Asian Panethnicity in North America:

How Pan-Asian Grocery Stores and Food Blogs Build Pan-Asian Culture

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**Introduction**

In my household growing up, the dinner table was always a rotating menu of different Asian cuisines and flavours. My family’s love of Asian food is inspired partly by my Thai mother, who only ever cooked delicious Thai food for us like curries, stir fries, and salads that set my palette for intense fermented fish sauces and extremely spicy peppers. Going to the Asian grocery store with her to pick up the ingredients needed for Thai cuisine also led me to enjoy childhood snacks from many different Asian countries, like Japanese sweet rice crackers or Chinese fruit jelly cups. But even my white French-Canadian father played a part in bringing in more variety to our diet, based on his own preference for different Asian cuisines coming from many years of travels throughout Asia. His signature dish to make for dinner is Hainanese chicken rice. A family tradition of ours growing up was to go out for Chinese *dim sum* on Sundays, at our favorite restaurant whose owners and staff we became very close with over the years. We were also close with the owners of a Vietnamese *pho* restaurant from frequent visits. In my own social connections, at my first part time job, I bonded with my Chinese, Taiwanese, and Filipino coworkers through our similar lunches. These sorts of familial, long term, and personal connections to various Asian food cultures developed in me a sense of Asian identity, encompassing experiences that go beyond just my Thai and French-Canadian ethnicity. The relationships that one builds with external sources of culture not from their own biological ethnicity troubles traditional definitions of identity. The concept of panethnicity, where various distinct ethnicities coalesce under a broader ethnic grouping based on common experiences, shared interests, and/or political factors, becomes increasingly relevant to discussions of identity and culture. In North America it is common to refer to panethnic groups like African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Canadians, and Indigenous peoples, for example.

Asian panethnicity is a timely subject because of how prominent the representation of Asian identities and issues has become within the last decade of North American discourses. In the sociopolitical sphere, the still recent spread of anti-Asian violence and racism in response to the Covid-19 pandemic brought Asian communities of various ethnicities together in risk but also in solidarity to action back. On the cultural side, there has been a boom in the North American entertainment industry in productions that focus on Asian American or Canadian characters and stories. Consider high-profile films like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Marvel’s *Schang Chi* (2021), and Disney’s *Turning Red* (2022), as well as the popular television shows *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-2020) and *Kim’s Convenience* (2016-2021) to name a few examples. Where there was once a lack is now an abundance of Asian representation in the mainstream and popular culture, but what does this reflect of panethnic Asian culture?

Most scholarship on Asian panethnicity thus far focuses on the political underpinnings and social implications of panethnic grouping, what needs to be explored further is how panethnicity relates to culture. How has a stronger presence of Asian panethnicity in North America produced new forms of culture and cultural identity? Do people who identify with a panethnic Asian label share a common culture? How are processes like racialization and hybridization involved in the production of panethnic Asian culture? An interesting avenue to explore these questions is through Asian food cultures in North America. Many scholars have pointed out the links between food and culture and identity. On the importance of examining foodways for questions of identity, Donna Gabaccia writes that food “entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties. Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In particular, food plays an important role in the histories, cultures, and communities of many Asian groups who have immigrated to North America. In terms of labor patterns, there is a long tradition of Asians working in food production and service. For some groups this is due to a history of discriminatory laws that limited options of work, like for the first significant wave of Chinese immigrants coming to the United States in the mid 19th century who were denied taking part in the gold rush and so had to work in restaurants instead.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other cases, Asian groups were pioneers in food sectors and shaped the way the market is today, like for the Japanese immigrants living in California pre-World War II who dominated the agriculture sector and are credited with inspiring the American concept of “California Cuisine,” a diet heavy with fresh fruits and vegetables.[[3]](#footnote-3) Today, all kinds of Asian restaurants can be found in cities across North America, even small towns, making Asian cuisines part of the American popular imagination.[[4]](#footnote-4) From farms to factories to stores and restaurants, this strong presence in food industries has led to Asian groups in North America being “coded by and through their relationship to the food they cultivated, picked, packaged, prepared, and served.”[[5]](#footnote-5) There is significant evidence of a panethnic Asian food culture in North America in the form of environments like grocery stores and popular Asian food social media.

This essay examines how physical and digital sites of Asian panethnicity grounded in food promote a distinct panethnic Asian culture and identity in North America, and how Asian Americans and Asian Canadians engage with these spaces. The literature in focus is the 2021 autobiography *Crying in H Mart* written by Michelle Zauner and will be interwoven throughout analyses of grocery stores T&T Supermarket and Lucky Supermarket located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, as well as with North American food blogging social media. There will be a combination of cultural geographies with media and literary analysis that specifically seek to understand the expressions of panethnic Asian identity in food cultures in North America.

**Methodology**

The autobiography *Crying in H Mart* was chosen because it synthesizes the concepts that arise in the discussion of online and physical spaces of Asian panethnicity. As a celebrated indie-pop musician with the band Japanese Breakfast, Zauner is a popular Asian American figure in media and culture and so reflects how cultural leaders react to and influence the concept of Asian panethnicity in North America. I will perform literary analysis on a couple chapters that relate directly to Asian grocery stores and food blogs. The grocery stores were chosen because, as nationwide chains, these stores can be considered representative of the Asian supermarket scene across Canada. They will be examined in terms of products carried, the in-store décor and organization, customer demographics, and the store’s location in the city to see what these reflect about the construction of Asian panethnicity through space and objects. Also, historical research on the companies is included and will be compared for their differences in ownership and expansion. The U.S. chain H Mart, which also has stores in Canada, will also be examined through its feature in *Crying in H Mart*.

