

September 2009

Book Review: How What You Eat Defines Who You Are: The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers

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Recommended Citation

Sherman, Jamie (2009). Book Review: How What You Eat Defines Who You Are: The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 213-217.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/14>

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How What You Eat Defines Who You Are: The Food Theme in Four American Women Writers. 2008. Ya-hui Irenna Chang. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press. 192 pp including bibliography and index. \$109.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Jamie Sherman¹

Ya-hui Irenna Chang argues that minority women authors are frequently caught between efforts to accurately represent experiences of minority women – often autobiographically, or influenced by their own histories – and pressures from members of their respective ethnic groups to combat popular stereotypes and refrain from presenting negative cultural images. Thus, for example, Chang cites Amy Tan's response to criticism:

When you have just one person from a culture, people in the culture end up saying, "this is terrible. This is a stereotype. My mother didn't speak broken English!" I could never explain to people that I wasn't writing about Chinese culture. I was writing fictional stories that were informed by my own family... And my mother did speak broken English

(quoted in Chang, 3).

Although she notes several times throughout the book that there are significant differences between the authors she studies, Maxine Hong Kingston, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, and Louise Erdrich, and the ethnic minorities to which they variously belong, Chang suggests they all face, and address within their work, the challenges and pressures of being a woman within an oppressed group. She draws a parallel, though one that is largely unexplored and not fully explicated, between the struggles of these authors "to balance their personal artistic vision with that of the interests of their own ethnic groups," and the challenges facing their fictional characters with regard to individual and collective or ethnic identities (5). These tensions, Chang argues, are portrayed and negotiated through food images, metaphors, and practices featured in their respective works (6).

The book is divided into four substantive chapters, each addressing food in relationship to, and as a symbol of, different aspects of identity: "self-identity, collective identity, ethnic identity, and gender identity." These are followed by a brief concluding chapter reiterating the framing argument that, contrary to critics' accusations, these authors "do not ignore the interests of their people" in favor of "feminist agendas," but rather balance the two (175). Chapter One interprets individual characters' practices in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Walker's *The Color Purple*, Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, and Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. In separate sections she argues that resisting meat in *The Woman Warrior*, eating sugary foods in *The Color Purple* and *The Joy Luck Club*, and Marie's attempt to feed her straying husband the raw heart of a wild goose as a "love medicine" are primary modes through which the characters address, or try to address, problems of the self. Chapter Two looks at the food images used to describe characters and relationships as embodiments of the cultural tensions between "ethnic" and "dominant" in both *Love Medicine* and *The Color Purple*. Chapter Three broadens the

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discussion to include “taste” in clothes as well as food. Here, she looks at the ways taste figures in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* as a marker of the division among ethnic “collective identity,” individual freedom, and, again, the “dominant” American (White) culture. Finally, Chapter Four looks at the use of food and domestic spaces – especially the kitchen – in Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of *The Color Purple* and Wayne Wang’s film version of Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. Chang argues that these directors locate scenes in the kitchen and add food related sequences that while sometimes diverging from the books, serve to emphasize and embody similar themes and tensions around ethnic identity and gendered inequalities. These scenes also demonstrate that women oppressed in domestic spaces can combat that oppression “when they band together rather than stay isolated in their own spaces” (134).

In general, each chapter contains several provocative statements and a few promising insights. Disappointingly, these are not well supported through the analysis, and often fail to “hang together” in a coherent fashion, while the relevance to the framing issue - criticism of the authors by members of their respective communities - is never entirely clear. In addition, the book draws on theoretical sources piecemeal, with little to no discussion of broader arguments and context. This, alongside flat-footed attributions of causality in relation to both authors and characters within their works (frequently with some slippage between the two) flattens both the literary works, and the analytical frameworks she draws on, while the categories of analysis, such as “identity” and “self worth” lack sufficient interrogation to be analytically meaningful.

