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Alien Comforts: The Languages and Foodways of Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals in U.S. Popular Culture

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U.S. Popular Culture

Jared Demick, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2015

My project deals with how the grotesque and simplifying distortion of Chinese American and Hawaiian Local languages and foodways has been used to promote facile multiculturalist encounters and the ways in which contemporary writers from those ethnic groups have attempted to articulate other ethnic formulations free from what I call *minstrel gestures*. These writers instead valorize innovation and transformation over an adherence to past traditions already pillaged and stereotyped by hegemonic interests. This strategy—which I dub the *creole relational mode*—has worked to varying degrees of success in creating the possibilities for oppositional cultural formations. While these oppositional cultural formations are often liberating, they sometimes can obscure persistent interethnic tensions in U.S. culture. The project's contribution to the existing scholarship lies in its central claim that language and food are invested with so much meaning in U.S. interethnic discourse because these two forms of difference are easily appropriated and internalized by individuals across otherwise rigidly constructed ethnic boundaries.

Alien Comforts: The Languages and Foodways of Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals in
U.S. Popular Culture

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B.A., University of Massachusetts, 2007

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Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Alien Comforts: The Languages and Foodways of Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals in U.S.
Popular Culture

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Introduction: Modes of Interethnic Encounters in U.S. Culture

As we navigate our way through the second decade of the twenty-first century, it has never been easier to market and consume even the most obscure cultural products across ethnic and national boundaries. I just purchased a cassette of Inuit Country-and-Western music from a record label based in Mississippi and received the tape in Connecticut in just under a week. Diners in New York City can visit Café at Your Mother-in-Law in Brighton Beach, an establishment that specializes in the cuisine of ethnic Koreans who were exiled to Uzbekistan in the 1930s (Silberstein). Foodies in Portland, Oregon chastise each other if they have not sampled the *northern* Thai food served by American surfer-turned-chef Andy Ricker (Knowlton). Teenagers in the Ivory Coast cultivate a form of slang called *nouchi* that borrows extensively from U.S. movies and television as can be seen in the term *macgaiveur*, which means magic, or the term *ken*, which is an opportunity to make money, a word derived from the name of David Carradine's character in *Kung Fu* (Newell 51). Through the twenty-first century's complex infrastructures, interested individuals can easily access cultural products across physical and social distances; no longer does one's sense of taste need to be determined by the culture one was born into.

This kind of easy access to culture has aided in the propagation of the ideology of globalization, giving the illusion that human societies are merging into a general mishmash. In other words, having access to other cultures is oftentimes portrayed as cultural mixing. However, this kind of conflation can sometimes nefariously obfuscate the complex nature of intercultural contact. As some borders between nations, societies, ethnic and racial groups break down in the name of neoliberal economic schemes, others are erected and reinforced in order to maintain

particular hierarchical social formations. Just because individuals are interested in the cultural products of another ethnicity does not mean that they wish to change how they relate to that ethnic group. Members of a hegemonic group especially tend to appreciate and appropriate aspects from the cultural traditions of the very groups that they marginalize in socioeconomic terms.

This has been especially true in the United States over the past thirty years in which the rise of multiculturalist philosophies valorizing authenticity and novelty have been accompanied by an obsessive need to more clearly define what it means to be an American. As a result, U.S. popular culture has been suffused with the intertwined impulses of fascination and disgust when considering the cultural practices of its marginalized groups. How else can one explain the fact that Chinese food is the most consumed restaurant cuisine in the nation, but that a Hollywood film studio can still release a movie like Seth MacFarlane's *Ted* (2012), which features a cartoonish Chinese American character who speaks in a grotesque pidgin reminiscent of the kind used in anti-Chinese immigration plays staged in nineteenth century California? How else can one explain that despite the fact that Hawai'i has long been conceived as America's very own Arcadia, the habits and mannerisms of Hawaiian Locals—the ethnically mixed population descended from the plantations' immigrant and Native Hawaiian workforce—are lampooned or just plain ignored by the Mainlanders who either visit or relocate to the archipelago?