To see how Asian food culture circulates online, I chose to focus on popular food recipe bloggers that have accounts on the social media platforms Instagram and TikTok in addition to their own personal website blog. These platforms host user-generated content in the form of pictures and short videos accompanied by brief textual descriptions and are accessed by millions on a daily basis, with the main demographic of users being teenagers and young adults. I am focusing on personal blogs run by individuals who share homemade recipes to see how real Asian Americans and Canadians take up panethnic Asian culture, as opposed to how they are portrayed by others in media. A close reading of these blogs will highlight the type of food they share, the language used in their posts, and relevant biographical details of the bloggers. A sample of 5 social media food bloggers active within the last year was chosen based on three main factors: 1. the blogger is Asian and lives in North America, this was determined by the blogger explicitly stating their ethnicity and nationality in an “About” section on their profiles or websites; 2. the recipes cut across various Asian cuisines, the bloggers posts recipes from at least 4 different ethnic cuisines; and 3. the social media accounts have a decently significant amount of popularity/reachability. Popularity was quantitatively measured in follower count, the number of views or likes per post, and activity in the comment section. Each of the chosen bloggers have at least 100k followers on either Instagram, TikTok, or both, with most averaging around 500k, and a couple having just over a million. Examining content on Instagram and TikTok is useful in capturing new yet popular practices of culture.

First, a review on scholarly literature about panethnicity thus far is necessary to understand how this emerging form of social grouping and self-identification troubles and expands traditional notions of culture, ethnicity, and belonging.

**What is panethnicity?**

Panethnicity is a relatively recent term in the social sciences, popularized by Vietnamese American sociologist Yen Le Espiritu in her seminal book about Asian-American identity, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* published in 1993. Espiritu explains panethnicity as the outcome of when various ethnicities with distinct cultures, languages, and national origins, among other differences, are united into a broader “politico-cultural collectivity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) She traces the origins of panethnicity in the United States to the civil rights era of the 1960s, where political and social processes of both internal and external sources produced panethnic groups. Panethnicity is “largely a product of categorization” in which the dominant group of society classifies other groups into an inferior “categorical identity” based on their perceived differences.[[7]](#footnote-7) At the same time, groups may decide themselves to coalesce in order to gain more political visibility and then better advocate for common interests and rights.[[8]](#footnote-8) During the American civil rights period, minority groups of different races and ethnicities pressured their government to redefine and expand minority rights, which lead to the institutional categorization of these diverse groups into four umbrella categories: African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American.[[9]](#footnote-9) In response, subgroup members of these categories realized they needed to mobilize together to gain more power, leading to the Black Power and Yellow Power movements, for example. The external and internal forces of panethnicity also manifest in racial violence. Espiritu refers to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was killed in racially motivated attack by two white men who mistook him to be Japanese.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similar cases of anti-Asian violence took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Espiritu reminds that panethnicity is not only “imposed from above but also constructed from below” as a political resource for groups to protect and advance their common interests and achieve material improvements.[[11]](#footnote-11) The tension between imposed, homogenizing forces and self-decided, agency building possibilities are central to the concept of panethnicity.

Japanese American sociologist Dina Okamoto furthers addresses these tensions in Asian panethnicity in her 2014 publication *Redefining Race: Asian American Panethnicity and Shifting Ethnic Boundaries*. Okamoto notes how some scholars and sociologists place too much emphasis on the negative structural conditions behind panethnicity, which leads to the view that panethnic formation is solely a type of assimilation where individuals are encouraged by mainstream institutions and larger society to adapt to social schemas that erase important ethnic distinctions. [[12]](#footnote-12) However, Okamoto argues that panethnicity is rather an active and negotiated “social achievement” where maintaining diversity and recognizing ethnic distinctions is central.[[13]](#footnote-13) Okamoto proposes a “racialized boundary framework” that identifies three main forces behind the process of panethnic group formation.[[14]](#footnote-14) The first is racial segregation in society, particularly labor market segregation, which sets the disadvantaging structural conditions under which ethnic group members may relate to each other. Second is ethnic organizing, where different Asian-origin groups build community organizations and infrastructures that help support one another. Third is the presence of active community leaders and members who create and share panethnic narratives that recognize similar experiences of discrimination and actively counter stereotypes.[[15]](#footnote-15) Okamoto’s view of panethnicity expands notions of race and ethnicity by considering ethnic boundaries as not static but dynamic and layered such that “panethnic identities are taken up in certain times and places and not only are multiple affiliations possible, but they can coexist and even enhance one another.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This positive, disruptive panethnic grouping maintains the important diversity of its different members while also progressively destabilizing the concepts we use to understand identity by fostering a sense of community that flows across racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and class boundaries.

