of the twenty blogs sampled, nine were connected to financial ventures—including writing cookbooks, becoming food journalists or food photographers, starring on cooking shows, and even manning a food truck. Being able to transition from unpaid blogger to food professional, or just being able to monetize a blog in any way, is an accomplishment that demands a powerful act of branding. That is, bloggers must be able to prove that their voices are unique and distinct and that their perspectives command loyal audiences. We can clearly see the logic of branding in play as many bloggers position themselves for financial profit through their blogging labor and steady readership. Given that a blog is a vehicle for a single personality and set of skills and knowledge, bloggers must be adept in shaping their brands so audiences will continue to support them, even when it costs money to do so.[25]

This logic of branding is also present in the work of bloggers who do not monetize their labor, as means for maintaining interest on the part of readers. If there is no semblance of coherency to the topics a blog addresses, or if there is no attempt to create and maintain a distinctive perspective, then readers are unlikely to return. To cultivate and retain interest in their brand, bloggers must carefully delineate their projects and their expertise using the tenets of promotional culture. Although this kind of labor might appear disconnected from the idea of financially profiting off of a blog, they are in fact intimately connected, as branding can never be seen as an exclusively financial process. In selecting a title for a blog, narrowing its specific focus, and creating a reliable location for procuring a specific set of information, bloggers are clearly deploying the logic of branding in order to gain and maintain readers—as well the many social, emotional, and intellectual benefits that accrue from doing so.

Importantly, for Asian American food bloggers, this desire for the maintenance of a marketable brand becomes a racialized project. As Viet Nguyen has argued, the panethnic entrepreneur has much to gain in capitalizing on the symbolic capital of race.[26] For Asian American fiction writers, this has often meant benefiting from the celebration of stories of struggle and resistance. For Asian American food writers, there is another realm of symbolic capital to be gained through the deployment of race—being recognized as experts on the topic of Asian cooking. Those panethnic entrepreneurs who write about food benefit from making race visible through descriptions of their racial/ethnic background,

pictures of themselves, and stories of their Asian families, histories, and experiences. This serves a dual function of calling for identification and solidarity for readers of similar ethnic or racial backgrounds while also offering an extension of food tourism for non-Asian readers.

Although it may seem cynical to argue that bloggers participate in racial branding in order to establish their authority as Asian American food experts, this viewpoint importantly disavows a more essentialist view of Asian American food blogs. That is, the argument that racial branding is an act of labor that strives to create a uniquely Asian American perspective reminds us that Asian identities do not automatically translate to Asian expertise or authenticity. Rather, authenticity is a social construction that is always tenuous and under attack, always necessitating work to maintain a claim on it.

Conclusion: Destabilizing Authenticity through Hybridity

Thus far, I have argued that Asian American food blogs work to uphold notions of authenticity as a means of capitalizing on racialized branding. However, the ways in which this presumed ethnic authenticity is expressed within the blogs can itself be full of contradictions. Thus, while relying upon the authority of ethnic identity, Asian American food blogs can also be seen to disrupt a stable notion of authenticity. This is most evident in the instances where bloggers struggle with the concept of authenticity, openly admitting that it is a challenge to pinpoint its meaning. Leela Punyaratabandhu of *SheSimmers* writes on her blog about Thai food that, "when it comes to cuisine, 'authenticity' is to me a word that is—at a risk of sounding intoxicated—both loaded with meaning and meaningless at the same time, depending on how you look at it." She then lays out three different possibilities for defining authentic Thai food: the royal cuisine that aristocratic households traditionally prepared, dishes from searchable written records, or any Thai food that cannot be labeled "fusion." For each of these potential arguments, she systematically provides counterexamples to reveal the narrowness or arrogance of such claims to authenticity. As she argues,

> Food is not a static thing. It evolves much like language and everything else. Years ago, we didn't cook with carrots, because we didn't have carrots. Now that we have and want to use carrots in some dishes, we're committing the crime of fusion? Which period of history represents Thai cuisine at its peak and most authentic, then? At which point did Thai cuisine start to allegedly decline? And exactly what do we have right now?[27]

In this exploration we can see that discussions of authenticity are not always taken up as a way of affirming their value; on the contrary, many bloggers

simultaneously participate in deconstructing the notion of authenticity through embracing the impossibility of defining its borders or requirements. Andrea Nguyen's Viet World Kitchen pointedly addresses the topic in an entry titled, "What is Authentic Asian Food?," confessing that wondering about authenticity keeps her up at night. She ultimately decides that the concept centers on a sense of typical food preparations, as well as relationships between people and food that are crafted from a true, honest position. But it is not easy for her to settle upon this definition, and she also ends the entry by asking her readers for their input because it is such a difficult concept.[28]

