HUNGER PANGS:
FOODWAYS, RACIAL MELANCHOLIA, AND GENDER IN ASIAN AMERICAN
CHICK LIT

By

KELLY ADAMS

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2009
To My Family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis could not have been completed without the support of my faculty mentors, family, and friends. I would like to thank my thesis committee chair, Malini Schueller, for her incredible wisdom, kindness, and rigorous commitment to helping me improve my writing and scholarly analysis. She has been instrumental in developing my breadth of knowledge in Asian American, American, popular culture, and gender studies, for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank my thesis committee reader, Amy Ongiri, for providing me with superb critical mentorship both on this project as well as with my future academic career.

Outside of UF, I would like to thank those individuals who have encouraged me to pursue my graduate studies and who supported me throughout writing this project. Erika Beck and Lois Becker have been both friends and mentors to me. Abigail Sills has lent me her ear on too many occasions to count and has shared many chick lit books. My sister, Megan, and her daughter, Lucy, have provided much needed (and appreciated) breaks from writing in the forms of shopping, eating, and playing. My partner, Daniel, has been a wonderful source of motivation. Finally, my parents, Paul and Melinda, have always encouraged me to do what I love. I am forever indebted to them for giving me a home when I had none.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................................. 4

LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................................................................................... 6

ABSTRACT …............................................................................................................................................. 7

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................................... 9

Defining Racial Melancholia: What’s Eating Asian America? ................................................................. 10
Excess and Erasure in Chick Lit: The Chick Lit “Formula” and Contemporary Chick Lit Scholarship ........................................................................................................................................... 12
Consuming Food, Fashioning Identities in Chick Lit and Asian American Chick Lit ................. 18
Notes ......................................................................................................................................................... 23

2 “A SUMPTUOUS CHINESE BANQUET”: KIM WONG KELTNER’S THE DIM SUM OF ALL THINGS AND BUDDHA BABY ..................................................... 26

Lindsey Owyang’s Diary? ......................................................................................................................... 29
Covert Meat-eating and the “American Dream” .................................................................................. 32
Growing Pains and the “Era of Lost Chinese Children” ..................................................................... 35
Spinning the Lazy Susan ....................................................................................................................... 39
The All-American Owyangs ................................................................................................................ 42
Notes ......................................................................................................................................................... 47

3 CHANGING THE CHICK LIT “RECIPE”: Gender, Melancholia, and COOKING IN AMULYA MALLADI’S SERVING CRAZY WITH CURRY ........................................................................................................... 54

Spicing up Silence in Amulya Malladi’s Serving Crazy with Curry ................................................ 57
Finding “Home” and Gendered Spaces: The Paradox of (Diasporic) Domesticity .......................... 61
Add Trauma and Stir: Melancholic Recipes ...................................................................................... 68
Notes ......................................................................................................................................................... 75

4 CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................................... 81

WORKS CITED ...................................................................................................................................... 85

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ..................................................................................................................... 91
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Make Your Own Chick-Lit Novel!”
This thesis examines the Asian American chick lit genre and explores the ways in which Asian American chick lit writers negotiate their racialized position writing in the margins of the normatively white mainstream chick lit genre. Asian American chick lit texts provide critical insight into how ethnicity is commercialized and commodified for mainstream consumption and articulate the complex ways in which Asian Americans have been racialized and gendered. This thesis continues the work conducted on women’s cultural productions published in the 1980s by Janice Radway and Tania Modleski, as well as contemporary studies on chick lit by scholars such as Suzanne Ferriss, Mallory Young, and Caroline Smith. However, my work differs critically from these studies in its focus on issues of race and ethnicity within the genre. While Radway and Modleski were influential in challenging myths about popular women’s narratives, their studies mainly focused on middle-class, white women. The same is true with recent scholarly publications on chick lit.

To engage with issues of race, ethnicity, and gender in Asian American chick lit texts, this thesis explores the construction and articulation of “foodways” in Asian American chick lit. I contend that the way Asian American chick lit protagonists perceive, consume, and create food is
analogous to the ways in which mainstream (white) chick lit protagonists perceive, consume, and select material items such as clothes and accessories. The popularity of “food pornography” as a practice of Asian American authors and as a source of pleasure for white readers illustrates how Asian Americans have adapted melancholically to their exclusion from America by producing ethnic products for consumption and how the white majority, in turn, has responded by melancholically consuming these ethnic products. Thus, my analysis of foodways is theoretically informed by Anne Cheng’s psychoanalytic critique of racialization in the U.S. and is situated in the discourses of Asian American studies, food studies, and gender studies. The texts I examine in this thesis include Kim Wong Keltner’s *The Dim Sum of All Things* and *Buddha Baby* in Chapter 1 and Amulya Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry* in Chapter 2.

Through an examination of Asian American chick lit texts, I argue that food is a productive site to articulate the contradictions within the genre, which texts both practice “food pornography” and challenge the commodification of race and ethnicity. Furthermore, the consumption and rejection of food, as well as the creation of recipes, become a critical means for these Asian American chick lit protagonists to form their identities. Ultimately, this thesis posits that an examination of Asian American chick lit represents a critical step towards conceptualizing not only what the potential future of Asian American literature might be, but also in conceiving what the current subjectivity of the Asian American woman is now and what might be her future.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

She trained for hours in the gymnasium of her mind. She became adept at the double entendre, going out to dinner armed with impeccable table manners and a forked tongue. She savored the chase but never actually tasted the food. By the end of the dating marathon, she was always left with hunger pangs.

– Kim Wong Keltner, *The Dim Sum of All Things*

In this epigraph, Keltner is describing the romantic trials of her protagonist, Lindsey Owyang. As this passage suggests, Lindsey’s approach to dating entails a careful and contemplative negotiation with (or as Keltner describes “manipulation of”) the opposite sex (31). In this respect, Pat Benatar’s eighties song, “Love is a Battlefield,” seems apt when describing Lindsey’s dating approach: she goes into dates trained and “armed with impeccable table manners and a forked tongue” (Keltner 31). However, despite showing up at the dating table, Lindsey never manages to taste the food and experiences “hunger pangs” in her love life.

I want to use this passage as a starting point for articulating my argument of what Asian American chick lit is “about.” Although I do not wish to assert that what this subgenre is “about” is something categorically static and fixed, I do want to suggest that there is a narrative often overlooked in popular criticism about chick lit—that is, a narrative that exceeds the formulaic boundaries of the genre. In contrast to what this passage purports to be “about” (i.e., Lindsey’s love life), I contend that the narrative is actually describing the complex negotiation that the racialized, young woman enacts with the normatively white mainstream. The “hunger pangs” that Lindsey experiences suggest her impoverished status as a racially melancholic subject in the U.S., whose “man-eating” ways are actually indicative of her inability to properly mourn her exclusion from the dominant white identity. Thus, the narrative of Asian American chick lit does trace a relationship, but this relationship is pathological rather than romantic.
Defining Racial Melancholia: What’s Eating Asian America?

By stating that the racialized woman is a “racially melancholic subject,” I am utilizing Anne Cheng’s theory of “racial melancholia,” which complexly employs the theories posited by Sigmund Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia”¹ to articulate how race and racialization function within the U.S. For Freud, “mourning” and “melancholia,” “mourning” is a “healthy response to loss” where the lost object “can be relinquished and eventually replaced,” while melancholia is a type of “pathological mourning” where the lost object is never replaced and in fact, haunts the subject (Cheng 7-8; Freud 587). As Freud explains, even though melancholia “borrows some of its features from mourning” (for example, both are “a reaction to the real loss of a loved object”), it nonetheless differs from mourning in its permanence (Freud 587). For the melancholic person, there is no end to melancholia; there is no “getting over” one’s loss (Cheng 8). As Freud states, the melancholic subject undergoes “an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale,” which is a consequence of the subject’s repetitive and self-destructive “devouring” of the lost object (584; 587). As abstract as this “devouring” might sound (especially since there is nothing material that is being “devoured” per se), what Freud is illustrating through this image of consumption is how the ego is formed in relationship with the lost object². The ego is constituted through incorporation of the lost object, but also in denying and maintaining its loss through exclusion; as Cheng clarifies, “melancholia alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss” (8-9). Thus, Cheng’s reading of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” and her articulation of “racial melancholia” relies on this interpretation of melancholia being an ongoing process of incorporation, denial, and loss.

In an important nuance of Freud’s argument, Cheng contends that the loss for which the melancholic grieves becomes figured as “exclusion” at the point that consuming this loss blurs the distinction of whether it is subject or object (9). Cheng argues that “loss becomes exclusion
in the melancholic landscape” because the melancholic does not only deny, in psychically consuming the lost object, having lost the object, but also must maintain the object as lost by excluding it (9; emphasis in original). Thus, Cheng argues that it is “exclusion, rather than loss, is the real stake of melancholic retention” (9).

The distinction that Cheng draws between exclusion and loss becomes critical to understanding her contention that melancholia provides insight into how racialization operates, specifically the racialization of Asian Americans, in the U.S. The notion of melancholic “exclusion” is especially provocative in the case of Asian Americans, where the word “exclusion” not only speaks of a history of legislated immigration restrictions and internment of Japanese Americans, but also of the perception of the Asian American as “the foreigner-within.” Cheng argues that melancholia enables us to conceptualize racialization in two ways: first, in understanding how the dominant white identity is formed and sustained; second, by providing insight into how the racialized other is produced as “the foreigner within.” According to Cheng, “[r]acialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (10). Racialized others are thus “consumed” by the dominant white identity in the sense that their difference is forcibly denied, yet retained, in the process of assimilation. Thus, as should be made clear, the dominant white identity is melancholic and racialization in the U.S. functions melancholically.

Because Cheng, unlike Freud, does not dismiss what happens to the lost object once it has been consumed by the melancholic subject, she is able to theorize what happens to those racialized others “consumed” by the dominant white identity and what it means to think about the raced subject as melancholic (9). She argues that the lost object (i.e., the racialized other)
become something in-between “object” and “subject” upon its consumption and contends that its status as both subject and object aptly describes what racial melancholia is for the raced subject; that is, “the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception,” so that the raced subject is not only the melancholic object that is lost but also the melancholic subject who is losing (Cheng 17).

Thus, the question that I posit in the title of this section, “What is Eating Asian America?,” can be answered as such: both the dominant white identity and Asian Americans are “eating” Asian America. To refer back to the introductory epigraph, “hunger pangs” that Lindsey experiences are a result of her attempting to prevent being dumped (or “lost”), but not realizing that she is already “lost” as a racialized other and, in this process of trying to prevent “loss,” is really the one “losing.” She has, to paraphrase Cheng, internalized this system in which she either rejects or will be rejected, as well as the perception that her status is already predetermined as rejected, in the sense that she assumes that rejection will happen if she doesn’t take measures to prevent it from happening. Lindsey’s dating approach, which as I argue earlier is actually her approach to life, can therefore be described as melancholic.

Excess and Erasure in Chick Lit: The Chick Lit “Formula” and Contemporary Chick Lit Scholarship

Lindsey is not alone in her melancholic engagement with the world; other protagonists in chick lit demonstrate similar melancholic responses to their racialized subjectivity. Asian American chick lit provides a critical site to examine how racialized subjectivity is negotiated and formed in relationship to the dominant white identity, since its status as subgenre to the normatively white mainstream chick lit genre produces a similar kind of consumption and exclusion. That is to say, Asian American chick lit is often subsumed as part of the mainstream genre, so much so that their plots are perceived to be only “colored” variations of the same,
recycled, and normatively white chick lit plot. As Maureen Dowd states in her *New York Times* article “Heels Over Hemingway”:

> Please do not confuse these books with the love-and-marriage of Jane Austen. These are more like multicultural Harlequin romances. They’re Cinderella bodice rippers — Manolo trippers — girls with long legs, long shiny hair and sparkling eyes stumbling through life, eating potato skins loaded with bacon bits and melted swiss, drinking cocktails, looking for the right man and dispensing nuggets of hard-won wisdom, like, “Any guy who can watch you hurl Cheez Doodles is a keeper,” and, “You can’t puke in wicker. It leaks.”

Dowd’s assessment that chick lit texts are “more like multicultural Harlequin romances” implies that they homogenously follow the same formula and only differ in terms of protagonist’s culture. In a similar way to Dowd, other critics of chick lit have argued that at best, the genre offers nothing more than “fluff” and at worst, the genre reinforces patriarchal notions of gender that disempower women and result in a regression to prefeminist attitudes. Even Cris Mazza, who claims that she coined the phrase “chick lit” with her co-writer Jeffrey DeShell, denounces chick lit as genre as nothing more than “books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels” (18). She states that she and DeShell intended for the term “chick lit” to be ironic, a gesture “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (Mazza 19). According to Mazza, “[t]he chicks in commercial chick lit, along with Hooters restaurants and celebrity boxing, have stripped themselves of irony” (28).

What these detractors of chick lit fail to see in their broad generalizations of chick lit are the nuances that exist within the genre and provide critical insight into contemporary issues and constructions of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. There has been an overt failure in popular and academic discourse to uncover what is most compelling about chick lit’s success: specifically, why this genre has proven to be so adaptable and engaging to a broad spectrum of women across racial, ethnic, and even geographical boundaries. Although the genre arguably began with the
publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996, the paradigm of a thirty-something, white, British woman looking for love and professional success has evolved into several different genres, featuring women from different ages, races, and ethnicities. However, in contrast to Dowd’s assessment that these protagonists are just multicultural (multicolored) versions of “girls with long legs, long shiny hair and sparkling eyes stumbling through life,” I contend that racial and ethnic differences complicate the chick lit paradigm in definitive and critical ways that cannot and should not be generalized or simplified as commercial multiculturalism.

The chick lit paradigm can be described as follows: a twenty- or thirty-something (white) woman attempts to find Mr. Right and achieve professional success, while working a low-end or relatively thankless job. The following figure, “Make Your Own Chick Lit Novel!,” appeared in Anna Weinberg’s article “She’s Come Undone” and provides a useful (if sarcastic) illustration of the conventions of the genre.
**Figure 1-1. “Make Your Own Chick-Lit Novel!” by Anna Weinberg, from *Book Magazine*, July/August 2003.**

1. **START WITH ONE YOUNG URBAN FEMALE**
   
   who's a low-level employee in:

2. **CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:**
   
   a) PUBLISHING  
   b) PUBLIC RELATIONS  
   c) ADVERTISING  
   d) JOURNALISM

3. **ANXIETY ABOUT ONE OR ALL THE FOLLOWING:**
   
   a) BODY  
   b) SEX LIFE  
   c) BIOLOGICAL CLOCK  
   d) ANNOYING MOTHER  
   e) EMOTIONALLY IMMATURE MEN  
   f) DYING ALONE  
   g) SHOPPING ADDICTION  
   h) INSUFFICIENT COLLECTION OF SHOES  
   i) NICOTINE ADDICTION  
   j) CRAPPY SALARY  
   k) EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION  
   l) FINDING LOVE IN THE CITY OF:
      
      1. NEW YORK  
      2. MANHATTAN  
      3. GOTHAM  
      4. LONDON

- Mix it all together -

4. **ZANINESS ENSUES.**
   
   Your book should look something like this:

   ![Chick-Lit Novel Cover Design](image_url)
Clearly, this visual suggests that chick lit follows a predictable formula, which is interestingly enough (in the context of this thesis), presented like a recipe. The instructions given to “Make Your Own Chick Lit Novel” follows the same logic as a recipe: each element (e.g., “young urban female,” “anxiety about one or all of the following”) can be viewed as an ingredient which, when “mixed” with other ingredients, produces a chick lit novel. I am intentionally conceiving the chick lit novel as analogous to a food product for consumption, the reason for which will become clearer later in my introduction.

Although this visual implies that chick lit novels are essentially homogeneous in that they follow same structure, I want to suggest that it nonetheless articulates an excess to the formula that is not quite qualified. I see this excess in the word “zaniness” which indicates to me, even if it is the predictable result of the narrative, something that cannot quite be articulated and which is not always the same. Thus, a chick lit novel might lead to “zaniness,” but this “zaniness” does not always take the same form.

It is important to note the ways in which the ingredients in the chick lit recipe do not always result in the same product and that the deviations, the excess implied by “zaniness,” critically alter novel, just as any modifications to a recipe might alter the taste and texture of the final dish. Much of the homogenization imposed on chick lit is because of its commercialization, which as the illustration shows, often relies on recycling the same objects of feminine consumption: high-heeled shoes, handbags, and cocktails. As Tania Modleski argues, “Marketing strategies…work to obscure novels that may deviate in important ways from the original formula” (xxii).

Chick lit scholars such as Suzanne Ferriss, Mallory Young, and Caroline Smith⁶ have all examined such variations within the genre. Like their predecessors, Janice Radway (Reading the
Romance) and Tania Modleski (Loving With a Vengeance), they have challenged popular and academic criticisms of chick lit that portray the women’s popular cultural productions as too simplistic and superficial for substantive critique. As Caroline Smith states:

In the past, critics have been reluctant to take popular fiction seriously, and, as Radford and other feminist critics have concurred, all too often literary critics are quick to label women’s fiction as low art, a term which, by default, often denies any thoughtful consideration of that art.

However, despite breaking critical ground in making chick lit the object of academic inquiry, chick lit scholars and their predecessors have arguably limited their analysis by assuming a normatively white perspective. For example, Ferriss and Young were the first to compile essays focusing exclusively on chick lit into an anthology titled Chick Lit: A New Woman’s Fiction (2006). In their introduction to Chick Lit, they argue that “the genre is rife with possibilities and potentials,” which not only “offers new opportunities to young women writers,” but also to “young voices in scholarship” (Ferriss and Young 12).

While I agree with Ferriss and Young’s contention, the anthology marginalizes chick lit written by women of color and does not interrogate fully how issues of race and ethnicity factor into the chick lit genre. There is a certain assumption, by eliding these issues from analysis, that there is a universal gendered position in the writing of and responses to chick lit. This assumption of universality not only masks the normative whiteness that lies at the core of such inquiry, but can also treat issues of race and ethnicity in superficial and problematic ways. Of the fourteen essays in Chick Lit, there is only one essay dedicated to a discussion of a non-white chick lit genre: “Sistah lit.” What is problematic about this essay inclusion is not that it has been included, but that its inclusion appears to serve as a stand-in for the multitude of Asian American, Latina, and other African American chick lit that have been published. This tokenization not only further elides a critical discussion about race and ethnicity from the
discourse of chick lit, but also reinforces chick lit’s association with whiteness\textsuperscript{11}. What Ferriss and Young fail to acknowledge in their glossing over of race and ethnicity are the distinctive voices that these “Other” genres offer and the possibility that these genres deviate from the chick lit formula in critical ways, having been informed by the historical, social, and economic circumstances of racialization in America.