Both of these authors focus on the sociopolitical histories and implications of Asian panethnicity in the United States. Espiritu’s research focuses on how Asian American societal conditions lead to Asian panethnicity in the form of political organizations, but she suggests that this sociopolitical panethnic grouping creates “a common Asian American heritage out of diverse histories,” and encourages others to document how culture building influences panethnic boundaries.[[17]](#footnote-17) Okamoto briefly touches on how panethnic organizing influences identity, drawing on data from a 2008 National Asian American Survey to suggest that a higher density of panethnic organization in certain areas is associated with a higher probability of identifying with a panethnic label, [[18]](#footnote-18) but leaves much room for this topic to be discussed. In my analysis of Asian supermarkets and food social media, I attempt to articulate the building of Asian panethnic culture in North America. In their introduction to the collection *Asian North American identities: beyond the hyphen*, editors Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht propose the use of “Asian North American” as an umbrella term to refer to both Asian Canadians and Asian Americans as they face the “same issues regarding identity, multiple cultural allegiances, marginalization vis-à-vis mainstream society, historical exclusion, and postcolonial and/or diasporic and/or transnational subjectivity.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Going forward I will use this term when referring to both Asian Americans and Asian Canadians.

**Supplying Panethnicity: Asian Supermarkets**

For many Asian North Americans, visiting the Asian grocery store is a common, core experience. Whether it’s a family stocking up on weekly groceries, a young person learning how to cook familial recipes, or a first-generation immigrant looking for familiar products from their home country, many turn to Asian grocery stores for nourishment- in both senses of the word. Only within the last few years have world foods aisles become more common in major North American grocery stores; for long before then, individuals belonging to cultural minorities relied on specialty ethnic stores and markets to provide imported products needed for maintaining the cuisines and lifestyles of their cultures. In their analysis on Indian grocery stores in the San Francisco Bay Area, Purnima Mankekar addresses how ethnic grocery stores are important cultural spaces because they “mark the urban landscape with specific signifiers” of ethnicity and culture, which enables communities to represent themselves to themselves and to the dominant society.[[20]](#footnote-20) As well, they provide spaces for people to gather and exchange important information about their communities, which can be especially helpful for newcomers to learn about neighbourhoods, schools, and employment opportunities.[[21]](#footnote-21) Through the commodities they sell, these stores invoke and produce powerful discourses about the nations and cultures involved.[[22]](#footnote-22) This section will examine how two Asian Canadian grocery chains that have been serving Canadian consumers for over 30 years each, T&T Supermarket and Lucky Supermarket, participate in building panethnic Asian culture. In the way that the stores bring together food, other cultural products, and people from nearly every nation across the Asian continent into one location, they are physical manifestations of Asian panethnicity. However, through their founders, both stores come from a single ethnic heritage, and this influences their construction of a panethnic Asian space.

T&T Supermarket

T&T Supermarket was founded by Taiwanese immigrant Cindy Lee with her husband Jack. Cindy was a mother and accountant with no experience in the grocery business but came from a family of successful entrepreneurs and Jack worked in food importation and real estate development in Vancouver.[[23]](#footnote-23) With connections and backing from investors, the Uni-President Enterprises Corporation, a Taiwanese international food conglomerate that is the largest food production company in Asia, and Tawa Supermarket, a chain of Asian supermarkets in the United States, they opened their first store in 1993 in Burnaby, British Columbia. The company was acquired by Loblaw Companies and is now the largest Asian supermarket chain in Canada with 28 locations across the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, as well as its own brand of private label products. Even though it is now a larger corporation T&T is still, in a sense, a family business; the name refers to the couple’s two daughters, Tina and Tiffany, and Tina is now the current CEO after taking over from her mother.

From the physical details to the food cooked in-house to the products stocked, T&T Supermarkets have a primarily Chinese focus. This makes sense given the company’s Taiwanese origins and initial business model to serve the large Chinese population found in Burnaby and the surrounding area. Its logo features Chinese characters “大統華” which translate literally to “Big United China” and all the signage within the store is written in both English and Chinese. The T&T Supermarket I visited is in the Chinatown section of the city’s largest mall, West Edmonton Mall, where the décor is also inspired by Chinese art and design. Most walls are covered with red Chinese inspired patterned wallpaper and there are red and yellow paper lanterns strung throughout the store. Above the hot food section, there are big prints made in the style of traditional Chinese ink and wash paintings, showing figures cooking street food with ancient wood stalls and instruments.

The showcase of Chinese culture through the visual signs and décor in T&T Supermarket is, on the one hand, authentic to the background of the company and people involved, and so importantly communicates this heritage. But in some ways, it is congruent with how the Chinese community is historically more represented in conceptions of panethnic Asian culture. Asian American scholar Lisa Lowe writes about how the building of Asian American culture brings the possibility to articulate and empower the diverse Asian-origin community, but when it attempts to fix identity and suppress differences, it supports dominant discourse that “implies Asians are all alike and conform to types” and often presumes the Chinese community as “exemplary of all Asians.”[[24]](#footnote-24) While the imagery that T&T displays is meant to be authentic, it unfortunately aligns with popular and stereotypical conceptions of Chinese and general Asian culture, which leaves the opportunity for less culturally aware non-Asian patrons to mistake these images as representative of one ethnically indistinct Asian culture. In their article on “gastronomical Orientalism,” Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-Ho Pih detail how East Asian restaurants adhere to Orientalist narratives and engage with “self-Orientalism” by relying on the signification of an exoticized, generalized Asian Other in how they organize their menus and spaces to evoke authenticity. [[25]](#footnote-25) Through interior décor and locale, restaurants employ “staged authenticity” to produce “an Orientalist sense of geography” that provides the dominant Western perspective with an enjoyable exotic experience.[[26]](#footnote-26) These remarks apply to the organization of Asian grocery stores and the food experiences that occur within them.

