Recipe for Renewal: Filipino American "Cook-Books"

GJ Sevillano

The central research question motivating this presentation, and my future dissertation work, asks, what can an assessment of the gastropoetics—the literature of food—of *kusineros* (cooks) do for a fuller and more holistic understanding of migration, the diaspora, and resistance to the neocolonial American empire? Perhaps even more foundational is the question, how does Filipinx foodways structure alternative arenas in which Filipinx Americans make meaning of their identities? Through a mixed-method approach to material culture analysis of cookbooks and close readings of literature, I highlight how Filipinx Americans negotiate and renegotiate their identities through food and foodways. I argue that the ways in which individuals identify and disidentify with the culinary allows Filipinx Americans to navigate, unsettle, and reformulate understandings of what it means to be Filipino in the diaspora.

The "cook-book" is a shorthand term for the literature of food that highlights both the importance of culinary themes and the cooking and eating subject. In this paper, specifically, I read in tandem recipe collections of professional chefs, which material culture scholars such as Anne Bower and Janet Theophano have tended to stay away from, instead favoring the personal receipt book and the communally formed recipe book as objects of their historical analysis.[1] And second, the ethnic literary text that centers the figure of the cooking and eating migrant, which Asian American literary scholars have taken up for decades.[2] The significance of the cook-book will be explored later in the presentation.

Before jumping into the analyses of primary sources, I wanted to first situate this conversation within the frameworks of the prolific and foundational Filipina culinary historian and food studies scholar,

1. Anne E. Bower, *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 2002).
2. Jennifer Ann Ho, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

ALON JULY 2022 ♣ 153-158

Doreen G. Fernandez in order to highlight the very stakes of what it means to engage in the interdisciplinary work of critical food studies and Filipinx American studies. She states:

> The experience of food is ephemeral. What one puts into the mouth is the end result of a process that starts with the sea, the soil, animal life. In the act of cooking, we make statements about ourselves—about our understanding of relationships between ingredients, about our perception of taste and appropriateness. In the act of eating, we ingest the environment, but we do not stop at that, for we Filipinos make eating the occasion for ritual—and ritual the occasion for eating. We build ceremony around it; we create celebration.[3]

Her gustatory theories evoke transcalar processes of production and consumption that bridges the gaps between the environmental, the corporeal, the social, the affective, the cosmological, the epistemological, the cultural, and the sexual valences of the deceivingly simple act of eating. Through this act, linear time is disrupted and geographic space is collapsed at the site of the mouth. The mouth becomes the bodily space in which relationships between the environment—geographic, social, cultural, etc.—and the self—perceived, ascribed, racialized, etc.—share a moment of contact resulting in what she calls "celebration" or perhaps even more theoretically useful though not explicitly stated, the creation of quotidian joy and life through social and cultural productions of the alimentary. In other words, the act of eating is thus not just one of biological importance to sustain the body, but is also rooted in the ways in which we facilitate contact between the external and the internal; how the individual is constructed and understood within the collective, the environment, and the rest of the world. Thus, Fernandez shows how the personal becomes political. As literary scholar Wenying Xu has similarly argued, food and foodways are key to "restore full personhood to those marginalized but also to politicize what has been perceived as common and banal."[4] This transformation of food from merely cultural representation of ethnicity and race to a deeply social and political mode of identity formation is key for my turn to the culinary as site of understanding the Filipinx American diaspora.

To underscore what I mean by this, I first turn to Nicole Ponseca and Miguel Trinidad's cookbook, *I am a Filipino: And This is How We Cook*, published in 2018. In the cookbook we see her. She is radiating with glee. Is she a model? A mother? A cook? A brown-skinned woman dressed in a marigold *Filipiniana* dress scrunches her

3. Doreen G. Fernandez, *Tikim: Essays on Philippine Food and Culture* (Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 1994), xv.
4. Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 4.