My project studies how contemporary U.S. popular culture increases access to non-white cultural traditions under the guise of multiculturalism while seeking to maintain the present socioeconomic inequalities that characterize modern-day American life. I also investigate how individuals from ethnic groups not classified as white use popular culture to articulate rebuttals to portraits constructed by hegemonic interests. Members of the U.S. white hegemony have

perennially attempted to make the practices initiated by ethnic groups seem inauthentic—accusing those groups of betraying their home culture’s origins—in order to freely appropriate aspects of those practices without guilt or the burden of learning complex contextual information.¹ In order to temper one’s enthusiasm for the ways of other ethnic groups, these hegemonic cultural appropriations often take the form of grotesque impersonations, which I dub *minstrel gestures*. Food and language are the two most common targets because they are the most immediate forms of difference that emerge in interethnic contact. The differences in the words that leave our mouths and the foods that enter them starkly testify to how individuals from different groups experience the world in fundamentally unique ways. Members of marginalized ethnic groups in the U.S. have not remained silent when encountering the grotesque renderings of their languages and foodways, however. In fact, artists from those groups have focused on food and language as a way to articulate how their identity formations are more adaptable, more complex, and more uniquely local than those of the U.S. white majority. In fact, I argue these artists counter the U.S. white hegemony’s obsession with authenticity with what I dub the *creole relational mode*, a form of nonhierarchical cultural interaction that refuses to value cultural origins over creative adaptations.

I could have studied how contemporary U.S. popular culture imagines the food and languages of a whole host of marginalized ethnic groups. However, I decide to focus on two

¹ I wish to clarify what I mean when I use the words *ethnicity* and *race*. By ethnicity, I mean a shared set of cultural traditions that guide one’s daily routines and inform one’s sense of identity (this happens to varying degrees, of course). My definition of race (at least in the context of the Western Hemisphere) comes directly from James Kyung-Jin Lee: “Race is better imagined as a verb than as a noun; it is not so much a description of a particular human condition as it is the production of one. The activity of race provides all Americans with a profound sense of agency, a way to place themselves in a terrain of social struggle and to derive meaning from that landscape” (20). Ethnicity too is better imagined as verb since it relies less on ancestral essences than a willingness to continually reaffirm one’s sense of shared belonging. So what exactly distinguishes the two (at least in this study)? I see ethnicity operating more in the cultural sphere while race is evoked more often as a justification for a group’s social position. However, as Nazila Kibria reminds us, ethnic groups can be *racialized*, as in the case with the multiethnic racial label of Asian American.

ethnic groups that have endured the perpetual invalidation of their cultures and have been seen as perennial outsiders to the label of “American”: Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals.

Studying these two groups together is illuminating because it illustrates how U.S. popular culture’s tendency to focus on languages and foodways is not unique to just one ethnic group; it is a habit central to how American culture addresses the very concept of ethnicity. Also, the two groups have been treated in slightly different, if equally detrimental ways: the cultural traditions of Chinese Americans have been viciously distorted and lampooned while those of Hawaiian Locals have either been ignored or infantilized. Artists from these groups have also used their languages and foods as flashpoints for generating different anti-discrimination strategies. Chinese American artists have sought to dismantle the very notion that ethnicity can tell one anything about an individual while Hawaiian Local artists have asserted a locally specific creolized identity that has not yet been victimized by the cultural homogenization that characterizes the U.S. Mainland. A comparative study between the two groups is necessary because it reveals how the creole relational mode employed by artists from these groups does not always yield the same results. While Chinese American artists have used the creole relational mode to fracture ethnic essentialism, many Hawaiian Local artists’ use of it actually masks persistent interethnic tensions on the Islands.

My project pulls from a variety of disciplines: literary theory, sociolinguistics, creole and pidgin studies, food studies, Asian American studies, performance studies, history, and anthropology. In particular, I am heavily indebted to the work of the following scholars: Regina Bendix’s study of modernity’s obsession with authenticity; W.T. Lhamon’s insistence that minstrelsy always mixes disgust and desire; Sasha Newell’s contention that all culture is an act of bluffing; Jennifer 8. Lee’s investigations into Chinese food’s ties with U.S. history; Anita

Mannur, Lily Cho, and Robert Ku's work on how Asian American racial formation is oftentimes voiced through food; Lee Tonouchi, Ronald Takaki, Rachel Laudan, Arnold Hiura, Jonathan Okamura's work on the ways in which Hawaiian Local identity is articulated. Without the insights of these scholars, I doubt that my own ideas about interethnic encounters in the U.S. would have emerged. However, I do wish to emphasize that I am not parroting their ideas; instead, this project crucially intervenes in their work by showing how the minstrelization that is characteristic of so much interethnic contact in the U.S. and the creole relational mode which responds to it occur through multiple channels simultaneously. The two most frequently used channels are foodways and language because they are two forms of difference are easily appropriated and internalized by individuals across otherwise rigidly constructed ethnic boundaries.

Multiculturalism as a Mode of Interethnic Contact

For the past three decades, multiculturalism has existed as commonly used, if often criticized, tool for changing the United States' self-image from that of an assimilationist melting pot to a mosaic of various ethnic and racial groups that coexist in a tolerant public sphere. Paired with the idea of harmonious coexistence is the notion that members of different ethnicities will be able to exchange and appreciate each other's cultural traditions. Having grown up in the 1990s when multiculturalism was in full flower, I can remember going on a fourth grade field trip to a "global convention," in which students visited various kiosks representing different nations. At each kiosk, a representative food from that country was served, a move which gave the illusion that one could encapsulate an entire culture in one dish. The motivation behind this global convention and other multiculturalist endeavors is to increase one's exposure to other

kinds of cultural traditions in the hope that such exposure will facilitate social harmony.