The supermarket continues to maintain a Chinese focus in their various delis and prepared foods sections but also expands slightly to include the popular cuisines of other cultures. The main sections offer traditional cuisine like *dim sum* (variety of small plate dishes), *char siu* (Cantonese barbecue pork), and a Chinese bakery section. There is a hot buffet that features traditional Chinese dishes like marinated beef tripe but also typical Chinese American dishes like ginger beef. Standalone dishes from other cultures are sprinkled in throughout these sections, like Korean bulgogi beef in the hot section and Vietnamese salad rolls near the cold section, both made in house, and Filipino baked goods sourced from a separate local Filipino bakery. There is also an extensive sushi bar, of Japanese influence, although reportedly inspiration for this came to founder Cindy Lee while on a trip to Taiwan where she saw kiosks sell sushi to commuters.[[27]](#footnote-27) Apart from the sushi bar, all the non-Chinese food items inconspicuously blend into the Chinese-Asian theme of the food court. The fact that it only includes a few of the most popular dishes from other nations speaks to how this diversity could be more about making profits on popular food trends than genuinely representing other groups. This relates to Tommy Wu’s article on Asian fusion restaurants that explains Asian fusion is a result of Chinese restauranteurs seeing the opportunity to capitalize on other popular Asian food trends like sushi and pad Thai by taking advantage of the homogenization of Asian Americans to incorporate these cuisines in their restaurants without backlash or notice from the dominant white culture.[[28]](#footnote-28) Here, panethnicity is an economic venture that does not achieve genuine inclusion of multiple ethnic powers but rather commodifies and homogenizes different cuisines into easy to reproduce and consume products.

Where T&T makes the clear distinctions between Asian groups is in the separation of East Asian products from Southeast Asian products by the aisles, although this creates further hierarchies in the organization of Asian panethnicity. Two rows of aisles are dedicated as the “Southeast Asian zone,” as written on banners inside the aisle that have little pictures and silhouettes of a Thai temple, an elephant, a tuk-tuk, and a person riding a bike and wearing Vietnamese style clothing and hat. Although this use of different imagery acknowledges and represents some Asian groups outside of Chinese, it continues to draw on stereotypical images. The overhead aisle signage displays categories like “SE Asian Soy Sauce” and “SE Asian Canned Food,” referring to products coming mostly from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand. In other aisles, general categories like “Soy Sauce” and “Canned Fruits and Vegetables” appear, which refer to the same types of products but imported from East Asian countries, mostly China, Japan, and Korea. In T&T, products from East Asian nations are unmarked and therefore positioned as the norm, while products from Southeast Asian nations are marked specifically so and sectioned off to special areas. This organization once again aligns with how popular discourses of Asian panethnicity prioritizes East Asian cultures over Southeast Asian ones.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Lucky Supermarket

The Lucky Supermarket comes from similar yet perhaps slightly more humble origins as T&T. Lucky Supermarket is an independent Canadian grocery store company owned and operated by the Nguyens, a Vietnamese family who settled to Edmonton after fleeing Vietnam in 1979.[[30]](#footnote-30) Husband-and-wife Ba and Diep Nguyen worked long hours as a janitor and produce packager respectively to save up money for their first store which opened in 1982, a small 500 square feet shop that sold only Vietnamese products.[[31]](#footnote-31) Over time, the store has grown to include products from many other Asian countries and expanded to bigger, multiple locations in Edmonton and a few in British Columbia and Manitoba, totaling to seven locations across the west coast of Canada. All operations are run by the Nyugen’s six children.

Like T&T, Lucky Supermarket draws on stereotypical images of Asian culture that is primarily Chinese. I visited the original location of Lucky Supermarket, located on the corner of one of the main streets running through Edmonton’s downtown Chinatown. This area of the city is lined by red traffic lights and streetlamps with little decorative posters reminiscent of Chinese style hanging scrolls and the main street has a large red Chinese style welcome gateway. In the parking lot of the supermarket there are stone statues of Confucius and lions. A small disruption to this Chinese imagery is the row of Canadian flags erected on the roof of the store, anchoring the presence of Canada. With these surrounding features, the store is set in the same Chinese dominant Asian panethnic culture as described earlier. However, inside the store is much less marked. The store’s interior décor and walls are relatively plain, though there are large banners lining the main hallway near the entrance that present what kinds of products and services can be found here. Some banners display general grocery services like pictures of red meat with the text “fresh meat cutting service” and pictures of bread with “fresh baked goods daily,” while others appeal to a generalized panethnic Asian culture that is once again communicated through stereotypical signs. For example, one banner says, “taste of Asia” with pictures of fried shrimp and a stir-fry in a wok, another says, “spice up your cravings” and has pictures of spices used in many Asian cuisines like star anise and peppercorn, and another says, “exotic fruits” and pictures dragon fruit and papaya, which are also used across multiple Asian cuisines. These latter banners assume the perspective of a non-Asian Canadian shopper, whose palette needs to be “spiced up” and to whom these fruits are “exotic.” The language plays into how various Asian cultures are typically indexed in these words and participates in the same kind of self-Orientalism described by Hirose and Pih.