**Consuming Food, Fashioning Identities in Chick Lit and Asian American Chick Lit**

To engage with issues of race, ethnicity, and gender in Asian American chick lit texts, I have chosen to examine the construction and articulation of “foodways” in Asian American chick lit for a couple reasons: the representation of foodways share certain similarities to the representation of consumerism prevalent in mainstream chick lit and foodways have been critically involved in the racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. By using the term “foodways,” I am specifically referring to what Carole Counihan calls the “behaviors and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (6). In this respect, I contend that the way Asian American chick lit protagonists perceive, consume, and create food is analogous to the ways in which mainstream (white) chick lit protagonists perceive, consume, and select material items such as clothes and accessories. Jessica Van Slooten argues that chick lit “novels become objects of conspicuous consumption, allowing readers a ‘safe’ outlet for their own consumerist fantasies, reinforcing the luxury lifestyle as a means of creating identity and achieving success in both personal and professional spheres” (220). While I agree with Van Slooten’s assessment in terms of mainstream chick lit, I argue that Asian American chick lit is consumable in similar, yet dissimilar, ways. On the one hand, Asian American chick lit often utilizes “food pornography,” which Frank Chin defined as the practice of exploiting one’s ethnic food (and by extension, one’s ethnicity) in order to gain acceptance within mainstream society\textsuperscript{12}. The use of “food pornography” to appeal to a wider (whiter) audience in its marketing and
paratext seems to encourage readers to not only consume these texts, but also participate in a racialized fantasy of the Other. Moreover, food, like fashion items in mainstream chick lit, is often used as a medium for identity construction in Asian American chick lit. On the other hand, Asian American chick lit writers do not construct foodways homogenously, nor do they capitulate entirely to mainstream consumerist desire to be “ethnic.” They do not make the “swallowing” of their texts easy. Their role in constructing race and ethnicity, as well as subversively showing the contradictions within contemporary articulations of race and ethnicity, should not be overlooked.

That Asian American chick lit texts are marketed for to appeal to the (white) consumer’s hunger for the “ethnic” is important to consider in the context of Anne Cheng’s theory of “racial melancholia.” Her theory frames my reading of these foodways, as I perceive the representations of them in Asian American chick lit as a melancholic response to the subgenre’s marginalized position within chick lit discourse as well as to the relative invisibility of Asian Americans within popular culture. Cheng argues that “racial melancholia…has always existed for raced subjects both as a sign of rejection and as a psychic strategy in response to that rejection” (20; emphasis in original). The popularity of “food pornography” as a practice of Asian American authors and as a source of pleasure for white readers illustrates how Asian Americans have adapted melancholically to their exclusion from America by producing ethnic products for consumption and how the white majority, in turn, has responded by melancholically consuming these ethnic products. According to Cheng, this consumption does not entail that raced subjects (in this case, Asian Americans) are incorporated into the dominant white identity as “white,” but rather are retained in this identity as “the foreigner within” (10). Cheng’s theory therefore
provides a critical framework for my argument to show how foodways functions in Asian American chick lit texts as articulations of racial melancholia.

Thus, by examining foodways in Asian American chick lit novels, the contradictory power relations that have defined not only Asian America’s relationship with food, but also Asian American identity, are revealed. By using the word “identity” in this capacity, I am not suggesting that Asian American identity is monolithic and fixed, but quite the opposite. Rather, I am agreeing with Stuart Hall’s argument that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (4). What I find critical about Hall’s argument, in the context of foodways, is his articulation that “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference,” so that the act of ingestion functions as a critical constitutive moment in which one’s (imaginative) “internal homogeneity” becomes compromised and “identity” is formed through the negotiation of the “outside” and the “inside” (5) 14. Thus, foodways can act as destabilizing and disruptive influences, just as they can reinforce hegemonic practices that stratify and oppress ethnic groups. Historically, food has been used as a tool against Asian Americans to cast them as unassimilable aliens, justify their exclusion from white America by invoking fears of physical contamination15, and (specifically in the case of Asian American men) to feminize them16.

Conversely, food has also become a means by which Asian Americans have sustained their livelihood, passed down their heritage, created a community, and acquired wealth (and arguably power) in a society that has worked extremely hard to exclude them17. According to Jennifer Ho, “Food has historically been a complex and fraught arena for Asian American subjectivity since Asians in America became coded by and through their relationship to the food they cultivated,
picked, packaged, prepared, and served” (Ho 11). In this respect, food has worked as a double-edged sword in Asian America, both as a weapon to castrate Asian American identity and partition them as “Other,” and as an instrument to carve a space in mainstream society. As Saeling Cynthia Wong describes this quandary, “Asian restaurant owners make their living on the knife-edge between novelty and familiarity, risk and comfort” (58)18. Asian America’s relationship with food (specifically that of restaurant entrepreneurs) becomes an apt analogy for Asian American chick lit writers, who face a similar dilemma of attempting to balance on the “knife-edge” of capitulation and subversion. The balancing act that these writers must perform is not a simple one of deciding whether or not to “sell out” to sell books, but rather a complex negotiation of what it means to be an Asian American writer writing in a popular genre for a wider (whiter) audience.

In this thesis, I examine foodways in the following Asian American chick lit texts: Kim Wong Keltner’s The Dim Sum of All Things and Buddha Baby, and Amulya Malladi’s Serving Crazy with Curry. While other Asian American chick lit texts have images of food and eating, these texts employ food as a central and selling feature (in other words, they are the most overtly “food pornographic”), either by including images of food in the paratext or recipes as part of the narrative. In Chapter 1, I analyze images of food and eating in Keltner’s Dim Sum of All Things and Buddha Baby, two novels that focus on the life of a twenty-something Chinese American woman, Lindsey Owyang. Keltner uses images of food and eating frequently in both novels, such as including references to popular Chinese dishes in chapter titles (“Egg Fool Young,” and “How She Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Broccoli Beef”), using food as metaphor (“it was sprayed like a big, black shellacked ball of cotton candy”), likening characters to food (one chapter title in Dim Sum is “Bananas, Twinkies, and Eggs”) and describing Chinese food in both
repulsive and delectable ways (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 12). At first glance, Keltner’s novels appear to pander to commercial expectations of ethnic texts by using “food pornographic” details and exploiting their “Asianness” through stereotypes in the peritext. I argue that Keltner’s utilization of stereotypes and “food pornography” ironically critiques not only the stereotypes themselves and the practice of cultural commodification, but also the legacy of Asian American racialization in the U.S and her own vexed position as an “ethnic” (or “Ethnick”) author within the white-centered chick lit genre. Keltner’s portrayal of foodways articulates Lindsey’s ambivalence toward her Chinese American identity, as well as illustrates the power of food in defining a racialized subjectivity.

In Chapter 2, I examine recipes and the act of cooking in Amulya Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry*. I argue that the chick lit formula functions like a recipe, as the earlier “Make Your Own Chick Lit Novel!” illustration demonstrated. However, in contrast to this illustration, which implies that the recipe structure represents a generic limitation, I contend that viewing the chick lit formula as a recipe enables us to interrogate nuances and consider the “excess” that I described earlier in my reading of the illustration’s undefined “zaniness.” I argue that this “excess” politicizes the novel in ways that resist commercial limitations. Thus, though Malladi claims on her website that her novel is not about anything political, the acts of cooking and creating recipes are gendered and racialized in such a way that articulates and critiques the melancholic condition of racialized women. Malladi not only critiques feminism in her novel by showing how it can function as another form of oppression for the racialized woman, but also critiques the way cooking has been figured as an act of feminist betrayal for “modern” women. Ultimately, this thesis posits foodways as a productive site to examine the contradictions in
Asian American chick lit and understand the hunger pangs Asian Americans experience as consumers and melancholic subjects of “America.”

Notes

1 This essay was written in 1915 and published in 1917 (Gay 584).

2 Freud states that “the melancholic’s disorder” allows us to view “the constitution of the human ego” (585).

3 Beryl Bainbridge (six-time Booker Prize shortlist recipient) and Doris Lessing (three-time Booker Prize shortlist recipient) who both denounced chick lit on BBC Radio 4’s Today program August 23, 2001 (Smith 3).

4 To provide more background on Cris Mazza’s claim, in 1995, she and Jeffrey DeShell published a collection of short stories by women and titled it Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction.

5 Given Weinberg’s critical treatment of chick lit (as evident by the illustration), it is surprising that this article appeared in a magazine that was co-owned by Barnes & Noble (Goldstein). According to an article published in The New York Times, Book magazine featured items such as “book reviews, author interviews and effusive features like ‘Anita Shreve's Secret Passions’ and ‘Hype! Hype! Hype! Wild Publicity Stunts’” (Goldstein). The magazine was created to be an “Entertainment Weekly-like magazine about the book world,” but stopped publication in 2003 (Goldstein; Natwoka).

6 Caroline Smith wrote the first booklength study on chick lit titled Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit, which was published in 2008. In her study, she examines consumerism in British and American chick lit texts, specifically how these texts “question the ‘consume and achieve’ offered promise by…women’s advice manuals and in doing so challenge the consumer industry” (5). Like Janice Radway and Tania Modleski’s studies in women’s cultural productions, Smith’s study does not engage with issues of race or ethnicity in these texts, though she acknowledges that the “genre has expanded, crossing racial and geographic boundaries” and that the initial narrow definition of the chick lit protagonist (white, heterosexual, British or American) has changed (Smith 136; 2). Her selection of texts reflect, as much of chick lit scholarship does, a normative whiteness that is not interrogated and critiqued.

7 Tania Modleski’s Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women was originally published in 1982 (republished in 2002) and Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature was published in 1982 (republished in 1991). Both studies broke critical ground by not only analyzing popular women’s productions (such as soap operas and Harlequin romance novels), which have historically and still are often perceived as “low art,” but also by arguing that these texts do not simply reify or reinforce patriarchy and actually can be subversive.

8 As Modleski states, “women’s criticism of popular feminine narratives has generally adopted one of three attitudes: dismissiveness; hostility—tending unfortunately to be aimed at the consumers of the narratives; or, most frequently, a flippant kind of mockery” (4).

9 Though the importance of Radway’s work should not be undermined, she nonetheless did not engage with issues of race and ethnicity. In her description of the subjects chosen for her ethnographic study on romance novels, she states, “The reading habits and preferences of the Smithton women are complexly tied to their daily routines, which are themselves a function of education, social role, and class position. Most Smithton readers are married mothers of children, living in single-family homes in a sprawling suburb of a central midwestern state’s second largest city” (50; emphasis added).
Ferriss and Young only briefly allude to the presence of Asian American chick lit authors by stating that “chick-lit works focusing on second-generation Chinese American and Indian American protagonists have also made their debut” (6).

Although Ferriss and Young attempt to justify their focus on white chick lit by stating “[i]t is indeed impossible to deny that the overwhelming majority of chick lit continues to focus on a specific age, race, and class: young, white, and middle,” they undermine this justification by further stating “[b]ut it is equally impossible to deny that the demand for and popularity of fiction focusing on protagonists beyond those categories is growing exponentially” (8).

Frank Chin coined the term “food pornography” in his play The Year of the Dragon and used it to refer explicitly to the Mama Fu Fu cookbook, which is a self-exploitative work that sells the “experience” of the Chinese family for social and economic “gain.” The Mama Fu Fu cookbook concept utilizes personal narrative and the cookbook genre to appeal to the white mainstream with “charming” anecdotes and secrets behind Mama Fu Fu’s “authentic” Chinese cooking. Fred Eng, the protagonist of the play, describes the Mama Fu Fu cookbook as a combination between his sister’s recipes and his “smut,” “a new literary form,” that “tell[s] the story of a Chinese family” (Chin 86). He states that the cookbook should include such instructions for “how to make a toasted cheese sandwich without a sound,” which would have a story of Mama Fu Fu “eating it listening to her parents slurp in their quiet little fucks…” (Chin 86). For more about “food pornography,” see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance.

In fact, the market does not work consistently to control the way ethnicity is constructed or used. As Marilyn Halter argues in Shopping for Identity: “In effect, the market serves to foster greater awareness of ethnic identity, offers immediate possibilities for cultural participation, and can even act as an agent of change in that process. Thus, consumerism simultaneously disrupts and promotes ethnic community and can be both subversive and hegemonic” (14).

Deborah Lupton argues that food is “both self and non-self simultaneously” (113), as the process of ingesting food makes it part of the body and not part of the body at the same time. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong further clarifies that “[i]ngestion is the physical act that mediates between self and not-self, native essence and foreign matter, the inside and the outside. The mediating relationship is crucial: until eaten and absorbed into one’s bodily system, food is no more than a substance out there” (26).

As historian Donna Gabaccia states, “Even in the 1930s, the San Franciscan Clarence Edwords hesitated to recommend many Chinese restaurants to middle-class eaters because of what he called Chinese chefs’ disregard for sanitation and ‘the usual niceties of food preparation’” (103).

Several Asian American studies scholars have noted that Chinese male immigrants were relegated to performing tasks that were considered “women’s work” such as cooking so that they would not compete with the white men (Ho 27; Xu 10; Wong 56; Hooker 286, 324). As Jennifer Ho argues, “Because Chinese men were forced to perform work associated with women, their gender identity became feminized – neutralized by the socioeconomic restrictions placed on them due to their ethnic status” (27). Asian American males have also been feminized through the food that they eat. As Deborah Lupton argues in Food, the Body and the Self, “[t]here is clearly a gendered division of food in contemporary western societies” so that some food is considered feminine, others masculine. To that end, there are foods that females prefer and foods that men prefer (Lupton 104). According to Margaret Visser (whom Lupton includes in her gendered reading of food), there are foods that can be considered “almost totally female in connotation” (Visser 19). One of these “female” foods that Visser classifies is rice, which she describes as “white, delicate, even ‘fluffy’” (19). Thus, by consuming “delicate” food, Asian American males are perceived as being “delicate” as well. Their preference for rice puts them categorically with females who “are constructed as preferring light, delicate foods and meals because they themselves hold and value these attributes” (Lupton 106).

Some examples of legislated discrimination against Asians: Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), California Alien Land Law (1913), Immigration Act (1917), Immigration Act (1924), and the Hawes-Cutting Act (1932) (Okihiro 180-185).
Panda Express, a popular Chinese fast food chain, has commodified Chinese food to become a model minority fairy tale for the fast food generation. According to an article in *USA Today* titled “Panda Express spreads Chinese food across USA,” Panda Express has spread to all but 15 states and has succeeded in “taking fried rice from sea to shining sea” (Krantz 3). On the Panda Express website, the appropriately titled “Panda Story,” tells of “an inventive young man from the picturesque Yangzhou region of China” who came to America with his father’s recipes and started his “dynasty” (Krantz 1).
CHAPTER 2
“A SUMPTUOUS CHINESE BANQUET”: KIM WONG KELTNER’S THE DIM SUM OF ALL THINGS AND BUDDHA BABY

One written memory recalled a woman’s first experience of Chinese food at the age of 26 years, when she was taken to a restaurant by her husband. Marie would have preferred any other cuisine, as she had heard rumours about the unconventional meat used in Chinese food: ‘The reason for Marie’s aversion to Chinese was all the gruesome stories of dog and cat skins found behind the local Chinese takeaway. Those images were indeed difficult to overcome when faced with lemon chicken. Her thoughts were, “Is this really chicken?”’

– Deborah Lupton, Food, the Body, and the Self

Kim Wong Keltner’s The Dim Sum of All Things (2004) and Buddha Baby (2005), like many chick lit novels, focus on a twenty-something woman as she attempts to find personal happiness and professional success while working a menial job and dating several “losers.” Keltner’s protagonist, Lindsey Owyang, resembles other chick lit protagonists in her jaded outlook on love and her increasing dissatisfaction with her work environment. However, the covers of Keltner’s books, as with many other Asian American chick lit novels, emphasize their racial difference from mainstream chick lit texts by including images that are (stereo)typically associated with Asians, such as Asian-ethnic food. What Asian American chick lit encourages its audience to “consume” are not the designer shoes and handbags visible on mainstream chick lit covers, but rather an ethnic culture made appealing in its images of curry spices and banquets. For example, on the front cover of The Dim Sum of All Things, a hand holds a pair of chopsticks above a Lazy Susan featuring a variety of items: a panda, a lantern, a pair of slippers, Tiger Balm, a mahjong tile, a peach, a pot of tea, a chrysanthemum, and a fan. At the top, a quotation from one of the reviewers calls the book “[a] sumptuous Chinese banquet…The minute you’ve finished, you’ll want to devour it all over again!” The back cover features the question “Have you ever wondered…” with several possible end phrases such as “Why Asians love ‘Hello Kitty’?” and “Where Asian cuties meet the white guys who love them?” The “you” that is
addressed in this question constitutes the reader as someone outside of the Asian culture, arguably the white, female reader for whom the majority of chick lit texts are written. It is the last question posed that is particularly relevant to this chapter: “Or will Lindsey realize that the path to true love lies somewhere between the dim sum and the pepperoni pizza?”

Clearly, the dim sum and pepperoni pizza in this question are intended to represent the seemingly irreconcilable cultural divide between the “East” and the “West.” By using food to convey the conflict between the “Asian” and the “American,” the cover shows the significant role food plays in identifying with a particular identity. Food simplifies the rift between these two cultures, implying that by choosing dim sum over pizza, or vice versa, one thereby chooses one identity over the other. As two ends of a continuum, the dim sum and pepperoni pizza cannot technically meet or overlap, so therefore, identifying as both Asian and American appears to be impossible. Though the question seems to imply that happiness (i.e., “the path to true love”) lies somewhere in the middle between these endpoints, these endpoints are nonetheless presented as fixed in opposition rather than in flux.

This binary opposition between East and West defined in Keltner’s cover does not only show how food functions in establishing this dichotomy, but also how it plays a pivotal role in commercializing an “ethnic” cultural product. Keltner’s cover conflates reading the book with consuming Asian food and culture, encouraging the reader to spin (metaphorically) the Lazy Susan on the front cover around to eat morsels of the “authentic” Chinese experience. Rather than discouraging the commodification of ethnicity, Keltner’s cover seems to offer essentialized representations of “Asianness,” curios that might be familiar to readers as common items found in the shops in Chinatown. Her cover appears to make the consumption of the “Other” as easy as ordering takeout from a Chinese restaurant or purchasing “Chinese” items from a store.
Moreover, the questions posed on the back cover present the text as a cultural authority, which looks like a targeted appeal to non-Asians who might want to understand more about Asian culture. Most significantly, these questions do not merely suggest that the book serves as a native informant for Chinese culture in particular, but rather Asian culture in general. Thus, Asian culture is not only reductively portrayed in terms of cheap souvenirs from Chinatown, but also the term “Asian” itself is presented as interchangeable with “Chinese.”

While it is unknown what role Keltner played in selecting the cover designs, the cover nonetheless frames her text and mediates the reader’s engagement with the text itself. The cover establishes certain expectations for the text, namely that its contents should provide some insight into Asian culture. As part of the peritext, the cover is in “‘an undecided zone’ between the inside and the outside…or as Philippe Lejeune said, ‘the fringe of the printed text which, in reality, controls the whole reading’” (Genette 261). The question becomes, how does the “fringe” of *Dim Sum* affect a reading of the text? I contend that this cover ultimately functions ironically as part of Keltner’s performative strategy to challenge essentialist notions of Asian American culture and identity, as well as to problematize the (white) mainstream practice of racialized consumption, or to use Anne Cheng’s term, “white racial melancholia.” According to Cheng, white racial melancholia operates “as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial” (11). Within this system, white identity becomes constituted by simultaneously excluding and retaining (what Cheng calls “swallowing”) racialized others (8; 10).

