

Rice, Rap, and Based FOBs: Food Discourse and Asian American Identity

by

Pearl Shavzin

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Thesis Sponsor:

Date

Signature
Ignasi Clemente

Date

Signature of Second Reader
Maryam Bakht

INTRODUCTION

The link between food and culture is a common enough idea in our society. With my interest in ethnicity and identity in diaspora and my love of food, I've had a long-standing interest in how *talk* about food—not just consumption of food—can be used as a interactional resource in the day-to-day performance of an ethnically- or racially-linked identity. Research, while limited, has shown that some Asian Americans may employ features of African American English or racist or stereotypical attitudes (Chun 2001; Reyes 2009) in the performance of their “Asianness.” The link between consumables and social position has also been established, in the identification of the register known as “oinoglossia” (Silverstein 2003), but so has the ways in which eating certain foods, or eating food in a particular way, can be used to include or exclude, marking similarity and difference.

However, work that links language and food has been limited, with few notable exceptions (see Levi-Strauss 2009 and Cavanaugh et al. 2014 for two very different approaches), but this does not mean that speakers have not been employing the relevant linguistic tools this whole time. I seek to understand how talk about different foods—including pronunciation and accent, use of foreign language words, and speaking as an “expert”—can be used as a resource by a speaker to present themselves, to an audience, as a member in an ethnic group or identification with broader racial categories. I will be undertaking this research using a media-based example: the food personality Eddie Huang in his capacity as host of Vice Media's online series, *Fresh Off the Boat*. Through this case study, I will demonstrate how this practice takes place through the use of a variety of registers and styles that index food knowledge and ethnic identity, and how

there can be clear differences in the ways of speaking employed depending on the ethno-racial links that a particular food is understood to have.

BACKGROUND

Language and Identity: An Overview

Identity

Categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, and race are socially constructed, and as such are used in the creation of social identity, whether marked or unmarked, indexed directly or indirectly. These identities are verbally performed for an audience, using a variety of linguistic tools, and with some degree of agency possibly stretching the bounds of expected behavior.

According to Elinor Ochs (1993:288), speakers use verbal means in attempting to establish social identities for themselves and others. She defines social identity as “a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life [...]. Membership in a social group, whether it be a distinct language community or a distinct social group within a language community, depends on members’ knowledge of local conventions for building social identities through act and stance displays” (1993:288–289). In *Key Terms in Language and Culture*, Paul V. Kroskrity (2007:106) argued that, while non-linguistic factors may be important to the membership with one or more social groups that comprises one’s

identity, he views language and communication as providing important or even necessary criteria to its construction. For both theorists, speakers seek to establish identity through verbal performance and displays; features like acts and stances (Ochs 1993:288); or particular discursive practices (Kroskrity 2007:106–107) may be called to service.

Linguistic construction of identities can take place through languages, linguistic forms, and communicative practices linked with specific ethnic, national, or other identities. Indeed, John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1982) have understood “gender, ethnicity, and class as given parameters and boundaries within which we create our own social identities” (1). These parameters are, of course, not merely “given” but communicatively produced.

Recognition of identities is a complex process that occurs through interaction. Language is recognized in relation to social identity when mediated by interlocutors’ understandings of social conventions and how certain acts and stances index a particular social identity. An identity will take hold in a social interaction if, at the least: (1) the speaker and other interlocutors share linguistic and cultural knowledge of the certain stances and acts that may index a particular identity, and; (2) all interlocutors share social, political, or economic history and conventions that allow them to associate an identity with the one the speaker is attempting to project, and; (3) the other interlocutors can, and will, ratify the speaker’s interactionally proposed identity (Ochs 1993:289–290). Maintaining that identity is discursively constructed, emerging from the specific conditions of interaction, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005:588–607) have identified five principles that they believe are fundamental to the study of identity: emergence; positionality; indexicality; relationality; and partialness. They assert that identity requires,

as a condition of its complexity, a thorough sociocultural linguistic analysis that is as broad as the number of linguistic resources that indexically produce it.

In constituting identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) recognize one of these five principles, indexicality, as “the mechanism whereby identity is constituted” (593). At its most basic, indexicality is about the tie between anything that serves as a “sign,” including language, manner of dress, behavior, etc., and social meaning. Informed by the work of Elinor Ochs and Michael Silverstein, Bucholtz and Hall argue that the “semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings” (593) that are created get meaning from culturally-borne associations between language and identity. As I’ll soon elaborate, the social meaning attached to different styles and registers can be used to perform an ethno-racial identity.

Bucholtz (2009) has noted how, in recent years, several scholars have begun to recognize how Asian Americans may appropriate dialects, languages, and styles of other ethno-racial groups, as a means of aligning with these groups (25). Bucholtz, as well as Elaine Chun (2001) and Angela Reyes (2005) have documented ways in which Asian American youth have adopted features of African American speech in this very way. Bucholtz notes that in such performances of identities, “linguistic styles and their concomitant stereotypes of race and/or gender are used deliberately and artfully to produce identity effects and to counter as well as produce cultural ideologies” (2009:25).

As a part of interpersonal interactions, Michael Moerman (1993) understands identity to be omnipresent and unavoidable. He cautions against the essentializing of a broad identity based on the self-identification by an individual viewed as representative (1993:95). Rather, identity—like ethnicity, social interaction, and culture—are social

occurrences, the result of multiple, fluid processes. Moerman has called for admiring and investigating “inconsistencies,” within the group, reflecting the intellectual requirement for the adoption of the community of practice, a need identified by language and gender theorists.

Speech Communities and Communities of Practice

Characterizing a speech (or linguistic) community as “the product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people,” Alessandro Duranti (2010) has used several viewpoints to synthesize a meaning that defines ‘community’ as assumed by and built through speech. An individual’s speech community is not static or permanent; the number of communities one belongs to may multiply over a lifetime, and in some cases an individual might shift to different ones (2010:82). Marcyliena Morgan (2007) writes, “The concept of speech community binds the importance of local knowledge [of language ideology and attitude towards language use] and communicative competence in discursive activities so that members can identify insiders from outsiders...” (33).

Speakers that participate in a speech community share norms of language use. Shared language, however, does not guarantee shared membership. This conception of speech communities was accepted as a departure from previous work. In the 1930s, Leonard Bloomfield and others understood speech communities as engaging in a one-to-one relationship with a language or linguistic variety; those who shared the same language, same first language, or a standard language were simply recognized as members of the same speech community (Hymes 1989:54). John Gumperz (1989) has

criticized this view for failing to recognize how political, economic or geographical factors, for example, may be directly reflected in speech (4). He argues, “When studied in sufficient detail [...] all speech communities are linguistically diverse and it can be shown that this diversity serves important communicative functions in signaling interspeaker attitudes and in providing information about speakers’ social identities. Speech communities vary in the degree and in the nature of the linguistic relationship among intracommunity variables and it is this relationship which is most responsive to social change and most revealing of social information” (1989:13). Morgan (2007) recognizes Gumperz and Dell Hymes, along with William Labov and Michael Halliday, for shifting the understanding of linguistic community to interaction as a social process (2007). She argues that the relationship between a speech community and the knowledge and implementation of communicative practices makes it critical to understanding “linguistic concerns like mutual intelligibility, variation, and communicative competence, as well as cultural, political, and sociolinguistic concerns like language and gender, nationalism, transnationalism, ethnicity, social class, and so on” (31).

Duranti (2010) would argue that even this is an oversimplification of the dynamics that have shaped the bounds of what constitutes a speech community ever since Labov proposed that membership simply required ‘participation in a set of shared norms.’ Speakers, in his view, can belong to the same speech community despite different patterns of use if they understand and evaluate linguistic forms in the same way (79–80). This view has been criticized by Nancy Dorian and others for its potential to exclude speakers who perceive themselves to be part of the same community even though their linguistic norms or evaluations of speech forms may differ. Accounting for such

situations, Dorian prefers S. Pit Corder's definition: "A speech community is made up of people who regard themselves as speaking the same language; it need have no other defining attributes" (2010:81). An earlier definition of 'linguistic community' by Gumperz concentrated on social contact, ignoring evaluations and norms, which is more applicable to speakers who live in close contact and speak different languages. However, in the process of shaping his own definition of speech community, Duranti recognizes that, "Linguistic variation is in fact not as rare as monolingual speakers or some theorists would like to believe. Even within monolingual communities [...] differentiation and shifting of codes may be more pervasive than usually believed. What in some communities might result in a shift from one language to another [...] in some other communities might result in a shift from one style or register to another" (2010:82).

As an alternative to "speech community," the concept of a "community of practice" has been proposed by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992). They adopt Lave & Wenger's notion of the "community of practice" for use in language and gender research. This socially constructed group is "defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages" and understood as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:464). Emerging in the course of this mutual endeavor are practices such as modes of speech, beliefs, values, and power relations. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (1999) believe, "This definition suggests that the concept of a CoP is a dynamic, rich, and complex one. It emphasizes the notion of 'practice' as central to an understanding of why the concept offers something different to researchers than the traditional term 'community'—or, in the context of sociolinguistic research, more than

concepts like ‘speech community’ ...” (174). As a socially-constructed category, they believe a community of practice is a more suitably dynamic category for studying gender, ruled by socially constructed interactions, than an inherently more fixed speech community (180).