In the way the produce area is set up, the store seems to continue to appeal to a dominant Canadian, Western perspective. Above every type of produce are little placards that state the name of the accompanying fruit or vegetable in English and in Vietnamese and gives a short informative paragraph. The paragraphs describe the texture and taste of the ingredient, its nutritional value, which Asian cuisines it is popular in, how to cook or use it, and health related information like what illnesses or physical conditions it may help with. At first glance these placards seem to fall in line with the appeal to a dominant non-Asian Canadian demographic as they explain everything about the mostly Asian foreign fruits and vegetables that fill the stands in a way that assumes the shopper is not familiar with them. However, the placards go on every sort of produce and not just “exotic” Asian ones, even common vegetables like tomato and celery are explained in detail. The placards can be informative for anyone, for groups like newcomers to Canada who are less familiar with some more domestic ingredients, or an Asian shopper exploring recipes from different Asian cuisines. In this sense, they are instead representative of a positive Asian panethnic culture that diffuses information in an objective way to all possible parties, while still importantly highlighting distinct ethnic markers of Asian cultures through the feature of Vietnamese writing and the mention of how different Asian cuisines use these ingredients differently.

Further, Lucky Supermarket embraces a positive approach to panethnicity by prioritizing the diverse communities that shop at its different locations in the way they stock their products. Although all stores have a pan-Asian focus, a news article about the local chain mentions how the selection of products is based on the neighbourhood and community demographics that each store is located in.[[32]](#footnote-32) The original downtown location stocks mostly Asian products as it has a dominant Chinese and Vietnamese customer base, but also stocks some products from African countries because there is a significant number of African customers. When I visited this store, I did notice this ratio of customers. The Lucky Supermarket in North Edmonton caters more to a Filipino and Mediterranean customer base and so carries more products from these areas compared to other locations. Many stores also have a halal meat section. Here, panethnicity is deliberate measure to accommodate the needs and demands of local communities that are continuously expanding through globalization, even beyond racial boundaries. On the one hand, this falls in line with the business strategy of panethnicity, where catering to diverse groups in one setting is valued solely for bringing in more profit. However, the awareness and care that the managers of Lucky Supermarkets display when talking about accommodating these diverse needs points to how panethnicity is built out of different minorities supporting each other for the better. Discussing the changing market over the years, the Nguyen’s youngest daughter Hong who manages the Edmonton North location says, “Our target market has changed over the years. We have more diverse ethnicities of customers other than Asian. They want ethnic food from their countries. Having the selection and variety for our customers is the key.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The value that the Lucky Supermarket team puts in providing for those who are in need no matter what ethnicity they belong to inspires a positive conception of panethnicity that begins with an Asian core but goes even beyond.

Michelle Zauner and H Mart

For Korean American musician and author Michelle Zauner, Asian grocery stores play a significant role in connecting to her ethnic identity, as detailed in her memoir *Crying in H Mart*. The title refers to a Korean-based chain of Asian supermarkets in the U.S. and Canada. Being half Korean and half white American, Zauner writes from a dual, contrasting position of having an intimate and authentic claim to Korean culture but at the same time a distance and lack of connection in actual everyday experiences. This tension characterizes how many young Asian North Americans negotiate the competing factors of living in dominant North American culture and trying to stay close to their family’s ethnic culture. As sociologist Jerry Park describes it, being Asian American entails negotiating “values instilled by one’s parents and the values perceived to be American.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Zauner does not speak Korean and her mother was her main source of experiencing Korean culture. After the death of her mother, Zauner attempts to maintain a strong connection to her Korean identity by learning how to cook Korean food with the help of Asian stores and food bloggers.

In her description of visiting an H Mart in a town near Philadelphia, Zauner acknowledges how these stores are often located in special ethnic enclaves like Chinatowns or Koreatowns. These areas hold authentic sources of Asian food cultures, what Zauner describes as “Asian storefronts and restaurants that are always better than the ones found closer to town” and not like the “sad Asian fusion joint by your work, where they serve bell peppers in their bibimbap.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In line with my analysis of store in Canada, the visual design of these places are marked with a mix of features from specific nations, yet together snowball into a generalized Asian culture: “Suddenly it’s another country. Everyone is Asian, a swarm of different dialects crisscross like invisible telephone wires, the only English words are HOT POT and LIQUORS, and they’re all buried beneath an assortment of glyphs and graphemes, with an anime tiger or a hot dog dancing next to them.” Important to note here is the use of stereotypical images like the anime tiger and how Zauner evokes the perspective of dominant North American society entering into unfamiliar ethnic space, for whom the Asian scripts blur into abstract unintelligible symbols. Another similarity with their Canadian counterparts is how the panethnic food court appears as an integral component of Asian grocery stores. In Zauner’s H Mart location, the court is filled with mostly East Asian cuisines: sushi, Chinese food, traditional *jjigaes* (Korean stew), modern Korean street food like cup noodle ramen, and specifically Korean Chinese fusion food. While still having a slight panethnic lens, this food court is consistent with the one in T&T in that it is biased to the representation of East Asian cultures.