In the context of Cheng’s argument, *Dim Sum*’s front cover image of the hand posed to eat Chinese souvenirs can be seen as articulating the cannibalistic relationship between dominant white identity and the racialized subject. This image illustrates what Lindsey refers to in *Dim
"Sum" and "Buddha Baby" (the sequel to "Dim Sum") as the “hoarding” of Asian culture by the “Hoarders of All Things Asian,” who are defined as “white people” who have a fetish for Asian objects (or perceive Asian women as objects). Even as Keltner provocatively uses (and seemingly promotes) an essentializing view of ethnicity through stereotypes such as “Hoarders” and images of consumption (both eating and buying), she does not do so uncritically and without qualifying, to a certain extent, the historical and social conditions which have informed Lindsey’s practice of stereotyping. I focus on images of food and eating specifically in this section because they not only show how Lindsey has been constituted as a racialized subject materially, but also how she expresses her ambivalence toward her Asian American identity. In other words, consuming food becomes a way for Lindsey to symbolically assert and reject her ethnicity. As my analysis of "Dim Sum" and "Buddha Baby" will show, Lindsey’s negotiation of her ethnic identity mirrors Keltner’s negotiation of her status as “ethnic” writer with the chick lit genre, a genre that melancholically consumes and retains racial difference in its identification of “ethnick lit” or “multicultural lit” novels.

**Lindsey Owyang’s Diary?**

At the beginning of "Dim Sum," Keltner situates the novel within the chick lit genre, yet complicates its generic affiliation by identifying her protagonist’s racial difference from the white standard. In the first sentence of "Dim Sum," the narrator states, “Many strange tales have been told about sassy receptionists and their antics in the urban wild, but none so strange as the story of Miss Lindsey Owyang, a Chinese American wage-slave who turned twenty-five last summer” (Keltner 1). With this introduction, Keltner clearly establishes that her novel differs from other chick lit novels (“many strange tales”) not so much in its formulaic plot (“sassy receptionists and their antics in the urban wild”), but rather with the ethnic identity of its protagonist (“a Chinese American wage-slave”). Indeed, much of the plot of "Dim Sum" aligns
with the typical chick lit narrative: a twenty-something woman works at an unfulfilling (and underpaid) job, meets her love interest, dates some losers, and ends up with her love interest. Lindsey lives with her grandma, Pau Pau, and works as a receptionist at the *Vegan Warrior* magazine. During the course of the novel, Lindsey falls in love with Michael Cartier, her coworker at the *Vegan Warrior*; goes on a series of blind dates with the grandsons of Pau Pau’s Mahjong friends; goes to China with Pau Pau; and eventually ends up dating Michael. In *Buddha Baby*, the plot varies in the sense that Lindsey must choose between her fiancé, Michael, and her schoolmate from childhood, Dustin Lee (who is Chinese American), but it ends in much the same way as other chick lit novels, with Lindsey happily engaged to Michael.

Yet, while *Dim Sum* and *Buddha Baby* may appear like a *Bridget Jones* with a Chinese American face, Lindsey’s Chinese American identity does not simply offer a one-to-one substitution of the average (white) chick lit heroine with a “China Doll.” Rather, her atypical identity shapes the narrative to address issues of race and ethnicity that largely remain unacknowledged and unspoken in mainstream chick lit. Lindsey has an ambivalent attitude toward her identity, which she often expresses through her practice of stereotyping people. Homi Bhabha argues that “the stereotype…is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” and that “it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency” (66). The stereotype, then, is not as static as we perceive it to be, but rather is “a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive” (Bhabha 70). According to Bhabha, it is important to shift the analysis of stereotypes from merely identifying them as “positive or negative” to “an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (67; emphasis in original). In this
respect, Lindsey’s practice of stereotyping should not be relegated to a discussion of its positive or negative effects, but rather should be interrogated for what it reveals about her own subjectivity.

What becomes clear is that her stereotyping is a symptom, not the cause, of what Anne Cheng calls the “racial grief” that forms her melancholic subjectivity. Her grief may be cushioned with comic relief and obscured by the formulaic (i.e., romantic) aspects in these texts, but it is the repressed narrative to what would otherwise be considered “lighthearted” chick lit fare. For example, the following description of Lindsey provided in *Dim Sum* reveals a melancholic perspective of her racial identity:

Lindsey was a fairly clever receptionist, but she was more than just a worker bee who had mastered the intricacies of voice mail and fax dialing. She was a third-generation San Franciscan of Chinese descent who could not quote a single Han Dynasty proverb, but she could recite entire dialogues from numerous *Brady Bunch* episodes. She knew nothing of Confucius and did not speak any Cantonese or Mandarin, but she had spent years studying the Western Canon and had learned to conjugate irregular French verbs. (Keltner 1). This description of Lindsey provides several critical insights into her character, as well as Keltner’s own conflicted feelings toward writing an “Asian American” novel. Keltner notably undermines the predominant “perpetual foreigner” myth (Lindsey is a “third generation San Franciscan” after all) and tries to portray Lindsey as an average “American” girl, whose preference for the *Brady Bunch* outweighs her interest in Confucius. In so doing, she problematizes the exoticization on the cover, as well as her immediate identification of Lindsey’s ethnicity in the first sentence of the novel. Yet, while this performative move strategically complicates (white) reader expectations to gain insight into (and fetishize) Chinese (not Chinese American) culture, it also reveals Lindsey’s racial melancholia and her exclusion from the dominant culture that she emulates. Lindsey’s preferences for European languages (instead of Cantonese or Mandarin) and the “Western Canon” can be viewed as attempts to negate her
racialized subjectivity by “consuming” European language and Eurocentric texts. Keltner’s
decision to portray a Chinese American woman, rather than a Chinese American (emphasis on
the “Chinese”) woman, represents her own defiance of a genre that would include her because
her racial difference, but also her melancholic desire to be accepted by the mainstream (even as a
“niche” author).

**Covert Meat-eating and the “American Dream”**

Lindsey’s outsider status from the white protagonists found in other chick lit novels is
represented analogously through her own position as the covert meat-eater employed at *Vegan
Warrior* magazine. Her “infiltration” into this magazine of all white staff (she is the “only non-
white employee”) can also be likened to Keltner’s entry into the white-centered chick lit genre,
with both Lindsey and Keltner serving as token “Asian” representatives in largely homogenous
communities (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 2; 18). As the “outcast” at *Vegan Warrior*, Lindsey’s
differences from the other staff members are primarily represented through their consumption
patterns (what she eats versus what the staff chooses not to eat) as well as through their racial
identities (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 2). The staff’s limited consumption practices serve as a critical
parallel for the practices of exclusion that have negatively affected Chinese Americans as an
ethnic group. Just as allegations that Chinese people eat cats and dogs and other “strange” food
have been used historically to show how they differ from (and hence do belong to) the white
majority, food is used at the magazine as a way of homogenizing and weeding out those who do
not “belong.” As Sharon Peckham states, “Eating (and the etiquette that surrounds it) is a cultural
practice that marks off insiders from outsiders” (172). The magazine staff often functions like the
INS or the Department of Homeland Security in their attempts to find any illicit meat-eating,
with one humorous incident in *Dim Sum* depicting employees being subjected to breath tests by
Human Resources in order to “sniff out” any carnivorous activity (Keltner 152)

10.
The analogy between the exclusionary environment of America and *Vegan Warrior* is clearly articulated through the latter’s hypocritical rhetoric of equality and its treatment of Lindsey. Though the *Vegan Warrior* staff claims in their mission statement that they have a “firm commitment to equality and social justice,” this “commitment” does not “prevent them from summoning Lindsey to perform all their menial tasks,” which include “mopp[ing] spilled rice milk” and “scour[ing] tofu cheese from the inside of the microwave” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 2). The food-oriented tasks that Lindsey performs, and the pretense of inclusivity that the *Vegan Warrior* staff expounds, not only reflect the (food) service positions that Chinese Americans have historically filled within the U.S\(^1\), but also critiques the disparity between the ideal of “equality” versus its reality in America (which the *Vegan Warrior* portrays in a white, socially liberal context)\(^2\).

The *Vegan Warrior* shows how both white social liberalism and racism function melancholically, a manifestation of the “white guilt” that Keltner likens to “smog in the Bay Area” (6). As Cheng argues, “[b]oth racist and white liberal discourses participate in [a diligent system of melancholic retention], albeit out of different motivations” (11). For Cheng, though the racist and the white liberal have separate aims in their melancholic actions, they both need racialized subjects to either “develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideals” (the racist) or “keep burying [them] in order to memorialize them” (the white liberal) (11). Thus, Lindsey’s presence at *Vegan Warrior* enables the staff to believe (erroneously) that they are fulfilling their proclaimed mission statement, even though her role in the magazine is as a “wage slave” and token minority. When Lindsey’s boss, Howard, wants to hold a potential donor luncheon, he decides that Lindsey should help him “research the yummiest ethnic restaurants” and plan the event because he assumes that her “Asian” appearance
places her on “the pulse of the Asian restaurant scene” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 251). Howard’s choice of food for the event, which includes items such as dim sum, sag paneer, and vegetable tempura (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 252), represents what Peckham observes as a paradox of ethnic cuisine:

> The distinct categories of ethnic cuisine have been dismantled, but remain firmly in place, suggesting that they are still potent. Today, it could be argued, commodified foreignness in the form of world cooking is served up by a mainstream culture and consumed in a feast that feeds the muscles of the ravenous nation, incorporating and finally annihilating all difference. (181)

In this respect, Howard’s decision to feature food at the luncheon from different Asian-ethnic groups recognizes “distinct categories of ethnic cuisines” to the extent that having a variety of food represents a kind of appreciation for diversity or multiculturalism. However, the differences between these categories of food (and the ethnic groups they represent) are nullified because the food items are lumped together under the same amorphous and problematic label – “ethnic.” Through ingesting these “ethnic” food items, Howard and his fellow (white) *Vegan Warrior* staffers can “fabricate multiculturalism” and consume difference, while retaining its essential structure as Other (Fung 271).

The consumption patterns of the *Vegan Warrior* staff not only represent their attempt to create a homogenous and exclusive community of eaters, but also their privileged position in relationship to what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls the “big eaters” in Asian American literature. The luxury that the staff members have in restricting their consumption according to their ideological beliefs is not one that Asian Americans (specifically first-generation Asian immigrants) necessarily share. As Wong states:

> Physical survival is incompatible with a finicky palate; psychological survival hinges on the wresting of meaning from arbitrary infliction of humiliation and pain; survival of family and the ethnic group not only presupposes individually successful eating but may demand unusually difficult “swallowing” to ensure a continued supply of nourishment for the next generation. (26)
“Big eating” can be viewed as symptomatic of the melancholic condition of Asian American subjects, who must swallow their “humiliation and pain” (or “racial grief”) in order to survive. Lindsey is not a “big eater” in the same way as Brave Orchid (the penultimate “big eater”) in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, but what she consumes reflects her own desire to mitigate the “humiliation and pain” she experiences as a Chinese American.

Lindsey cannot afford to have the “finicky palate” that the *Vegan Warrior* staff possesses, as her “survival” in America is contingent on her ability to assimilate through consumption. Thus, just as she pretends to consume only vegetarian food in order to keep her job at *Vegan Warrior*, so too does she pretend to consume only “American” food in order to assert her citizenship. In that respect, her presence at the magazine represents, on the one hand, a subversive “contamination” of the imaginatively homogeneous (white) community at *Vegan Warrior*, and on the other, a melancholic response to her own exclusion from the white national identity.

**Growing Pains and the “Era of Lost Chinese Children”**

Lindsey’s performative Americanization can be viewed as symptomatic of the pathology over her racial identity that she develops as a child. Keltner includes flashbacks to Lindsey’s childhood in *Dim Sum* and *Buddha Baby*, which not only provide the origins of Lindsey’s melancholic subjectivity, but also show how food plays a critical role in the constitution of this subjectivity. These flashbacks often feature incidences of racial injury that Lindsey cannot “get over” (hence their reappearance throughout both novels). At the beginning of *Buddha Baby*, the narrator describes Lindsey as having “spent her youth dodging the inconvenience of her Asianness, but in the last three of her twenty-eight years she was forced to wake up and smell the bock-fa oil” (Keltner 2). One painful incident described in both *Dim Sum* and *Buddha Baby* is when two neighborhood boys throw “mushy berries and bologna sandwich crusts” at the
Owyangs’ house and call them “Stupid chinks” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 130). How Lindsey and her brother, Kevin, respond to this incident, in contrast to their parents, reflect the different levels of assimilation that each character, or rather each generation, has undergone. When Lindsey’s parents find the mess, both deal with the incident by cleaning it up and not saying anything, choosing instead to “swallow” the painful incident\(^{18}\). As the narrative describes:

Lindsey was fully engaged in watching *The Superfriends* when she heard her mother go to the door, and from the outside Lindsey heard her groan, “Oh, no.” Her mother came back in and woke Lindsey’s dad. When they both emerged from the bedroom they were quiet. Once again, her dad went out and cleaned up the mess, and pretty soon it was a normal Saturday morning with her mom sipping coffee and her dad mixing Bisquick. (130-131).

The last sentence of this paragraph is particularly compelling, as the phrase “[o]nce again” suggests that this form of racial injury has become normalized. To that end, the “normal Saturday morning” that this passage describes with Lindsey’s “mom sipping coffee and her dad mixing Bisquick” reaffirms that the Owyangs are Americans, with both “coffee” and waffles being typical American breakfast foods.

Unlike their parents, Lindsey and Kevin direct their humiliation and pain to humiliating and causing pain to others – they decide to throw dog shit at their Chinese American neighbor’s house, a neighbor whom they identify as more “Chinese” than themselves\(^{19}\). As the narrator states:

The Ahchucks, so kind and gracious, had been an easy target. Lindsey was only nine and didn’t understand her emotions or the reason behind why did what she did. But feeling conflicted about being Chinese and retaliating against other Chinese people was a lot easier than blaming her tormentors. As illogical as it seemed, even after the neighborhood boys had vandalized her house, in the weeks that followed, she still wanted them to like her family and perhaps come over for sandwiches as if nothing ever happened. (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 132)

Kevin and Lindsey’s actions in this passage can be viewed as what Anne Cheng argues as a form of assimilation, which is “not the adaptation of behavior or customs per se but the repetition of a violence (against an other that is also the self)…already experienced” (75)\(^{20}\). Kevin and Lindsey
are not empowered, within their tenuous American identity, to retaliate against the white boys that hurt them, but they are empowered to hurt others like themselves. They replicate the boys’ actions exactly, except for what they throw (dog shit versus “mushy berries and bologna sandwich crusts”). The symbolism behind what the white boys’ throw and what Kevin and Lindsey throw is critical: the boys mark the Owyang family as “Other” by staining their house with “mushy berries” and implying that they don’t belong with a literalized American weapon (bologna), whereas Lindsey and Kevin throw what they identify with (dog shit)\(^21\), in order to impose that feeling on someone else. Yet, despite these boys’ actions, Lindsey still wants these boys to come over for sandwiches (to illustrate how she is not a “Stupid [chink]”), which indicates her capacity to keep swallowing grief.

Most of Lindsey’s childhood experiences with racism occur at school, a place where the Chinese American children seemed to vanish mysteriously in what Lindsey called the “Era of Lost Chinese Children”\(^22\) (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 91). The school itself is depicted as “consuming” the Chinese children that go there, as the narrator notes that “Chinese children had a particular way of going bye-bye, and Lindsey had always feared she would be dropped down a trap door to a fiery, dungeon furnace” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 91). Lindsey’s fear of becoming one of those “Lost Chinese Children” and being classified with the other Chinese “immigrant outcasts” leads her to join in on the torment of another classmate of Chinese ancestry, “immigrant-girl Dorcas Foo” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 96). The narrator states that Lindsey participates in this abuse because “she knew she didn’t want to be a helpless Chinese victim lashed with Red Vines” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 96)\(^23\). Lindsey’s fear is not unfounded, given that another Chinese American girl, Gina Fang, is described as being “pummeled with Nutter Butters during tournaments of freeze tag and four square” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 96). Keltner’s decision
to make American food snacks the weapon of choice against the Chinese American children at Lindsey’s school articulates how food is used (literally in this case) to mark insiders and outsiders of a culture. By being pelted with American food, Dorcas and Gina are marked as Other and are denied the opportunity to consume the food (and become Americanized through consumption). By throwing the American food at Dorcas and Gina, Lindsey shows that she has assimilated as American.

Keltner not only articulates the violent cycle of assimilation by showing how food functions as a cultural weapon against the Other, but also by showing how consumption figures as a site of potential cultural degradation and Othering. In Buddha Baby, a new Chinese American boy in school, Dustin24, tells Lindsey, “It’s a well-known fact that Chinese people eat rats. Do you eat rats?” (Keltner 42)25. Dustin’s use of the phrase “Chinese people” in his racist comment, when he is in fact Chinese American, shows how his disidentification from his ethnicity is only made possible by identifying with Lindsey (Cheng 75). In using the word “you,” he interpellates Lindsey as a racialized subject, imposing his own feeling of foreignness on her in order to show that he belongs (whereas she does not). When Dustin begins to taunt Lindsey by calling her “rat-eater” and a “rodent-eater,” Lindsey responds by hitting him with her lunchbox. After she does so, the other children who witness the exchange begin to taunt him, changing his initial insult from “rat-eater” to “Rat Boy” (Keltner, Buddha Baby 44). Dustin responds to their name-calling by stating, “I am not a rat. I am a homosapien” (Keltner, Buddha Baby 44). The transformation that Dustin’s insult undergoes from “rat-eater” to “Rat Boy” to “rat” shows how people do not only become defined by what they eat (a “rat-eater”) – they can become identified as what they eat (a “rat”).26 Thus, the shift the children make from identifying (and insulting)
what a person consumes to identifying the person as what he or she consumes illustrates the power of consumption in the formation of identity.

**Spinning the Lazy Susan**

Lindsey’s awareness of how consumption patterns can influence how a person is identified causes her to feign dislike for anything Chinese. When she was a child, Lindsey would “never let her grandmother, Pau Pau, put anything Chinese in her Bugs Bunny lunchbox,” choosing to fill it instead with “sandwiches with Safeway cold cuts” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 6). For Lindsey, consuming Chinese food is particularly fraught with identity issues, especially since food itself “is potentially polluting because it passes through the oral boundary of the ‘clean and proper body’” (Lupton 113). As Doris Friedensohn states, “It’s one thing to buy an ‘alien’ object as a souvenir, another to ingest it” (166). Chinese food, specifically, has been historically been treated as transgressive and abject (as Dustin’s “rat-eater” insult suggests). Keltner does not sanitize the image of Chinese food for her reading audience, but instead depicts it as variously delectable and repellent, vacillating between food pornography and anti-food pornography.