nose as she widens her gap-toothed smile, excited for the meal ready on her plate. The beautifully sculpted butterfly-sleeves accentuate her shoulders, but its short cut at the elbow allows her a sense of mobility to easily carry a plate of food. Gracefully picking up the chicken leg with her thumb and first two fingers, she readies herself to bite into the *adobong manok* that sits gently atop a bed of steamed white rice. Stewed in a reduction of sugarcane vinegar, soy sauce, bay leaves, garlic cloves, and whole black peppercorns, the piece of chicken raised a few inches above the plate now glistens in the light as if mimicking a traditional pearl necklace that would have once rested along her clavicle, paying homage to the national gemstone. The unnamed woman photographically captured moments before she takes a bite of what could be considered the national dish of the Philippines, sits alongside a recipe for "Classic Adobo" in the cookbook. This version of adobo—and by extension, this woman—perhaps lays out Ponseca's argument in the cookbook—the desire for claims of authenticity. However, Ponseca goes on to provide readers with recipes for "White Adobo with Duck" which removes the use of soy sauce completely, "Red Adobo with Lamb Shanks and Annatto" which substitutes the use of soy sauce with *achuete* oil giving it a distinctive hue, and even "Yellow Adobo" which uses turmeric as not only a coloring agent, but also as an anti-inflammatory ingredient. These variations not only change the color and flavor profile of the national dish, but also signal a departure from perceived notions around singular claims of authenticity. In other words, by building upon a classic, Ponseca is not only changing how and what we eat, but is also challenging hegemonic ideas about the relationship between culinary authenticities and ethnic epistemologies.

The recipe for renewal and the photograph present an interesting query—who made the dish she is about to eat? One possibility is that she made the dish herself. Though this is only conjecture due to the lack of documentation of the actual cooking process, it is likely that this woman cooked or has cooked this popular Filipino dish before because of the heteronormative and traditional role women play in the Filipino kitchen. Her reproductive labor as the traditional homemaker is not only limited to biological reproduction or maintenance of the home but also encompasses the task of passing on culinary heritage as the *kusinera* (female cook).[5] If we are to take this as true, then in this photograph she is understood as both chef *and* diner. This detail is important for its theoretical possibilities. The invisible labor of creating this dish is not lost but is instead paid off by her being able to eat the food as well—a literal and metaphorical self-nourishment. The woman is in the process of eating and *not* cooking. This representation, one that we do not often see, is important for its depiction of Filipina identity not merely as woman in the kitchen or

5. For more on "reproductive labor" see Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

abjectified-subject, but also a subject in a moment of pause, joy, and respite.[6] Though clothed in the garments of Filipina identity rooted in colonial contact(s), her act of eating invites us to think deeper about the possibilities of alternative ontologies of the Filipinx subject. Though the Filipina in the photograph is captured, frozen in this act of almost eating, Ponseca moves her across these borders—temporal, colonial, and physical—through the act of publishing in the cookbook; literally enacting alternative meaning and radical potential to the Filipina subject. In this instance, the camera, which was once used as a colonial tool for dehumanization during the genocidal campaign of American empire making in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, can now be seen as a tool for capturing alternative social subjectivities of the Filipina subject—one that is in reversal and refusal to hegemonic notions of gendered and racialized authenticity. Though she leaves us with more puzzling questions than clear answers, this smiling Filipina—and by extension Ponseca's cookbook—may begin to show us that it is possible to cook your chicken adobo *and* eat it too.

This photograph echoes the very sentiments and mechanisms of identity formation present in Elaine Castillo's Filipinx American novel, *America Is Not the Heart* (2018). Castillo's text alters the title of Carlos Bulosan's 1946 semi-autobiographical text *America Is in the Heart*, which details the immigration experience of a young, Filipino man in the United States. Instead of focusing on the heterosexual Filipino man, Castillo figures Hero, an undocumented queer Filipina as the narrator of the novel set in 1990s Milpitas, California, a city in San Francisco's South Bay area. Hero is tasked to look after her *ading* when she first gets to the United States. Despite sharing the first name Geronima, these two characters work through a series of differences before finding common ground as newly united family members. Roni admits that she does not like adobo. Surprised to hear of this, Hero asks of her younger cousin, "*Pilpina ka ba*?" (Are you even Filipina?) wanting to know if her disdain for the national dish mirrored her attitude towards her own cultural identity. Roni resolutely states, "I am Filipina. I just don't like adobo. I like other things more."[7] As a first-generation Filipina American born in the United States, Roni developed a penchant for American foods in just her eight years of life. From years of nursing on Nestlé formula to late night dinners of frozen pizza, she grew up recognizing these flavors as homely. In stark contrast, these processed American foods were novel to the Californian Hero, who spent all of her life in the Philippines accultured to fresh ingredients and homemade meals. In this case, adobo or the desire to eat adobo is metonymically represented as an authentic experience of being Filipina. However, for Roni, a young Filipina American straddling the line between two cultures, it is not that simple.