Bucholtz (1999a) also outlines the differences in her study of female nerds, “Why Be Normal?” She states that all definitions of the speech community have a focus on language, whether linguistic system, shared linguistic norms variation, or a set of sociolinguistic norms. The community of practice, on the other hand, recognizes practice “as the motivating context for linguistic interaction,” which allows “the theory of the community of practice [to make] activity much more central to sociolinguistic analysis. Just as importantly, whereas the speech community model understands language as fundamentally disembodied—as detachable from the physicality of speakers—the community of practice quite literally reincorporates language into the physical self” (208). Difference and conflict are treated as regular occurrences, and the “abnormal” or peripheral members of the community are more readily positioned at the forefront of analysis. She writes that, “the community of practice, unlike the speech community, may be constituted around any social or linguistic practice, no matter how marginal from the perspective of the traditional speech community. Likewise, by focusing on individuals as well as groups, the theory of the community of practice integrates structure with agency. And because identities are rooted in actions rather than categories, the community of practice model can capture the multiplicity of identities at work in specific speech situations more fully than is possible within the speech community framework” (210).

The concept of a community of practice is important in discussing the linguistic practices of Asian American English. In the introduction to *Beyond Yellow English* (2009), Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo note that “efforts to find a variety of ethnically or racially distinctive [Asian or Pacific Islander (APA)] English have generally been unsuccessful. Researchers have found, instead, that the forms of English spoken by APAs are often not recognizable as indexing a particular ethnic or racial group across a speech community...”(5). Later in that same volume, Mary Bucholtz (2009) notes that despite problems, distinctiveness-centered models have been widely used in linguistic studies of ethnic groups within the United States, but that they “fail outright when confronted with Asian Americans’ speech practices, especially but not only those of the English-speaking second generation” (24). A major and unignorable factor is the diversity of cultures, languages, and socioeconomic classes of those identified as “Asian Americans.” For that reason alone, it is necessary to recognize that variations will exist in the speech of different Asian American individuals. While this paper attempts to look at identity through speech, it is not an argument for one single way in which all Asian American speakers perform their identity through speech or even how one Asian American individual may speak in a variety of situations.

Style and Identity

Norma Mendoza-Denton (2007) defines style as “the implementation, at any given time, of a combination of features from the many varieties (such as California Chicano English, or standardized British English), registers (such as baby talk), and performance genres (e.g., sermon, advice, proverb) at that speaker’s disposal” (235).

Immediate audience, addressees, referees (“reference groups [...] who are absent but influential on the speaker’s attitudes” (Bell 1984:161) and contextual factors can all have an impact. Rather than using the term to simply refer to intraspeaker variation, Bucholtz & Hall (2005) point to a contemporary understanding of style as “repertoire of linguistic forms associated with personas or identities” (596–597) used in variationist sociolinguistics.

Linked to certain linguistic features, the habitual use of a style (or other linguistic resources) becomes tied to an identity and shapes its social meaning (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:597). Bucholtz (Bucholtz 2009), however, points out that the availability of some styles for identity-formation can be linked to other factors. Despite the fact that a style might mark orientation to a certain youth culture,

Such style-based identities are often shaped by ethnicity, insofar as certain styles are available to some ethnic groups but not others. This is particularly the case with AAE, which has become increasingly used emblematically as a cross-ethnic marker of youth identity among young people of color; European Americans’ use of AAE is generally more likely to be met with suspicion or ridicule from both ingroup and outgroup members [...] unless speakers have credentials within the local speech community [...]. [Bucholtz 2009:25]

Though codeswitching often refers to the alternating use of multiple languages within one speech exchange (Auer 1998:3), some sociolinguists speak of *switching* more broadly as occurring between languages or styles (Barrett 2010:517), recognizing that the processes that cause a monolingual speaker to shift styles are similar to those which cause switches between languages in multilingual speakers (Bell 1984:158).

Allan Bell (1984) has proposed a framework for styleswitching, which he refers to as “Audience Design.” This framework “assumes that persons respond mainly to other

persons, that speakers take most account of hearers in designing their talk” (1984:159). Speech is “made real, possible, and meaningful [...] through its use of particular actors at particular times and places. The shared nature of the communicative system is two-sided: it is assumed, and at the same time must be realized, in concrete acts of verbal communication” (Duranti 1986:240). Audience roles can be ranked based on whether that audience member is known, ratified and/or addressed by speaker, and the position of an audience member in relation to the speaker—his or her role distance—may affect style; an addressee, who is known, ratified and addressed will have considerably more impact on speaker style than unknown, unratiated, and unaddressed eavesdropper (Bell 1984:160). In addition to role distance, speakers may respond to one or more audience members’ personal characteristics, levels for specific linguistic variables, or style level in order to design a style for addressees (167).

Using Howard Giles’ “accommodation model” to understand attribution of style variation on audience, Bell broadly describes it as “[hypothesizing] that speakers accommodate their speech style to their addressee in order to win approval” (1984:162). Accommodation may take the form of convergence, maintenance, or divergence. In its most common form—convergence—the speaker’s style will become more like that of the addressee. Alternatively, the speaker may shift their speech away, making it even more different, or they may choose to maintain the current level of difference between speaker and audience style (1984:162). Peter Auer (1998) raises an important point regarding the analysis of codeswitching and role of the participant. He writes, “The theoretical point to be made [...] is that the definition of the codes used in code-switching may be an

interactional achievement which is not prior to the conversation (and to be stated once and for all by the linguist) but subject to negotiation between participants...” .

Performance and Performativity

The performative utterance was first introduced by J. L. Austin as “a new category of utterance that has no truth value since it does not describe the world but acts upon it” (Hall 2007:180), who went on to argue that “all utterances are performative [...] since such utterances do the act of informing” (Hall 2007:180). Kira Hall (2007), however, describes the second generation of performativity in linguistic anthropology as utilizing “more localized, ethnographic accounts of diverse communities of practice” (181). She and other theorists, such as Mary Bucholtz and Deborah Cameron, follow the lead of Judith Butler’s work, viewing “gender [...] as a performative, constituting the very act that it performs” (2007:182). Following in the footsteps of language and gender studies, Alastair Pennycook (2003) used performativity to understand Japanese rap as a cultural process. He states that, “performativity[, ...] following Butler, can be understood as the way in which we perform acts of identity as an ongoing series of social and cultural performances rather than as the expression of a prior identity” (528). This socially constructive role of performativity, like switching, is important to understanding the processes of in which identities are formed and changed.

Race, Ethnicity, and Asian American Identity

By examining Louisiana Creole identity, Virginia Dominguez (1994) points to the fact that, rather than a “natural” occurrence, racial categories are the result of the actions

of many, all designed to maintain a social order through legal and social means; in other words, the fact that race was, and continues to be, socially constructed.

Noting this socially constructed nature, it is impossible to ignore the problematic nature of racially or ethnically identifying terms. Broad terms such as “Asian American,” “Asian Pacific American,” and “Asian or Pacific Islander” gloss over the broad diversity of those who are grouped under these classifications and ignore categories that may be more salient, such as (but not exclusively) gender, sexuality, nationality, or class. Terms for more specific groups, on the other hand, may be a point of in-group or out-group contention. For good reason, Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo (2009) speak in-depth on naming and categories early in the introduction to *Beyond Yellow English* (4).

Like Reyes, Lo, and other scholars in Asian American studies, however, I do see a need to use and discuss terms like “Asian American.” Existence of radicalizing terms point to a broader racialization of “non-white” bodies that endures despite the claimed “post-racial” state of our society. They point out that “for those who willingly claim the term, it can have enormous social and political utility” (Reyes and Lo 2009:4), and in fact, was adopted and embraced by racial justice activists in the 1960s for that very purpose. “Asian American” provided an alternative to “Oriental,” serving as a means of linguistic resistance against Western imperialist policies from which that word originated and against the related view of “the Orient as inferior, exotic, and threatening” (ChangeLab 2012:4).

That understood, I note that the speaker who is the focus of this paper, Eddie Huang, has used the terms “Asian” and “Asian American” as part of a broader social and political category. He also has spoken of himself as Chinese, Taiwanese, and Chinese-

Taiwanese (or Taiwanese-Chinese) American in varying situations, though has criticized how he has been asked to clarify which group he “belongs” to (Nguyen 2013).

Recognizing Huang’s attitudes about his identity and the labels he uses to refer to himself in varying situations, I employ the terms “Asian,” “Asian American” and “Chinese-Taiwanese American” from this point forward¹. While I think these are salient and meaningful categories for Huang, I do also note that Huang has nuanced attitudes about ethno-racial categorization, which he has spoken about numerous times (see Nguyen 2013 and TEDLeaks 2013 for examples).