Her heterogeneous portrayal of Chinese food contrasts with her depiction of homogeneous and processed American food (which I will discuss later in the chapter), and subverts the domestication that Chinese food has undergone to make it safe for “take-out.” For example, in the scene where Dustin calls Lindsey a “rat-eater,” Lindsey reflects on what Chinese food would be like with rodents:

> Standing there she thought of all the different kinds of rodents and how they might be prepared in Chinese cooking. She imagined marmots in black bean sauce, sweet ‘n’ sour gerbils, Peking squirrel with hoisin sauce, chipmunks cubed in a dry wok, and chinchilla chow fun. (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 44)

In this decidedly anti-food-pornographic passage (which is reminiscent of Kingston’s description of Brave Orchid’s cooking), Keltner clearly portrays a repulsive image of Chinese food,
illustrating common (mis)apprehensions about this cuisine (the sentiment conveyed earlier in Lupton’s quotation, “Is this really chicken?”)\textsuperscript{31}. It is critical that this passage features rodents not in their unadorned form, but with sauces commonly seen on Chinese menus, such as “black bean sauce” and “sweet ‘n’ sour.” Notably, “sweet ‘n’ sour” sauce appeared in \textit{Dim Sum}, when Lindsey and Michael go to a Chinese restaurant and she cautions him not to order “anything with sweet-and-sour sauce, or egg rolls, or any of that tourist stuff” (Keltner 206). Thus, what Keltner appears to be challenging through Lindsey’s anti-food pornographic musings is the “sanitization” (read: Americanization) of Chinese food (the “tourist stuff”) which has made it easily commodifiable and harmless. I use the word “sanitation” not to suggest that Keltner is claiming that Chinese food is unhygienic, but rather to argue that Keltner is disrupting the symbolic order of “cleanliness” that has structurally kept Chinese food in its defined place\textsuperscript{32}. By combining the “safe” (“sweet ‘n’ sour) with the “dirty”\textsuperscript{33} (“gerbils”), Keltner defamiliarizes Chinese food and in doing so, contaminates not only its commodification, but also the commodification of Chinese culture. Keltner’s anti-food pornographic description of Chinese food with rodents does not so much exoticize Chinese cuisine and culture as it reveals a resistance to playing the role of literary “native,” whose job is to “defamiliariz[e] [an ethnic specimen] of American likenesses as well as the familiariz[e] of ethnic difference” (Bow 211).

What Keltner posits instead of the familiar “sweet and sour” combination of Chinese food is an indescribable version of the cuisine that is unintelligible not only to the white reader, but also to Lindsey herself. In \textit{Dim Sum}, Lindsey lives with her grandmother Pau Pau who cooks “hardcore what-the-hell-is-that kind of Chinese food,” which includes “organ meats and unrecognizable fish parts that had been sliced to bits with a cleaver as long as a human arm earlier that morning in Chinatown” (Keltner, \textit{Dim Sum} 6; emphasis in original). The phrase
“what-the-hell-is-that” represents a critical breakdown in language, where the “details of real Chinese food – real Chinese anything” cannot be conveyed, according to Lindsey, to “white people” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 6). In contrast to the questions posed on the back cover (“Have you ever wondered…Why Asians…?”), the phrase “what-the-hell-is-that” challenges that the “you” addressed in the back cover (the white reader) can ever know the answer to these questions. To that end, Lindsey’s inability to articulate what the Chinese food is that Pau Pau prepares suggests not only her alienation from her culture, but also that the complexity of Chinese food far exceeds what fortune cookies and take-out menus imply. That Keltner does not make Chinese food immediately “intelligible” to the reader further demonstrates her resistance to the literary “native” role, which Leslie Bow analyzes in the context of Jade Snow Wong. As Bow states, “While ‘remoteness’ is the catalyst for voyeuristic interest, an unintelligible native is of no use; nor is one who remains absolutely (in)different” (211). Unlike the “intelligible” native, Keltner does not fully explicate the contents of Pau Pau’s dishes, which leaves the reader with incomplete information. In this respect, Keltner differs in her representation of Chinese food from Jade Snow Wong, whom Frank Chin was clearly alluding to in his description of “food pornography.” Whereas Jade Snow Wong “[took] pains to explain the ritualistic significance of certain meals and folk beliefs about the medicinal properties of certain ingredients” to lead “the white reader on a verbal gastronomic tour,” Lindsey does not know the names of the ingredients that go into Pau Pau’s dishes (S.C. Wong 63).

The unintelligibility of Pau’s cooking makes it nonreproducible, which suggests that it is the opposite of mass-produced American food. Moreover, the nonreproducibility of Pau Pau’s cooking makes it resistant to commodification in ways that “chop suey” and “dim sum” are not. Pau Pau’s dishes are depicted as “invented recipes” that appear on “no restaurant menu anywhere
in the city” (46). Pau Pau’s cooking, though presented as “authentic” Chinese food, does not actually look or taste like the food that Lindsey encounters in a trip to China:

When the food arrived, she scanned the lazy Susan for dishes she might want. But the more she searched, the more she found that she didn’t recognize anything. The mushy-looking brown goo bore no resemblance to the mushy goo she was familiar with back home. A couple of selections looked vaguely like seafood but lacked discernible parts that could be verified as either animal or vegetable. A bowl of sautéed beef, upon close inspection, was not beef at all but tiny severed duck tongues. (Keltner, Dim Sum 283)

We see in this passage the “lazy Susan” from the front cover, only this time it contains unrecognizable Chinese food, rather than popular Chinatown souvenirs. What is critical to note in this passage how nothing is as it appears to be in this particular lazy Susan; that is, what Lindsey mistakes for recognizable and delicious food (“sautéed beef”) is not what she expects at all (“severed duck tongues”). Lindsey, in fact, is “almost convinced that this whole meal was a joke on the tourists,” who seem to happily enjoy the strange exoticism and do not perceive anything amiss in their consumption of “authentic” Chinese food (Keltner, Dim Sum 284). I would argue that the lazy Susan on the cover functions in a similar way, in that what appears to be an open invitation to consume Chinese culture via Chinese souvenirs is actually a more complex engagement with the power of consumption and what it means to be the melancholic subject being consumed within the dominant white identity. Keltner’s subversion of the commodification of Chinese cuisine and her resistance to playing the literary “native” role allude to the agency she possesses, even within a genre that appears highly commercialized for audience appeal.

The All-American Owyangs

While Keltner portrays Chinese food as indescribable, she depicts American food as heavily branded. Keltner consistently refers to the names of American food products (such as “Nutter Butters” and “Red Vines”), which suggests that the Owyang family, by consuming
American food, is actually buying the “American” label implicit in these food names. As Deborah Lupton argues,

To eat American food is to incorporate some of the desired attributes of American culture, and at the same time to reject one’s own cultural food practices. The nutritional value of such food has little to do with the desire to consume it: such food signifies American success, and thence is considered desirable. (27)

The question becomes, what “desired attributes of American culture” do the Owyangs wish to incorporate? Lindsey’s parents are depicted as believing in the “American Dream” and running their household according to the standard of the idealized “American Family.” In Buddha Baby, Lindsey reflects on her home life as a child and notes how “her nuclear household had been like a small factory in which conversation was designated by and limited to one’s role in the family” (Keltner 74). The image of the nuclear family as factory is critical in the characterization of the Owyangs, who ingest processed American food in order to keep this “factory” running. Significantly, Keltner provides a context for the Owyangs’ methodical Americanization in the beginning of a chapter in Dim Sum titled “Chinese + English = Chinglish”:

When Chinese immigrants first came to San Francisco in the mid-1800s, laws excluded them from bringing their wives or families to join them. As a result, the men formed Benevolent and Family Associations that grouped men according to their homeland villages or last names and provided services and sense of community to the immigrants, who could not count on any city services to guide them. (Keltner 61)

This passage critically posits the “family” as a site of traumatic exclusion that Chinese Americans have had to overcome. In this way, the Owyangs’ smooth execution of the nuclear family dynamic can be viewed as trying to regain the “family” that Chinese Americans were historically denied. Thus, eating American food functions as a normative activity that reinforces the Owyangs’ position as the “All-American Family,” in the respect that the “four main food groups” that Lindsey was raised on (“frozen, canned, store-bought, or pimento loaf”) homogenize the Owyangs so that they can “blend in” with other American families (Keltner,
Keltner noticeably uses brand names like “Swanson’s frozen entrees” and “Oscar Mayer luncheon loaves” when describing the American food that Lindsey was raised on, which not only establishes the Owyangs as part of the American middle class\(^39\) (and thereby reinforces their position as the “All American Family”), but also serves as a productive metaphor for what the Owyangs seek to become (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 47). That is, “American” can be viewed as a kind of brand name (like “Swanson” or “Oscar Mayer”) which entails a certain amount of processing and packaging. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, “cooking mark[s] the transition from nature to culture”; thus, processed food, having theoretically been “cooked” multiple times, becomes a marker of culture (164). In a similar way, the process of Americanization can be seen as a process of “cooking,” imposing modifications on racialized subjects so that they can become “cultured” and have the “American” label appended to their ethnicity (as in Chinese American). However, just as processed food lacks nutritional value\(^40\) (which Keltner alludes to in *Dim Sum*)\(^41\), the “American” label lacks substance and disappears, specifically in the case of Asian Americans. In this respect, the “American” label can be viewed as the Freudian “lost” object that the Owyang family melancholically devours with their Swanson frozen entrées.

The Owyangs do not only assimilate by eating American food, but also by creating and eating hybrid dishes with Chinese and American ingredients. As the narrator describes in *Buddha Baby*, Lindsey’s “parents did occasionally attempt to blend Chinese and American cultures together by preparing meals such as bok choy with cut-up hot dogs, or macaroni salad with pai don, Chinese preserved eggs” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 2). These fusion dishes illustrate how the Owyangs attempt to negotiate the materiality of their Chinese side by combining Chinese and American qualities to create hybrid identities\(^42\). Lindsey’s mother, Lillian, is described as wanting Lindsey and her brother, Kevin, to be “the perfect combination of qualities: well-
educated with good manners like upper-class Americans, but with the humility and toughness like the Chinese” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 65). However, combining cultures is obviously less simple and clear-cut than combining cultural food, as ensuring that the “Chinese and American balance [is] just right” can erroneously reduce the formation of identity to an essentialist process of give-and-take (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 65).

Cooking (which I will discuss further in the next section) thus serves as an apt (if problematic) metaphor for the Owyangs’ approach to assimilation, as their attempt to mix Chinese characteristics with American ones can be viewed as similar to combining ingredients in order to create something palatable. However, combining cultures by combining ethnic ingredients simplifies the psychic negotiation a racialized subject must enact in order to assimilate, as well as elides the violence that such assimilation entails. The belief that blending together cultures can be as simple as combining bok choy and hot dogs hints at a false and easy utopic resolution to the messy problem of existing between cultures. Lindsey’s attempt to negotiate between her Chinese side and her American side is, for her, more like the process of combining oil and water. Lindsey’s perception that her two sides cannot blend provides a context for why Lindsey is called a “Twinkie” (an Asian person who is “yellow” on the outside and “white” on the inside”). This racial epithet, which is often used to denigrate Asian Americans who act too “white,” is a provocative example of how ethnicities are constructed as static entities mutually exclusive to one another. In other words, with a “Twinkie,” one can clearly see where the “yellow” ends and the “white” begins; there is a visible line of separation between these two elements. Calling someone a “Twinkie” implies that they have undergone a process of Americanization (they are “processed” like an actual Twinkie), a culturalization that results in
imaginative closure of identity, where the “internal homogeneity” (to recall Stuart Hall) is conceived as unified and “white.”

For Lindsey, who resists being called a “Twinkie,” the attempt to balance her Chinese and American characteristics only implicates an inherent imbalance that she has internalized from an early age. Her attempt to “get over” her race by compensating through consumption backfires to the extent that she feels at crisis with her two opposing sides of her identity. Thus, Lindsey’s identity crisis, rather than her romantic troubles, is actually the primary conflict in both novels that Keltner attempts to resolve and “get over” – a critical plot deviation from the standard chick lit formula. Though Keltner has received criticism for her handling of racial issues (some reviewers found her work too stereotypical, others compared it to the only other commercial Asian American text they were familiar with – The Joy Luck Club), I would argue that her provocative posturing of complicity and subversion thoughtfully grapples with what it means to be interpellated as “Asian” in America, as well as the fraught position of the “ethnic” author in the chick lit genre.

I want to end this section with a particular passage from Buddha Baby, which I believe articulates Keltner’s response not only to Asian American detractors who see her writing in the chick lit genre as “selling-out” to a white audience (or as Dustin phrases it, “cater[ing] to Western palates”), but also a response to her white readers, who fetishize her as an “ethnic” author. In this passage, an older version of Dustin (the boy who called Lindsey a “rat-eater”) is talking to Lindsey about her experience of being an alienated (assimilated) Asian American, as well as his own:

See, if you were a beverage, I bet you would be a peppy soda pop rather than a heavy, murky tea...When white people see you and realize you wear the same kind of clothes as you do and you don’t speak with an accent, they probably welcome your hint of Chinese flavor, assuming you’re filled with empty calories but are nonetheless...refreshing. They
like that you’re different enough to be entertaining, but not strong enough to upset their stomachs. On the other hand, some Chinese people, Angry Asian Men included, take one look at your packaging and immediately judge you. They assume you’re too bubbly, or have some kind of gimmick. They might think you’re too sweet to be any good, or think you’ve designed yourself to cater to Western palates. In all of two seconds of seeing you, they take it upon themselves to proclaim that your character consists of inferior ingredients devoid of any authentic Chinese flavor. (Keltner, Buddha Baby 88)

Like Lindsey, chick lit is often perceived as a “peppy soda pop” that is devoid of any kind of substance. As Keltner’s passage insightfully illustrates, Asian American chick lit authors often must straddle the fence between subversion and complicity in order to appease their two contingents of the chick lit reading audience, both of whom seek Asian American chick lit for conflicting reasons. I find it critical here that Keltner uses food and consumption imagery to show what Lindsey, and arguably she, is viewed as, as well as what both Asian American and white outsiders (readers) want from her, suggesting that she is not only aware of herself as commodity, but how racialized subjects are specifically constituted as commodities for consumption in everyday life.

Notes

1 Ferriss and Young argue that “chick culture can be productively viewed as a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women” (Chick Flicks 1). What is not explicitly stated is that the categories “American” and “British” are normatively white.

2 One Amazon.com reviewer called The Dim Sum of All Things “one long inside joke,” stating “[i]t seems that the non-Asian reviewers disliked this book because they ‘don’t get it’” (A Customer). This comment insightfully locates Dim Sum within the discourse of comic racial representation, which as Minh-Hà Pham argues in her dissertation “Playing (with) Stereotypes,” is an equally fraught area within Asian American studies largely due to the way “[c]omedy has been a useful means of shepherding even the most malicious racial representations into the mainstream” (4). Arguably, like images of food and eating within Asian American literature and the genre of Asian American chick lit itself, “comedy – whether externally or internally produced – is notoriously difficult to categorize as either resistant or accommodating, either racist or good-natured, it does not lend itself easily to any one set of politics” (Pham 7).

3 Lindsey identifies “Hoarder” males and “Hoarder” females, with the former being defined in Dim Sum and the latter being defined in Buddha Baby. “Hoarder” males, who have a much longer nickname (“Hoarders of All Things Asian”) are described as “shy, Caucasian beta-males with dirty blond hair and sallow complexions” and “stealthy predators who [feign] interest in Asian cuisine, history, and customs in hopes of attracting an exotic porcelain doll like those portrayed so fetchingly in pop culture movies and advertisements” (Keltner, Dim Sum 2-3). (Cara Lockwood also has a similar stereotype in her book Dixieland Sushi; she describes white men who have a fetish for Asian women as possessing an AO (Asian Obsessed) blood type.) In Buddha Baby, Lindsey encounters “Hoarder”
females while working for a museum. In contrast to “Hoarder” men that are “focused mainly on the procurement of Asian love slaves, Hoarder Ladies seemed more concerned with the acquisition of fashion and home items, preferring to feather their nests with a healthy dose of oriental razzmatazz” (Keltner 33-34). Keltner goes into great detail describing both “Hoarder” males and females, constructing ethnographic accounts of what they are like and their recognizable features. (Keltner even describes a scene where Lindsey meets a “Hoarder” male who admits that he fetishizes Asian women in this fashion.) While the concept of “Hoarders” is problematically stereotypical, the way that Keltner writes about them is quite similar to how Chinese Americans have historically been represented within popular culture – that is, as one-dimensional caricatures (e.g., “lily-footed celestials, geishas, fan-tan dancers, and singsong girlies”) (Keltner, Dim Sum 3). As Robert Lee argues in his seminal work Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture, Asian Americans have been stereotypically represented by the “six faces of the Oriental”: “the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority and the gook” (8). What is critical about Lee’s argument is that each of these faces “portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family” (8). What Keltner observes in Lindsey’s “Hoarder” theory is that the threat the Oriental body poses has been mediated through commodification and objectification of that body. The Oriental body is perceived as attractive by Hoarder males precisely because it is alien and the same is true for Oriental objects that Hoarder females buy.

4 Lindsey’s unfulfilling career is a condition of what Michelle Sidler calls “McJobdom.” As she writes in her essay “Living in McJobDom,” “The McJobdom inhabited by so many twentysomethings is but a local manifestation of a growing economic condition. The condition is so subtle and pervasive that women and men of my generation do not know how to fight it” (37).

5 Michael initiates his relationship with Lindsey largely because he wants to “understand better what it means to be Chinese” (Keltner, Dim Sum 205). He asks Lindsey to be his “cultural guide,” an obviously problematic request that nonetheless implicates Michael’s, and arguably the white reader’s, desire to have Lindsey (and Keltner) play the role of “native informant.” Lindsey responds to his request with agitation, stating “Well, there’s no guidebook or anything” (Keltner, Dim Sum 205). Lindsey’s comment significantly problematizes reading Keltner’s work as a guidebook to Chinese life, which is a direct contradiction to what the cover of Dim Sum encourages.

6 The romantic relationships in both Dim Sum and Buddha Baby often emphasize (rather than de-emphasize) the racial issues within the text. According to an interview with asianconnections.com, Keltner stated that she constructed the relationships very intentionally to highlight the racial issues. As she articulates in the interview, “Well, in The Dim Sum of All Things, [Lindsey’s] attracted to this guy who she thinks is just this run-of-the-mill white guy. I was concentrating on the Asian-white thing. I really wanted to talk more about the Asian-Asian thing with an Asian girl and an Asian guy [in Buddha Baby], and how that can be sticky. Specifically with Lindsey and Dustin, neither of them had dated anybody Asian before. They’re wondering if I’m liking this person because I like them or because I’m so hooked into this I-have-to-date-an-Asian person thing. It’s an unspoken pressure.” Of course, Michael is not a “run-of-the-mill white guy” because he is also a quarter Chinese. His Chinese heritage serves as a critical plot point that not only disrupts the common heterosexual relationship in Asian American chick lit novels (that is, between an Asian American woman and a white man), but also illustrates the material conditions that race engenders. In Dim Sum, Lindsey reflects on how Michael’s “white” appearance has allowed him to escape from the “subtle mistreatment or outright hostility due to race,” where “she could never escape being identifiably Asian” (Keltner, Dim Sum 257).

7 Keltner uses a similar opening in her follow-up novel about Lindsey, Buddha Baby: “She had been born and bred in San Francisco, raised on Cocoa Puffs and Aaron Spelling productions. As a kid she never wore silk slippers or mandarin-collared pajamas, but rather was more often outfitted in checkerboard Vans and an “I’m With Stupid” T-shirt. Confucian proverbs eluded her, but she was well versed in the spunky aphorisms of great philosophers such as Fonzie and Fred Sanford, whose Nick-at-Nite reruns taught her handy phrase such as “Sit on it, Malph,” and “Bring me some ripple, Dummy” (1).