7. Elaine Castillo, *America Is Not the Heart* (Philadelphia: Penguin Group Viking, 2018), 43-44.

These examples highlight the ways in which individual identification and dis-identification with the culinary allows Filipinxs to navigate, unsettle, and reformulate understandings of what it means to be Filipinx in the diaspora. The titular assertation of Ponseca's cookbook, "I am a Filipino" is akin, but not completely one and the same to the way Roni reassures Hero of her own ethno-racial identity, "I am Filipina." Ponseca suggests a kind of universal way of being through culinary technique, "And this is how *we* cook" (emphasis my own). Whereas Roni unsettles the assumption that all Filipinos love adobo to make clear the alternative possibilities of what Filipinx ontological subjectivity can mean, "I just don't like adobo. I like other things more." It is in this kind of migratory "messiness," to borrow foundational Filipinx American scholar Martin Manalansan's term, that the alimentary exposes so well.[8]

According to Leland Tabares, Ponseca's cookbook is just one of a plethora of "coming-to-career narratives" that have been recently published by "misfit professionals" in the culinary industry.[9] These diverse chefs are using the cookbook genre to "expose the restaurant industry's institutionalized racisms, sexisms, and homophobia…these cookbooks function as discursive sites where Asian Americans actively contest the genre's formal generic conventions to revise mainstream conceptions of Asian Americanness."[10] I build here on Tabares's characterization of these cookbooks as not only sites of disruption for Asian American professionalism, but these cookbooks are also unabashedly accounts and assertations of personal preference and taste that act as an alternative space for radical self-actualization of the Filipinx-American. Thus, rather than understanding it as a Filipino American cookbook, I suggest that it is more of a Filipino American "cook-book." What I mean by this is that cookbooks are normatively meant to situate the reader as its main subject; the book's conventions are laid out for the reader to be able to replicate and recreate dishes that are approachable for the home cook in their own kitchens. The recipes have been planned out down to the 1/16 teaspoon of fish sauce in order for the home cook to understand the techniques needed to complete the dish. Thus, the genre of the cookbook ensures that the user is thought of first, that the user is in the forefront of the author's mind when writing it. However, these moments of the assertive "I" in Ponseca and Castillo's texts, the forced shift in perspective from the home cook user to the knowing Filipina "I"—and more importantly the collective "We"—highlights how Ponseca's cook-book transforms from a collection of recipes to a political manifesto for collective meaning making through the alimentary.

8. Martin F. Manalansan IV, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014): 94-107.
9. Leland Tabares, "Misfit Professionals: Asian American Chefs and Restaurateurs in the Twenty-First Century," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 77, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 103-132.
10. Ibid., 107.

By way of conclusion, I contemplate the question that opens Ponseca's cookbook, "Why Not Filipino Food?" If her answer to this question was that Filipino foodways have been overlooked because of the archipelago's colonial histories which strain the process of national cuisine formation and her cookbook seeks to fill this gap, then I augment the question to offer a reversal of the very same question: "Why ~~Not~~ Filipino Food?" And I hope that through this presentation I have made clear that Ponseca and Castillo ultimately illustrate that the domain of Filipino food and foodways in the diaspora are not moments in which Filipino "authenticity" is lost but are instead moments of a paradigm shift in which Filipinx identity is hinged on resiliency and adaptation, remembrance and oscillation, movement and reformulation. Thus, as Manalansan reminds us, to insist on analyzing food solely through a positive light, we miss this chance to critically explore and engage in a fuller, more robust way of what Filipinxs and Filipinx Americans are experiencing.[11] Thus, the answer to "Why Not Filipino Food?" for scholars in the fields of critical food studies, Filipinx American studies, and those outside of these fields is that it offers Filipinx subjects the opportunity to deconstruct colonial legacies and find ways to renew their culinary culture, subjectivities, and futurities.

11. Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Culinary Diaspora," in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, Anita Mannur (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 288-300.