

**CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN
COMING-OF-AGE NOVELS**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the theme of consumption in Asian American bildungsromane, focusing on scenes of cooking and eating as representations of ethnic identity formation. Using four discrete modes of identification as my organizing categories—historic pride, consumerism, mourning, and fusion—I examine how Asian American adolescents challenge and revise their cultural legacies and experiment with alternative ethnic affiliations through their relationships to food. Drawing upon a diverse range of scholarship, including theories of consumption, adolescent psychology, cultural criticism, and Asian American history, my analyses of Asian American texts will attend to the tensions between Asian stereotypes often found in popular culture—film, television, advertising—and more “authentic” portrayals of Asian American consumptive practices.

Chapter One focuses on the role of history in Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk*. Food, both Chinese and American, serves as a medium for the eponymous Donald Duk’s growing knowledge of Chinese American history and proves essential to his positive ethnic development. Chapter Two explores the portrayal of consumption in Lois Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*. Japanese Hawaiian adolescent Lovey Nariyoshi consumes trademark items in order to achieve an American cultural identity. Dominant culture commodities, such as Coca Cola, are set against the wild turkey and

deer that are killed, dressed, and consumed by the Nariyoshi family. Chapter Three shows the relationship between food in rituals of mourning and the longing for an ethnic motherland in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*. In both novels, mourning rituals that are intricately bound up with the preparation and consumption of food provide a means of compensating loss and affirming ethnic ties. Chapter Four explores hybrid ethnic identity formation in Gus Lee's *China Boy* and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*. The adolescent protagonists in these works demonstrate how food affords vital possibilities for identifying across ethnic and racial boundaries.