Chapter one, for example, begins with a discussion of food and meaning. Chang cites anthropologist Sidney Mintz’ work on the history of sugar and its imbrication with histories of class, colonialism, and the industrialization of Europe (Mintz 1985). Yet she draws from it merely that “an ordinary food item, such as sugar, has its own history” (11). From Roland Barthes’ body of work she takes only that “food can communicate meanings” (11). In all fairness, the conversation moves from there to a discussion of whether food can be considered an “accurate” code through which to convey meaning, in as much as people may ascribe meanings variously. But rather than maintain the nuances of interpretation implicit in communication generally, Chang cites the work of social psychologists Mark Connor and Christopher J. Armitage - again with no discussion of the details of their work or their findings - to conclude a flat “yes” to the question of accuracy (13). Even more disturbing in the context of this journal, Chang notes that women and food have historically been linked and concludes, therefore, that “they are usually good at speaking the language of food” such that it “is not surprising” that food figures prominently in the works of these women authors (14). In a book that aims to explore themes around gender as well as ethnic oppressions, this truncated discussion and blatantly gendered assumption regarding the automatic link between women and food is unsettling, to put it mildly. It is, moreover, oddly resonant with her own argument in Chapter Four when she finds one of the “two sources of Sofia’s oppression” in *The Color Purple* to be the cultural association between black women and domesticity on the basis of which Miss Millie presumes that Sofia would be flattered by an invitation to be her maid (166). Thus Chang makes some of the very same assumptions regarding a naturalized relationship between food, domesticity, and gender that she seeks to analyze within these literary works.

Such generalizations and dubious attributions of motive and cause, as well as somewhat surprising leaps to tangentially related “conclusions” are endemic. In the introduction, Chang states that the authors’ struggles to balance their artistic visions with those of their ethnic groups “makes them good at writing in an artistic form...that allows them to explore the tension between the one and the many” (5). While there can be little doubt that each of the authors is “very good” at what they do, and while one can imagine that they may each have struggled with pressures pertaining to minority authors, this statement, presented with no further discussion, attributes a causality that is one dimensional and difficult to credit in an academic context. In a similar move, Chang glosses Alice Walker’s childhood loss of an eye as a damaged “self image” and a changed “self identity.” “Because of this,” Chang states as fact, “Walker has a great understanding of how a person’s self-identity is closely linked to his or her perception of his or her body” which, in turn, enabled her to effectively portray Celie, a character who is consistently abused by her stepfather and later her husband in *The Color Purple* (68).

It should be said that Chang touches on ideas that, had they been followed through with greater rigor could have made for a compelling book. For example, she argues that domination over appetite and hunger (the first as desire, the second as bodily need) is central to the “White Tiger” chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Chang looks first at the story narrated by a young Chinese American girl, who draws on her mother’s “talk-stories” to imagine herself the “legendary ancient Chinese swordswoman (Fa Mu Lan).” In the girl’s fantasy, she (as Fa Mu Lan) leaves her peasant family and meets an old couple that offers her foods symbolic of the Chinese traditions of kinship, immortality, and rebirth. Fa Mu Lan becomes their disciple and under their guidance, becomes a vegetarian. Later, alone in the forest and first merely nostalgic for the meat her family used to cook, then later actually hungry, Fa Mu Lan is tempted, but resists the urge to consume meat. Provocatively, though never fully explicated nor made relevant to the food theme, Chang compares Fa Mu Lan’s ordeal to Christ’s temptation by the devil in the Book of Matthew (19). The swordswoman, Chang argues, is transformed into a savior through control of her “appetite, emotions, and hunger” (22) and, like Christ, sees angels (21). Chang then drops the Christ discussion without considering of the implications of drawing an implicit connection between food and the devil, and proceeds instead to describe the narrator’s later story, now told from the perspective of an adult, of comments she overheard as a child: that girls are unworthy of being fed. While the Christ analogy is interesting if tangential and not developed, Chang’s description of the later narrative suggests but does not discuss the relationship between the food ordeal in the young girl’s imagined self as an “ancient Chinese” legend, and food in the more troubled voice of the grown up American Chinese woman. Unlike Fa Mu Lan who, following her successful transformation, was welcomed back into her village “as if they were welcoming a son” (quoted in Chang 23), the contemporary narrator’s “American success” remains “a private shawl” she wraps around herself when visiting her family, telling herself that she is “worthy of eating the food” (quoted in Chang 25). The American narrator’s relationship to food – noted by Chang, but not discussed in relation to the warrior narrative – is likewise one of abstinence that resonates with gendered self-transformation. The warrior (who is, after all, the girl’s imagined, desired self) is transformed victoriously, in an act of will that makes her “like a son.” The narrator’s transformation, one of “American success,” is one of disappointment,