However, while multiculturalist fantasies seek to correct the injustices that largely characterize past interethnic contacts in the U.S., this cultural mode lends itself to facile, surface-level forms of mixing, the kind of contacts that do not empower individuals from traditionally marginalized ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism's failure to fundamentally change how individuals from different ethnicities or races interact with each other has been extensively studied. One of the most cogent and nuanced critics of the philosophy is Vijay Prashad who defines multiculturalism as "the idea of culture wherein culture is bounded into authentic zones with pure histories that need to be accorded a grudging dignity by policies of diversity" (61). By placing ethnic cultures in "authentic zones with pure histories," multiculturalism places non-white identity outside the realm of modernity and segregates it in a separate sphere where it is acknowledged, but is not allowed to change the course of neoliberal capitalist schemes. Furthermore, multiculturalism's emphasis on "pure histories" implies that non-white ethnicities have somehow poisoned their heritage by participating in contemporary public life. Prashad theorizes that multiculturalism was born from the U.S. white hegemony's desire to undercut the radical antiracist doctrines of the 1960s: "Instead of antiracism, we are now fed with a diet of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity (63). In other words, multiculturalism hopes to hold off protest and social change by acknowledge the barest modicum of difference. This desire to maintain the status quo is not just motivated by historical ethnic and racial privileges; it is also propelled by economic incentives. In her scathing investigation into multiculturalism and the academy's complicity with its effects, Jodi Melamed argues that the philosophy uses the pursuit of money as a social panacea, as if "the abstracting and virtualizing nature of money is itself inherently antiracist, a kind of color-blind

general equivalent” (15). The fact that individuals from multiple social groups can accumulate wealth is used as proof that discrimination does not exist anymore. This kind of cultural amnesia is dangerous because, as James Kyung-Jin Lee argues, it leads to the neglect of communities perennially threatened by violence and the lack of resources. Lee sees multiculturalism as particularly damaging in American cities where it legitimates a process that he dubs *urban triage*, a method in which a society sacrifices groups of people by diagnosing them as unwilling and unable to participate in American civic life (28).

Multiculturalism fosters surface-level interactions so that it mirrors modernity’s insistence on the free circulation of goods, ideas, and people. As Brian Larkin points out in his analysis of infrastructure and media in modern Nigeria, the cultural and material conditions of non-North Atlantic societies can create “sensorial and experiential conditions of distortion as much as regular functioning” (63). These kinds of distortions disrupt the flows that modernity promises, creating an ontological crisis about its very ability to act an organizing principle for our reality. This crisis can only be alleviated if the source of the disruption is cast not as a challenger to the world system, but as an aberration that has not yet learned to smoothly operate within the system. While Larkin is interested in the material and conceptual implications of infrastructures, his contention that modernity emphasizes free and easy circulation can help interpret how the ideology of multiculturalism imagines interethnic encounters as the exchange of cultural traditions in the national sphere as ethnically-labelled-yet-open-to-all entities that can be commodified and adapted to any context. Multiculturalism desires ethnically-marked cultural products that do not require elaborate rituals of initiation or contextual modes of understanding; such deep culture does not circulate easily and prevents the kind of surface level interethnic encounters that multiculturalism needs to exist. Culturally thick traditions would make such

encounters difficult and raise awareness about the glaring socioeconomic gaps that exist between ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism's desire to only engage with the most consumable and context-free parts of a culture leads to entire cultures becoming fetishized into a set of simplified traditions and products. This process of fetishization centers around food and language, in particular, because they are the most striking and immediate forms of difference that emerge in interethnic contact. Language and foodways are integrally tied to one's collective identity so when one encounters variations to them, one's reaction, whether positive or negative, is oftentimes intense and instant, having little to do with rational responses. The reason for this is that language and food are tied to repetition, the daily rhythms of a particular form of existence adopted by a society. They are powerful generators of habits that we use to renew our identities on a daily basis. As such, they become bastions of what Paul Connerton dubs "habit memory". Connerton argues that memory has more dimensions than the visual and that it is often most powerfully evoked through performance (70-1). Since language and food are daily performances, we are sometimes blind to how ritualistically-infused with meaning they can be. David Sutton, who has extensively theorized about the relationship of food and memory, offers this insight, which I think can easily apply to language as well: "Yet, this obviousness can be deceptive as well, because food can hide powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian" (3). Sutton goes on to explain that "Food, then, can carry hegemonic identities through its very ability to connect the mundane with the pleasurable and the necessary" (4). In doing this, transitory acts of speaking and eating become affirmations of not only personal memory, but also rearticulations of the structure of the society to which we belong.