Despite confirming these limiting trends in the physical details of how Asian panethnic culture is constructed, Zauner’s reflections reveal more on how these grocery stores genuinely help a wide variety of people connect to their different Asian identities. She describes the groups of people sitting in the H Mart food court beside her: a group of young Chinese students “alone without family at schools in America,” a table of three generations of Korean women eating silently yet energetically together, a young white man explaining dishes to his parents, and an “Asian guy” introducing his girlfriend to “a new world of flavors and textures.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This mix of patrons captures how many different groups of people, mostly Asians but not exclusively, in their unique and complex life experiences, are all connected to the pan-Asian sense of food culture fostered by this space. For the Chinese students, the food offered here satisfies cravings of home while abroad; for the Korean women, it is familiar and ritualistic quality family time; for the white man, who Zauner guesses might have taught English abroad or been in the military stationed in Seoul, it is a result of transnational experiences that developed a taste for other cuisines and an opportunity to share this with others; for the so-called Asian man, it is also about sharing personal experience and culture with others, yet his come from being Asian and growing up eating this food with his immigrant parents, as Zauner mentions this man talking about “how his parents came to this country, how he watched his mom make this dish at home.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Members of different Asian groups living in North America are connected through shared histories of immigration and the resulting desire for homeland culture, especially food. Park writes about how immigration is a binding experience in Asian American identities, “Asian American reﬂects a uniﬁed immigrant experience shared by all Asian ethnic groups.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This panethnic Asian space in North America provides an outlet to consume things that remind Asian individuals of home and their families. Non-Asians are also invited to experience culture by shopping and eating here but depending on the awareness and intentions of the individual, this can be either a superficial experience of culinary tourism or a meaningful and respectful engagement with other cultures. All together, the space itself, the food served, and the communal process of using these to connect to individual personal cultures, is what constitutes panethnic Asian culture. Zauner describes the stores accordingly:

It’s a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have

been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history. […] We don’t talk

about it. There’s never so much as a knowing look. We sit here in silence, eating our

lunch. But I know we are all here for the same reason. We’re all searching for a piece of

home, or a piece of ourselves. […] H Mart is where your people gather under one

odorous roof, full of faith that they’ll find something they can’t find anywhere else.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

This passage highlights the ways that different Asian groups are similar to each other through shared histories and food practices. Every Asian person in North America has a personal or historical connection to immigration, all Asian cuisines connect to being “odorous” and only authentically found in special places. Even though these commonalities may not be explicitly discussed among the members in these spaces, the sense of shared culture persists.

**Blogging Panethnicity: Food Blogs and Social Media**

Food culture is traditionally understood through popular media like cooking television shows and magazines, but the online sphere of blogs and social media networking is increasingly important to its transmission. Food has always been central to the social media platforms Instagram and TikTok. Instagram is the birthplace of Internet foodies who capture so called aesthetic food pictures, whereas TikTok is known for producing many viral food recipes and trends that often reach news-headline levels of attention. One of the most popular kinds of food that circulates online is Asian food. From instant ramen noodle hacks to Asian street food videos to the worldwide popularity of *mukbang*- a style of eating video originating from Korea, Asian content creators have a large stake in Internet food culture. The wide reach and strong cultural popularity of social media platforms allow young Asian North American food bloggers to directly participate in the representation of Asian culture to a large public arena. Many scholars push for new digital media like online blogs and social networking to be included in academic research, including Asian American studies scholar Jennifer Ann Ho who writes, “an attention to new media, particularly to blogs as a source of knowledge dissemination as well as identity making is vital in our current digital age.”[[40]](#footnote-40) My analysis intends to articulate how Asian North American food bloggers exhibit a distinctly panethnic Asian culture through the similarities in how they curate their pages and express themselves. There are many patterns that emerged in the way these bloggers represent Asian panethnic culture, including the common types of recipes they share, mentioning experiences with immigration and stereotypes, growing up in a panethnic environment, and using food to reconnect with identity. Through these expressions, the bloggers engage in positive and empowering forms of fusion and cultural hybridity that destabilizes traditional notions of ethnicity and authenticity.

The bloggers implicate themselves directly in their blogs’ content by sharing biographies and personal stories and reflections along with food recipes. Most of the bloggers describe backgrounds of immigration and experiences with stereotypes as important parts of understanding their identity and food cultures, which further addresses how “different Asian nationals share common experiences of immigration, discrimination, acculturation, conflict, and generational strains.”[[41]](#footnote-41) One blogger, Susanna, makes this the central focus of her blog @smelly.lunchbox. The title of the blog draws on the common experience of Asian children being made fun of by others for having pungent food in their school lunchboxes. In the “About” page on the blog’s website, Susanna describes her personal experiences with feeling embarrassed and alienated because of her packed lunches of Chinese potstickers, “like many children of immigrants in the US, I grew up being embarrassed by my smelly lunchbox… I wanted nothing more than for my parents to pack me a ham & cheese sandwich or lunchables!”[[42]](#footnote-42) Food studies scholar Anita Mannur describes similar experiences in the chapter “Eating America: Culture, Race, and Food in the Social Imaginary of the Second Generation” from her book *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Mannur confirms how many Asian immigrant children are racialized and Othered through their pungent and vibrant school lunches, which produces feelings of “racial abjection” and the desire to eat food that is “overtly coded as American” in order to assimilate into the “mainstream whiteness” of dominant society.[[43]](#footnote-43) However, Susanna presents her blog as a way to overcome this abjection and reconnect with ethnic identity:

Now, my life-long love for food & cooking combined with my desire to reconnect with

and celebrate these Chinese & Asian flavors from my heritage bring you this

*smellylunchbox* that I’m excited and proud to share. […] I know that I’m not alone or

unique in my experience, and I hope that smelly lunchbox inspires you to reconnect with

and embrace your own culture, or to explore some recipes from ours.