8 Cheng cites the “formation of canonical literature” as an example of how “[r]acial melancholia plays itself out not only in national formation” (12). As Cheng argues: “The canon is a melancholic corpus because of what it excludes but cannot forget” (12).
The tales of Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups eating “unconventional meat” such as dogs and cats has become prevalent to the point that “[w]hen a sizeable number of Vietnamese refugees settled recently in a small Kentucky city, a rumor began circulating that people’s cats and dogs were disappearing. The rumor suggested that the strange food habits of the Vietnamese were responsible for the vanishing pets” (Kalčik 37).

In *Buddha Baby*, the narrator reveals that Lindsey has been fired from her job at *Vegan Warrior* because she is “caught red-handed gnawing on a pork chop” (Keltner 48).

Many of Lindsey’s family members are described as having worked or currently work in a food-related industry: Lindsey’s aunt Shirley is “a part-time file clerk at the corporate office of Whole Foods”; her mother used to “[shell] pounds of shrimp for a local restaurant” when she was younger; her paternal grandparents own a grocery store (they also previously “worked in the asparagus and pear fields” and her grandfather, specifically, worked as a cook at a private residence) (*Dim Sum* 64; *Buddha Baby* 109). The popular association of Chinese with food service industries leads Lindsey to be mistaken for a restaurant worker while buying some green beans: “As she stood in line clutching her baggie of Blue Lakes, the man behind her suddenly spoke. ‘For the restaurant, eh?’ he asked. She was unaware that he was addressing her, and she didn’t turn around. A moment passed before he tapped her on the shoulder and repeated, ‘Need those for the restaurant, huh? Had this man mistaken her for someone he knew from his local take-out place? Or did he just assume that a Chinese person holding a large sack of string beans worked in a restaurant?’” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 116).

According to Cheng, “American melancholia is particularly acute because America is *founded* on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over” (10).

As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong states, “The references to the stereotype of cat- and dog-eating Asians recall other Chinese American stories…that portray attachment to pets (farm animals, ‘dove birds,’ crabs) as an indulgence disdained by the hard-boiled immigrant generation (61).

Wong provides some examples of the “humiliation and pain” that Asian Americans have experienced: “No wonder, then, that big eaters abound in the literature of Asian Americans, who at various points in their history have been kept out of America by discriminatory immigration legislation; exploited as cheap, dispensable labor; ghettoized while being faulted for refusal to Americanize; denied citizenship, landownership, or a chance to raise families in the United States; scapegoated during hard times; run out of town, lynched, and slain; forcibly interned, relocated, and dispersed on no evidence of disloyalty; deprived of property by confiscation or virtual confiscation; and, even in an era of liberalized immigration, subjected to stereotyping and racial violence” (26).

As Cheng describes the process of melancholic consumption, “The ‘swallowing’ does not go down easily. As the libido turns back on the ego, so do the feelings of guilt, rage, and punishment (Freudian melancholia is anything but mild!) originally attached to the initial object of loss and disappointment” (8).

In *Dim Sum*, Lindsey reflects on the “humiliation and pain” caused by race when she receives a plain white envelope with the phrase “The Slant” and perceives it as a racial slur directed against her. She notes that “[i]t had been a long time since anyone had called her a slant, or any other racial epithet, for that matter” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 254). Michael later informs her that this is not a racial slur against her at all, but the title of his new humor column. Lindsey becomes upset at what she perceives as his lack of sensitivity toward a racially charged word, which causes her to reflect on not only the difference between Michael’s “Chineseness” and hers, but also on how the visibility of one’s race changes one’s experience. As the narrator states, “[Lindsey] had tried to ignore these humiliations, but each incident had stayed with her” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 257).

In *Dim Sum*, the incident is described in one short sentence: “[Lindsey] remembered neighborhood teenagers pelting the house with mushy blackberries, and she recalled the glare from a boutique saleslady when she’d shopped for her junior prom dress” (Keltner 257).

Keltner portrays Lindsey’s parents as stereotypically quiet: “Like most Chinese families, they never talked about feelings” (*Buddha Baby* 75). However, she complicates this portrayal by going on to state, “Or, perhaps, like
everybody else in the rest of the country, they were just bored with each other and were more interested in watching *American Idol*” (*Buddha Baby* 75). The latter statement seems to undermine that there is anything necessarily “Chinese” about the Owyangs’ silence, by recasting silence as American apathy. What Keltner articulates in her portrayal aligns with King-Kok Cheung’s argument in *Articulate Silence* that “[m]odalities of silence need to be differentiated” (3).

19 In a scene before the vandalism, the narrator describes Lindsey’s feelings toward the Ahchucks: “When Lindsey was young she hated the Ahchucks’ house. She loathed visiting them, and was embarrassed by how Chinese their home was. She felt that the Ahchucks were purposely calling attention to their otherness, and was uncomfortable in the midst of all the Asian motifs” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 128; emphasis added). Lindsey clearly differs from the Ahchucks in trying to not call attention to her otherness by conforming to normative American standards of consumption and behavior.

20 The context for Anne Cheng’s argument is the famous bathroom scene in *The Woman Warrior* where the protagonist inflicts the same humiliation and shame that she formerly experienced by the hands of a teacher onto another Chinese American girl. As Cheng argues, “The narrator suffers the trauma not of being a victim but of being the aggressor. The juxtaposition of these two scenes (the narrator in the bathroom with the other little girl and earlier in the classroom with the teacher) not only plays out the autobiographical coercion but also acts out the internalization of that coercion and its subsequent epistemological aporia” (75).

21 This dog shit is from a “neighbor across the street who always let his German shepherd take a huge crap in front of the Owyangs’ house” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 131). Lindsey’s dad consistently cleans the mess up, but “every day there was more shit, and they all knew it was the same guy and his same damn dog” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 131).

22 Allegorically, this “Era of Lost Chinese Children” seems to represent the historical exclusion of Chinese children from white schools in San Francisco and throughout California, which occurred “well until into the 1930s” (Chan 58). According to Sucheng Chan, in San Francisco, Chinese children were segregated from white children in schools. In 1859, “a separate school for Chinese children was opened in the city” but was closed in 1871 (57). After 1871, the “only education available to children of Chinese ancestry…would be private tutors hired by their parents or in a few English and Bible classes taught by Protestant missionaries working in Chinatown” (Chan 57). Joseph and Mary Tape famously challenged the “school board’s denial of the right of their daughter, Mamie, to a public education” resulting in the creation of yet another school, the “Oriental School,” in 1885 (Chan 57-58).

23 Significantly, Keltner does not state that Lindsey was afraid of being a “Chinese [American] victim lashed with red vines” but rather a “Chinese victim.” By eliding the “American” hyphenate, Keltner articulates how in the playground (and in other contexts as well), it does not matter to what degree a Chinese American has been assimilated or what citizenship status that person holds, but rather that the person is Chinese.

24 Dustin’s desire to assimilate is apparent from when Dustin first arrives at St. Maude’s and he “insist[s] that he [isn’t] Chinese at all, but a direct descendant of the great general, Robert E. Lee” (Keltner, *Buddha Baby* 40).

25 According to David Sibley in his book *Geographies of Exclusion*, “Rats, pigs, and cockroaches have had a particular place in the racist bestiary because all are associated with residues – food waste and human waste – and in the case of rats, there is an association of spaces which border civilized society…The potency of the rat as an abject symbol is heightened though its role as a carrier of disease” (28). Rats and other rodents are known to spread the bubonic plague, a disease that became associated with Chinese and Japanese immigrants and justified their removal from San Francisco and Honolulu in the 1890s (Chan 56). Sucheng Chan states that “Chinese and Japanese…were singled out for detention in quarantine because the ports of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Yokohama, and Kobe, according to the medical officials in San Francisco, were ‘infected’” (56). In addition, “Chinese and Japanese were forbidden to travel outside of California without certificates issued by the surgeon general of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, the federal agency responsible for quarantine” (Chan 57).
According to historian Nayan Shah, Chinese immigrants were often compared to farm animals such as “rats, hogs, and cattle” (27). The animals chosen for comparison were deliberate, as “[t]he choice of animals underscored a relationship to waste and an imperviousness to crowding” (27).

In *Dim Sum*, Lindsey remembers visiting a Sanrio store when she was younger for a “brief shoplifting pick-me-up,” but only “walk[ing] out with a gluestick, fearing that any Sanrio product would associate her with the immigrant outcasts who snacked on Pocky sticks at recess” (Keltner 6). Even though Lindsey’s “white friends” like (and shoplift) Sanrio products, Lindsey is aware that her consumption of the same products would remind the others of her “Chineseness” and affirm her racialized status. Significantly, what is figured as a crime in this scenario is not the act of shoplifting, but the act of being “Chinese.”

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the abject as “the jettisoned object” which draws a person “toward a place where meaning collapses” (2). According to Kristeva, abjection is not caused by “the lack of cleanliness or health…but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4).

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s clarification about “food pornography” is critical here: “Food pornography consists not in any particular menu of intrinsically ‘pornographic’ or even intrinsically ‘ethnic’ items but in a certain posture of presentation. This ingratiating posture, having arisen in response to a set of oppressive interracial relationships, cements it in turn by reassuring the patron that the unsettling implications of ‘eating ethnic’ can be arrested” (67; emphasis added). Thus, by stating that Keltner vacillates between “food pornographic” and “anti-food pornographic” descriptions, I am arguing that she is positioning herself in relationship to the audience in a specific way: either by capitulating to the audience’s desire to read delicious, yet exotic, passages of “authentic” Chinese food or by subverting that desire with defamiliarized (sometimes repulsive) depictions of Chinese food.

This passage is similar to a description of Brave Orchid’s cooking in *Woman Warrior*: “My mother has cooked for us: raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub…She boiled the weeds we pulled up in the yard” (90).

According to Gabaccia, “B.E. Lloyd’s 1876 guide to the ‘lights and shades’ of San Francisco scarcely mentioned Chinese food as a viable option for visitors. It noted instead that the Chinese – while usually penurious eaters – often staged great banquets where exotic and rare, but sometimes also disgusting, foods were consumed. At this date, Chinese food was mentioned as a curiosity but not yet recommended for consumption by tourists” (103).

As Nayan Shah states, “During the 1870s, [San Francisco] had passed ordinances regulating…the sanitary condition of [Chinese] food vendors” (35). These regulations not only implied that Chinese immigrants were unsanitary, but they also imposed a homogenization of Chinese food.

Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*, “As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder…Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment” (2).

In Frank Chin’s short story, “Railroad Standard Time,” he refers directly to Jade Snow Wong, as well as other authors he considers “food pornographers”: “I hated after reading *Father and Glorious Descendant, Fifth Chinese Daughter, The House That Tai Ming Built*. Books scribbled up by a sad legion of snobby autobiographical Chinatown saps all on their own…Part cookbook, memories of Mother in the kitchen slicing meat paper-thin with a cleaver. Mumbo jumbo about spices and steaming, The secret of Chinatown rice. The hands come down toward the food. The food crawls with culture. The thousand-year-old living Chinese meat makes dinner a safari into the unknown, a blood ritual. Food pornography” (3).

Lindsey’s favorite dish by Pau Pau is described as “a mélange of shrimp, tofu, bean paste, and a smattering of other ingredients with Chinese names she could never remember” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 47).
This is not to say that Keltner is completely different from Jade Snow Wong or to deny that Keltner has food pornographic passages that are ingratiating, rather than subversive. For example, Lindsey identifies Chinese food as one of the reasons why being Chinese American is positive, rather than negative. In a highly food pornographic scene, Keltner describes Lindsey’s feelings about her Chinese identity: “And what good Chinese things had Michael skipped?...He had not spent years tasting the flavors of ancient recipes that soaked form the taste buds into the heart; he had missed out on the fortifying crunch of every bamboo shoot, the soothing reassurance in each swallow of faintly tinted broth, and the surge of love in every pungent bit of dinner. She knew that she gained a certain strength in not being able to hide who she was. And now that she reflected on her upbringing filled with Empress of China dinners, New Year’s parades, and calligraphy lessons, she realized that each experience had formed an impression on her identity, augmenting her development layer by layer, like an intricate design carved over a thousand hour of soft cinnabar” (Dim Sum 258). The last sentence, specifically, is quite similar to the sentiment Jade Snow Wong expresses in Fifth Chinese Daughter at the end of a chapter titled “Lucky to Be Born a Chinese”: “Yes, it was sometimes very lucky to be born a Chinese daughter. The Americans, Jade Snow heard, did not have a Moon Festival nor a seven-day New Year celebration with delicious accompaniments” (43).

Chop suey is one dish that has ambiguous and unconfirmed origins and is largely responsible for the early popularity of Chinese restaurants. According to Richard Hooker in Food and Drink: A History: “Among the rapidly growing foreign restaurants, those of the Chinese made the greatest gains. The Chinese-Americans did not have to face hostile labor unions as restaurateurs, and chop suey gave them a dish acceptable to Caucasians. Beginning about 1900 Chinese restaurants were opened in towns and cities across the country. For several decades these remained modest and invariably featured chop suey” (324). In Dim Sum, Lindsey subversively rewrites the origins of chop suey by telling Michael “in the gold rush days, Chinese cooks picked scraps out of the garbage and fed it to surly miners. They called it ‘chop suey,’ and foreigners have been ordering it ever since” (Keltner 206). In We Are What We Eat, Gabaccia does not relate the same story as Lindsey, but she does illustrate chop suey’s questionable origins by asking “Was chop suey left-overs cooked for drunken American miners or a special dish prepared for a Chinese visitor?” (103). Chop suey has changed from being a familiar, but still exotic, Chinese dish to the quintessential Americanized, inauthentic Chinese staple, as Heather Schell illustrates in her description of eating at a Chinese restaurant: “Once I step into a Chinese restaurant, my personal standards change. I am reluctant to betray any kind of ignorance, even when this pretense is to my disadvantage. If the table is set with silverware, I request chopsticks. I shun chop suey and chow mein; similarly, I avoid places that offer a small ‘American’ selection (usually featuring hot dogs or mashed potatoes or other embarrassing food): any Chinese restaurant more tolerant than I of unenlightened American diners must be awful” (208).

In Buddha Baby, the narrator states that Lindsey’s “mom and dad would freak out if they knew her liberal high-school and college curricula were teaching her that the American Dream was fraught with ennui, alienation, and personal malaise” (Keltner 75).

Monica Domosh states: “The tactics [Post and Kellogg] pursued in promoting their new products served as important lessons for other food-manufacturing companies: link your product to abstract qualities considered desirable by middle-class Americans, and advertise those linkages aggressively. In addition, given that there was little in the way of taste or quality to distinguish between most mass-produced food products (the standardization of technologies of food manufacturing led to uniform products), the only way to distinguish, for example, one type of corn flake from the other, was the development and promotion of brand names” (11).

Lupton notes that “[a]dvertisements and packaging seek to create an image around the foodstuff into which consumers can fit themselves, and which is not necessarily related to its nutritional properties, its taste or its form. This is most obvious with highly processed foods such as soft drinks, confectionery, bottled sauces, frozen and canned foods, snacks and fast foods, which have few well-established, distinguishable, ‘natural’ characteristics giving them meaning” (24; emphasis added). The notion that consumers “fit themselves” into the image surrounding the foodstuffs is critical to understanding that the Owyangs’ ingestion of American food products is more complicated than “eating” American means “being” American; rather, this consumption of American food should be seen as a psychological investment in which the Owyangs modify themselves according to the “American” image they wish to project.
The narrator states that “[f]or years Lindsey’s standard school lunch had been two slices of any variety of luncheon loaf on white bread with ketchup and Miracle Whip” but “[w]hen her school tried to kick off Nutrition Week twice a year, she conceded to eating vegetables when her mom packed a Ziploc of sweet pickles and cocktail gherkins” (Keltner, *Dim Sum* 212).

Frank Chin and Jeffrey Chan referred to this hybridity as “The Concept of the Dual Personality,” which they perceived as a debilitating and fragmenting influence on the Chinese American identity (72). Chin and Chan argue that “[t]he conflict between the ‘Chinese’ part and the ‘American’ part has been a source of white entertainment for the whole of the twentieth century,” and thus “[v]irtually every book-length work by a Chinese American – China- or American-born – published in America has stated the concept of the dual personality” (73). According to Chin and Chan, “The concept of the dual personality successfully deprived the Chinese American of all authority over language and thus a means of codifying, communicating, and legitimizing his experience” (76). They perceived the notion of the “dual personality” as effectively precluding the creation of a unique, Chinese American (masculine) identity. Other Asian American scholars have critiqued Chin and Chan’s nationalist position (which is clearly posited against an assimilationist position) and have articulated non-essentialist conceptions of ethnic identity. In particular, Lisa Lowe has argued for recognizing that “[a]n Asian American subject is never purely and exclusively ethnic, for that subject is always of a particular class, gender, and sexual preference, and may therefore feel responsible to movements that are organized around these other designations” (“Heterogeneity” 32).
CHAPTER 3
CHANGING THE CHICK LIT “RECIPE”: GENDER, MELANCHOLIA, AND COOKING IN AMULYA MALLADI’S SERVING CRAZY WITH CURRY

Cookbooks, which usually belong to the humble literature of complex civilizations, tell unusual cultural tales.

– Arjun Appadurai, “How to Make a National Cuisine”

In the previous chapter, I argued that cooking provides an apt metaphor for the Owyangs’ approach to assimilation, as combining cultures by combining cultural foods becomes a way to achieve some imaginative closure to their hyphenated identity. Whereas I found Keltner’s articulation of cultural resolution through cooking as lacking in conviction (which arguably was a point that she was trying to illustrate), in this chapter, I explore an Asian American chick lit novel, Amulya Malladi’s Serving Crazy with Curry, that presents a nuanced and insightful view of how cooking, as a trope, becomes a productive way to express the racial melancholia and gendered experience of Asian American women. In this section, I explore the ways in which gender and ethnicity intersect through cooking, particularly by examining the recipes in Serving Crazy and analyzing the relationships formed, reinforced, and deconstructed through the act of cooking.

What I find particularly significant in Serving Crazy is Malladi’s manipulation of the key “ingredients” (if you will) of both the Asian American and chick lit literary genres, so that even though there are certain formulaic aspects that align with other Asian American and chick lit texts (mother/daughter relationships, traditional/modern familial conflicts, romantic pursuits), they deviate critically from one another in their representations of ethnicity, familial relationships, and gendering. I want to invoke here the argument Lisa Lowe makes in her important essay, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity,” which claims that interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the
particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians; the reduction of ethnic cultural politics to struggles between first and second generations displaces (and privatizes) inter-community differences into a familial opposition. (24)

In a similar way to Lowe, I contend that the relationships constructed within Asian American chick lit novels are complex and should not be viewed only within the framework of “master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation.” Specifically, I argue that the trope of cooking within Malladi’s novel reveals nuances within familial and extrafamilial relationships. Recipes, in particular, “[imp]ly an exchange, a giver and a receiver,” which suggests that they do not only articulate the complexities of relationships, they also create those relationships (Leonardi 340). As Susan Leonardi argues, “[a] recipe is…an embedded discourse” rather than a simple list of instructions on how to create a dish (340)\(^1\).