As a result, when one encounters languages and foods of another ethnic group, one is actually contemplating the limits of their own culture's ability to interpret the world. Depending on one's viewpoint, this can either be liberating or terrifying or some mixture of the two. In fact, in these unstable situations, they begin to operate as portals to what the anthropologist Victor Turner dubs *liminal* spaces, or interstitial moments when the social structure is no longer ossified. Within these liminal spaces, Turner argues that *anti-structures* get birthed. These anti-structures are "the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses" (44). Anti-structures appear in rare moments of consciousness when individuals pursue desires that are not structurally produced. Such a recognition births a brief openness where the members of a newly forming social group are susceptible to influences that they normally would reject or ignore. While Turner sees this as a liberating process, I would argue that many individuals would shy away from liminal encounters with other groups' languages and foodways and even use their interethnic encounter as a valid reasoning for not pursuing further cultural intermingling.

Multiculturalism's fetishization of language and foodways allows individuals to briefly and vicariously wear the identity of another ethnicity without the fear that one may be completely transformed by the experience. It offers this kind of safeguard through a method of impersonation that I dub the *minstrel gesture*, in which a member of a hegemony appropriates a cultural practice from a marginalized ethnic group, but intentionally deforms the appropriated practice so as to render it ridiculous and, in extreme instances, abject. Through the minstrel gesture, the hegemony can borrow from other traditions to satiate a craving for novelty or spiritual solace or even profit without feeling that such appropriations will threaten the existing modes of capitalistic modernity. In other words, a white family can safely incorporate Chinese

takeout into its mealtime repertoire as long as family members also makes jokes about there being cat cooked into the lo mein.

As one may gather, my term is inspired by the tormented legacy of blackface minstrelsy, the genre in American popular culture that codified the habit of mixing fascination and revulsion. In his history of blackface minstrelsy's ghostly presence in the U.S. cultural imaginary, W.T. Lhamon argues that minstrelization produced a cycle of lore in which disdain and desire were inextricably linked: "But we must not mistake the segments of this cycle, turning from desire for black gestures to disdain for black gestures, to be either separate from each other or complete. Rather, the parts turn together and they cycle on. Disdain is not their conclusion; replacement of one with another attitude is not what happens" (76). Part of the reason has to do with blackface minstrelsy's attempts to alleviate the socioeconomic divisions inherent within American life. Louis Chude-Sokei in his study of the African American minstrel performer Bert Williams defines minstrelsy as "that 'farce,' that painful joke at the center of the impending American sprawl which is produced by the tensions between the mask of democracy and the denial of it that lays on the surface of the skin beneath" (80). Minstrelsy sought to ameliorate that pain by paradoxically distorting black bodies into lewd, inept, and grotesque gestures. Eric Lott declares: "one of minstrelsy's functions was precisely to bring various class fractions into contact within one another, to mediate their relations, and finally to aid in the construction of class identities over the bodies of black people" (67). Lott implies here that the minstrel gesture transforms abject bodies into spaces for social articulation.

Asian American groups such as Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals are especially vulnerable to the machinations of the minstrel gesture because they have been figured as abject

in the national imaginary for so long.² Karen Shimakawa contends that Asian Americanness has been used an abject specter that polices the boundaries of American identity. Considered in this way, Shimakawa reminds us that Asian Americanness “does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object” (3). Instead, Asian Americanness must be considered as a “movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans, I argue, that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship” (3). The grotesque fluxness that characterizes how Asian Americanness has been used in U.S. popular culture not only robs Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals of authoritative subject positions, it also means that their cultures are not considered to be legitimate entities that require careful study and respectful curiosity; instead, they are fashioned into ludic playgrounds for members of the hegemony who seek temporary relief from their own cultural traditions. This process of invalidating the cultures of Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals begun by the minstrel gesture will be completed by accusing these immigrant-rooted cultures of being inauthentic incarnations of overseas cultures.