Language use is just one way of performing any kind of identity, racial or ethnic identities included. Jane Hill (2008) points out that “a particular language, or a particular class or regional dialect of a language, can function as a social indexical that signals an identity as ‘speaker of X’ or ‘person from Y.’ [...] In] saying /tuk'son/ [a] speaker signals her Chicana identity, a commitment to her right to speak this word in Spanish, and her primordial claim to the place and its resources” (Hill 2008:143). Though construction of some racial identities, particularly “unmarked” identities like “whiteness,” can sometimes be hard to spot, Bucholtz (1999b) has pointed out that discursive practices that name the “other” (marked identities), can render them visible (447). This is, in fact, one way in which mock languages function.

As a covert racial discourse, mock languages allow the speaker to index and reproduce culturally-meaningful stereotypes in a silent, “invisible” way. Speaking

¹ While Huang uses “Asian” and “Asian American” as socially and politically useful categories, I have not come across an example of him using “Asian Pacific American”/“APA,” or “Asian and Pacific Islander”/“API.” While ChangeLab (2012) notes that many of their racial-justice-oriented study participants use the categories interchangeably, I cannot conclude that Huang does so, and have decided to avoid these categories unless relevant.

specifically about one she terms “Mock Spanish,” Jane Hill (2008) identifies Mock Spanish as a means “to create a particular kind of ‘American’ identity [...while] it assigns Spanish and its speakers to a zone of foreignness and disorder” (128–129). Its growth in usage grounded in the same era as the rise of the Official English movement, Hill argues that Mock Spanish has become an “important resource for American English Speakers” (134). By using a combination of four broad tactics—semantic pejoration of Spanish loanwords (134), euphemistic substitution of vulgar English words with Spanish equivalents (137), adding Spanish morphological features like definite article “el” and the suffix “-o” (138), and “hyperanglicization” and “bold mispronunciation” (140)—speakers of Mock Spanish can index a colloquial or jocular stance and kind of cosmopolitan identity. Mock Spanish is, she argues, “a vital part of the rhetorical skill set of someone who aspires to a prototypical ‘American’ identity” (144) by allowing a speaker to place themselves in opposition to the “foreignness and disorder” (129) that Spanish speakers are associated with.

Following Hill’s lead, Elaine Chun (2009) has coined “Mock Asian” to refer to a discursively similar style in her analysis of the Asian American comedian Margaret Cho. Two widely recognized features of Mock Asian include the use of nonsense syllables (beginning with /tʃ/ or ending with /ŋ/) and the neutralization of certain phonemes (/r/ and /l/ or /r/ and /w/), though Chun (2009: 266–267) identifies over a dozen more prototypical features. By indexing “a stereotypical Asianness that unambiguously mocks Asians, rather than being characteristic of ‘realistic’ interpretations of Asian speech,” Chun (2009: 266) argues speakers can use Mock Asian and its ideological link to Asian immigrants—viewed as “foreigners”—as a contrastive tool to signal one’s American

identity. Chun shows how Cho has used this style in her comedy routines as a way to question and subvert racist speech and attitudes.

While Asian Americans “are constructed as a distinct racial group in U.S. culture, they have not been shown to hold a [...] degree of ethnolinguistic distinctiveness [as demonstrated with African Americans, Latino Americans, and European Americans]” (Newman and Wu 2011:154) and a clear “Asian American” phonetic variety has yet to be established outside of substrate effect from the non-English language.

What *has* been identified in sociolinguistic literature is how, “through the appropriation of the dialects, languages, and styles of other groups, Asian Americans may align with other ethno-racial categories...” (Bucholtz 2009:25). As previously stated, the adoption or appropriation of elements of African American English (AAE) in particular has been identified in several studies by Angela Reyes, Elaine Chun, and Mary Bucholtz.

Food as an Indexical

However, probably of most interest to me is a broader exploration of food discourses in the performance of identities. In a discussion of dogmeat, Ku (2014) explains that he had often heard older Korean men in the U.S. speak of dogmeat with a clear overall attitude: “real Korean men eat dog” (124). When given the opportunity to try it on a trip to Seoul, he takes it, finding that he can’t stomach it. Upon his return, “I confessed to one of my older Korean male colleagues my failure to enjoy dogmeat [...]. He shook his head and got me where it hurt the most when he teased: ‘That means you’re not a true Korean man.’ That stung. That is to say, *not* being called a dogeater felt like a slur, and it bruised my ego” (2014:155). Huang’s speech about food, while salient, is only

one way food talk and identity interact; it is *highly* performative, presented through a recorded and edited medium. The interaction Ku reports, taking place in an everyday situation, with his interlocutor's response as important as any statement he makes about himself is also a negotiation and performance of identity.

Much in the way that Asians in the U.S. are a “forever foreign” people, Ku (2014) points out that they “have always been and continue to be emblematic of the unassimilable American [...] in gastronomic culture as well” (13). Even foods with a presence in the U.S. dating back to the 1800s, such as chow mein, chop suey, and wonton soup, are continually viewed as foreign when identified as belonging to an Asian cuisine (50). Despite this enduring status, food still serves as a tool to expose a relatively broad swath of Americans to foreign cultures; Samantha Barbas (2003) points out in a early history of chop suey, that “the image of Chinese Americans as restaurant servers or cooks posed little threat to most Americans—although they could not accept the presence of Chinese Americans in mainstream social settings or businesses, they had little trouble envisioning them in subservient roles” (682). Anita Mannur, in “Model Minorities Can Cook,” argues that modern Asian American chefs like Ming Tsai are easily accepted:

because he is socially and economically on par with [...] those who consume fusion cuisine. At the same time he is not exactly breaking bread with his clientele. He cooks for them, he looks beautiful for them, and he performs for them. To this end, selling Ming Tsai as a model minority is a crucial ingredient in making Tsai successful. [Mannur 2005:77]

In other words, Tsai poses little threat, just like the Chinese Americans who introduced chop suey to Americans. Huang is well aware of this attitude, and brings it up in a conversation with another Asian American chef, Roy Choi:

I came back to food after doing the law, trying to be a journalist, doing all these things. Because I realized that I would be given a fair shake in food, but I wouldn't be given a fair shake at a lot of other— people expect us to be good at food. [Huang 2012e:03:14]

Huang, however, adopts this stereotyped role, with the intention of exploiting and subverting it. Tsai is “upwardly mobile, well assimilated, [and] does not talk about unpleasant racial experiences” (Mannur 2005:77). Huang uses the way he talks to style himself as unabashedly unassimilated, engaged in resistance against white dominance, and unconcerned with an upper-middle class presentation. The closer he identifies with a food or cuisine, the more Huang engages in mixing elements from foreign languages (as nonce borrowings) and non-standard American Englishes (like AAE and Mock Asian) with culinary discourse. He uses language to make them more approachable to his white American audience, while refusing to apologize for or mitigate the “foreignness” of either the food or himself.

In discussing food talk and indirect indexicality, I draw heavily upon a concept Michael Silverstein (2003) has coined “oinoglossia,” or “wine talk” (222). This register uses terminology associated with wine tastings, and while it allows a speaker to demonstrate knowledge or expertise of wine, using oinoglossia also allows them to position themselves in society based on the socially constituted image of the type of person who has such knowledge. Similarly, with talk about foods widely understood to be tied to an ethnic identity, speakers can work to position themselves as experts with the ultimate goal of being recognized as someone who knows because they should by virtue of their ethnic identity. This may take place in casual conversation; like oinoglossia, it does not require a structured speech event similar to wine tasting notes. A Chinese American interlocutor may wax poetic about the texture of jellyfish or make sure to ask a

waiter for “*xiǎo long bāo*” instead of “soup dumplings”; one Filipino American may jestfully exclaim to another, “You don’t like *patis* [fish sauce]?? What kind of Filipino are you?!” In these situations, the speaker’s performance may be driven, consciously or unconsciously, by the audience: this kind of discourse can be an effort to unify an ethnic self-identification with the identity assumed by others.

Oinoglossia is the name of the register Silverstein associates with the activity of “wine tasting” and the text associated with “tasting notes.” Oinoglossia includes terms like aroma or bouquet or nose, body, mouthfeel, and it also describes more specific “wine talk” to describe wine, like “leathery,” “catty” or “cat pee,” “buttery,” or “hot”; even a term like “unctuous,” which, because of heavy use by a particular wine critic, has come to have a specific and separate meaning in this realm. Besides the fact that one can directly demonstrate knowledge or expertise of wine with this register, using oinoglossia also allows a speaker to use their speech to position themselves in a particular position in society based on the socially constituted image of the type of person who has such knowledge: in the case of wine, people commonly identified in our society as “yuppie” or “bougie.”

