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New Show Pilot on Travel Channel: “Culturally Appreciative Foods”

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New Show Pilot on Travel Channel: “Culturally Appreciative Foods”

Cover Page Footnote

Khor, Shing Yin. "Just Eat It: A Comic About Food and Cultural Appropriation." Bitch Media. 18 February 2014. Web. 22 Sept. 2016.

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“The best way to experience a culture is by digging a little deeper for your meal -- no matter how strange or where you find it,” says Andrew Zimmern, host of the show, “Bizarre Foods.” On the show, Zimmern says he tends to stray from the usual culinary adventures, “sampling tidbits that might seem a little bizarre to the average set of taste buds.” On this episode, Zimmern travels between Oaxaca and Mexico City tasting back alley delicacies such as octopus in Huatulco, roasted Armadillo in Oaxaca, and grasshoppers in Mexico City. While in Mexico, Zimmern is on the search for the most authentic Mexican food. In analyzing Zimmern’s expedition wrought in cultural exotification, I compare his travels to Khor’s comic on food cultural appropriation. While the former artifact informs the latter, both artifacts exhibit issues brought about by cultural appropriation and exotification. The latter suggests solutions and best practice for limiting these problematic behaviors. While this paper does not aim to suggest we cannot consume the cuisines of other cultures in which we do not reside, this paper does suggest there are ways of going about appreciating cultural cuisines that do not objectify or invalidate the people and experiences of those cultures — Visiting other cultures and calling their food “bizarre” is not one of them, nor is collecting gastronomical gold stars.

In Khor’s comic about food cultural appropriation, the antagonistic sidekick asks Khor, who identifies as Malaysian, where he can get the most “authentic” Malaysian food in town. It is in this moment, Khor questions what constitutes authenticity. When out for burritos another day, the friend points out the large presence of Latino folks, suggesting the restaurant’s high level of authenticity. “Because people make the best authenticity props,” mocks Khor. The antagonistic sidekick persists, “So! Malaysian food?” using Khor as a measure for the authenticity of local Malaysian cuisine — Khor’s stamp of approval. As Khor points out, authenticity is not simply the delicacies of a country, but the intervening years of colonialism, migration, and globalization, as well.

The antagonistic sidekick of the story fails to acknowledge Khor’s history and struggles as a first-generation American, as well as the history and cultural relevance of the food with which Khor was raised. The story’s sidekick was merely concerned with obtaining gastronomical gold stars on their cultural acquisition adventure. The antagonistic sidekick in Khor’s story materializes as Andrew Zimmern from “Bizarre Foods.” Zimmern’s work is problematic for a number of reasons, but this paper will focus on just four intersecting points: the show’s title, cultural appropriation, failure

to acknowledge centuries worth of oppression, and general paternalistic traits. The “Bizarre Foods” show title is potentially highly offensive. While Zimmern appears to *appreciate* various cultures, the connotations behind addressing foreign foods as “bizarre” implies judgement. Other words that come to mind might be “freak,” “ludicrous,” “wild.” These terms can all assume someone or something is untamed, uncontrollable, and nonconforming, and thus, negative and unnecessary. Not only does Zimmern’s language other cultures, but his sheer role as a food critic travel extraordinaire others cultures, as well.

Zimmern makes a living by literally consuming other cultures, and collecting bits of other culture along the way. During his time in Mexico City, Zimmern indulged in chapulines, salted and toasted grasshoppers, atop a crispy tortilla called a tlayuda. In an effort to demonstrate his cultural prowess and exhibit his gastronomical gold stars, Zimmern mentions, “you know, in other parts of the world, when I’ve had crickets or grasshoppers, they don’t lend a whole lot to the dish itself. Here, it just works beautifully.” In complimenting the dish in this way, Zimmern essentially credits the entire culture with cooking the grasshoppers in a way that meets his culinary standards, wherein other cultures have failed to cook grasshoppers in a way that meets his culinary standards. This exchange exhibits Zimmern’s innate paternalistic traits brought about by American culture.

