Rita Nakashima Brock and Jung Ha Kim, eds. *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion & Theology*. Louiville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. 352 pages, $40.00.

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Among the many anthologies that I have read, *Off the Menu* is easily one of the best. In addition to the high quality of most of the essays, there is a coherence here that is seldom found between the covers of an edited volume. Many of the entries, for instance, take a cue from the volume's creative title, and end up referring to specific food items and ingredients like "corn" (Yee, 45), "bitter melon" (Ngan, 163), "garlic" (Allen, 183), as well as "salmon and carp, bannock and rice" (Ng, 197). Other essay titles will refer to "fishing" (Kwok, 3), "indigestible" (N. Kim, 23), "buffet" and "diet" (J. Kim, 69), "cooking without recipes" (Brock, 125), or "re-creating our mothers' dishes" (Lee, 293). Even the brief bios about the contributors at the end of the book include their individual culinary flavors and favorites (323-27). There is more than just rhetorical cleverness here, but let me just point out now that the volume's coherence also has to do with how common themes emerge from various essays and how contributors refer to each other. For example, while ancestor veneration is the focus of Jane Iwamura's essay, ancestral matters are by no means limited to that single piece. Rita Brock also touches on, quoting Mitsuye Yamada, "the genetic code of Asian ancestral ties" (140), Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng mentions "ancestral land" (205), and Wan-Li Ho talks about being led by her Chinese parents to "ancestral shrine" to celebrate important festivals (231). Similarly, while Jung Ha Kim problematizes how "non-Western" religious traditions have been adapted and appropriated for the development of spirituality in the US, Nami Kim will not only disrupt the term or the category of "Asian" but also discuss the popular division by anticolonial nationalists in Asia between their social "deficiency" in the "material" realm and their cultural "superiority" in the "spiritual" sphere (31, 34-35). As we find Jung Ha Kim clarifying her use of "Western" and "non-Western" in light of Nami Kim's problematization as well as continuing her scrutiny of this spiritual "yellow fever" in terms of Lee Yearly's "spiritual regret" and Renato Rosaldo's "imperial nostalgia" (76), we will read in Brock—in addition to a reference to Nami Kim's genealogy of Japan's construction of a unified Asia (130)—a discussion of both "imperial nostalgia" (128) and how a third "Great Awakening" in religion in the US may be coming by way of Native American and Asian traditions (130-31). Brock's juxtaposition of Native America and Asia will find an echo in Ng's attempt to imagine a coalition between the First Peoples and the Asians in Canada.

Kwok's essay also deals with this problematic of using Asian or Asian Pacific resources, when she criticizes Kathryn Tanner for using the gift exchange of Asian societies to develop and universalize a divine economy of grace (13-14). All of this raises the question, of course, of the native informant (Nami Kim, 26). The introduction to the anthology—with its account of a white man who speaks Chinese to order "off the menu" (xvii-xviii)—makes it clear that if "off the menu" implies a kind of insider knowledge, it is the knowledge that makes one an insider rather than an insider that

makes the knowledge. That is to say, the alternatives offered by Asian and Asian North American women's religion and theology are open and accessible to anyone who is willing to learn. At the same time, as Jung Ha KimJung Ha Kim emphasizes, one must keep in mind power differential in evaluating the merits or ethics of " borrowing" (77). As Kwok joins Jung Ha Kim in warning against the commodification of racial/ethnic difference (72), Kwok further suggests that difference must be set within a sociopolitical context and material history (14, 17). After all, as Kwok herself points out, the so-called Asian economic miracle as well as the U.S. economy have both been built on the back of cheap female labor, particularly those of Asian descent (7-8). Anne Dondapati Allen will add in her essay that Asian women—just like the term and the ideology of a unifying Asia that Nami Kim examines—have been a platform for both colonial and anticolonial nationalist projects (184-86, 190; see also Kwok, 12; and Nami Kim, 31).

Food is arguably as material as one can get. That is why I said earlier that there is much more than rhetorical cleverness at work here. Cooking, as demonstrated especially by Brock's and Boyung Lee's essays, is generally assumed to be women's work, since women, unlike men, are generally understood to be bodies and defined by their bodies as well as how they use their bodies. Rather than shying away from these problematic stereotypes, contributors to this anthology consistently choose to confront those very issues that have not only burdened women but also done so partly or even largely through religion, so we find Allen writing about sexuality, Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis about prostitution, Seung Ai Yang about divorce, and Rose Wu about homosexuality. Again, as an illustration of the coherence of this collection of essays, Lee will refer to a news report that hundreds of young Asian North American women visit plastic surgeons every year for hymen restoration before their marriage to men (295), while—if I may add—it is rather culturally acceptable for men to do almost exactly the opposite in so-called bachelors' party before their wedding. I said "so-called" because these parties may include not only male and/or female strippers and prostitutes but also married men who are close friends of the future groom.