About Eddie Huang

To look at this kind of identity work, I’ll be examining one media-oriented individual, Edwyn “Eddie” Huang. Huang is the chef and co-owner of a restaurant, Baohaus, located in the East Village neighborhood of New York, NY, though he may be known more widely as an outspoken and controversial food personality (Stein 2013). He has had several outlets for his thoughts and critiques: his online presence includes a blog

called *Fresh Off the Boat*; a Twitter account, @MrEddieHuang; and a VICE Media online series, *Fresh Off the Boat*, which is the focus of this study. He has also published a memoir, also named *Fresh Off the Boat*, and been interviewed numerous times. He's been described by several media outlets, like food blog Eater.com, "as the rabble-rouser and the chef who doesn't play nice with others" (Pang 2013).

Self-identified as "Chinese Taiwanese American," Huang is the oldest son of immigrant parents from Taiwan. The first of his family born in the United States, Huang was raised in Orlando, Florida. While the outside world of his youth was predominantly white, he was immersed in Chinese culture and language at home (Cutolo 2014) and speaks "basically 5th grade mandarin [sic]" (basedfob 2013). I would identify Huang as an L1 speaker of Standard American English (SAE). It is, as discussed earlier, a more complicated and murky distinction as to whether he quite speaks the same "standard" or "mainstream" English used by his white peers, or what substrate effect from Mandarin (and Mandarin-accented American English) an interlocutor may use in identifying his speech as "non-white" or as "Asian." Nonetheless, he is linguistically quite "flexible" and fluid, and is able to utilize some elements of African American English (AAE) and Mandarin in concert with the more standard variety of American English.

One Asian American-linked variety that Huang clearly uses is "Mock Asian." Like fellow Asian American comedian Margaret Cho² (Chun 2009), Huang appears to use Mock Asian in a way that may both "necessarily reproduce mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians," while attempting to "simultaneously

² Like Cho, Huang also worked as a stand-up comic, using his racialized identity as an aspect of his stage performances. Using the stage name "Magic Dong Huang," his stated goal was "to stomp the life out of the model-minority myth." (Stein 2013)

decontextualize and deconstruct these very discourses” as an “Asian American who is critical of Asian marginalization in the United States” (2009:262). A much deeper discussion of Huang’s use of Mock Asian, plus his use of racist terminology in self-reference, appears later, in the analysis.

Huang’s use of AAE is also relevant to his performance of an “Asian American” identity, supported by the limited but significant body of work produced by Reyes (2005) Bucholtz (2009) and Chun (2001) on the use of AAE by members of several Asian American groups. In a *New York Times* profile, Joshua David Stein (2013) writes that, according to Huang’s memoir, physical abuse experienced in childhood “led, in part, to Mr. Huang’s identification with black culture. ‘I remember black parents would hit their kids at the grocery store when they bruised the fruit,’ he said. ‘I remember getting hit by my mother when I bruised the fruit, too. I thought, “I guess I’m more like them than the white kids.””” This is reminiscent of the argument made by one of Angela Reyes’s (2005) informants, Sokla, who:

identified as the Other Asian because he claimed he shared little with Asian Americans [such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans] (and European Americans) because of their different political, class and immigrant histories in the United States. Rather, Sokla saw the Other Asian in a similar position as African Americans because they both struggled socio-economically and ‘against white power’. He argued: ‘we don’t identify with Asians so we identify with blacks’. [2005:519]

So, though Sokla would likely exclude Huang as “Asian American” within this taxonomy, both appear to use linguistic features to show an alignment with an (arguably somewhat class-specific) African American experience, or more broadly with a “non-white” one.

A Site For Analysis: Vice's *Fresh Off The Boat*

I will be focusing specifically on Huang's speech as it appears on the VICE Media series, *Fresh Off the Boat*, henceforth referred to as *FOTB*.³

The online video series *FOTB*, which completed its second season April 2014, currently consists of twelve 3-part episodes. The basis is, at least superficially, similar to Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations*,⁴ a show also known for its "controversial" chef-host. On *FOTB*, Huang travels to different parts of the world, eats the local food, and converses with people from that place, either functioning as the guide for the viewing audience or being led with a guide of his own.

Like Bourdain on *No Reservations*, Eddie demonstrates expert knowledge of food, but it's not the stated focus of this show. At the beginning of the first video, "Bay Area, Part 1," he tells the audience, "If I had to explain *Fresh Off the Boat*, I would say it's a cultural show told through the lens of food, putting on voices that have long gone ignored" (Huang 2012a:00:29). Not much later, in Part 2 of the Bay Area episode, Eddie gets into a conversation with guests Valerie Luu and Katie Kwan, two Vietnamese American women who do "a lot of guerilla cooking" (Huang 2012b:00:35) as "Rice Paper Scissor":

Kwan: Do you feel that you have to, like, fight to legitimize Asian technique?

Huang: I do. I think the thing that bothers people in the Chinese community or Asian community is, we don't have a food critic or a food writer who grew up, in, like, a Chinese home, or a

³ I have chosen to abbreviate the name of the show as *FOTB*, as I have seen it written in various places online, largely to distinguish the show's title from the phrase "fresh off the boat," commonly abbreviated as "FOB"

⁴ *No Reservations*, officially billed as *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, was originally aired by the Travel Channel as 9 seasons, running from 2005 to 2012.

Vietnamese home. So, don't come tell me what's the best until you've really tried to immerse yourself and give credit to like, where it comes from.

Kwan: So do you think that you hold off from trying to make those types of statements?

Huang: When it's not a food that I really grew up eating and really feel like I understand, I let people tell me about it. And then I go to explore. You have to eat your way through a cuisine, and a culture, before you can say something about it. That's how I feel.

[Huang 2012b:01:47]

Through this interaction—one that I believe may have been placed early audience early in the series on purpose⁵—Huang makes clear what his attitudes about food and culture are. Food knowledge is, to him, critically tied with cultural identity, and he links food and culture in a very thought-out, intentional way.

Later in this same episode, Huang comments on a grocery store they're in:

(1) “baby dill for the WPs” (Huang 2012b: 02:49)⁶

1 Huang: This is a nice grocery (room). Very multicultural, serving the
2 neighborhood.
3 Got some /gə læŋ'gə/ for the Thai people.
4 /ɛ pi'zou teɪ/, (.) Mexican.
5 Baby dill for the WPs@.

In just this relatively short segment of speech, the audience is able to read Huang's attitudes about different groups of people through pronunciation and word choices.

⁵ As a general rule, edited video may not be presented in chronological order, and there evidence within the series to support this. Part 3 of the Bay Area episode starts with Huang saying that he'll be visiting Daly City after showing us his favorite Mission District burritos, even though the first segment is in Daly City. Near the beginning of Part 2 of the Los Angeles episode, Huang admits “we're here since there's a cheap ride from San Francisco to LA,” though the first episode in Taiwan is presented between their respective episodes.

⁶ A description of the transcription conventions used in this paper can be found in the appendix.

“Galanga,” a Southeast Asian rhizome similar to ginger, is pronounced with no hesitation (“/gə læŋ'gə/” in line 3), in a way that demonstrates familiarity with the ingredient. Instead of pronouncing “epazote” in a more (hyper-) correct manner (like /ɛ pə'zou te/), which might be expected from someone who easily uses a “culinary expert” register, Huang instead says /ɛ pi'zou teɪ/ (line 4) with an exaggerated “incorrect” pronunciation, potentially aligning himself with a white, non-Latin@ identity through use of “Mock Spanish.” However, at the point Huang references white people in this utterance, he refers to them in reference to a food that reads as “trendy” and calls them “WPs,”⁷ a decidedly vernacular term that one would expect from out-group members.

So, with this segment as an introduction, I seek to show how Eddie Huang uses food talk on *FOTB* in the performance of his Chinese Taiwanese American and Asian American identities. Specifically Huang uses discourse markers, accent, nonce borrowing, and a “culinary expert” register to directly and indirectly index these identities interactionally, presenting himself as an expert on food while using his knowledge to present his ethnicity in a particular way.

To this effect, I’m interested in how Huang speaks in different situations presented on *FOTB*: in Taiwan-based episodes, speaking about Chinese/Taiwanese food; in segments where the focus is on the broader category of “Asian” (American) food; and, when the foods in focus are tied to other identities and locales, unlinked to a Taiwanese, Chinese, or Asian identity.

⁷ “WPs” is an abbreviation of “white people” that has a pejorative connotation.

FOOD TALK ON *FOTB*: TAIWANESE, ASIAN, AND “OTHER”

A few minutes into Part 1 of the “Taiwan” episode, Eddie visits (Shilin) Night Market in Taipei and, in a series of clips, shows the viewer “some of my favorite night market foods.” (Huang 2012d: 3:06)

(2) “sausage in a sausage” (Huang 2012d:03:43)

6 Huang: So, this is a sausage stuffed with sticky rice? Sometimes they'll put
7 shiitake mushrooms, some shallots (.) and he's wiping it with like a
8 sweet soy? Then he came with some pickled radish over there? Then,
9 there's some more (.) pickled *zhà cài* that we had earlier today
10 ((burp)) ((under breath)) 'cuse me.
11 ((normal volume)) Cucumber shredded? (.) And then a Taiwanese red
12 sausage. (0.5)
13 Sausage in a sausage.