The deconstruction of authenticity also occurs implicitly through the recipes and writing of individual posts, in which bloggers inescapably participate in blending traditions from many cultures and celebrate the overlapping of cuisines as they move through different geographical spaces. Although bloggers may outwardly claim to be authentically representative of Japanese cuisine, Thai cuisine, or Vietnamese cuisine—and in doing so, reify the notion of Asian authenticity through its connection to their heritage and experiences—it is difficult to find a blog that exclusively focuses on just one cuisine or even one continent. Rather, food bloggers clearly delight in creating and consuming a diversity of dishes that trace their own unique journeys, both geographically and culturally, as they blend traditions from any number of cultures. For instance, in her blog *Kimchi Mom*, Amy Kim includes recipes for bibimbap burgers and ramen-grilled cheese; Diana Kuan, from *Appetite for China*, writes in detail about her favorite Thai pork salad larb, and Soma from *eCurry* describes naan pizza with balsamic roasted figs and goat cheese. Such posts evidence a playful blending of ethnic traditions and the wholesale embracing of food cultures outside their own. Some include posts about the cultural or historical reasons for how specific foods made their way across the Pacific, as in Marc Matsumoto writing in *No Recipes* about the difference between Japanese ham-ba-gu versus ham-ba-gah. But bloggers also simply write about their own favorite dishes that have nothing to do with their ethnic heritage because the reality is that there is no identity and no food culture that remains unchanged by contact with others.

These deviations from the so-called authentic dishes that characterize a blog's brand likely do nothing to damage the perceived authenticity of the overall blog; of course readers understand the prevalence (and enjoyment) of cross-cultural mixing in every aspect of life. But if authenticity of food knowledge is shored up through affirming a connection to one's specific ethnic identity, heritage, and experiences, as we have seen illustrated thus far, then the inclusion of these foods outside the specific ethnicity delineated as authentic only serve to remind us how unwieldy and fraught the concept of authenticity can be. Indeed, any connection between authenticity and identity becomes disrupted through engagements with hybridity. This proves important because one's identity may be connected to a

specific food culture, but this connection is just as unstable as any aspect of our identities, which are always moving and shifting to reveal different articulations in different circumstances.

The political work of destabilizing an essential notion of identity through engagements with fusion cultures and cuisines must be tempered by Anita Mannur's concern that the framing of fusion cuisine has often served to uphold social inequalities, particularly in the case of Asian Americans.[29] Her fears about fusion cuisine falling prey to the "economy of desirability" are certainly relevant in the context of this discussion of how bloggers deliberately craft a brand that they believe will resonate with readers, and even more so with those who have begun to enter into mainstream professional food industries such as cookbook authoring. Nevertheless, there remain significant differences between the corporate food world that produces fusion cuisine for restaurants and programming on the Food Network and the possibilities offered by individual bloggers striving to gain audiences through self-branding. Alongside the attempts by bloggers to rely upon racial formations as a form of authenticity, food bloggers also call upon their authentic experiences as complex, imperfect, multifaceted human beings to set their blog apart and connect with readers. Individual bloggers have the space to express their own sensibilities about what constitutes fusion food, how it is understood, and how any particular dish might be enjoyed by their own friends and family. Although I have demonstrated the ways that these blogs are inherently subject to larger discourses surrounding race, culinary tourism, and the logic of branding, they also reflect the individual experiences of each blogger. It is through these individual responses to larger economic forces and the effort of laboring to represent their own specific experiences, tastes, and practices that we can more accurately see through these blogs that Asian America is in a constant state of cultural flux. Through the distinct voices of each writer, Asian American food blogs participate in opening up possibilities for challenging traditional discourses of authenticity and their connection to the process of racial branding—and in helping to redefine the shape of Asian American identities, cultures, and practices in doing so.

NOTES

1 Victoria Yue, "Do Asian Americans Yelp Like Crazy?" *Hyphen: Asian America Unabridged*, March 31, 2011, http://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2011/3/31/do-asian-americans-yelp-crazy.

2 *kevinEats.com*, "Why Are There So Many Asian Food Bloggers?" January 11, 2010, http://www.kevineats.com/2010/01/why-are-there-so-many-asian-food.htm.

3 Nancy Pollock, "Food and Transnationalism: Reassertions of Pacific Identity," in *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives*, ed. Helen Lee and Steve Tupai Francis, 103–114 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009), 105.