Brock suggests that Asian America is a palimpsest with multiple traces written over a single surface (135). I find that to be actually rather apt as also a description for this anthology. Not only are there pieces that are rewritten or revised from previous publications (Yee; Jung Ha Kim; Iwamura; Brock; Yang; and Wu), but some of the entries also give you a helpful sense of a particular author's larger work. That is the case, for instance, of the essay by Wonhee Anne Joh Anne Joh on *jeong*. The idea of a palimpsest also captures the kind of intersections or layering that gives this anthology a unique coherence. The idea of a palimpsest also causes me to think of another metaphor for the volume, besides or alongside the culinary one. Joseph Roach, writing about racial dynamics of Louisiana as part of what he calls the "circum-Atlantic world," discusses "selvage" as "frontier" (1996: 177-80). Although literally referring to "the edge of a fabric [that is] woven thickly so that it will not unravel," Roach exegetes the term figuratively to imply a perimeter, a margin, or a boundary (1996: 177). Asian and Asian North American women scholars, given their need to negotiate between their own culture and the culture of what is dominantly white and/or male, can certainly be read as living on the edge, not to mention fabric, sewing, and spinning are—like cooking—also assumed to be too material or embodied for men and hence particularly suited as women's work. What I appreciate about the image of a selvage is that it communicates

positively how one's work may be a seam at which different worlds meet, as is true of this anthology on Asian and Asian North American women. The kind of interweavings—or series of stretching, folding, and blending—being signified here are both mutilayered and multidirectional. Selvage bespeaks, then, a multiplicity that overlaps, much like how the essays in *Off the Menu* echo and refer to each other, yet without ending in a uniformity of voices. Just to give one example, alongside Rachel Bundang's idea that identity—in her case, a Filipino American Catholic identity—is improvisational, one will find Ngan using language of not only root finding but also a "true self," a "real me," or "the person who I am meant to be" (171).

The series of folds in a selvage also imply the strength of perseverance as well as an ongoing creativity that comes from the meeting of different worlds. Let me go back to the linking of Natives and Asians, whether in terms of their spiritual resources as discussed by Brock or their potential alliance in Canada as discussed by Ng, to talk about this ongoing creativity. I find in *Off the Menu* a very helpful emphasis on the "inter," or the need to go across certain perceived boundaries. Ho's essay goes from the religious syncretism within Chinese religiocultural traditions in general and her own Chinese family practice in particular to the interreligious cooperation by women in Taiwan for the cause of environmental protection. While the volume as a whole is heavily Christian, one does find within its pages references to Hinduism (Allen), folk religion (Iwamura), as well as an essay by Lewis that really focuses on Buddhism. I also find Lai Ling Ngan and Wu both gestering toward a kind of alliance or coalitional politics (177, 283, 287-88), even if those gestures remain somewhat vague or undeveloped. In that light, I am really intrigued by Ng's essay on Natives and Asians in Canada, especially since both Kwok and Brock also talk about Columbus' fascination with or fantasies about Asia, and how he ended up misidentifying Natives in North America as "Indians" (5, 129). In fact, one also finds in Brock a reference to the work of a Cherokee feminist scholar, Laura Donaldson (128). There is, however, more—in fact, a lot more—in this volume beyond Native and Asian connections. Brock talks about her own biological father being Puerto Rican (133), and the editorial introduction also refers to the early conversations with and support from womanist and Latina scholars. Not only does Ngan acknowledge that the Asian American movement is indebted to the black movement for civil rights, but her own account of a young white person backing away from her with fear and horror in a store in Waco, Texas (165) also reminds me of the famous "look, a negro" episode that Frantz Fanon narrates in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). In fact, Ng's own piece on "solidarity between Asian Canadian Women and Aboriginal Women" is peppered with references to blacks, like how descendents of African slaves have already changed the coloring of Canada long before the elimination of country-of-origin quotas in immigration laws in 1962, how nonwhite domestic workers in Canada are mainly composed of Caribbean blacks and Filipinas, how Aboriginal, Asian, *and* black Canadian women served together on the planning team of a United Church of Canada conference in 1997, or what the African Canadian scholar, Carl E. James has to say not only about Black History Month but also how Canadian history needs to include the history of all peoples who have contributed to the nation (199, 203, 206, 209). I do not have time to question the way James seems to premise inclusion on the basis of contributions or virtues, so will simply state that this debate is also played out internally within *Off the Menu* if one looks at Gale Yee's problematization of Ruth as a model minority (55) and