As a white, middle class American who ventures into countries to report on their cuisine, Zimmern’s minute sample of the cultures he visits is not indicative of the culture as a whole. Though certain cultural foods have received Zimmern’s stamp of approval, Zimmern’s visits being portrayed as insider knowledge completely warp, exotify, and exploit local culture thus perpetuating American ignorance about worldly matters. For instance, Zimmern spends a short time in Huatulco free diving with various fisherpeople to catch shellfish and octopus. At one point, he gives the oysters they catch a monetary value -- how much they’d sell for at a five-star restaurant. By comparing the local industry to a materialistic five-star restaurant, while mentioning how few pesos the oysters would cost at a local restaurant, Zimmern both discredits the subsistence lifestyle of locals in Huatulco *and* diminishes the quality of the dish by mentioning its low value compared to its counter-dish in the states. Zimmern is so disillusioned by his narrow focus on Huatulco’s role in shellfish and octopus production, he fails to mention or even acknowledge Oaxaca’s turbulent history of colonialism and war. At some point, he does mention the Zapotecs, the indigenous group of Oaxaca, but only mentions their contribution to the local food, and how their contribution sets Oaxacan food apart from the rest of Mexico. In disregarding Oaxacan and Zapoteca history, Zimmern further ignores southern Mexico’s adversity and socio-

political turmoil, and objectifies the local culture for its, potentially stolen, service to the food world.

As a world traveler, Zimmern utilizes his show as a platform to not only offer foodie advice, but to advertise tourist opportunities wherever he visits. Oaxaca, according to Zimmern, is “best experienced outside of the popular tourist zones.” He asks the viewer, “Does [Mexico] conjure images of TexMex burrito joints or wild spring breaks?” With cow’s tongue tacos, 5-star chefs “serving up pre-hispanic indigenous cuisine,” Zimmern promises “there’s more to Mexico than meets the eye.” Oaxaca is evidently now worthy thanks to Zimmern’s seal of approval as a tourist destination. While in Oaxaca, Zimmern entertains roasted armadillo, indicating Juchitan is one of the few places left in the world to eat fresh armadillo cooked in its own shell. The added bonus, according to Zimmern, “is that it was cooked by native Zapoteca women using traditional recipes — now *that’s* authentic!” It seems Zimmern’s measure of authenticity has mostly to do with primitivity and original practice, which denotes an impossibly high standard for all cultural evolution occurring subsequently.

The antagonistic sidekick in Khor’s story shares a lot of characteristics with Andrew Zimmern. For one, both individuals fail to realize their appropriative tendencies. In Khor’s comic, the antagonistic sidekick, like Zimmern, exhibits his gastronomical prowess when declaring proudly, “this roti is the heart of Malaysia.” As if Khor’s birth country’s entire culture can be summed up into a single flatbread. Additionally, both individuals possess an astonishing amount of privilege in taking advantage of the opportunity to enjoy “foreign” food, all the while natives are historically ridiculed by Western culture for enjoying the same exact meals. By simply focusing on cultural delicacies, Khor’s antagonistic sidekick and Zimmern erase history that surrounds cultural food production, ignores colonialism, and disregards any oppression producers of the cultural food may have faced. Khor reminds the reader that authenticity is not simply the delicacies of a country, but the intervening years of colonialism, migration, and globalization, too. Both Khor’s antagonistic sidekick and Zimmern fail to acknowledge cultural history and cultural struggles. Instead, the two individuals are simply concerned with boosting their own cultural valor and credibility. In sum, this rampant form of narrow-minded authenticity fails to take into account authentic lives and authentic adversity.

Andrew Zimmern’s show, “Bizarre Foods” perpetuates the very issues Khor deals with on a daily basis. Through broadcasting the show to its target audience - middle class Americans who can afford to travel - the majority of American viewers learn to exoticify and appropriate other cultures. Instead of just eating and appreciating, “Bizarre Foods” sets an expectation to assume cultural insight into exotic ways of living through cuisine. Thus, a

new generation is raised expecting gastronomical gold stars. Due to lack of space and time, this paper won't discuss the ways in which "Bizarre Foods" and shows like it perpetuate systems of capitalism through promoting tourist culture in "exotic" places, but does acknowledge this problematic media framework.

Toward the end of the article, Khor suggests a couple of ways in which one can appreciate another culture without appropriating it. "Eat," suggests Khor, "but don't pretend that the food lends you cultural insight into our 'exotic' ways. Eat, but recognize that we've been eating, too, and what is our sustenance isn't your adventure story." In other words, eat, but don't expect anything in return.

Works Cited

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