Thus, what makes recipes in the novel especially productive to examine is not only what they suggest about the characters’ relationships, but also how they create relationships between the reader, author, and characters that further establish a dynamic web of entanglements in which connections are founded on multiple sites: shared gender, shared ethnicity, shared race, and, of course, shared love of cooking and food. Arjun Appadurai’s argument that “[c]ookbooks allow women from one ground to explore the tastes of another, just as cookbooks allow women from one group to be represented to another,” though contextually referring to middle-class, urban women in India\(^2\), nonetheless articulates how cookbooks, and I would argue culinary literature in general, can be instrumental in the formation of relationships across regional and ethnic specificities (6)\(^3\). Therefore, the relationships depicted (and enacted through the recipes) are not only those of mother-daughter stereotypically associated with Asian American novels\(^4\), but also sister-sister, father-daughter, grandmother-granddaughter, and reader-author. In this way, the argument that Lowe makes that “Joy Luck multiplies the sites of cultural conflict, positing a
number of struggles—familial and extrafamilial—as well as resolutions, without privileging the singularity or centrality of one,” can also be made about these Asian American chick lit novels (“Heterogeneity” 25).

Recipes therefore add complexity to the characters in *Serving Crazy* and make their relationships multidimensional in ways that popular criticism of chick lit has often overlooked. In addition, these recipes provide a way for the characters to challenge the abstract boundaries created through ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural affiliations, as well as the material realities that these boundaries engender. Since recipes clearly produce something, they enable symbolic and material critiques of different sites of power (race, gender, class). While I concede that recipe creation, as presented in this novel, may provide too simplistic of a resolution to the identity crises that these characters face between cultures (specifically, between the Orientalist division of “East” and “West”), I contend that the negotiation that these characters perform in the construction of these recipes (specifically the negotiation between their individual and collective identities) articulate and challenge the ways in which we imagine global subjectivity, American citizenship, and multiculturalism. I would argue that by incorporating recipes within the narrative, though used as a selling tactic, Malladi politicizes the novel in ways that exceed the generic formula and commercial limitations. In other words, these chick lit characters do not quite perform as predictably as commercial appeal demands; like Keltner, Malladi does not shy away from characters who speak critically about discriminatory practices or the stigma of immigration. While the blow of these critiques is arguably softened by their fictionalized settings, they nonetheless allude to injuries incurred as a racialized woman that, despite the novel’s happy ending, become the trauma that these recipes attempt to work through and “get over.”
While this novel does participate in a kind of food pornography, not unlike what Frank Chin imagined in his Mama Fu Fu caricature, I do not limit my analysis to this particular frame, but instead situate it within the generative discourses populated by scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, Anita Mannur, and Parama Roy, who have examined the role of cooking and cookbooks in a South Asian context, as well as Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, who have argued persuasively for transnational feminist and critical race critiques of chick lit (specifically South Asian American chick lit). As the term “Asian American” often homogenizes “Asian” to mean people of East Asian descent, it is critical to demonstrate that the genre “Asian American chick lit” is not homogeneous or entirely composed of East Asian American writers. South Asian American chick lit writers, in particular, have been instrumental in shaping the genre. Ultimately, I argue that South Asian American chick lit writers improvise the chick lit “recipe” of love, career, and family and, to quote Appadurai, “tell unusual cultural tales” of Asian America, being a woman of color, and living the “American Dream.”

**Spicing up Silence in Amulya Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry***

In her author’s note of *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Amulya Malladi states, “I didn’t want to tell the story about immigrants and how they adjust to life in a foreign country. Neither is this the story of the Indian Diaspora and their travails. This is just the story of four women, spanning three generations and two cultures” (“Author’s Note”). Malladi’s author’s note is interesting for several reasons: it emphasizes gender (and de-emphasizes race); it privatizes the immigration and assimilation politics in the novel; and it thematizes the narrative as an intergenerational and cross-cultural story. By stating that *Serving Crazy* is not “the story of the Indian Diaspora and their travails,” but “just the story of four women,” Malladi highlights gender to appeal to a broader audience of women readers, but still underscores her ethnic difference by mentioning the
“Indian Diaspora.” In other words, Malladi appeals to what Leslie Bow identifies as the multicultural appetite for “spice,” which “ethnic and gender content” both satisfy (111).

This author’s note provides some critical insight into how Malladi would classify her text and how she is negotiating her ethnic and racial difference as an “Ethnick lit” author. Notably, what is absent from her description is the standard chick lit plot: a story of a single, young woman protagonist in pursuit of Mr. Right. Admittedly, Serving Crazy represents somewhat of a generic outlier in Asian American chick lit because of its noticeable absences: there is no romantic pursuit, no Mr. Right, very little to no workplace politics, and no shopping sprees. I have chosen to include Malladi’s text despite these generic deviations not merely because it was marketed as a chick lit novel (which it was)\(^7\), but because it is probably the best example of what Tania Modleski articulated as the difference between romance novels and chick lit: “In sum, if romances are novels of illusion, upholding belief in the perfect man, perfect sex, and a life lived happily ever after, many chick-lit novels may be called novels of disillusionment” (xxiv). To clarify, Malladi’s novel may not have the generic elements that I mentioned above, but what it does have is the aftermath of the romantic pursuit, the failure of the McJob\(^8\), and the debt that accompanies such activities as shopping. In addition, Devi Veturi, the protagonist, shares certain characteristics with other chick lit protagonists: she is in her late twenties, she is struggling with her identity, and she has experienced a series of professional and personal failures. Thus, although Malladi’s novel does not follow the stereotypical formula attributed to (mainstream) chick lit, it is a melancholic version of chick lit with much of the same elements and a darker point of view (and protagonist). It is chick lit that includes a lover (but the lover is married), where the desire for a baby is fulfilled (only to be quickly taken away by a miscarriage), and where a “perfect” marriage happens (and ends in divorce).
By suggesting that this novel is chick lit, I am not trying to devalue its merit, but quite the opposite: I am suggesting that chick lit, specifically Asian American chick lit, consists of more than a list of ingredients (young woman, dead-end job, Mr. Right) assembled in the same predictable way. Rather, it is more productive to think of the generic conventions of chick lit like a recipe to avoid essentializing and eliding the textual nuances of the genre. In a recipe, context is important; a cook can improvise and substitute ingredients (obviously limited to a certain extent); order does not necessarily always matter; and the result is not always the same—there can be critical differences in taste and texture. In a similar way, context (the author’s background, the tools available to her) is important in chick lit, the author can change elements around, and what results may still look like chick lit (and packaged as such), but with noticeable and critical nuances from the original “recipe.” In the case of Asian American chick lit, many of these nuances exist because of the way that Asian American women have been specifically racialized and gendered.

We see these nuances at the beginning of *Serving Crazy*, which ironically starts with a contemplation of the end (that is, of Devi’s life). A basic summary of the novel could be described as follows: a young woman attempts suicide, moves back in with her parents, begins cooking “crazy” (but good) food, and ultimately decides to go to cooking school. Thus, while the novel has the essential plot of a mainstream chick lit novel (i.e., a young woman finding her identity, a post-adolescence *bildungsroman*), Malladi critically changes the paradigm so that Devi does not “find her identity” as a consequence of increased independence from her parents, but rather the opposite: her returning home allows her to work through past trauma and articulate a new identity.
In comparison to Keltner’s beginning, Malladi’s does not begin with an enumeration of who Devi is and is not—at least, not in the typical sense. When we first meet Devi, she is on the verge of suicide and has created a list divided into two categories: “Reasons to Die” and “Reasons Not to Die” (Malladi 4). This list is simultaneously informative and vague, providing a framework for understanding the relationships in the novel, while still leaving out critical details:

**REASONS TO DIE**
1. Have disappointed the father and grandmother who love me
2. Laid off again
3. Completely in debt
4. Can’t pay rent
5. Have had only failed relationships
6. Slept with a married man
7. Had a relationship with a married man
8. Fell in love with a married man
9. Lost a baby

**REASONS NOT TO DIE**
1. Have a loving family (sort of, if mother and sister are not included)
2. Have my health
3. Hmm...

The reasons that are crossed out in the list are explained as the reasons that Devi decided “didn’t make sense” to kill herself over (Malladi 3). However, their persistence on the list (they are not erased, merely stricken through) suggest that Devi is still melancholically grieving over them. Despite what Devi suggests, the crossed out items do matter and they, and the questions they present, haunt the rest of the narrative. What these crossed-out items indicate is Devi’s ambivalence toward these particular losses, an ambivalence, which, “must not be overlooked among the preconditions of melancholia” (Freud 588). In the context of Freud’s theory of melancholia, Devi’s losses do not lead to a “normal” kind of mourning, where the desire for these objects are displaced onto new objects; rather, they lead to her melancholically devouring these losses at her own self impoverishment (586-588). As the narrative states, “[Devi] knew that the losses she incurred had eaten away everything joyous within her” (Malladi 4). Her desire to commit suicide shows how she has turned her love for these “lost objects” (specifically her lost
baby) into hatred against herself, which thereby enables her to not only to contemplate, but also attempt, suicide. Her suicide attempt is the culmination of her transgressive behavior, or perhaps more accurately, an inability to reconcile her identity with the demands of dominant culture. Thus, what begins as teenage rebellion ultimately becomes self-destructive and leads to her having an affair with, and becoming impregnated by, her sister’s husband, Girish.

Finding “Home” and Gendered Spaces: The Paradox of (Diasporic) Domesticity

Devi’s suicide attempt clearly results in a critical and transformative shift not only in her life, but also in the Veturi family structure. After her suicide attempt, Devi moves back into her parents’ house to recover, which effects two notable changes:

1. Devi completely stopped talking
2. Devi started cooking
   Two things she did with such intensity and consistency that it drove her already shaken family up the wall. (Malladi 12)

In other words, Devi appears to become the traditional model of femininity through her cooking and silence. However, Devi’s cooking and silence are not capitulations to ideas of femininity or returns to prefeminism, but rather are rewritten as subversive acts that upset her family dynamic. In addition, the agency she asserts through these acts subverts the idea that a woman’s liberation lies in the (Westernized) teleological movement toward greater independence from one’s family. Prior to her suicide attempt, Devi was, in the Americanized sense, “liberated” from her family, but such “liberation” did not bring happiness (as chick lit novels and other Asian American novels assert), but rather increased feelings of alienation. Her suicide attempt and subsequent retreat into silence and cooking could be viewed as a patriarchal form of “punishment” for “fuck[ing] everything that moves,” but I would argue that Malladi is questioning the (white) liberal feminist narrative that female empowerment lies in the denunciation of traditionally feminine activities (such as cooking) and in the rejection of
silence (Malladi 52). Butler and Desai argue that “[i]n South Asian American chick lit…the protagonist’s desire is not to sever ties of dependency, but to reform those connections to allow for the satisfaction of both the protagonist and her family” (15). What Malladi appears to be articulating is the power of family that is often denigrated and devalued as an obstacle to becoming an “individual.” I would argue that Malladi’s text, therefore, does not portray the clichéd clash between traditionalism and modernity, but a negotiation between those constructs and a rewriting of the “prefeminist-but-becoming-enlightened” narrative (Bow 73).

Upon returning to her parents’ home, food and silence thus serve as Devi’s primary means of her communication with her family. However, Devi’s silence did not only begin after her suicide attempt; she is described as going into “silence mode…whenever she got upset or whenever she didn’t want to say anything to anyone” (Malladi 62). Notably, she only goes into “silence mode” when she is at her mother’s house (Malladi 62). Devi first went into “silence mode” in the fourth grade, when she was accused of stealing her “pretty as Barbie” classmate’s “dollar and twenty-three cents” and breaking her nose (Malladi 62; 29). Devi notes that she “maintained silence rather than defend herself,” knowing that “if she protested too much, they’d blame her for lying on top of stealing” (Malladi 62). What Devi does not say is that her “pretty as Barbie” classmate had called her “a thief and a ‘brown-skinned refugee’” (Malladi 62). Devi’s decision not to speak shows that she has internalized the notion that somehow her “pretty as Barbie” classmate’s words mean more, that they would be received as “Truth” while hers would only count as lies. Her internalization, as Cheng would argue, “expresses agency as well as abjection” (17). Her racial grief prevents her from speaking, but this is not to suggest that her silence is not subversive; rather, I would suggest, in the context of Cheng’s argument of racial
melancholia, that her silence is a complex articulation of agency, which is “a convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times self-contradicting negotiation with pain” (15)\textsuperscript{20}.

Yet, more than silence in the novel, cooking becomes the way that Devi primarily exercises her agency and conveys her feelings toward her family. When she moves back in with her parents, Devi becomes the household cook, thereby displacing Saroj (her mother) from what had traditionally been her role\textsuperscript{21}. Devi was never allowed to cook growing up because “Saroj lived in fear that Devi, Shobha, or even Vasu would put things away in the wrong place or ruin her perfectly managed kitchen” (Malladi 70). For Saroj, the kitchen is her domain and cooking provides a way to return “home” to India. When Saroj first came to the U.S., back when there were not “a hundred Indian restaurants all over the Bay Area and an Indian grocery store within sneezing distance,” what she seemed to miss the most was the community that cooking provided her in India (Malladi 85). The narrative describes Saroj as “want[ing] to go home where she could chat with the milkman in the morning and buy vegetables in her front year from the vendors” (Malladi 85). Saroj does not have the same community in the U.S., or any supportive community for that matter, which intensifies her loneliness and nostalgia for India\textsuperscript{22}. Although she “made a few friends…it wasn’t the same…[w]hen she stepped out of her house there was nothing familiar, no vegetable vendor selling coriander and mint, no coconut vendor selling coconut water” (Malladi 86)\textsuperscript{23}. Thus, what Malladi conveys in her characterization of Saroj is not only the alienation that diasporic women experience from their adopted homes, but also the sense of homelessness that uniquely defines their condition. Unlike her husband and her children, Saroj does not have communities outside of the home to assimilate her (or help her become assimilated). Instead, Saroj develops friendships with other diasporic Indian women, who maintain their ties to India by “hav[ing] marathon movie sessions” of Hindi movies (Malladi
It is not simply that Devi and Shobha are more assimilated because they are second generation, but as Butler and Desai argue, in the absence of an “ethnic community,” they have “[relied] entirely on a white support system” which “often replicates the experience of assimilation” (18). In this respect, Saroj’s limited community outside of the home also limits the extent of her assimilation.

Even though Saroj gradually realizes that “there was nothing to go back to”—that is, no “home” as she has idealized it—cooking becomes a way to reclaim the homeland that she has lost (Malladi 86). Yet, in a more complicated sense, cooking is also the way she negotiates an identity and articulates a space within a country that is closed to her as an immigrant and a woman. As Anita Mannur argues:

> The domestic arena…becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity…immigrants often invent an image of the homeland as an unchanging and enduring cultural essence and are often singular about the ontological coherency of their national cuisines. (“Culinary Nostalgia” 14)

Therefore, the kitchen becomes a place where Saroj can claim her “culinary citizenship” to India, which Mannur describes as a “form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (“Culinary Nostalgia” 13). In addition to providing Saroj access (if constructed) to her “home,” the kitchen also serves as the primary place where Saroj has control, a space that becomes entirely hers due to her “ban[ning] everyone from using” it (Malladi 70). The kitchen thus represents a forbidden space to Devi, which her suicide attempt suddenly makes accessible. It gives Devi “immense pleasure to walk into her mother’s kitchen and start cooking” (Malladi 70).

By cooking, Devi disrupts the orderliness of the kitchen, and in doing so, challenges what gendered discourse has deemed valuable (masculinized labor) and dismissed as invaluable (feminized work). Not only does Devi come to appreciate the paradoxically visible, yet invisible,
products of Saroj’s labors as a homemaker (namely food), she also comes to see how her cooking is not a practice that returns to a prefeminist feminine sensibility, but one though which she, and other women such as Saroj, can find a place in the world, even if that place is confined within the parameters of stereotypical femininity. The kitchen is an example of the “domestic paradox” that Benay Blend describes, a place where “[o]n the one hand, it defines territory in which women are honored as the carriers of tradition. On the other, it encloses women within a female space defined by external assumptions” (“I Am An Act” 46). Like her kitchen, Saroj is depicted as constructing and “[feeling] stifled within the boundaries she’d set for herself” (Malladi 83). Yet, the kitchen is the one place where she is empowered, where she defines who goes in and out of the space, what actions are performed within the space, and what products are created there.

What Malladi appears to be negotiating within her novel are the limited forms of agency available to racialized, young women, who seem to be given an either/or choice of renouncing “feminine” activities such as cooking in order to compete within a masculinized workforce or marrying and becoming homemakers. While this either/or choice can be viewed as similar to the choice offered to white, young women, I would argue that race and ethnicity critically inflects this “choice” so that for racialized women, it is not merely a choice to be “feminist” or not (or perhaps less provocatively, to be “modern” or not) but more insidiously, a “choice” to be assimilated or not. Choosing the stereotypically “feminine” route of homemaking is particularly fraught for the racialized woman, whose citizenship to contemporary femininity (as expounded by mainstream chick lit texts and popular television shows such as Sex and the City) seems contingent upon her willingness to adopt a “progressive” view of female autonomy, which is figured as incompatible with her “traditional” (read: repressive), ethnic heritage25. Thus,
mainstream chick lit, and the criticism that it engenders, often problematically propagates, in its appeal to a female universality, a construct of “liberation” that is naturalized as desirable for every woman, regardless of race, ethnicity, or class.26

Malladi thus critiques liberal feminism and the “postfeminist” label often leveled against chick lit by showing how the framework such feminism establishes can become another kind of repression, where engagement in stereotypically feminine behaviors implies a backwardness or laziness on the part of the woman. Through her critique, Malladi suggests that cooking offers a form of empowerment that challenges the devaluation of feminized labor, as well as the denial of one’s ethnic heritage. The question underlying Malladi’s characterization of Devi and Shobha as a “closet feminist” and a “postfeminist,” respectively, seems to be “What is wrong with cooking?” or, more specifically, “What is wrong with cooking ‘ethnic’ food?” Devi’s and Shobha’s perspectives of feminists and feminism reproduce a problematic dynamic often seen in popular criticisms of chick lit; that is, they both blame other women (specifically homemakers) for perpetuating or creating problems for working women.27 Malladi describes Devi as a “closet feminist” who, like her sister Shobha, “had developed a healthy disrespect for homemakers” (Malladi 132). Shobha is described as “wish[ing] things were different and accus[ing] feminists for screwing up her lot in life” (Malladi 132). As Shobha says, “Some bitch burns her bra and now all of a sudden I have to work for a living and keep house. If it were the good old days I could happily sit at home doing nothing while Girish brought home the money” (Malladi 132).

Clearly, Shobha’s depiction of homemakers problematically devalues their labor and presents an oversimplified view of what they do (women who “sit at home doing nothing”). Shobha crudely conveys what Michelle Sidler argues is the condition of contemporary, middle class, young women, “Most twentysomething women do not question the possibility of work,
and not necessarily because we feel particularly empowered or independent” (26). Malladi suggests in her portrayals of Devi and Shobha, who are presented as quite different in their respective careers and personal lives, that greater “independence” has not necessarily engendered more security, either materially (in one’s career or personal life) or abstractly (in one’s sense of self), for either of them. In a similar way to Shobha, Devi believes that “[homemakers]…made it hard for career women like herself to break the glass ceiling. No matter what, every man who hired a woman thought about the woman going away on maternity leave and not coming back to work because she didn’t want to leave her child in day care” (Malladi 132). In the configuration of power that Devi describes, it is men who do the hiring and women who are hired. Notably, what Shobha and Devi do not acknowledge are the institutional structures that have created and fostered this unequal gender dynamic. Devi’s generalization about the workforce, though too simplistic, nonetheless alludes to the deep-seated structural inequalities that the second wave feminist movement did not eliminate or change.