Susanna uses social media and Asian food culture to build positive realizations for herself but also to encourage others to do the same. In this passage, the importance of Asian panethnicity is also evident in how Susanna describes “Asian flavours” as part of her heritage and highlights communal food experiences that exist across cultures. Similarly, the blogger Ian from @iankewks describes himself as a “first generation Filipino-Canadian with a huge passion for food” who is inspired by his parents cooking traditional Filipino food and pastries for him growing up and their love of exploring new restaurants and local eats in their city.[[44]](#footnote-44) Like Susanna, Ian values his blog as a way to promote and reconnect with ethnic identity:

I began to see a lack of representation in the West when it came to Filipino cuisine. […]

my mission to promote Filipino culture and food began. It rekindled a newfound

appreciation towards my original roots, and with it, emerged a community of others who

also rediscovered the beauty of their own culture through food.

He also displays a focus on community, connecting to the sense of Asian panethnic culture. The positive impacts that food blogs have in nurturing personal connections to Asian cultures extends not just to the bloggers themselves but also to the Asian North Americans who follow and consume the blogs. Michelle Zauner follows the video recipes of Korean American YouTube vlogger, Maangchi (real name Emily Kim), to learn how to cook Korean food and thus strengthen her sense of ethnic identity after the passing of her mother. On following one of her recipes for porridge, Zauner writes “Maangchi supplied the secrets to its composition step by step, like a digital guardian I could always turn to, delivering the knowledge that had been withheld from me, that was my birthright.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Facing a lack of Korean influence in her life, this food blog becomes an essential source. How Zauner describes the knowledge of Korean culture as “withheld” and her “birthright” relates to the experiences described by the previously mentioned bloggers, of trying to hold on to one’s ethnic culture against the strong dominance of North American culture. For Zauner, Maangchi becomes a stand in for her mother, not just as a new authoritative figure to draw Korean culture from, but also just simply in her mannerisms, “Maangchi peeled the skin off an Asian pear with the giant knife pulled toward her, just like Mom did.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The small, everyday moments captured in these blogs align with the experiences of many and emphasize how similar approaches and practices to food draw people together.

Asian food blogs play a role in empowering and promoting panethnic Asian culture and identity. The bloggers express a love for food and cooking and genuine desire to share recipes from their favourite cultural cuisines, but in addition to this, it is important to remember that for many of the individuals who run these blogs, this is also an entrepreneurial pursuit that ideally brings the blogger social and economic upward mobility. In her piece “Asian American Food Blogging as Racial Branding,” media activist and scholar Lori Kido Lopez describes how bloggers capitalize off essentialist notions of authenticity by emphasizing their ethnic heritage as “a key “selling point” of their blogs” which reproduces hegemonic assumptions about ethnicity and cultural value.[[47]](#footnote-47) By showcasing their identities, the bloggers participate in this discourse of “racialized branding” in which “racial identities are carefully managed and packaged for consumption while simultaneously reifying and essentializing racial difference.”[[48]](#footnote-48) However, Lopez maintains that racial branding is an “act of labor that strives to create a uniquely Asian American perspective [that] reminds us that Asian identities do not automatically translate to Asian expertise or authenticity.”[[49]](#footnote-49) So at the same time as working within traditional concepts, the bloggers also disrupt the stable notions of authenticity through engagements with hybridity that highlight their “authentic experiences as complex, imperfect, multifaceted human beings.”[[50]](#footnote-50) This relates to Okamoto’s description of panethnicity as an active “social achievement” that asserts identity instead of being externally defined.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In a sense, the permeable boundaries of Asian panethnicity as experienced through food is “authentic” to the bloggers because they grew up with heavy panethnic Asian influences. All the bloggers examined expressed some personal connection to Asian panethnicity either through being of mixed ethnicities themselves or through personal experiences, social relations, and the environment they live in. Jacky Kwok, who runs @kwokspots on Instagram and TikTok, mentions in his “About” page how growing up in a large multicultural city made him develop a panethnic food taste, “My parents are from Hong Kong and I was born in Toronto, Canada. Growing up, I was exposed to a lot of different cuisines and foods which is where my love for food began.” For another blogger, Jasmine of @jasmineandtea, she describes her identity explicitly in panethnic terms: “I am Southeast Asian and grew up eating lots of Hmong food – known for being very simple, but definitely not short on flavor!” She specifies a Hmong ethnicity but presents Southeast Asian as her main identity marker. Jasmine also has panethnic influences from personal travelling experiences, “I am an avid traveler and love to recreate recipes from my foodie adventures. When I’m suddenly missing the beautiful country of Japan, what do I do? Well that’s simple. I just cook up a quick Katsu Chicken Curry and it’s takes me right back to my time there.” Lopez points out how “Asian American food bloggers benefit from the mobilities and transnational connections that often characterize Asian American experiences and narratives.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Bloggers often “physically navigate the borders between the different cultural identities that constitute Asian America.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Most importantly, the food and recipes shared through these blogs are deliberately pan-Asian. All the blogs feature a mix of traditional ethnic dishes coming from one nation and fusion food that combines multiple Asian or Asian with Western cuisines. Looking at a screenshot of any of these bloggers’ feeds at any given moment will show at least 3 different ethnic cuisines included. Many bloggers claim to offer trustworthy and delicious versions of recipes even if not from their personal ethnic heritage, which troubles traditional notions of authenticity and appropriation. But as Lopez proposes, “food bloggers clearly delight in creating and consuming a diversity of dishes that trace their own unique journeys, both geographically and culturally, as they blend traditions from any number of cultures.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Interestingly, many of the content creators place their own personal taste preferences and habits over the value of adhering to external definitions of authenticity. For a post on a recipe of Thom Yum soup, blogger Pete from @pete\_eatss writes, “This is how I make mine, I know people will comment some ingredients aren’t “authentic” but this is how I like it. If you don’t like certain ingredients. Don’t put it. Very simple 🙂”[[55]](#footnote-55) Another blogger, Jasmine from @jasmineandtea writes in the “About” page on her blog: “Here, you’ll find a collection of recipes ranging from Authentic to blended cuisines to “I have no idea what this is called but it all tastes really good together.”[[56]](#footnote-56) For these bloggers, individual tastes and opinions are valued in the establishment of panethnic Asian culture.