Uses of Authenticity in Interethnic Contact

Commencing with the emergence of North Atlantic modernity and compounded by the industrial revolution’s reliance of mechanical reproduction and the resulting obfuscation between the real and the imitation, authenticity has been a hotly debated concept, an experience that many

² Hawaiian Locals are not solely Asian American since the members of the group may also have Native Hawaiian, Portuguese, and Puerto Rican heritage; however, since Locals of Asian descent are so numerically dominant, the group as a whole often is figured as Asian American, especially when discussed by white Mainlanders, or *haoles*, and Native Hawaiian activists. See Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura’s edited collection *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai’i* for examples how Hawaiian Locals are racialized as Asian American.

individuals have sought.³ The search for authenticity begins with a perceived lack, an anxiety that one is encountering someone or something that is fraudulent. As Regina Bendix argues in her book about the ties of folklore to nationalism, desiring the authentic is rooted in the feeling that modernity itself is fraudulent and it is “oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through the methods and sentiments created in modernity” (8). Bendix argues that this attitude receives its greatest expression in earlier folklorists like Johannes Herder or the Grimm brothers who sought the essence of German identity in the folklore of the rural areas, but who felt that only the most modern and enlightened scholars could do justice to this precious national essence. Since modernity itself is somehow working against the authentic, then the “true” essence of life had to be sought out in populations that could be imagined as living outside its reach. European scholars and folklorists figured their nations’ rural populations as some ancient holdover from a pre-modern era, whose customs and speech ways became a living resource that could grant contact with a deep past. This kind of a belief was both blind to the ways in which the rural population was a part of the modern economy and how their traditions were always changing as well.

³ The concept of authenticity has been of interest to philosophers, anthropologists, folklorists and critics of popular culture among others. There is a sizable, if not daunting, amount of literature on the topic, but interested readers are encouraged to consult the nuanced theories of Regina Bendix, Russell Cobb, Alessandro Ferrara, Hugh Barker, and Miles Orvell. While they come from different disciplines and focus on different cultural and historical areas, they all contend that a society only starts talking about authenticity when its members feel like they no longer experience it. They also tie the practices of industrial capitalism to anxieties about the fake. In the words of Cobb: “Commodification—or the transformation of a good into a product whose value is determined by the market—is a phenomenon that destroys the artifice of authenticity, even though all cultural products have a market value” (6). My favorite image about the anxieties of the fake comes from Orvell’s study of late nineteenth-and-early-twentieth century American consumer culture: “The consumer lived nervously on the edge of this world, which was constantly liable to reverse itself into a false image of itself; as if shams and frauds were flooding the marketplace, threatening the authenticity of the consumer’s paradise” (146). I imagine a family in a Victorian parlor being swallowed by their overstuffed furnishings. My absurdist fantasies aside, as Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor demonstrate in their study of popular music, anxieties about the fake actually seriously shape the North Atlantic cultural landscape. For example, they point out that the music of Billy Joel might be popular, but it is not necessarily held in high esteem because its slick professionalism—the very quality that helps make it so widely heard—also makes it artistically questionable according to tastemakers; to their ears, Joel is sacrificing artistic vision for record sales.

Not only has the authentic usually been sourced on the fringes of modernity, it also can only emanate when one is not conscious of its presence. According to Alessandro Ferrara, authenticity has long been conceptualized as an actor's insistence on remaining faithful to their intended project even if that means running the risk of being misrecognized or ignored by others. According to this conception, "nothing is more inauthentic than an identity constructed with a view to recognition" (16). That is, the construction of an identity with an eye to how others will receive is not considered to be culturally valid. Returning to multiculturalism and interethnic contact, the concept of authenticity operates as a means of controlling the agency of an ethnic group. First, U.S. white culture's insistence that the authentic can only be found in the unconscious parts of an ethnic tradition robs members of an ethnic group of the ability to adapt, present, and market aspects of their traditions across ethnic lines. Second, whoever takes it upon themselves to label parts of another ethnicity's traditions as authentic is transforming themselves into a colonialist curator who proclaims the ability to understand the true value of others' traditions, a value that is not even recognizable to those individuals who practice them on a daily basis. In these discussions of authenticity, colonialism wears the garb of cosmopolitanism.

One night in February 2015, my wife and I were eating dinner at Chang's Garden, a Chinese restaurant across the street from the University of Connecticut. At the next table over from us, a white man loudly asked the owner what dishes were available from the restaurant's secret menu. The owner smiled and then apologized, saying that the establishment had no such menu and that all the available dishes were listed on the regular menu. The man refused to believe what she was saying, arguing that *he knew* that all Chinese restaurants had secret menus. After a couple of awkward minutes, he finally relented and ordered some Sichuanese-style dishes from the regular (and only) menu. I am struck by the man's insistence that the restaurant did in

fact possess a secret menu. The authentic is oftentimes equated with the secret and, in order to encounter it, the person seeking it has to spend time with an alien, vaguely threatening population and participate in situations in which social and moral differences announce themselves in blaring colors, loud smells, and polychromatic sounds. The authentic is never easy to find or possess; without a quest requiring arcane knowledge, an ethnic tradition runs the risk of being deemed a fake by people from other ethnicities, a front meant to throw seekers off the trail. The image of the authentic as the prize awarded at the end of an esoteric quest has serious implications for how a society sees interethnic encounters: it automatically assumes that members of an ethnic group are a duplicitous, conspiratorial cabal devoted to keeping their traditions away from those of other ethnic groups. This bad faith assumption actually can poison the utopian visions of harmony that characterize multiculturalist philosophies. This desire to penetrate into the depths of an ethnic tradition also implies that the seeker of the authentic feels entitled to automatic entry into another's culture without taking into consideration the nuance and complexity of the traditions that are encountered. Such a position has disquieting echoes of colonialist ghosts within it.

