

**Joy Adapon.** *Culinary Art and Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg, 2008. 160 pages.

Envisioning salsa made with spicy chilies makes my mouth water. So it was with some excitement to me that Joy Adapon, in her book *Culinary Art and Anthropology*, included recipes at the end of almost every chapter. I began with trying the tomato salsa recipe, playing with the flavors, and in the process embodying and digesting Adapon's thesis and ideas that were based on 24 months of fieldwork in Milpa Alta, the smallest municipality of Mexico City.

Adapon presents us with a unique contribution to anthropological food studies through her utilization of Alfred Gell's ideas of art as a technical practice—a system of actions embedded in a dynamic social matrix or a network of intentionalities.<sup>9</sup> In this framework, cooking is a creative process that requires technical expertise; such skill is not unique to trained chefs, Adapon argues, but can be found in the everyday culinary traditions of Mexican households. "Good" food, which is food with *sazón* (i.e. made with love), is an art form produced on a daily basis. The cook as artist creatively plays with and builds upon traditional recipes, but modifies them according to the dictates of personal taste, pragmatics (i.e. availability of particular food items), and intended recipient(s). Central to Gell's theory is both artists' and art's agency in the production of social relations. In Adapon's application of Gell, the cook is the artist, and conveys social meanings through the production of flavorful foods. The cook, then, deeply impacted by this artistic process, has "culinary agency," which constructs social and spatio-temporal relations within both the family and community. Thought of in this way, food has salience beyond the moment of ingestion. As Adapon argues, food itself, viewed as an art object, has social agency, affecting both producers and consumers.

Adapon provides several ethnographic examples to ground her theoretical understanding of cooking as an artistic practice and Mexican cuisine as a body of art. Her first example (chapter 3) describes the process of preparing *barbacoa*—a festive, pit-roasted meat that takes days to prepare—and how this activity structures social relations within the community. The preparation of *barbacoa* requires a team effort from husbands and wives of *barbacoieros*, or families that specialize in its making (from slaughtering the meat to

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gell, "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps," in *Journal of Material Culture* 1:1 (1996), 15-38; and Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

readying the accompanying salsas). Using the model of cook as artist and food as an art object, the social meanings of *barbacoa* become evident: *barbacoa* is a special food, marked by its elaborate preparation and carefully crafted flavorings, and in turn *barbacoieros* attain a higher social status (a fact that is materially reflected in the size of *barbacoiero* family homes and the appliances therein). Thus, much like a work of art, *barbacoa* itself has social agency, defining the relations between people and families involved in its production and consumption.

Adapon's second example (chapter 4) focuses on women's culinary agency within the context of normative gender roles and ideals. Here, she examines power dynamics within the family and women's agency in creating and maintaining social relations through food. Through the use of Gell's concept of artistic traps, Adapon makes a case for considering food, particularly women's use of food, as a "culinary trap."<sup>10</sup> In other words, women's everyday cooking in the domestic realm can be viewed as a means of mediating social relations, including supporting or castigating spouses. Through cooking, women speak and create; by consuming women's culinary artworks, others respond. Although key to the audience's response is aesthetic appreciation (specifically admiration for the flavors that the cook has produced), once this relationship is established, women's culinary agency can "trap," punish, or coerce others to behave in socially acceptable ways.<sup>11</sup>

A strength of this chapter is its ability to highlight local meanings of womanhood and identify the power that comes with the role women play in the domestic realm. Adapon shows us how women communicate through their cooking, asserting their place in the family and community, and shaping the actions and behaviors of others. Key to this argument is that, by undertaking domestic tasks such as preparing meals, women are not necessarily subservient, but

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<sup>10</sup> In "Vogel's Net," Gell proposes that animal traps are artworks, for traps embody knowledge and behaviors of both the creator (hunter) and the prey, in addition to encompassing their relationship (constructed as a social one in many hunting communities) to each other (see also N. Bird-David, "The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Hunters-Gatherers," in *Current Anthropology* 31:2 [1990], 198-196; T. Ingold, "Hunting and Gathering as a Way of Perceiving an Environment," in *Redefining Nature*, ed. R. Ellen and K. Fukui [London: Berg, 1996], 117-55; and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 [September 1998], 469-88). Adapon theorizes in turn that food embodies elements of the cook and the intended recipients of the meal, in addition to the social relationships between these actors—eloquently demonstrated in Laura Esquivel's 1989 novel *Like Water for Chocolate*.