He starts by using the discourse marker “so,” which in this case seems to lead his description in a way that implies that he's about to share knowledge with his audience. He's able to fluently speak about the ingredients and seasonings, demonstrating his culinary familiarity: he does this in lines 6 & 7 when he says, “sometimes they'll put some shiitake mushrooms, some shallots,” implying the rice here doesn't seem to contain those ingredients. He also uses a nonce borrowing (“*zhà cài*” in line 9), and even uses the tonal pronunciation or accent on those foreign words, further demonstrating both a familiarity with the food at the center of this discussion and the language used by those for whom this food is ethnically and culturally linked. While he names ingredients and uses an overall manner of speaking in a way that utilizes a “culinary expert” register, it's less pronounced here than it is when he discusses non-identity-linked cuisines.

Immediately following the “sausage in a sausage,” Huang describes another food,

bà wán:

(3) “boogeyman food to an American” (Huang 2012d:04:32)

14 Huang: I’d say top 5 most popular:: Taiwanese night market foods? This is
15 called a *bà wán*. They use the funkiness of the bamboo, the essence of
16 the pork, some (.) u::h shiitake mushrooms, some shallots, (.) and
17 they’ll make like (.) a– a– a grou:nd mixture, a ground **meat** mixture
18 in that mixing bowl? is the starch mixture? then they’ll put the filling
19 in? Once it’s filled, it’s shaped? Once it’s shaped it goes here. (0.5)
20 And steamed. (.) Then topped with the sauce over there? Sometimes
21 people do a little sweet chili too.
22 The thing about Asian food that always bugs Westerners out? Savory
23 foods with a gelatinous texture. (.) **This is probably** like, the
24 boogeyman food (.) to an American or Western palate but (.) I love
25 this, and it’s the quintessential Taiwanese flavor.

The way he speaks about *bà wán* is similar to his previous explanation of the “sausage in a sausage” (excerpt 3). Huang describes the process followed to prepare this item description of how this food is made and how it is or can be served (lines 20–21), and uses descriptive words that index culinary expertise (“funkiness” and “essence” in line 15, and “starch mixture” instead of “batter” or “dough” in line 18).

Notably, in his discussion of a “gelatinous” quality to savory Chinese foods (lines 22–25), Huang draws a more explicit dichotomous relationship between “I/me” as equivalent to “Taiwanese” versus “Americans/Westerners.” He identifies Americans or Westerners as having a negative relationship to such foods (“always bugs Westerners out” in line 22 and “the boogeyman food to an American or Western palate” in line 24), but says, “but I love this” (line 24–25), and refers to this food as having “the quintessential Taiwanese flavor” (line 25). By doing this, Huang seems to place himself *in opposition* to Americans or Westerners who dislike or are afraid of “savory foods with

a gelatinous texture” while simultaneously *in alignment* with Taiwanese people (and, presumably, Taiwanese Americans like himself) in their love of a food (or style of food) he views as inextricably tied to a culture and, by extension, an ethnic identity.

At the start of Part 2 of “Back in Taiwan,” a second episode focused on food and culture in Taiwan, Huang introduces the viewer to the local breakfast:

(4) “fresh hot soy milk for /dæt/ ass” (Huang 2013a:00:59)

26 Huang: So::, you see this short, fat Chinaman ((/tʃaj nə_mɪn/))? Clea::rly I
27 don’t like to eat breakfast and get my metabolism going in the
28 morning **bu:t**, my **ma::ns here**, Huckleberry Finn up in /dɪz/ **bitch**,
29 was like “you got /tə/ have breakfast in Taiwan” right?
30 ((Concierge nods))
31 Huang: It’s not (on) some IHOP shi::, it’s not some Waffle House shit.
32 We ‘bout to go to the best soy milk joint, fresh hot soy milk for /dæt/
33 ass, right now.
34 ((cut))
35 Yo, no photos no photos, the god is here.
36 ((cut))
37 The name of this place is “World’s Greatest (.) Soy Milk,” but, it’s **so**
38 **good**, and this neighborhood is Yǔng Hē, that it is now known as *Yǔng*
39 *Hē Dòu Jiāng*. It’s the most official, (.) the best. ‘s like Cali Kush.
40 *Yǔng Hē Dòu Jiāng*.
41 These are staple items at a Taiwanese breakfast so we got the whole
42 spread? (.) so you guys can see what’s ((/wəs/)) really good.
43 This is what we came for, hot, sweet soy milk. (.) You gotta see my
44 eyes eating this is me::an. This soy milk is fucking me::an.
45 They’re the only people that roa::st their soybeans (.) before making
46 the soy **milk**. They roast their soybeans like coffee ((/kə: fi/)). This is
47 (.) ama:zing.
48 This i::s (.) ah beef in a sāobǐng, which is like a pancake? But I’m
49 gonna open this up /fə/ you so you could see (.) look at those pickled
50 mustard greens with a little chili in there? And then this is **bee::f**
51 **sha::nk**? (.) *mù gǎo de*. And when we say “*mù*” it mean braised (.)
52 and specifically braised with five spice. (2.5)
53 This is the egg pancake? It is a fried dough bottom? so it’s like a– a
54 Sicilian pizza? then topped with a **egg**? like this is just straight murder
55 on a plate. (2.0) It is **so** good. () This is retarded.
56 I wake up eat thi::s, (.) drink thi::s, (.) I run 20 miles in soft sand I
57 have a career longer than Canibus.
58 This is *mǐ jiāng*, and this is peanut and sticky rice breakfast soup. This

59 is (.) *shāobǐng yóutiáo* you have the fried cruller on the inside? it's the
 60 Taiwanese churro ((/ˈtʃʌ roʊ/))? now I'm gonna dip this in here? (.)
 61 This really compliments the flavor of (the) *shāobǐng yóutiáo*. (3.0) It's–
 62 it's– it's a churro on the inside, a pancake on the outside, and it tastes
 63 like peanut butter and jelly like (0.5) un-motherfucking-defeated.
 64 ((takes another bite)) ((pounds table)) **UH! So** good! That's so good!

In excerpt 4, Huang uses many nonce borrowings, speaking with heavy tonal pronunciation, in this excerpt (“*sāobǐng*” in line 48, “*mù gǔo de*” in line 51, “*mǐ jiāng*” in line 58, and “*shāobǐng yóutiáo*” in lines 59 and 61) Additionally, most of these nonce borrowings (with the exception of “*shāobǐng yóutiáo*”) are matched with English translations, confirming for the audience how familiar he is with these foods. A range of styles and registers are here, and while some speech is in line with “culinary expert” speech (such as “braised” in line 51, “compliments the flavor” in lines 61), he shifts away from the register often. He uses more vernacular, describing how this food is “un-motherfucking-defeated” (line 63) or “murder on a plate” (line 54–55), and makes references to hip hop (“run 20 miles in soft sand” in line 56 is a lyric from a rapper known as Canibus⁸) and stoner culture (“Cali Kush” in line 39 refers to a variety or strain of marijuana). He employs some features of AAE, like realizing word initial /ð/ as [d] (“/dɪz/” rather than “/ðɪs/” in line 28, and “/dæt/” instead of “/ðæt/” in line 32), and dropping the copula *be* in line 32 (“We ‘bout”). He also uses some non-Taiwanese terms for his assumed American, foodie-identified *FOTB* audience. While referring to these Taiwanese foods as a “churro” (line 60), “Sicilian pizza” (line 54), or “[tasting] like peanut butter and jelly” (lines 62–63) his work to provide a familiar reference point demonstrates that, while this food is something that he’s familiar with, it’s not something

⁸ “2nd Round K.O.” <http://rap.genius.com/Canibus-2nd-round-ko-lyrics#note-1189119>

he thinks his audience will necessarily know or be comfortable. However, his comparisons, plus the fact that he seems to push more towards these informal modes of speaking when he uses heavier marked nonce borrowings, seem to be a way for him to try and help bridge that divide.