The kitchen, therefore, serves a space where a woman can challenge these inequalities and exercise a certain amount of control over what she creates, so that what she produces in this space becomes an expression of her creativity and her identity. Devi notes how “[s]he, who had never cooked, never been part of the kitchen militia, was a general now” (Malladi 133). Malladi’s use of a militaristic metaphor to describe Devi’s cooking experience disrupts the gendered division of masculine and feminine labor, inscribing value to the practice of cooking by using the terms of dominant discourse that valorizes masculine (military) action. This metaphor illustrates how Devi and her mother act as a team to cook Devi’s recipes, a metaphor that departs from the rigidly defined lines between homemaker and career woman that Devi and Shobha identify. Whereas the masculinized workplace can lead to women becoming divided against one
another, the passing down of recipes and food traditions “[suggest] new ways to configure community and family” (Blend, “I Am an Act” 46). Blend contends that “[t]o remember a recipe is to honor the woman it comes from, how it was passed on to her, and where she situates herself within a culinary female lineage that defies patriarchal notions of genealogy” (“I Am an Act” 46). Cooking can thus be viewed as both as an individualized act of identity articulation (which includes such processes as recipe creation, development, and improvisation), as well as a communal act that can build relationships across generational, racial, ethnic, regional, gender, and class lines.

Add Trauma and Stir: Melancholic Recipes

Creating recipes and new dishes becomes a way for Devi to work through not only the trauma of her suicide attempt, but also the lingering trauma of her childhood, her failed post-adolescence, and the secrets she cannot tell her family. Devi begins cooking and creating recipes shortly after finding an old notebook of her mother’s that contains a recipe for “Girija’s goat sabzi” (Malladi 66). Devi recognizes this recipe as “Saroj’s ‘famous’ goat curry,” which Saroj “never revealed…belonged to some woman called Girija and that Saroj had acquired the recipe in 1970 in Jorhat” (Malladi 66). Thus, this recipe, which is the first recipe in the novel, is the bearer of a secret that Saroj has kept hidden from her family. Though minor, the notion of the recipe as “secret” is critical in the context of the novel, which plot revolves around a multitude of family secrets. Through this initial “secret,” Malladi establishes a frame to read the rest of the recipes that Devi creates.

Significantly, what Malladi also illustrates in the passage of the recipe from Girija to Saroj to Devi is the transformation a recipe can undergo (“Girija’s goat sabzi” has become “Saroj’s ‘famous’ goat curry”). The use of the word “curry” instead of “sabzi” (which Malladi does not define) indicates an adaptation of the recipe that marks it as Westernized. According to Uma
Narayan, “[c]urry exists of course in one fairly simple sense, on the menus of Indian restaurants, and in bottles of curry powder to be found even in unpretentious US grocery stores. But search through the shelves in an Indian kitchen, or grocery store, and you will find no bottles labeled ‘curry powder.’” The recipe adaptation that Saroj makes from “sabzi” to “curry” shows how she has assimilated through her cooking (in her use of the word “curry”), but has also retained an “ethnic” exoticism (as indicated in her use of goat meat).

What is different about this recipe, compared to recipes typically found in cookbooks, is that it does not provide list of ingredients or instructions. Instead, the recipe is written as one would orally describe it:

Get good goat and clean it well. Chop out some of the thick fat but let the rest stay, it doesn’t hurt and the fat content will give sabzi more taste…Make sure you remove all the stringy parts of the ginger; they don’t harm, but still, why have that to get stuck in between the teeth. Fry nicely on medium heat for a while. Don’t hurry otherwise the sabzi won’t turn out right…After a while, add some ground jeera, dhaniya, and elaichi. You can also add a little dal chini and lavang. (Malladi 66)

In this passage, Malladi is clearly trying to fabricate an authenticity, using the words “jeera” and “dhaniya” instead of cumin and coriander (67). However, this fabrication also creates a complication for the reader, as Malladi does not provide a list of what all the terms she uses mean. The list that she provides on the next page is incomplete, so that if readers were to try to replicate this recipe, they would be unsuccessful. Malladi seems to tantalize her audience with the recipe instructions, yet the audience does not receive full satisfaction in knowing what all the words mean nor the pleasure of being able to experience “Saroj’s ‘famous’ goat curry” for themselves. As Parama Roy argues, this “refusal of complete disclosure” can be the “most productive of readerly gratification” (487; emphasis in original). In other words, the lengthy descriptions of eating food are in some ways more pleasurable than eating the food itself. Yet, Malladi does not describe fully what “Saroj’s ‘famous’ goat curry” contains; she offers
translations for most of the Indian spices included in the recipe except for two. The absence of these two spices suggests a subtle subversion, a certain unwillingness on Malladi’s part to play the culinary tour guide (at least in what Frank Chin might call the “food pornographic” sense).

This goat curry recipe is the only recipe that Devi finds in Saroj’s notebook, which is significant to consider since Jorhat was the last place in India that Saroj lived prior to leaving for the U.S. In the history that Malladi provides about Saroj, Jorhat symbolically represents the last time, at least for Saroj, that the Veturi family was happy (84). The fact that “Girija’s Goat Sabzi” (or “Saroj’s ‘famous’ goat curry”) is the only recipe included in Saroj’s notebook is suggestive of the object that Saroj lost and for which she is melancholically grieving. That is, this recipe alludes to the beginning of a new life that Saroj had hoped would fulfill her longing for a stable home life (which was denied to her as a child of divorced parents), as well as the “home” that Saroj lost in her move to the U.S. Moreover, although Malladi never reveals who Girija was, Girija’s recipe instructions convey a certain authority that suggests that she was a mother figure to Saroj. Given Saroj’s strained relationship with her mother, Vasu (and Vasu’s admitted lack of “maternal instinct”), Girija’s recipe seems to be important to Saroj because it represents the type of “motherly” instruction that Vasu did not provide (Malladi 41). As Anne Goldman argues, “The act of passing down recipes from mother to daughter, then, not only provides an apt metaphor for the reproduction of culture across generations but also creates a figurative home space from within which the ‘I’ can begin the process of self-articulation” (Goldman 9). Thus, when Devi takes the notebook for herself and uses it to write down all of her recipes, not only is she claiming a tie with her mother, she is also articulating her own trauma and fulfilling the promise of self-realization that began the notebook.
When Devi begins cooking, the recipes that she creates are quite different from Saroj’s dishes and from the dishes one might find at a local Indian restaurant. With names like “Angry at Vasu Grilled Chicken in Blueberry Curried Sauce” and “Lamb Clitoris,” these recipes clearly depart from familiar Indian dishes like Chicken Tikka Masala and Aloo Gobi. The question becomes, what does Devi’s divergence from “traditional” Indian recipe suggest? Benay Blend states that “changing the recipe can be a formula for the construction of a creative space in which to defy those limits imposed by society on women writers” (“In the Kitchen” 157). Thus, Devi’s act of changing the standard recipes can be viewed as analogous to Malladi’s act of changing the chick lit formula; both challenge genre conventions and in doing so, articulate new possibilities for what counts, respectively, as “food” and “literature.” To that end, Devi’s recipe creations seem less about intentionally hybridizing Saroj’s standard Indian fare with “American” elements (in other words, creating a fusion cuisine that neatly reconciles her Indian and American identities) and more about resisting the limitations of labels, conventions, and formulas that define one’s role in life. Her suicide attempt was clearly a rejection of the life she previously led (and the labels she was identified by), as well as a violation of social mores. As tragic as her suicide attempt was, it was nonetheless a response to the limitations imposed on the racialized woman, whose gender and ethnic identifications often lead to disempowered marginalization. Malladi rewrites this marginalized space as potentially empowering, as Devi’s status as “suicidal mute” not only allows her a certain autonomy that was denied to her as a functioning, social subject, but also enables her to be creative35 (Malladi 71).

It is through cooking that Devi primarily asserts her newfound autonomy; she makes new dishes that deviate from her mother’s standard South Indian fare36. The first recipe that Devi creates in the aftermath of her suicide attempt is called “The Anti-Saroj Chutney” which, as its
name suggests, is a direct challenge to Saroj’s chutney (and Saroj’s way of cooking). Her recipe includes mint, like Saroj’s chutney, but also has unconventional chutney ingredients like apricot and chipotle chili peppers. From “The Anti-Saroj Chutney” recipe onward, the end of the chapters mostly include one of Devi’s unique creations, written in first-person and detailing not only the steps to create the recipes, but also the stories behind them. In contrast to the first recipe presented in the novel (“Girija’s Goat Sabzi”), the voice in these latter recipes differs in that they are less instructional and more contemplative. That is, Devi does not simply state that the reader should soak the apricots in water for the chutney, but rather describes the different steps of the recipe as extended thought processes:

Soaking the apricots in water seemed a good way to make them mushy but soaking them in sugar water seemed like an even better idea. It would make the chutney sweet. Surveying the fridge, my eye caught the ginger. Mama buys big chunks of ginger. Lots of garlic and ginger in her food. Maybe not garlic in the chutney, but definitely ginger. Lots of ginger for a sharp tangy taste. (Malladi 78).

In this one recipe, Devi clearly shows her antagonism toward her mother (the recipe is called “The Anti-Saroj Chutney” after all), but this antagonism is mixed with nostalgia for her mother’s food. Devi’s rumination that Saroj has “[l]ots of garlic and ginger in her food” leads her to incorporate ginger, but not garlic, into the chutney. The different flavors that this chutney seems to possess—sweetness from the apricots and sharp tanginess from the ginger—are not only left to the reader’s imagination (Malladi does not provide any exact quantities), they are also illustrative of Devi’s complex feelings toward her mother.

The rest of the recipes in Serving Crazy vary in their unconventional tastes: at the beginning of Devi’s cooking, the recipes are more unusual (they combine unexpected ingredients together, such as blueberries and curry) and do not have the elements typically found in recipes (i.e., an ingredient list, numbered list of steps, etc.). However, as Devi begins to cook more and develops an appreciation for her mother’s culinary contributions, her recipe entries include some
of her mother’s dishes (“Bread and Aloo Grenades with Tamarind-Yogurt Chutney”) or combine her mother’s staples with her own modifications (“Mama’s Rasam with My Pastry”) (Malladi 195; 179). One recipe is not actually a recipe for food at all, but one for “Life” (Malladi 117). The recipes that come earlier in the novel also mark a certain passage of time since Devi’s suicide attempt (e.g., Devi’s “Cajun Prawn Biriyani” has the subtitle “Day 8 after coming home from the hospital”), while the recipes that come later mark certain milestones in Devi’s convalescence (e.g., Devi’s “Dosa with Sambhar” recipe has the subtitle “The day I decided my future”) (Malladi 93; 211).

The recipe for “Lamb Clitoris,” in particular, marks a climactic turning point in the novel, as Devi’s secret miscarriage is revealed to her family. Devi’s former lover and friend, Jay, comes to the house while she is at a therapist’s appointment and tells her family about the miscarriage. He knows about the miscarriage because it was he, rather than her family, that Devi contacted to take her to the hospital and hold her hand through the ordeal. Although Devi asked him to keep her miscarriage a secret, he decides to tell her family after he learns of her suicide attempt. Devi thus creates the recipe “Lamb Clitoris” “in honor of Jay, the clitoris, and of course the day when my wall of secrets fell apart around me” (Malladi 163).

As the most sexualized recipe in the novel, “Lamb Clitoris” merges the symbol of innocence (the lamb) with female genitalia (the clitoris) to articulate Devi’s traumatic feelings about her miscarried baby (the innocent who died) and her “transgressive” sex acts (her sexual relationships with both her brother-in-law and Jay, whose skin color makes him an “unsuitable” partner for Devi in Saroj’s eyes) (Malladi 38). The sexualized overtones of this recipe suggest, at least in part, that Devi blames her loss on her sexual behavior. The relationship between
“transgressive” sex acts and the baby is clear in the structure of the recipe, which begins with sexual images and ends with a discussion of the lost baby:

Jay once told me that the pomegranate seed is sometimes compared to the clitoris for being pink, succulent, and an aphrodisiac…

These days whenever I cook, I stop to think that if my baby were alive, what would I be cooking? Where would I be? I think about it a lot. I think about it a lot while I cook and then I imagine that the child was to be and the child was as old as me and I was as old as my mother and everything was different. (Malladi 163).

The last paragraph of the recipe is particularly significant because it indicates the relationship between Devi’s cooking and the trauma she experienced. Clearly, cooking becomes a way for Devi to melancholically grieve the loss of the baby by providing a way to fetishize what could have been had the baby lived. The recipes in the novel can thus be seen as melancholic, as Devi displaces her desire for the lost baby on the food she creates, which she then consumes and begins the process of grieving again.

Devi’s family’s response to her secret miscarriage, specifically Saroj’s response, is not like Devi imagined, which effects a critical change in their relationship. The revelation of Devi’s secret, in fact, becomes a transformative event for the Veturi family, as her secret leads to the revelation of other secrets, such as Devi’s affair with Girish, the farce of Shobha and Girish’s marriage, and Saroj’s abortion when Shobha was three months. In the aftermath of this critical night, Devi and Saroj begin cooking together, making rasam from scratch. The recipe that Devi creates with Saroj’s rasam pays homage to Saroj’s talent as a cook, but also adds her own creative twist by putting puff pastry over the rasam (Malladi 165).

However, even as Devi rebuilds her relationship with her mother, she does not begin to talk until after Shobha confronts her about her affair with Girish. Shobha decides to do so after a series of life-changing events: she loses her job, decides to divorce Girish, and moves back into her parents’ house. In other words, Shobha loses everything that made her and her life appear
“perfect.” Ultimately, the two Veturi daughters, who each made different (if not opposite) decisions in their lives, end up in the same place: at their parents’ home, in need of new beginnings and familial support.

That Devi and Shobha seem to end up in the same place suggests that neither marriage nor single life, the two statuses that come to define women in their contemporary lives, engender the happiness one expects. Even Saroj and Avi, who have been married for a long time, are not content in their situation and teeter on the edge of divorce throughout the novel. In contrast to mainstream chick lit novels, Malladi challenges the idea that marriage is the ideal goal of a woman’s life. As Devi’s cooking and recipes show, a woman has choices outside of heteronormative relationships to define a subjectivity that brings happiness and satisfaction. Moreover, simply because cooking has long been affiliated with the gendered construct of femininity does not preclude, and should not preclude, the creative and resistant possibilities within this practice. To that end, in response to the question I posited before, “What is wrong with cooking ethnic food?,” I would argue that Malladi is suggesting that there is nothing “wrong” with cooking ethnic food. Cooking ethnic food is more complicated than gaining access in mainstream society (as Chin would argue); rather, the process of cooking ethnic food is significant in the context of diasporic nostalgia for one’s “home,” as well as the individual negotiation of one’s subjectivity in relationship to a larger ethnic and gendered community.

Notes

1 Susan Leonardi argues that such recipes, stripped of their context, would make for “an unpopular cookbook indeed” (Leonardi 340).

2 Significantly, this phrase could describe the audience who reads chick lit as well.

3 This is not to disregard the importance of cultural context in reading cookbooks or recipes. In her critique of Susan Leonardi’s argument in “Recipes for Reading,” Anne Goldman argues that “we read the ’embedded discourse’ of the cookbook not as an archetypally feminine language but rather as a form of writing which, if gender-coded, is also a culturally contingent production” (7).
Leslie Bow argues that “The Joy Luck Club” does not merely comment on the way the trope of the mother/daughter relationship comes to symbolize Asian American culture but, in fact, participates in constructing this trope (Betrayal 110).

In her article “‘Peeking Ducks’ and ‘Food Pornographers,’” Anita Mannur states: “If it is possible read ‘food pornography’ as a symbolic act, one that does not detour into heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia, the concept retains usefulness for navigating Asian-American alimentary metaphors because it fashions a language for critiquing self-Orientalizing gestures that rely on the active commodification of one’s purposed exotic-ethnic appeal in order to make a living” (24).

By using this designation “South Asian American,” I am not intending to homogenize or ghettoize these novels within Asian American chick lit, but rather to articulate this group’s fraught positionality within the “Asian American” pan-ethnic movement, which has historically had a west coast, East Asian-centric focus.

For example, the back cover of Serving Crazy features blurbs from reviews by other chick lit authors, such as Kavita Daswani (For Matrimonial Purposes) and Sarah Salway (The ABCs of Love).

See Michelle Sidler’s “Living in McJobdom: Third Wave Feminism and Class Inequity.”

Susan Leonardi argues that “[l]ike a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be” (340). She suggests that cookbooks which explain the context for the inclusion or exclusion of a particular ingredient (or for that matter, recipe) and have highly embedded discourses is “more conducive to good cooking” (343).

Lisa Heldke’s “Recipes for Theory Making” provided me with a theoretical basis to think through this argument. The main argument in Heldke’s essay is that “cooking is a form of inquiry that is anti-essentialist, that successfully merges the theoretical and the practice, and that promotes a self-reflective and interactive model of an inquiry relationship” (16). Heldke describes a recipe as “a description or explanation of how to do something—specifically how to prepare a particular kind of food. As such, it does not present itself as the way to make that food—the opinion of some eaters notwithstanding” (23). Thus, a recipe has a certain level of flexibility depending on what kind of result that you want and what limitations you face (Heldke 24). Moreover, Heldke argues that the decision that what recipes one chooses to make are informed by external and internal factors, such as personal history, “health/nutrition and environmental concerns” (Heldke 25). In this way, I see the way that Asian American chick lit authors adapt the chick lit “recipe” as also informed by similar factors, which notably changes the result, not so much in form, but in more abstract areas, what may be called the taste or texture when applied to food.

Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai describe the relationship between the chick lit novel and a bildungsroman as follows: “Dominant white chick-lit novels, as bildungsromans, describe the coming of age of the modern subject and narrate the integration of the citizen-subject into the nation-state…More specifically, the bildungsroman traces the development and coming into maturation of the individual as she finds her proper location in community and society…For women's bildungsromans, this usually means a conclusion in which identity, status, and position are determined through a proper marriage sanctioned by family, society, and nation-state. In modern bildungsromans, this maturation is increasingly marked as the ability to adapt oneself to a globalized society, to gain entrance into a professional labor class and to access its corresponding bourgeois luxury and leisure consumption, and to develop a comprehensive self-knowledge that is linked to a well articulated identity” (15).

Devi’s ambivalence is apparent when her therapist, Dr. Berkeley, finds out about her miscarriage and asks Devi if the baby was the reason for her suicide attempt. Devi is described as “nod[ding] again and then [shaking] her head and then nod[ding] again” (Malladi 135).

I have somewhat simplified Freud’s argument, which he explains in detail in “Mourning and Melancholia”: “If the love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—take refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering…It is this sadism alone that solves the riddle of the tendency to
suicide which makes melancholia so interesting—and so dangerous...The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object—if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego’s original reaction to objects in the external world” (588).