4 Determining what counted as "Asian American" was a difficult undertaking for this study, given that I was simultaneously interested in the category of "Asian America" and the existence of transnational food cultures and identities. Each blog author identifies him or herself within the blog as both Asian and American (although in many cases the phrase "Asian American" is never used). Yet some are mixed-race Asian and non-Asian, and some authors do not currently reside in the United States.

5 Blogs included for study include *Appetite for China* (appetiteforchina.com), *@Køkken* (www.atkokken.com), *Beyond Kimchee* (www.beyondkimchee.com), *Burnt Lumpia* (burntlumpiablog.com), *eCurry* (www.ecurry.com/blog), *Indian Simmer* (www.indiansimmer.com), *junblog* (blog.junbelen.com), *Just Hungry* (www.justhungry.com), *Just One Cookbook* (www.justonecookbook.com), *Kimchi Mom* (www.kimchimom.com), *Korean Bapsang* (www.koreanbapsang.com), *No Recipes* (norecipes.com), *NoobCook* (www.noobcook.com), *Rasa Malaysia* (rasamalaysia.com), *Red Cook* (redcook.net), *SheSimmers* (shesimmers.com), *Steamy Kitchen* (steamykitchen.com), *The Ravenous Couple* (www.theravenouscouple.com), *Viet World Kitchen* (www.vietworldkitchen.com), and *White on Rice Couple* (whiteonricecouple.com).

6 Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz, "Why We Blog," *Communications of the ACM* 47, no. 12 (2004): 41–46.

7 By this I simply mean that I discovered the blogs for this study by using search terms such as "Asian American food blog" and "Filipino food blog." The top hits for these searches were obviously only the most popular sites.

8 Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long, 20–50 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

9 Karen R. Humes, Nicholas Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010" (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, March 2011), http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf.

10 Alan Warde, "Eating Globally: Cultural Flows and the Spread of Ethnic Restaurants," in *The Ends of Globalization: Bringing Society Back In*, ed. Don Kalb, Marco van der Land, Richard Staring, Bart van Steenbergen, and Nico Wilterdink, 299–316 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Jennifer 8 Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Hachette, 2009).

11 Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1995): 535–553.

12 Mark Padoongpatt, "Too Hot to Handle: Food, Empire, and Race in Thai Los Angeles," *Radical History Review*, no. 110 (2011): 83–108, quote at 85.

13 Bee Yinn Low, "About," *Rasa Malaysia*, http://rasamalaysia.com/about-rasa-malaysia, accessed January 24, 2010.

14 Makiko Itoh, "About," *Just Hungry*, n.d., http://justhungry.com/about, accessed January 13, 2014.

15 Hong Pham and Kim Pham, "About," *The Ravenous Couple*, n.d., http://www.theravenouscouple.com/about, accessed June 5, 2015.

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11

Picturing the Past

Drawing Together Vietnamese American Transnational History

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"Individuals choose sides, families don't."
—GB Tran

Vietnamerica, published in 2010, chronicles GB Tran's attempt to draw together scattered societal fragments to create a Vietnamese American transnational history.[1] In *Vietnamerica*, Tran uses the graphic narrative form to create a unique visual plane that leverages sensory experiences so actors can traverse multiple times and places in a single scene. These sensory experiences provide glimpses of historical, if not political, reconciliation for the older characters in the story while bringing Tran closer to a coherent historical narrative for himself, despite not being able to experience the same sensory journeys directly. My analysis of this work proposes (1) that Tran uses a flattening of time and a multiplicity of perspectives to link the oft-neglected continuities between Vietnamese and Vietnamese American experiences, (2) that *Vietnamerica* presents what I call the "visible social body" to reflect upon the totality of the refugee population and the nameless others who did not survive the passage, and (3) that Tran's reflexive description of the process involved in compiling this narrative works to hail multigenerational readers. Together these narrative techniques reanimate sensual loss and gesture toward a uniquely somatic brand of "Vietnameseness" that can travel across the globe.

Vietnamerica follows Tran's search for his past following the death of his grandparents. Born and raised in the United States, Tran was previously uninterested in learning about his family's history, and his parents would rarely bring up older traumatic events, preferring instead to focus on the future. However, when Tran finds an inscription in a book about the war in Vietnam that reads "A Man without History Is a Tree without Roots," he "returns" to Vietnam to pay his respects to his departed elders. During this trip he learns about his paternal grandfather's decision to join the anti-colonial movement, his trials, and ultimate disillusionment with the cause, as well as his grandmother's long romantic affair with a French colonial officer. Tran also unravels the story of his mother's internal Vietnamese migration from the North to the South, as well as his father's previous marriage to a French woman. The narrative both starts and climaxes