Returning to the Bay Area episode, we can contrast Huang's speech about Taiwanese or Chinese food and another Asian cuisine. In Part 3 of this episode, he focuses on the Filipino community in the Bay Area's "Little Manila," located in Daly City, CA. Beginning the discussion about Filipino food, he sparks a conversation in a barbershop, Fresh Cuts, with barbers Julius Arriola and Chad Gabriel:

(5) "Them /'mə θər, fək əz/!" (Huang 2012c:01:00)

- 65 Huang: Yo, so Daly City, this **Pinoy** town, huh Jules?
66 Arriola: Yes sir.
67 They like to call this place Lil' Manila, man.
68 Huang: No shit.
69 Why did that happen?
70 Is it just like mad hospitals here? @@@
71 I saw the Jollibee coming in.
72 Arriola: Oh, there you go.
73 Huang: So ya'll got to be here.
74 I feel like Filipino food just gets disrespect, like not enough people talk
75 about it. Why do you think that is?
76 Gabriel: I think just the way it looks. It's not really appetizing by the sight. It
77 looks like already chewed-up food, you know? And people get the
78 misconception that it probably tastes nasty.
79 Huang: I feel like a lot of it's packaging. Cuz, like, Americans will bring
80 people to, like, a Japanese sushi lunch business lunch; I doubt many
81 people are like 'Yo, let's get this sisig power lunch, you know what
82 I'm saying?
83 (.) Them /'mə θər, fək əz/!
84 Group: @@@@

A little later in the episode, Arriola takes Huang to a favorite restaurant:

(6) “They’re gonna bug” (Huang 2012c:06:07)

85 Huang: Oh yeah, so this your spot?
86 Arriola: Yeah, man.
87 Pampanga’s Cuisine, they call it, man.
88 Huang: I smell it, man. I smell the grilled pork. Oh man, what do they got
89 here?
90 (to server) Hi, how are you?
91 [Server Good.]?
92 Arriola: So they got a whole bunch of stuff, today, man.
93 Huang: ((to server)) What’s that?
94 Server: Beans?
95 Huang: What’s in the beans?
96 Server: Uh, it’s pretty much just a little bit of pork, and some vegetables.
97 Huang: What vegetable?
98 Server: We normally put in, um:::, the, umnn::: (1.5?)
99 Huang: If we don’t tell Americans what’s in there they’re gonna bug, know
100 what I mean? They need to know
101 Arriola: It’s all good.
102 Huang: Make it sound /də’li: fəs/ to them. All right?
103 What’s this?
104 Server: Menudo.
105 Huang: Pork and what else?
106 Server: Just pork?
107 Huang: I see potatoes. I see carrots.
108 What’s in the sauce?
109 Server: Tomato sauce.
110 Huang: We gotta make this sound more appetizing, god! You got to give me
111 more. Come on.
112 You’re not selling your food properly.
113 (????): All right.
114 ((cut to Huang and Arriola eating))
115 Arriola: Awesome, man.
116 Huang: Yeah, man.
117 This is a Filipino feast, man.
118 Arriola: The sisig has been a craze out here, recently. The Señor Sisig, that’s
119 the food truck. They’ve done Filipino-Taqueria fusion. Instead of
120 carne asada, they put in sisig as replacement. And it’s been a hit, man.
121 Huang: I’m down with people taking my Filipino food.
122 You know what, I think people will be more receptive to it if it’s in a
123 taco, or if it’s in a (bow).
124 If that’s what has to happen for people to actually start to experience
125 our food, that’s great, but that is kind of sad part that people won’t
126 just eat our food as is. Do you know what I mean?

Here, in excerpts 5 and 6, Huang is talking to other Asian Americans about food in a very casual way that we can understand to be identifying himself and his immediate audience—the ones being recorded—as non-American. He demonstrates “insider” cultural knowledge (“Pinoy” in line 65; “I saw the Jollibee” in line 71)⁹ and uses first-person pronouns throughout this segment to mark his Filipino American interlocutors and himself as part of one group (“my Filipino food” in line 121 and “our food” in line 125)¹⁰. As Huang never explicitly identifies himself as Filipino on *FOTB* (or elsewhere), the first person pronouns likely refers to membership the broader category of “Asian American.” (White) Americans—referred to as “Americans,” “people,” or “they”—are, in this situation, spoken about as an out-group (“Them / mə θər, fæk əz/!” in line 83 and “they’re gonna bug” in line 99). He also, again, adopts from other non-white varieties of English, and this segment includes what I’d categorize as Mock Spanish, with “Make it sound /də’li: fəs/ to them” (line 102). However, in this case, where “they” refers to Americans, his use of Mock Spanish seems to mark “us” (Asian Americans) as non-whites along with or in solidarity with the Latin@ Americans indexed.

The attitudes that Huang describes Americans as possessing towards Filipino food and when talking about *bà wán* in Shilin Night Market (excerpt 3), cannot be understood without contextualizing it with American attitudes towards Asian-marked foods in general. The “dubious” (as coined by Robert Ku (2014)) nature ascribed to these foods is clearly recognized by Huang; how it can be used in the performance of an Asian American identity will be elaborated on in the discussion section.

⁹ “Pinoy,” is typically used as an in-group term of self-identification, and Jollibee is a fast food chain based in the Philippines.

¹⁰ See p. 275 of Chun 2009 for a similar use of “we” by Margaret Cho.

The second season of *FOTB*, begins with an episode in Mongolia. In Part 2, Huang is taken to a restaurant by Uugii, their Mongolian fixer, where he watches as a dish called *horhog* is being prepared:

(7) “No baby corn?” (Huang 2013b:07:57)

127 Uugii: You know, this is a **very** traditional dish.
 128 The way the West, uh, you know they– people call it, like, Mongolian,
 129 like, barbecue place=
 130 Huang: =Yeah.
 131 Uugii: This is like, yeah, [u:h
 132 Huang: This is] actual Mongolian barbecue.
 133 Uugii: Yeah, it is.
 134 Huang: So Mongolian barbecue is not actually garlic sauce on a=
 135 Uugii: =No, no, not–
 136 Nothing like [that
 137 Huang: flat] top, no?
 138 Uugii: No, yeah=
 139 Huang: =No baby [corn? @@@
 140 Uugii: yeah, no] (0.5) @@
 141 Huang: So adding vegetables and things like that, is like a new innovation?
 142 Did it used to just– just be straight lamb meat (itself)?
 143 Uugii: Yeah I– i– it used to be, this like, st– straight lamb
 144 Huang: So this is a very modern thing, to actually have aromatics and
 145 seasonings for cooking [Mongolian=
 146 Uugii: =Yes.=
 147 Huang: =food.]
 148 Huang: Wha– how long ago did this actually start to develop?
 149 Uugii: Twenty [years
 150 Huang: Yeah]=
 151 Uugii: =when Mongolia became a democratic country after the
 152 democratic revolution in nineteen ninety (.) one?
 153 Huang: That’s interesting, and (0.5)
 154 ((to camera)) you know, I’ve been making fun of Mong@olian food
 155 along the way, but this is a very young culinary culture (.) and it’s just
 156 coming around.
 157 ((video cut to cook)) No baby corn?
 158 Cook: (???)
 159 Huang: No baby corn? (.) @I always like the baby corn or the– (.) chow mein
 160 in my (.) Mon@golian barbecue.
 161 ((cut with music))
 162 Huang: This technique is very interesting, and (.) you wouldn’t think but it’s
 163 very similar ((/’si mjə, lɜr/)) to the technique that cooks potstickers.

164 When you cook potstickers (.) you get a hard sear on the bottom of the
 165 potsticker, but then you put a lid on top of it (.) so it's cooking the
 166 potsticker (.) from the bottom **and** steaming the top. So, the meat is
 167 going to have a nice sear? (.) from the pieces that touch the rock? and
 168 it's also have the **flavor** (0.5) from that **burning** (.) from touching hot
 169 rock, but it's also gonna be **tender** from the steam.
 170 You have (.) the **pressure** that's cooking it, you have the **steam** that's
 171 cooking it, and you have the contact with hot **rock** (.) that's cooking it.
 172 Uugii: Yeah.
 173 Huang: (2.0) Three-way gang bang. (1.5) @@@@
 174 This generation of cooks is always talkin 'bout ingredients,
 175 ingredients, (0.5) spices. They're so focused on (.) things they see like,
 176 study abroad, but I'm telling you, the thing to pay attention to is
 177 **technique**. (.)
 178 Look at like, Korean budae jjigae, with SPAM and like, goofy ramen
 179 noodles it's one of the most delicious casseroles you'll ever have. You
 180 can make anything delicious if you have technique.

At the end of the episode, Huang consumes the *horhog* that was prepared, continuing the same style of talk:

(8) "ain't no such things as halfway cooks." (Huang 2013b:12:23)

181 Huang: Nice.
 182 The main event. (0.5)
 183 That's the horhog.
 184 Gonna risk my life for you guys.
 185 Look how tender this is. (0.5) This horhog looks (.) delicious. I'm just
 186 still concerned about that time in the van.
 187 So you could see here there's some char? (.) on parts of the beef. Other
 188 parts the beef were cooked by steam? (0.5)
 189 And when (.) I smell this, there's **no** funk on the lamb (.) **at all**. (1.0)
 190 That river rock (.) just sizzling directly onto that (.) meat? (.) Brought
 191 so much flavor and its kind of (0.5) taken the edge off that natural
 192 musk that the lamb has and this lamb was literally sitting in the trunk
 193 of a car (.) for five hours? (.) in desert heat. (0.5) That's (.) how funky
 194 this was when I came in here. (0.5) And the river rock did the job.
 195 ((Huang seen tasting the horhog for 7.0s.))
 196 Uugii: So what do you think?
 197 Huang: Uugii, you were fuckin' right man. (.) The tenderness (0.5) and that
 198 **flavor** of that **horhog**? (0.5) Best I've ever had. (.) Hands down. Hands
 199 down, best lamb dish I've ever had.