unrecognized by her family, and articulated in a willful refusal of gendered food related roles: she won't cook and cracks the dishes when she washes them (24).

Discussion of the love triangles in Erdrich's *Love Medicine* similarly has moments that are almost promising, but are undermined by reductive readings and a lack of internal coherence to the argument. Thus Marie, the half-White, half Chippewa wife in *Love Medicine* symbolizes for Chang non-native White society and is "bitter, salty food" in comparison to Lulu, the "tart berry" – a more natural food than "candy" and that (for Chang) symbolizes Lulu's metaphoric role as (the putatively more natural) Native American tradition. Nector (= "Nectar," Chang notes), the man who loves them both, also loves sugary sweet things. For Chang, Nector's taste for processed foods signifies the corruptive, unhealthy influence of White society he acquired when sent to the government school as a boy (53). Unresolved by Chang, although she herself notes it, is that Lulu is also described as "candy" and "sugar," making it hard to constrain her to the "all natural" and more wholesome "native" that Chang wants her to be, while Marie, elsewhere in the book, is associated with apples, albeit crab apples, a nonetheless natural fruit. While Chang seems to flounder in trying to resolve the many and often conflicting images of these two women and Nector as foods into a coherent and linear schema, the sheer weight of food imagery in *Love Medicine* is compelling and Chang – sometimes almost inadvertently, it seems – draws out some interesting points. While the reader may doubt, for example, that Nector's marriage to Marie is as complete a capitulation to White culture as Chang seems to want it to be, the contrast between Marie as "bitter" to Lulu as sweet (whether berry or candy) is relevant. Chang expands the distinction into Lulu as "real, natural, sweet" and Marie as "bitter, salty" (55). Unfortunately for the reader, Chang never offers evidence for the transformation and association from bitter to salty. If, however, we take on faith that Marie is somewhere in the text associated with "salty" then later moments – as when Marie moves Nector's letter telling her he is leaving, which he had left under the sugar can, to a hiding place under the salt can before Nector, called back from Lulu's, comes home (in Chang 64) – become far more resonant.

That food is significant in the works of these authors and that food serves in many ways to articulate relations between characters and even – in a more limited and complex way than presented here – as a trope through which ethnicity and belonging are signified and negotiated is worthy of further and more detailed attention. It is unfortunate that it does not happen in this book. Beyond the initial and rather brief discussion of critics within each author's "own" community, there is absolutely no discussion whatsoever of existing critical discourses around these works. Moreover, it is unclear from Chang's argument how a focus on food goes beyond the already explicit themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and gendered experiences that are present in the works of all four authors and better explicated elsewhere. Finally, facile comparisons between the authors' lives and some of their characters aside, Chang never manages to connect the practices and metaphors surrounding food to the issue of minority women authors in any substantive way. Given that the food theme is interesting enough in and of itself, one wonders why Chang felt it necessary to add this to the mix at all. However, since it is the issue that frames the book in both the introduction and conclusion, it ought to have been more clearly addressed. Given these fundamental flaws and despite some real promise in the basic theme, this book cannot hope to contribute to critical academic discourse in literature, women's studies, or any other field, nor to fruitful classroom discussion.

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