Ngan's affirmation of bitter melon (179-80). Allow me now to return to Kwok and what she creatively calls a "yellow Pacific"; Kwok develops this out of Paul Gilroy's much cited study on the "black Atlantic" (9). What I am getting at is how interreligious cooperation and conversation that Ho so eloquently describes and advocates may be or should be expanded to other types of alliance or coalition, especially but not exclusively among women from different communities of color. This is significant given Yee's account of how the model minority myth about Asian Americans was constructed to fend off red communism, black menace, as well as white homosexuality (51). The introduction to *Off the Menu* mentions how this collection of essays, in commemorating the past two decades of PANAAWTM, was encouraged by and modeled after the womanist collection edited by Stacey Floyd-Thomas (xvi). Perhaps in addition to producing a parallel volume by Asian and Asian North American women, women of different colors will also come together in another anthology to cooperate and converse on constructing or cooking up alternative menus on religion and theology. If Floyd-Thomas is correct that religious and theological matters have been defined predominantly by white experiences and for white interests and male egos (xviii), then it is even more necessary for women of color to shift their conversation partners from whites to each other. Ng's admission that (1) Aboriginal and Asian women have been racialized differently (202), and (2) Asian Canadians have played a part in taking over Native lands (198) shows that this kind of coalitional politics or alliance academics among women of different color will not be easy, but that may also mean that it is all the more necessary.

The other 'inter" emphasis that I really like in *Off the Menu* is its highlighting of "our intersected world" by refusing to follow the conventional and convenient demarcation by nations or continents (xix). Instead, the volume seeks to emphasize the transnational and intercontinental dynamics (Kwok), whether it is the trafficking of female bodies (Lewis) or religiocultural resources and/or practices (Jung Ha Kim; Bundang; Iwamura). It is important to point out that such a move does not negate but, in contrast, underscores the ideology of geography and hence also the need to be specific about one's location in terms both geographical and sociocultural. That is why one finds within the anthology not only numerous autobiographical accounts that go beyond anecdotal illustrations (Nami Kim; Yee; Jung Ha Kim Bundang; Brock; and Ngan), but also essays that are specifically focused on Hong Kong (Wu), India (Allen), Taiwan (Ho), and Thailand (Lewis) even or especially if the framework is transnational and intercontinental. The ideology of geography does raise an issue for me that this anthology may have overlooked, particularly given its heavy Christian component that I mentioned earlier. Referring to the Cold War construct of Asia, Kwok questions how Asia's division into the subregions of East Asia, Southeast Asian and South Asia contributes to the invisibility of countries in the Pacific (6). What strikes me is how the word "west" is almost never seen together with the word "Asia." As the recounting of how PANAAWTM derives its name to match the composition and direction of the group in the introduction to this volume shows, choice of names or words, like the demarcation of geography, is never benign. Europeans had used the term "Oriental" to distinguish a "Christian Europe" from an "Islamic Asia," or particularly what had been part of the Ottoman Empire (1520-1807). As such, "the Orient" refers to Asia Minor, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt. However, other areas that are beyond the Ottoman empire—like Persia/Iran and India—may also be included in "the Orient" by virtue of

their Islamic polities. This larger "Orient" is what is generally known as "the Near East," which is a particularly familiar term within the traditions of Christian biblical scholarship. For my purposes here, I would like to point out that one way to look at this so-called Near East is to see it as constitutive of both West Asia and North Africa. This lumping continues in the more current term, "the Middle East," which adds to the "Near East" not only Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also Algeria and Tunisia in North Africa. We see here not only how people are lumped together and racialized as a self-defining "other" of (white) Europeans on the basis of religion, but also how the vagueness or vastness of these terms speaks to the potential for alliance, even or especially after 9/11. After all, white Europeans have themselves betrayed the leakiness or instabilities of their ideology by using the term "Oriental" to refer also to East Asians like Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. As Kwok suggests, revealing the cracks or contradictions within imperial ideologies, especially where "the national intersects with the international," is one way to do theology from below, or use the interstitial to intervene or interrupt the imperial (18).

I have found *Off the Menu* deliciously nourishing. Best of all, it makes me hungry for more. It makes me think of food, but it also provides me with plenty of food for thought. If you have not yet tried anything *Off the Menu*, I recommend it. There may be nothing out there that is more healthy and appetizing, all in one serving.