Relatedly, the Asian fusion food presented is not specifically tied to any one national cuisine and thus a wholly panethnic food culture in its own right. Dishes like dumplings, spring rolls, fried rice, and noodles have different versions in many Asian cuisines but are often left unspecified when featured on these blogs, heightening the sense of panethnic culture. Or, there are new recipes invented by the blogger that use traditional Asian ingredients or techniques mixed with other Asian or North American cuisines. Many bloggers have taken Vietnamese rice paper- a thin edible wrapping typically used in Vietnamese dishes like salad rolls, as an innovative ingredient for cooking, using it in vastly different ways than how it is used in traditionally. For example, @jasmineandtea presents a recipe for “crispy shrimp + avocado rice paper bites” which uses Asian ingredients like oyster sauce and fish sauce but cannot be defined to one single cuisine.[[57]](#footnote-57) These bloggers use familiar ingredients and techniques from their ethnic cuisines together with North American ones to create new recipes and eating practices. Anita Mannur holds a negative view of fusion food, that posits it as a form of assimilation that is only accepted when incorporating “cultural markers of whiteness” and not other ethnic food, and it never includes “culinary unmentionables” and “oddities” like gizzards or bugs.[[58]](#footnote-58) However, the blogs examined here do not hold back from featuring such ingredients, for example @kwokspots has a recipe for chicken feet.[[59]](#footnote-59) Also, the fusion is not limited to “white” Western cuisines, as evidenced in @pete\_eatss’s post for “Sweet & Spicy Ahi Poke Tacos.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Mannur also contends that fusion food is targeted to those with high cultural and financial resources,[[61]](#footnote-61) yet most of the blogs here state that they aim to share cheap and accessible recipes. The fusion food presented through these blogs is different than Asian fusion food created by restaurants that is suited to North American tastes because it is created by Asian individuals with respect to their own taste preferences and understandings panethnic cuisine. Asian North Americans are not partly assimilating their authentic Asian cuisine to a North American palette, rather it is a more mutualistic combination of these two cultural forces and more. This connects to the understanding of hybridity that Lisa Lowe proposes as a core characterization of Asian panethnicity, a hybridity that “does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Similarly, Park describes the “bicultural negotiation” that Asian Americans must perform as empowering, where people “have the choice of two sets of values from which one might construct an individual value system.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Lopez writes that these blogs give Asian content creators and consumers the “space to express their own sensibilities about what constitutes fusion food, how it is understood, and how any particular dish might be enjoyed by their own friends and family.[[64]](#footnote-64)

**Conclusion**

In all, the physical manifestations of panethnic Asian culture in Asian grocery stores and food blogging social media is fraught with contradictions and complexities. In itself, the concept of panethnicity involves the racialization and homogenization of diverse ethnic groups by dominant society, but also serves as a positive political and social force to bring more power and rights to minority groups. How Asian panethnicity is expressed and taken up through culture works along similar dualistic lines of reproducing stereotypical conceptions of Asian cultures while also empowering minority groups through more visibility and representation. The analysis of pan-Asian grocery stores in Edmonton reveals how the physical details of the stores rely on orientalist images of a homogenized Asian culture that is largely based on Chinese culture. Within this, authentic expressions of Chinese and other Asian cultures are mixed with stereotypical concepts. These details shape a hierarchized representation of cultures, that places Chinese and other East Asian cultures at the top, and South and Southeast Asian cultures at the bottom. However, going beyond the superficial experience of visual culture, the stores still offer meaningful and positive impacts for the panethnic Asian community. These spaces allow Asian individuals to connect to their own cultures, and even though they may be widely different, a piece of them can be found in Asian grocery stores. As well, the experience of needing to shop here fosters a sense of culture that binds together different Asian North Americans. Similarly, Asian food blogs and bloggers rely on traditional and essentialist notions of ethnicity and culture to lend authenticity to their blogs and the food content they share in a way that is easily legible to mainstream audiences. Yet at the same time, such traditional concepts are broken down by the ways the bloggers engage in fluid cultural hybridity through creative fusion recipes and diverse lived experiences and backgrounds. This leads to the production of a destabilized, open, and accessible panethnic Asian culture which empowers individuals and promotes diversity. Michelle Zauner’s reflections on all these areas of culture, ethnicity, and identity give more insight to the real experiences of Asian North Americans. What is interesting to note in both spaces of culture examined is how ethnicities that go beyond pan-Asian factor in. My analysis of supermarkets just slightly touches on how ethnic groups and communities outside of the racial category of Asian also shop at these stores. Likewise, the reading of social media focuses on the Asian community, but how these digital sites of culture engage with other racial communities should be explored further. The concept of panethnicity only just begins to address how traditional concepts like culture, ethnicity, and race are destabilized in the increasingly nuanced and never-ending flow of globalization.

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