Labelling cultures as inauthentic has a tremendous effect on many Chinese Americans and Hawaiian Locals. Nazli Kibria notes that many second generation Chinese and Korean Americans feel pressured to conform their identity to practices widely considered authentic. She mentions that her informants "felt a certain tension between the pressure to cultivate and the suspicion that cultivation would produce something that was false and artificial rather than genuine" (96). As a result, members of ethnic group have been alienated from their own ethnicity. These kind of anxieties are mirrored in their funereal pronouncements of certain theorists discussing the concept ethnicity. Stephen Steinberg states that the ethnic crisis in the

U.S. “is fundamentally a crisis of authenticity” and that ethnicity itself as become “culturally thin,” consisting “mainly of vestiges of decaying cultures that have been so tailored to middle-class patterns that they have all but lost their distinctive qualities” (63). In both Kibria’s subjects’ feelings and Steinberg’s words, the concept of authenticity is revealed to be a weapon that helps to disenfranchise certain ethnic groups in the cultural sphere.

The Creole Relational Mode

I contend that artists from non-white marginalized ethnic groups in the U.S. have used the subjects of languages and foodways as focal points to articulate another view of culture, one that escapes the ideological trap of the authentic, what I call the *creole relational mode*. I see the creole relational mode less as a social process than an approach that is adopted by individuals within marginalized groups, a way to empower themselves within the cultural sphere of their society. The creole relational mode makes us painfully aware of the violent processes that brought our cultures into existence and, consequently, those individuals who use it seek no affiliation with any kind of pure cultural origins. As an abject, incomplete creation of modernity, the creole relational mode allows us to understand that all culture is, in the words of anthropologist Sasha Newell, a form of bluffing. For this theory, I borrow extensively from creolization studies, but openly acknowledge that I am applying that field’s ideas to cultural situations that are very different than usual creole scenarios such as former Caribbean plantation societies. As a result, I do not necessarily consider the creole relational mode to be the same thing as creolization; while they can occur together, I believe that they are distinct entities. The creole relational mode is more a set of attitudes that have been strongly exhibited and studied in

creole societies, but as I argue, appear in any social interactions that are predominantly characterized by an imbalance of power.

Before delving into the mechanics of this concept, it would be helpful to take a look at how *creolization* has operated as a cultural theory and what aspects I have borrowed to fashion the concept of the creole relational mode. While linguistics is the academic discipline that has done the most extensive theorizing about creolization, many in the social sciences and humanities have used it as a term to describe a total process of cultural mixing. Originally, this theory was used to describe the cultural identities in the Caribbean region, as exemplified by Édouard Glissant and his theory of *créolité*. A rejection of the Pan-Africanist tendencies of *negritude* writers, Glissant instead proposed that Caribbean identity was a specifically *local* mix that could not be replicated elsewhere. Later Caribbean writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant would codify Glissant's notions in the following manner: "Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history" (83). These writers were rejecting the ideology that the essence of Caribbean peoples could be explained by pointing out their African roots. They were proclaiming the fact that they were not relics of some distant culture; instead, they were the product of an active *local* cultural synthesis. This synthesis is not always a happy one. According to Glissant, creole societies were ones full of economic dislocation and cultural loss, which leads to a sense of *nonhistory*, a state in which the collective consciousness could not absorb all the shocks and ruptures and is unable to manufacture a narrative about the past (62).

Creolization has been applied to situations ranging from France's Indian Ocean colonies to the effects of globalization. The concept has proven to be so attractive to those working within

the social sciences and cultural studies because it hinges on the notion of creativity as conduit for social liberation. Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara's edited collection of essays, *Creolization as Cultural Creativity*, investigates this notion. According to the duo's introduction, creolization as a theoretical concept frees us "to focus on cultures in transition, allowing us to grasp the 'in-betweens,' the ambiguous spaces where cultural boundaries blur and disappear as hierarchical categories collapse into each other" (4). They go on to argue that "Creole enactments are counterhegemonic in their challenge to cultural dominance, making creolity nothing but revolutionary", an assertion that somewhat ignores the fact that creole forms emerge because of a loss of contact with one's source culture and a need to compromise with other individuals who do not share one's culture (6). Raquel Romberg's contribution to the collection somewhat complicates Baron and Cara's ideas by proposing that creolization propagates "ritual piracy", a concept which, "presumes a dialectical tension of two seemingly contradictory attitudes, if not a downright paradox" (113). According to Romberg, ritual piracy ruptures signification, disorienting the social order, possibly leading to liberation, but maybe also something far more ambiguous.