<sup>11</sup> See: pages 78-82, in which Adapon outlines a story of culinary revenge involving a woman who reproached a cheating husband via her cooking.

in a position of power—a contention that has also been made with regard to other cultural settings.<sup>12</sup> Adapon's observations build upon previous work conducted in Latin America, and implicitly critique the assumption that there is a global, uniform experience of women as family food providers. And yet, I found myself wanting further discussion on how Milpaltense women's experiences intersected with social class and other markers of identity. For example, how do women laborers (such as those who work in the fields), conceptualize cooking and serving? How is this similar or different from women performing other forms of paid work? Do ethnicity, age, and other aspects of identity intersect with social class, modifying Milpaltense women's perceptions of their gender roles, as well as of the role of food in constructing womanhood?

Another minor comment: Adapon asserts that "Cooking is a complex and artistic practice, different from other kinds of housework because of the creative component involved" (71). However, I wonder whether other kinds of women's work would not in fact be equivalent to Adapon's example of cooking, particularly the Milpaltense production of textiles.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, cooking does differ from some types of household work in that the product of one's labor is destroyed in the process of consumption. Comparisons of cooking with other kinds of domestic practice would be a fruitful area for future research. Since arguably, the meanings associated with women's work are dynamic, Gell's understanding of artwork might also be useful here.

Adapon's final example (chapter 5) examines feast foods in the context of hospitality and community celebrations. Here too, she provides examples of women's culinary agency and the coercive force of food in "trapping" and shaping social obligations. Key to this chapter is her analysis of cuisine as a "distributed object," made of

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<sup>12</sup> See: Arjun Appadurai, "Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia," in *American Ethnologist* 8:3 (August 1981), 494-511; Theresa W. Devasahayam, "Power and Pleasure Around the Stove: The Construction of Gendered Identity in Middle-Class South Indian Hindu Households in Urban Malaysia," in *Women's Studies International Forum* 28 (2005), 1-20.

<sup>13</sup> Much has been written on the lack of recognition of women's artistic skill in the production of textiles (see Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* [London: The Women's Press, 1984]; and Clare Wilkinson-Weber, "Women, Work and the Imagination of Craft in South Asia," in *Contemporary South Asia* 13:3 [September 2004], 287-306). Yet few of these studies have considered how such activities could also be a source of status and social recognition for both the creators and their families (see Helena Ahopelto, "Feminists Who Know How to Knit: Women & Crafts in Finland," in *Canadian Women's Studies* 9 [1988], 67-68; and Mary Jane Schneider, "Women's Work: An examination of Women's Roles in Plains Indian Arts and Crafts," in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, eds. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine [Washington: University Press of America, 1983], 101-121).

lineages of recipes that embody an indefinable “style.”<sup>14</sup> This idea sets the stage for understanding how specific foods, particularly *barbacoa*, have become equivalent with fiesta foods (such as mole). Adapon, building upon Gell’s concept of the “halo effect of technical difficulty,” argues that it is not just any dish that can be equated with mole, only ones that entail great technical skill (108-109). In this chapter, Adapon goes beyond an analysis of mole and *barbacoa*’s symbolism, using an understanding of cuisine as an art form to explain why and how *barbacoa* became marked as a fiesta food.

In sum, Adapon provides a distinctive addition to anthropological food studies in her analysis of food as an art form embedded in a particular social context. Pursuing such theoretical analysis and application in other places with similar complex cuisines will no doubt be fruitful. Adapon’s writing is excellent, evocatively describing abstract, complex ideas with ethnographic examples. I highly recommend this book for colleagues in food, art, and gender studies.

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**Kobena Mercer, ed. *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*. Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts/MIT Press, 2008. 224 Pages.**

If we consider Kobena Mercer’s latest anthology, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, in relation to the title of the InIVA/MIT Press series “Annotating Art’s Histories” in which it appears, a potentially productive space opens up between annotation as a practice of adding notes to existing narratives, and annotation as a revisionist methodology that challenges the ground upon which these narratives have structured the histories of modern and contemporary art. In this volume, Mercer makes relevant the question of what happens to art history’s disciplinary frameworks when we take diaspora, exile, and movement as the basis for inquiry.<sup>15</sup> Contributors therefore reveal the

<sup>14</sup> Adapon uses Gell’s concept of art as a “distributed object,” in which a body of art is dispersed temporospatially, although each piece of art has its own micro-history reflecting social relations (*Art and Agency*, 221).

<sup>15</sup> Since the themes of migration and exile are fundamental to this volume’s framework, Mercer (and the contributors) often refers back to the scholarship of thinkers who have conceptualized subjectivity outside the boundaries of the nation-state, including Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford, and Georg Simmel.