14 Devi and Shobha have a complicated relationship that stems from their respective roles as the “prodigal” daughter and the “good daughter” (Malladi 33). Unlike Devi, Shobha appears (at the beginning of the novel) to be quite professionally and personally successful. She is a “vice president of engineering at a software company” and married to a Stanford professor in quantum mechanics (Malladi 7; 110). The narrative notes that “[f]or a very long time Devi had been jealous of Shobha; part of her still was” (Malladi 7). However, despite Shobha’s successes, she is unable to have children. Devi’s pregnancy (with Shobha’s husband no less), while unintentional, nonetheless appears to be an appropriation of the life she envies, as well as the chance to have something that Shobha doesn’t (and can never) have. Eventually, the two sisters end up in the same place (living with their parents) after Shobha decides to divorce her husband. Malladi shows, throughout the course of the novel, that the two sisters, despite being portrayed and perceived as opposites of one another, are really not that different after all. As Shobha reflects after Devi’s suicide attempt, “She could in some way understand why Devi tried to end her life. Sometimes Shobha could feel the pressure from within to finish it, to get away and not deal with deadlines, Girish, her ditzy mother, life. But she didn’t have the raw guts. Even in this, Shobha admitted, she was envious that Devi could do something about her useless life, while Shobha could only pretend that hers was perfect, which made her life worse because it was dishonest” (Malladi 53).

15 Interestingly, Devi’s suicide attempt is not linked to any female figures in the family, which is seen in other Asian American novels such as The Joy Luck Club; rather, it is connected to her maternal grandfather’s suicide. He and Devi’s maternal grandmother, Vasu, divorced because of his abusive nature; shortly thereafter, he killed himself (Malladi 8).

16 Butler and Desai argue that “[m]ost chick lit novels rewrite the bildungsroman’s conventional relation between the female self and family by suggesting that the female protagonist does not simply move from her parental home to her marital home, but may instead live independently. In dominant white chick lit, this separation from family is seen as essential for marking the self-sufficiency and maturation of the individual prior to marriage” (15).

17 As Leslie Bow states: “To some extent, narratives of gender progress that portray Asian women as prefeminist-but-becoming-enlightened seem to promise a teleological movement toward modernization expressed through the hope of increasingly democratic gender relationships” (Betrayal 73).

18 See King-Kok Cheung’s Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa. Cheung contests the valorization of speech by both Anglo-American feminists and Asian American male critics (1). Her text argues that Yamamoto, Kingston, and Kogawa “challenge blanket endorsements of speech and reductive perspectives on silence,” thereby demonstrating how “silences…can also be articulate” (3-4).

19 The novel recalls that when Devi was younger, she would ask her father what would happen if she was ever “left in a lurch” (Malladi 61). Her father says that all Devi would have to do is state, “Daddy, come get me,” and he would come and “rescue” her (Malladi 61). While this scene undoubtedly reinforces a patriarchal narrative that women need men to “save” them, I would suggest that Malladi also complicates the perception that one needs to “cut the cord” with one’s parents—that is, that family is essentially unimportant. Yet, for racialized subjects, specifically racialized women, family is important because it provides a support structure that marginalized people do not have access to within dominant culture (Butler and Desai 17).

20 Another racist incident that Malladi describes is when Devi was eleven and experienced her first kiss. A couple days after the kiss, she attempts to kiss the boy again, only to be told that the boy’s priest said it was wrong to kiss a “brownie slut” (Malladi 55). Until that moment, Devi is described as “never really notic[ing] her skin color compared to those around her” (Malladi 56). After that day, “she always knew she was brown” (Malladi 56). Three years later, when she kisses a boy again, and he tries to kiss her a second time, “she told him that Father Velázquez, from her church, told her that it was wrong to kiss boys, especially whities” (Malladi 60). Like Lindsey, Devi thus
repeats the violent cycle of assimilation, trying to inflict upon others the pain that was inflicted upon her. However, because the boy is white, and not another racialized person, his response to her is quite different than what she expected and instead of feeling vindicated, she can’t “remember why it had seemed like the right think to do when she’d rehearsed it in her head time and again for the past three years” (Malladi 60).

21 Clearly, Devi and Saroj’s relationship is strained, even though Devi realizes certain similarities between her and Saroj. Like Devi, Saroj “had no solid successes to her credit”; in this way, both Devi and Saroj differ from Devi’s sister (Shobha), her dad (Avi), and her grandmother (Vasu) (Malladi 6). It is critical to note that Shobha, Avi, and Vasu are considered “successes” because they have excelled in the masculinized field of technology (in the case of Shobha and Avi) and military (Vasu). Saroj’s accomplishments as a mother or wife, because these successes are in the private arena and feminized, are inherently less valued (Malladi 6). Notably, even though Saroj encourages Devi to be successful like Shobha, Saroj herself chose to give up her schooling and a possible career when she got married to Avi. Though Avi did not ask her to give up her these things, Saroj wanted to because she “wanted to be a wife and a mother” (Malladi 83).

22 Appadurai notes that “In the contemporary Indian situation, and to some degree generically, cookbooks appear to belong to the literature of exile, of nostalgia and loss. These books are often written by authors who now live outside India, or at least away from the subregion about which they are writing” (18).

23 Malladi’s descriptions of Saroj’s activities as a homemaker in India suggest that Saroj had greater mobility in India (she was not, in other words, confined to her home), as well as a more empowered sense of agency. Therefore, the teleology that American mythology has popularly inscribed of the “Third World” woman becoming liberated upon entering and living in America is challenged by Malladi’s construction of Saroj feeling more confined, not less, to her domestic space in America.

24 As Appadurai similarly argues, “[i]n the contemporary Indian situation, and to some degree generically, cookbooks appear to belong to the literature of exile of nostalgia and loss” (18).

25 See “The Triumph of the Prefeminist Woman? Incorporating Racial Difference Through Feminist Narrative” in Leslie Bow’s Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion. Susan Koshy also argues convincingly in Sexual Naturalization that the stereotypical femininity often attributed to Asian American women has made them more attractive than white or African American women as partners. She states that in the wake of second wave feminism, “the Asian American woman came to stand in for the more traditional model of family-centered femininity challenged by feminists” (Koshy 16). Koshy argues that Asian American women have become the “sexual model minority.” According to Koshy, as the “sexual model minority,” an Asian American woman “cannot entirely displace the white woman, whose appeal is reinforced by racial privilege and the power of embodying the norm, but she does, nevertheless, represent a powerfully seductive form of femininity that can function as a mode of crisis management in the cultural contest over different meanings in America” (17).

26 As Butler and Desai argue, the charges leveled against chick lit as “symptomatic of an apolitical ‘postfeminism’” mask “an inability to address the insidious ways in which empire, whiteness, and American nationalism are at the center of both neoliberal and liberal feminisms in the U.S.” (6). They contend that “[b]y focusing exclusively on questions of gender and feminism, this framework re-centers white women as the subjects of feminism who must be saved from the threat of postfeminist apoliticism, and from the popular culture that is imagined as a cause and/or symptom of that apoliticism” (6).

27 Tania Modleski argues that chick lit’s female detractors “would do well to stop blaming other women for their misfortunes in the publishing world and to redirect their anger to its true source…the male-dominated literary establishment that… supports and awards the ‘big boy books’ that get much more ‘airtime’ than ‘women writers of literary fiction’” (xxiii).

28 Of course, it is not always the case that the kitchen provides a woman with a certain level of freedom or autonomy. Ketu Ketrak recalls her essay “Food and Belonging: At ‘Home’ in ‘Alien-Kitchens’” that “cooking did not give my mother any authority within the family hierarchy” (267). Although described as a “very fine and
intuitive cook,” Ketrak’s mother’s “spirit of accomplishment was often snuffed by [her] father’s critical palate” (Ketrak 264). In Ketrak’s essay, cooking is a source of pain and conflict as a child, a trauma that she eventually overcomes to create a sense of “home” in “alien” locations (272).

29 As Blend states, “Particularly for ethnic women writers, reproducing a recipe, like retelling a story, requires that they maneuver between personal and collective texts, between an autobiographical ‘I’ and various forms of a political/cultural ‘we’” (“In the Kitchen,” 147).

30 According to Lucy Long, one of the strategies of negotiation that producers enact in order to make foreign or unfamiliar food palatable to the consumer is through receipt adaptation (43). Long states that “recipe adaptation. . .involves the manipulation of the ingredients and preparation methods of particular dishes in order to adapt to the foodways system of the anticipated consumers” (43). In her discussion of food festivals, Long notes that “festivals frequently adapted recipes to produce foods that would seem familiar yet still out of the ordinary and with an aura of exoticness” (43).

31 Saroj’s (or perhaps more accurately, Malladi’s) use of the word “curry” therefore makes the recipe, which uses a meat that is not typically eaten in American households (Saroj has to order the goat “special from the butcher”), more recognizably palatable than “sabzi,” a word that an average reader may not recognize (Malladi 66).

32 Within the U.S., goat meat has been considered an “ethnic” food staple, rather than something enjoyed by the (white) mainstream (Alford; Raisfeld and Patronite). According to a recent article published for The New York Times, goat meat is the “most widely consumed meat in the world, a staple of, among others, Mexican, Indian, Greek and southern Italian cuisines.” However, despite its worldwide popularity, goat meat has only recently become popular outside of “ethnic” restaurants in the U.S. (Alford; Raisfeld and Patronite). In an August 2008 article published in New York Magazine, writers Robin Raisfeld and Ron Patronite note that using goat meat has become a trend among fine dining establishments.

33 Roy argues that in Madhur Jaffrey’s A Taste of India, the audience “receive autobiography of the palate in place of recipes and are invited to feast on words rather than read” so that for the audience, “[t]he imaginary delights of these meals exist. . .primarily and exquisitely as a form of writing to be read” (488).

34 Although Saroj is described as not believing in cookbooks (she claims to believe in experience instead), the narrative states that Saroj used this notebook when “she didn’t believe she knew it all but needed to learn,” a sentiment that aptly describes Devi’s current state (Malladi 66). Significantly, though we are told that Devi starts writing in the notebook, we are not initially privy to her thoughts. Instead, Malladi inserts a letter from Avi (Devi’s father) to Devi, a narrative device that not only provides insight into Devi (through her father’s observations and memories), but also provides an intratext to read Devi’s recipes. Like her recipes, Avi’s letters do not quite comply with the standard function that the genre delimits. That is, though the letters are written to specific recipients, they are never actually given to those recipients. In this respect, his letters are honest in a way that letters that are actually intended to be read by their recipients are not. Devi’s notebook is similarly honest and provides the audience access to the thoughts of the protagonist, who is largely silent throughout the novel. Malladi thus performs several critical manipulations of the chick lit formula: she has a confessional narrative (but the confessions come in the form of recipes), she interjects a “masculine” point of view that is often marginalized in these texts, and she doesn’t privilege the thoughts of her protagonist alone.

35 As the “suicidal mute,” Devi embraces her status as “crazy” by disregarding such social pleasantries as table manners. For example, after Devi creates and eats “The Anti-Saroj Chutney,” she “pick[s] up her plate and [runs] her tongue on it” (Malladi 78). She is described as “perversely pleased that she’d been able to do what she just did without Saroj yelling the place down. As a child it was a treat to lick a plate smeared with remains of delicious goodies and she used to have to do it stealthily, but now, now she was a basket case, she could do anything she wanted to do” (Malladi 78).

36 Interestingly, Appadurai states that the category “South Indian” cuisine is an invented category that “collapse[s] the distinctions between Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayali cuisines” (16). What I think is critical about
Malladi’s usage of “south Indian” when describing Saroj’s cuisine is that it is obviously more specific than simply stating “Indian” food, yet its specificity also obscures the ethnic heterogeneity within India (Malladi 90).

37 The confessional nature of these recipes is similar to Bridget Jones’s diary entries in Fielding’s novels; they not only provide a reader with the protagonist’s thoughts, they also use food as a way to work through other issues in their lives. For example, Bridget Jones obsessively counts calories because monitoring calories gives her a sense of control that she lacks in other aspects of her life (both professionally and personally); Devi Veturi cooks unusual food because deviating from her mother’s standard recipes allows her to articulate an identity that both rejects and affirms her ties to her mother.

38 We can assume that Jay is the “black man” referred to in other scenes in the novel when Devi’s previous transgressions are discussed. Devi was seen kissing Jay in public “for all to see,” which is a scandal because of Jay’s race (Malladi 29). Devi’s relationship with Jay is perceived as an Americanized act of rebellion, an indication that she is not a “Pukka mix of East and West” like her sister (Malladi 51). As the narrative describes, “And when one sister was praised, the other was disgraced. ‘Oh and that Devi, no sharam that girl has, no shame. Did you hear? Kissing some kallu, some black man, in front of Pasand, chee-chee’” (Malladi 51). That Devi chooses to confide in Jay, whose racialized status stigmatizes him in the eyes of her mother, suggests that she identifies with his status as Other. When Jay comes to the house, Saroj treats him rudely, unnerved by “the idea of a black man sitting on her sofa” (Malladi 154). Jay’s intrusion into the Veturi familial space, not only as a literal “outsider” of the family, but also as a symbolic outsider because of his race, performs the critical gesture of bringing the issue of race in the novel. I find this moment significant because the issue of race relations, specifically between African Americans and Asian Americans, is not typically discussed in Asian American chick lit novels (the race relations usually depicted are between Asian Americans and white Americans).
Asian American chick lit texts offer pertinent and important commentaries about race, ethnicity, and gender in the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century America. In line with Cheng’s theory of race melancholia, I see the relationships depicted in the chick lit narratives and the relationships developed between the author and her readers as complex, racialized interactions through which subjectivity is formed. While the desire to find “Mr. Right” is typically a driving force in Asian American chick lit, finding him is not the ultimate objective. Rather, the romantic pursuit, despite being posited as primary narrative, is actually secondary to the protagonist’s search to define a subjectivity that is not constructed as “racialized” and “lost.” The psychic toll of being racialized, of presuming a loss but not being able to quite recognize one’s engagement with that loss, results in the “hunger pangs” that I allude to in my thesis title. I see this “hunger” as specifically racialized, one that articulates in its implied physicality the relationship between psychic trauma and its impact on the body.

In this conclusion, I want to address the two questions that drove my study: “What is the future of Asian American literature?” and “Why is it critical to examine these works if their popularity may be (or will be) ultimately ephemeral?” While I do not suggest that chick lit represents the future of Asian American literature, I do argue that these texts represent a critical commercialization that is important to consider in the Asian American literary study. Asian American chick lit not only provides protagonists to whom younger generation of Asian American women can relate (or in some cases, reject), but also constructs a new, viable genre worthy of academic study that may expand mainstream conceptions of “Asian American” literature beyond the figures of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston.
While there has yet to be an Asian American chick lit novel or protagonist that has achieved the commercial success of Amy Tan or the icon status of Bridget Jones, there are several writers and readers of Asian American chick lit texts. Online booksellers like Amazon.com have made it quite easy to navigate and find other books within the same genre, so that even if one particular author is not amassing a large reader base, the Asian American chick lit genre is nonetheless acquiring a community of faithful readers. For example, according to Amazon.com, customers who bought *Serving Crazy with Curry* also purchased other Asian American chick lit texts such as *Imaginary Men* by Anjali Banerjee and *The Hindi-Bindi Club* by Monica Pradhan. Devices such as “AuthorTrackers” on publishers’ and authors’ websites allow readers to follow their favorite authors online and make it even easier for the writer to acquire a fan base.

From the reader reviews posted on Amazon.com, it is clear that these books are not only selling to other Asian Americans, but that they have a kind of crossover appeal to those interested in another culture or reading books that may speak to their own personal experience. As one reader states in her review of *Serving Crazy with Curry*, “I find Indian culture pretty fascinating. Indian cuisine, too, is outstanding” (Teacher and Book Lover). Another reviewer states:

*Serving Crazy With Curry* easily qualifies as one of my favorite books, ever. Being in my mid-twenties, I can very easily identify with the way Devi feels, believing her life's not worth living, and she should just take the easy way out. When her mother saves her, Devi goes silent and expresses her frustration through Indian cooking, but with strange ingredients.

Not only can one easily identify with the main character, you see characters who are Indian-American struggle in being more Indian, or more American. Grandmother, mother, and daughter; who knew their lives would be so complex? (Lee, C.)

The identification that this reviewer expresses with Devi and the question she asks with regard to the lives of the Indian-American characters (“who knew their lives would be so complex”) show
an intriguing tension and negotiation between Self and Other, in which the reviewer seems to see Devi as Self, but views the rest of the characters as Other (the “their” in the question suggests to me a racial dissociation).

Naturally, these reviews only show how some readers are responding to these texts and to sites of similarity and difference (i.e, gender, race, class, and ethnicity) that they perceive in the characters. However, what we can glean from these reviews is not only that readers across racial lines are reading these works, but also that presumably non-Asian American readers are choosing to read these books for reasons that simultaneously reinforce the construct of race (to read about another culture) and subvert that construct (to read about oneself). Thus, Asian American chick lit novels that feature recipes, such as Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry*, seem to sell better than those that don’t (like Keltner’s novels). According to Amazon.com’s sales rankings¹ for books, *Serving Crazy* ranked 152,122, while *Dim Sum* ranked 402,801 and *Buddha Baby* ranked 247,375².

Popularity is clearly important in lifespan of these novels, as they do not have the status of canonical literary texts to ensure that they will still be in print beyond a certain time period. One of the key questions I posed earlier (“Why is it critical to examine these works if their popularity may be (or will be) ultimately ephemeral?”), can be addressed by looking at the questions and issues posited by these texts as not restricted to the chick lit formula (which I have already articulated does not account for the critical “excess” that can define these novels), but rather in relationship to the questions and issues posited outside of the chick lit genre, within the larger body of Asian American literature. Thus, I agree with Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young in their assertion that “[e]ven if chick lit’s popularity were to diminish, the body of work amassed
over the past decade alone raises issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race, and class in women’s texts for another generation of women to ponder” (12).

The studies that Janice Radway and Tania Modleski conducted on women’s cultural productions in the eighties have not only been hugely influential, they are still relevant to our understanding of chick lit today. Therefore, even if the romance novels that Radway studied are not in print anymore, the cultural work she produced nonetheless challenged dominant discourse and resulted in a paradigm shift in how we conceive of women, women’s writing, and domesticity. Examining Asian American chick lit represents a critical step towards conceptualizing not only what the potential future of Asian American literature might be, but also in conceiving what the current subjectivity of the Asian American woman is now and what might be her future.

Notes

1 All sales rankings as of February 1, 2009.

2 Another South Asian American chick lit novel that features recipes, Monica Pradhan’s The Hindi-Bindi Club, had a sales rank of 26,098, making it the highest ranked Asian American chick lit novel of all those I reviewed. It was the 15th most popular novel in the “Mothers and Children” category and the 24th most popular novel in the “Asian American” literature category.
WORKS CITED


88


Weinberg, Anna. “She's Come Undone: Chick lit was supposed to be the bright light of postfeminist writing. What happened?”. *Book* (July-August 2003): 46(4).


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kelly Adams earned her Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of California, Irvine in 2003. She worked for four years and in 2007, returned to school to pursue her Master of Arts in English at the University of Florida. She will be pursuing her doctorate in English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison beginning fall 2009.