Creolization has also been used as a concept for approaching the process of globalization because it allows us to work outside the common narrative of the United States and Western Europe homogenizing the world's cultural diversity. Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato mention that "the idea of creolization constitutes a valid alternative to conventional interpretations of cross-cultural contact as a linear process either leading to phenomena of 'acculturation' or giving rise to cultural 'survivals'" (12). This is not to say that creolization totally scraps the existing models of globalization. For one, it still relies on the center vs. the periphery relationship; it just proposes that the relationship is more of a two-way dialogue than a series of mandates from the

center. Ulf Hannerz explains that “creolization also increasingly allows the periphery to talk back. As it creates a greater affinity between the cultures of center and periphery, and as the latter increasingly uses the same organizational form and the same technology as the center, not least some of its new cultural commodities become increasingly attractive on a global market” (265).

The use of creolization beyond the sphere of the Caribbean has not been without controversy, however. There are many who believe that ripping the term out of the context in which it was initially used robs it of any meaning. One of the best stated objections comes from Iain Walker, who thinks that we should not conflate creolization with mere externally produced social transformations. In his words, “[t]o describe such processes as creolisation disavows the distinctive character of those societies that have emerged in the context of struggles for political rights by subaltern populations (13). Caribbean anthropologist Sidney Mintz echoes this sentiment by stating that creolization “stood for centuries of *culture building* rather than cultural mixing or cultural blending, by those who become Caribbean people. They were not becoming transnational; they were creating forms by which to live, even while they were being cruelly tested physically and mentally” (Cohen and Toninato 5-6). I believe that Mintz creates a false distinction here: one can be both becoming transnational and create forms with which to live. However, he makes a good point that the slaves and indentured servants of the Caribbean were not trying to become cultured cosmopolitans. In fact, the whole notion of creolization as a form of cultural creativity implies a level of intentionality that might not be present in the process. Patrick Chamoiseau contends that “the process of creolization is not a conscious, voluntary, or resolute one. It occurs without those who are living it being aware of it. Because those who are living it live in these fantasies of purity, linked to former conceptions of identity” (Sheringham

3). This idea strongly echoes linguistics' notions that languages change without their speakers even being aware of it. Chamoiseau also introduces the idea that those making a creole culture might not wish to embrace that culture as much as maintain a connection to a lost home. Here the overwhelming nostalgia of diaspora enters into the picture of creolization, a connection that I address below.

Viewing creolization as an expression of creativity could potentially blind us to the powerful and oppressive social forces that characterize creole situations. Stuart Hall warns "creolization *always* entails inequality, hierarchization, issues of domination and subalterneity, mastery and servitude, control and resistance. Questions of power, as well as issues of entanglement, are always at stake. It is essential to keep these contradictory tendencies together, rather than singling out their celebratory aspects" (29). Even a creolization celebrator such as Ulf Hannerz recognizes that transnational encounters are usually not equal: "the institutions of the transnational cultures are often so organized as to make people from western Europe and North America feel as much at home as possible (by using their languages, for one thing)" (250). The problem seems to lie in the fact that "creoleness is an open specificity" (Bernabe, Chamoiseau, Confiant 84). We are left with the lingering question: is it even a good term? Even the former advocate of creolization, Patrick Chamoiseau, has pointed out that creolization still "supposes absolutes - 'my God, my skin, my language, my cuisine, my music', - which meet 'your God, your language, your skin, your cuisine, your music'. So at a certain moment we had these creolizations when these absolutes begin to interact and reproduce themselves once again" (Sheringham 4-5). Chamoiseau is arguing that the whole concept of creolization constructs this imagined scenario in which two or more *whole cultures* are mixing together to create a creole culture. However, as he reminds us, the process is much more selective and messy than that and

that we need to pay attention to the individual actors involved in the process of cultural mixing: “An Algerian who arrives in Martinique - he doesn’t bring all of ‘Algerian culture’ with him. He’s an individual who picks what he likes in Algeria and will pick what he likes in the Caribbean and constructs his relational tree (Sheringham 4-5). Individuals within one culture do not have the same conceptions of that culture. Instead of using the term creolization, Chamoiseau suggests we think of cultural mixing as forms of *Relation*, a theory which emphasizes that cultures are constantly in flux, dynamically changed by how various individuals in a society relate to one another.