200 ((To audience)) So (.) Mongolians know, ain't no such things as
201 halfway cooks.

While Mongolia is, of course, “Asian” in terms of geography, Huang doesn’t connect to the culture in quite the same way he does with Taiwanese culture or that of Asian Americans in USA-based enclaves. Here, he takes more of an approach that can be seen at other points in the series, on camera asking his “host,” Uugii, a significant number of questions about the food and culture as it’s being prepared and treating them as an expert in that particular culinary tradition. There is a striking difference in how he speaks, or actually refrains from speaking, about a food that was less familiar to him growing up and less part of his stated identity. He does demonstrate his own knowledge with extensive segments of talk—here, he compares the cooking technique of horhog to that of potstickers (lines 162–166), which he is more familiar with—but he’s speaking very much in a “culinary expert” register, similar to that of a professional chef or a food reviewer. Though some elements of this register are present whenever he speaks about food, his speech here is a solid example. Huang’s culinary expert register is marked in several ways: besides terminology (“innovation” in line 141, “aromatics” in line 144, “hard sear” in line 164), there’s significant differences in timing and word stress. Huang has a general tendency to speak without significant pauses, even between sentences, but when using the culinary expert register he employs a lot of short pauses that give the impression of analysis through the time he takes to express himself. This register is also marked, for him, with significant use of high rising terminals and stress on lexemes that seems to go hand in hand with ideas that he wants his audience to view as important.

Even here with Mongolian food, though, Huang manages to help further enforce his Asian American identity. Here he comments multiple times about baby corn, which most viewers would recognize as linked to Asian foods in America like “Chinese take-out”: foods that, in the current culinary dialogue of “artisanal,” “craft,” and “authentic,” would be regarded as “fake” or “dubious.” (Ku 2014) Huang’s mock surprise (line 157 and 159) and sarcasm (line 159–160) about ingredients and equipment not present here but seen at Mongolian barbecue restaurants in the U.S.A. is a way in which he tells the viewer that Americans get Asian foods “wrong” in a way that has a sort of defiance, a defensiveness for Asian foods (and Asian people) that he’s expressed previously.

At the beginning of Part 3 of the Bay Area episode, Huang tells the audience “/aɪ mə/ take you to the Mission for three of my favorite burritos” (Huang 2012c:00:45). Interspersed with the segments on Filipino Americans and Filipino food discussed previously, Huang visits El Farolito, La Taqueria, and Taqueria Cancun.

(8) “Farolito burrito” (Huang 2012c:01:50)

202 Huang: All right. (.) Farolito burrito. (Tong.)
 203 ((Acoustic guitar over video of Huang eating burrito))
 204 The things that really drive you crazy are **nuanced**. In– in Chinese we
 205 call this **shien wei**, (.) where it’s like– it’s a flavor that’s not too **heavy**,
 206 not too **light**, just **there**. (.) And it’s just enough that you– you want
 207 more, (.) and you’re not satisfied and you keep coming back. That is,
 208 like, the **go::al** of every chef cooking something is that, he wants to
 209 make you a dish (.) you never want to stop eating. **That’s** what this
 210 fucking burrito is.

(9) “Carne asada at Taqueria” (Huang 2012c:04:48)

211 Huang: ((about to take a bite)) Oh. Carne asada at Taqueria. Alright?
 212 ((mariachi-like music over video of Huang eating burrito))
 213 In comparison of the other burritos, this one is a little **smaller**, it’s a
 214 little **tighter**, (0.5) and I like that.

215 There's not rice in here. I would prefer a little bit of rice. Rice provided
 216 a nice **texture**? (.) In here, the flavor of the protein overpowers the
 217 avocado ((, æv ə 'ka doʊ/)), (.) the tomato, the beans. They did
 218 everything well, I just kind of wish there was some **rice**, (.) a little
 219 more:: toothsome **tortilla**, but (.) very good.

(10) “Taqueria Cancun burrito, /ɒ 'aɪ/?” (Huang 2012c:08:05)

220 Huang: Finally, after multiple tries. (.) Taqueria Cancun burrito, /ɒ 'aɪ/?
 221 Even in this state (.) of burrito palate fatigue (.) I cou(ld) eat two of
 222 these joints.
 223 **Nice** tortilla. There's a little bit of even **flakiness** to this tortilla, (.) cuz
 224 it was on the griddle.
 225 I think that (.) this carnitas can't be topped. This one of the **best** carnitas
 226 I've ever had.
 227 I liked Farolito the best, but all three of them had something different.
 228 (.) You know?
 229 Taqueria had a very nice (.) si::ze, (0.2) very easy, it wasn't unwieldy.
 230 This one, I think, might have the best protein? It's tender and delicious.
 231 (0.2) Very moist, packs a punch?
 232 But overall as a package, (.) I think El Farolito, just enough man. It's—
 233 it's the— the— the— it's a very balanced **ha::nd** (.) that they're cooking
 234 with over there. [and] to ((/tə/)) me that's hands down numero uno,
 /ɑ 'aɪ/?

Again, as in Mongolia (excerpts 7 and 8), Huang makes heavy use of the culinary expert register. He critiques the various burritos in turn, talking about texture, size, and flavor (“a little bit smaller, a little bit tighter” in lines 213–214, “toothsome” in line 219, “flakiness” in line 223) and speaks a more technical manner (“palate fatigue” in line 221, “protein” in lines 216 and 230, and “balanced hand” in line 233). He even throws in a Chinese culinary term (“*shien wei*” in line 205) that would not be expected here unless the speaker was trying to index expertise in Chinese cooking. The culinary expert register is also present, as it was in Mongolia, through the use of timing and amplitude to mark what he wants the audience to view as important.

Huang uses Mock Spanish, like Mock Asian, throughout *FOTB*. However, its presence is most salient when he talks about Latin@-identified foods, in both the words he uses and the pronunciation employed. Concluding his review of burritos, he declares the one from El Farolito, “numero uno” (line 234), utilizing the kind of “hyperanglicization” or “bold mispronunciation” that marks Mock Spanish tokens. (Hill 2008:140) A much lengthier interaction, with similar attributes, takes place in his efforts to acquire a burrito at Taqueria Cancun:

(11) “No bueno, kid.” (Huang 2012c:05:25)

235 Huang: ((to server)) I’ll get the super burrito, but I don’t want the, like (.) the
 236 hot sauce and (guac) on top.
 237 I want it– (0.5) ((gesturing)) burrito in foil.
 238 ((video of preparation of burrito until 5:38))
 239 Huang: That mine?
 240 Server: Yes, yes.
 241 Huang: That **is**? I don’t want the sauce **on** it. I want, I want, like ((gesturing))
 242 (? the **foil** burrito)
 243 Server: Oh:::kay, like that.
 244 Huang: ((to camera)) They just **dyin**’ to give me this Mexican sushi with the
 245 bukkake ((/bu: 'ka: ki:/)) (0.3) accoutrements on top, (you know)?
 246 No bueno, kid.

Not only does Huang use “no bueno” (line 246) to indicate his dissatisfaction, but says it after he refers to the undesired version as “Mexican sushi with the bukkake accoutrements” (lines 248–250) a heavily negative evaluation marking “dubiousness” (as per Ku (2014:11)) through a degree of “inauthenticity” (“Mexican sushi” does not qualify

as “real” sushi) and “disreputableness” (the word “bukkake”¹¹ with an even more dubious connotation through the use of Mock Asian pronunciation). In the video, Huang can also be seen heavily employing gestures both times he wants to get across his burrito packaging requirements, which indicates that some sort of language difference, real or imagined, exists between the English-fluent Huang and the “questionably” fluent Latino servers.

Despite arguing that one “[has] to eat your way through a cuisine, and a culture, before you can say something about it” (Huang 2012b:00:35), Huang does not have a cultural/culinary “host” here, though he is talking about a food or cuisine that doesn’t seem to qualify as “his.” He never speaks of burritos in a way that ties him to a Mexican American or Latino identity, unlike his talk about Filipino and Taiwanese foods. It seems that this kind of speech about “Mexican”-marked foods may be a resource of presenting an “American” identity, using negative attitudes towards the people who are culturally linked to it in way that Mock Spanish serves to index an “American” identity. However, the fractal recursivity that may be taking place here is something that requires much more thorough examination and I must consider it out of the scope of this thesis

¹¹ On the open-source online slang dictionary Urban Dictionary, the majority of user-submitted definitions agree that “bukkake” (alternatively “bukakke” or “bukake”) refers to the sexual act of having several men ejaculate on the face of one woman. This Japanese loan word is often tied to Japanese-produced pornography or Japanese sexuality (as demonstrated by multiple Urban Dictionary definitions), and many of these definitions also simultaneously imply that “bukkake” refers to a practice that could be viewed as foreign and deviant.

DISCUSSION:

Throughout the series, a pattern of indexing identity through “food talk” emerges, with Eddie Huang’s performing “Taiwanese-ness” and “Asian American-ness” interactionally. In shaping a Chinese and/or Taiwanese identity, Huang makes full use of his linguistic toolbox. There is heavy use of nonce borrowing of food terms, and he employs a full tonal pronunciation of Mandarin. To this effect, the tonality may seem hypercorrect to his audience and, possibly, other Mandarin speakers; it is very likely that Huang, having self-admittedly poor speaker of Chinese, may be compensating in situations where heritage language knowledge is critical to “legitimate” identity. Besides knowing the names of foods, Huang also demonstrates a familiarity with Taiwanese and Chinese food, through his fluency in cooking techniques, ingredients, and flavors, and he uses this knowledge whether or not the current focus is Chinese or Taiwanese food. Eddie is able to speak about Taiwanese food on the show like he’s eaten it before, not just once or twice, but in a hyper-knowledgeable way, as if he’s grown up with it as part of his cultural identity. To this effect Huang uses discourse markers to enforce how knowledgeable he is, indexing an identity where he is an outsider to the hegemonic (white) American identity for whom this food (and he) is foreign.

There’s also a correlation between how familiar or connected he is with a cuisine and the amount of non-standard English he uses within that utterance. In segments talking about Taiwanese food (excerpts 2, 3, & 4), his speech is the most marked by crossing into AAE and the use of a very casual speech style one associates most with major urban centers. When speaking about Filipino foods (excerpts 5 & 6), there are similarities in register, but the nonce borrowings aren’t there; this lack of knowledge demonstrates a

lack of familiarity, even though other features (like vernacular, features of AAE) show some sort of knowledge of Filipino food and connection with Filipino culture as part of the broader Asian American identity. On the other hand, a “culinary expert” register is most heavily used when talking about Mongolian (excerpts 7 and 8) and Mexican (9 through 10) foods, and his focus seems to be on describing techniques and characteristics as thoroughly as possible. This linguistic position may be a way that Huang refrains from “speaking for” another culture about its food, refusing participation in a practice sometimes known as “gastronomic colonialism” (Heldke 2008).

In comparing his speech about Taiwanese food to that directed towards Filipino, Mongolian, and Mexican foods, Huang expresses his Taiwanese cuisine and cultural fluency, which is closely aligned with his personal identity. However, there is an added benefit to the way he speaks about his own cultural resources: Huang uses language to make these foods more approachable to an unfamiliarized audience that can connect find commonality through pop culture references and shared knowledge of certain linguistic styles and slang terms. Talking about how that “Taiwanese churro” (line 60) is “unmotherfucking defeated” (line 63) is the linguistic equivalent of preparing a *sisig* taco (see lines 118–123); such adaptations help make these foreign foods more approachable for that audience.

Huang’s use of AAE features is likely motivated by an alignment with a non-white identity—like Elaine Chun’s subject (2001), his speech “[consists] of terms that [are] less common in [Mainstream American English (MAE)] because of their inherently racial references to non-European Americans as victims of “the white man society” (54). It is likely that a study of Huang’s use of AAE will show he utilizes only a subset of

features, similar to what has been described by Cecelia Cutler (1999) and Elaine Chun (2001) in situations where speakers became familiarized with features of AAE through popular culture. In the past, Huang has spoken about his consumption of some cultural resources associated with black American men, namely hip hop and basketball (see Cutolo 2012 and Pang 2013). It is likely the source of this linguistic knowledge, but such a conclusion, requires an in-depth examination beyond the bounds of this study.

Mock Asian and anti-Asian speech is another form of racialized discourse that Huang uses for the purposes of identity performance. Like Margaret Cho (Chun 2009), Huang is authenticating himself as Asian American, and one critical of Asian marginalization, and as such his use of Mock Asian “yields an interpretation of [his] practices primarily as a critique of racist mainstream ideologies.” (262) Defiance against the expectations, stereotypes, and tropes he encounters as an Asian American man are key to his identity practices. Throughout the series, and in other media, Huang uses terms and monikers like “fresh off the boat”/“FOB,” “chink” (styled as “chinkstronaut”), “Chinaman,” “Magic Dong Huang,” and “Human Panda” to mark himself and what he creates as Asian, in defiance of originally derogatory connotations. Huang also uses food-specific racist discourse—calling to mind the yellowface image of “a bucktoothed Asian chewing on dogmeat” (2014:121)—by saying to the Vietnamese American identified Rice Paper Scissors members, “Oh, we got cat? That’s the real authentic Vietnamese food!” and then laughing (Huang 2012b:04:10). As Chun argues about Cho’s use of Mock Asian, I have to say that it is debatable how effective Huang’s use of racist and racializing discourse really succeeds at doing the work it’s being used for.

FOB, which Huang employs often, has been noted for its relatively wide circulation in reclaiming contexts. Hall-Lew & Starr (2010) note that the cultural identity of FOB is no longer strictly tied to recent immigrants to the United States and their failure to understand and assimilation into the dominant culture; in current years, the appeal of FOB “draws on the increasing cultural cachet of China, and is based on a culture in which Chinese is the majority ethnicity” (18). Building upon this, I would argue that the use of FOB by multiple generations of U.S.-born Asian Americans brings the “forever foreigner” stereotype to the forefront and allows for reclamation or destruction of that stereotype. Huang takes this further by calling himself and relevant others “a/the based FOB” or “Based FOB,” fashioning an audacious or undaunted attitude to this identity.¹² This moniker, which also demonstrates Huang’s connection to hip hop culture, is a way for Huang to take a bolder, even defiant stance on the type of Asian American identity that “FOB” has been used to describe.

However, despite reclaiming “FOB” and Mock Asian, Huang may also be fashioning an “Asian American” identity that is oppositional to an “Asian” identity. Distinctions made between these identities, as previously described by Reyes (2007) and Chun (2009), would be worth further investigation as this tension may be used by Huang as a tool to perform “American-ness” in certain situations.

¹² Lil B, also known as “Based God,” is a rapper who has been credited with popularizing a contemporary definition of “based” as: “Being yourself. Not being scared of what people think about you. Not being afraid to do what you wanna do.” (Complex Magazine 2010)

CONCLUSION

There is still a significant amount left to explore regarding food, ethno-racial identity, the politics of the “Asian American” label, and Eddie Huang. That said, a clear pattern emerges in just the few examples of Huang’s speech presented here. During *FOTB*, talk about Taiwanese or Chinese food features more nonce borrowings with at least some degree of alignment with an accent and tonality associated with Mandarin; this does not happen consistently, but the fact that his Mandarin speech skills are, as he describes it, “5th grade level” (basedfob 2013).

Huang demonstrates a strong familiarity with Taiwanese food, which he connects with as part of his cultural identity. He uses his “fluency” in cooking techniques, ingredients, and flavors and mixes this speech with informal styles and registers to attempt to bridge the divide between him and an audience that sees him and his (“non-American”) culture as somehow “foreign.” Indeed, he recognizes this, and talks about such ethnically-linked foods from the perspective of an outsider to a hegemonic (white) American identity. As the distance grows between his experience as a Chinese-Taiwanese American and the food culture being presented, Huang’s speech shifts to a more standard version of American English, and the formality of how he speaks about the food (when he speaks) aligns more closely with that expected from a “foodie” or a chef.

The present study illustrates the range of meanings that can be indexed by food talk, not just as “oinoglossic” marker of social position or lifestyle (Silverstein 2003), but as a reflection of social meanings ascribed to one’s race or ethnicity. Over this range of cuisines, Huang shows he knows *how* to talk about food, but he also makes choices on the ways he goes about doing so on a situational basis. In just these few excerpts I have

shown how discourse about food is a linguistic resource that a speaker can employ to shape ethno-racial identity.

I do not believe Huang's linguistic practices are unique. This study contributes to the still relatively small body of work on Asian American speech. It provides a new direction for studying how ethno-racial identity can be shaped through speech, with or without an ethnically or racially distinct English form, in line with current studies and theories about "Asian American English" or "Asian Pacific American English" (Reyes & Lo 2009:5–6). Huang himself is bilingual, but it would be worth exploring how talking about food may serve *as an alternative resource* to fluency in a heritage language or variety; when such language knowledge can be a consideration in "legitimate" ethno-racial identity, speakers who don't have this resource may look to other ones. Future research will examine further at this food/language phenomenon with a particular type of "contested" identity—self-identified multiracial or multiethnic individuals—where the role of phenotype on an audience's perceptions or assumptions of a speaker's identity may drive linguistic choices. After all, while the phrase more commonly used may simply be "you are what you eat," gastronome Brillat-Savarin's original aphorism moves us a few steps closer to what exactly has been observed here: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are."

APPENDIX

The following transcription conventions were used in this thesis:

<i>Italic</i>	Italics indicates Mandarin speech, using the Pinyin phonetic system.
Bold	Bold indicates stressed word
?	Rising intonation
Oh:::kay	Sound lengthening
[text, text]	Overlapping speech
text=, =text	Latching speech
@	laughter (per pulse)
(.)	Untimed pause
(1.0)	Timed pause (in tenths of a second)
(text)	Audio unknown or unclear
((text))	Transcriber note

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