Chamoiseau’s somewhat vague theory of Relation can receive further nuance when seen in the light of Ien Ang’s concept of *hybridity*, which she argues “is not the solution, but alerts us to the difficulty of living with differences, their ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analysing complicated entanglement” (149-50). More so than the term hybridity itself, I would like to emphasize Ang’s phrase, “complicated entanglement” because I think that it most accurately describes what emerges from creole cultures. Instead of throwing out the term creolization, I suggest that we tweak the term to describe situations of dislocation that yield complicated entanglements that are actively acknowledged by the participants.

Keeping in mind the insights of previous creolization theorists, I posit that the creole relational mode imagines culture to be a constantly changing entity that emerges from the complicated entanglements of interethnic contacts within a society. This approach emphasizes four particular attitudes about culture. The first is the *memorialization of dislocation*. Those who use the creole relational mode do not emerge from groups of people who have remained firmly anchored to a particular geographic location; instead, they belong to populations that were at one

point both voluntarily or involuntarily uprooted from their homes and moved to a new location. This dislocation is never forgotten because it represents the moment when members of that group realized their culture could not completely explain the world. The second attitude that characterizes the creole relational is *an acknowledgment of deprivation*. Dislocation oftentimes means that one cannot associate with large numbers of individuals from one's social group or access the necessary materials to continue cultural traditions, creating a vacuum in one's sense of identity. This sense of deprivation is alleviated to some degree by the next characteristic: *a willingness to build new traditions*. While the pain of dislocation and deprivation is never forgotten, those who use the creole relational mode do not fetishize the past figurations of their cultures; instead, they willingly take materials that are at hand and construct new traditions that better address the socioeconomic circumstances facing them. Keep in mind that while pidgin and creole cultures mix cultural traditions, these combinations are neither haphazard nor idealistic. Instead, they are constructed from pragmatic needs. In fact, the last major characteristic is that individuals who use the creole relational mode *rely on pragmatism more than ideological dictates*. The creole relational mode is a creative strategy for not only rebuilding cultures that have been partially destroyed, but a method of healing from the past's wounds.

The authentic is the nemesis of the creole relational mode because it valorizes stasis rather than promiscuous transformation. In order to defeat the status quo cravings of multiculturalist philosophies, Prashad espouses that we embrace Robin D.G. Kelly's concept of *polyculturalism*, an approach which critically "uncouples the notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture" (65). Individuals who employ the polycultural and creole relational mode understand culture is comprised of acts of bluffing, that it is the accretion of individual efforts to produce ways to experience reality. As Sasha Newell theorizes in his insightful study of Ivory

Coast teenagers and their consumer patterns, “By thinking of culture and communication as acts of bluffing, in which we con(vince) others into accepting our interpretation, our discursively produced reality, we are closer to an actor-centered model through which collective representations are built as well as destroyed” (255-6). This idea of culture as bluffing resonates powerfully within the Asian American experience. As Tina Chen argues, Asian Americans have long had to be “double agents” who have “im-personated themselves,” “performing into existence their multiple allegiances and identities—often fractured, sometimes incoherent, but always necessary—for Asian Americans” (xx). The creole relational mode’s insistence on bluffing and impersonation is the most clear-eyed response to the *abjectifying* methods employed by the U.S. white hegemony.

Outline of My Argument

In Chapter One, “Ching Chong Chinglish: The Minstrelized Languages of Chinese Americans,” I show how U.S. popular culture continues to grotesquely distort how Chinese Americans use English and how Chinese American writers have used those distortions to counter their ethnic and racial marginalization. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century when the first major flux of Chinese immigrants entered California and extending to the present moment, American popular culture has circulated grotesque distortions of second language (L2) forms of English used by some Chinese individuals, including the spoken medium of Chinese Pidgin English and the written medium of Chinglish. This mocking practice has become so persistent—periodically appearing in television shows or stand-up comedy acts to this day—that *all* individuals of Chinese descent (and those of other Asian backgrounds!) are assumed by some Americans of other ethnicities to speak and write in this manner, making it appear as if Chinese

individuals are perpetual immigrants, unable to adapt to American life, members of a marginalized population can only produce a flawed counterfeit of North Atlantic, white modernity. Chinese American writers have addressed this haunting legacy in their work with biting humor and political acumen. I investigate contemporary works that deal with linguistic stereotyping: Teresa Wu and Serena Wu's *My Mom is a Fob* (2011), Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* (2012), Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman* (2011) and John Yau's *Ing Grish* (2005). Despite the fact that each of these writers attempts a different set of strategies—ranging from violent parody to absurdist scenarios to purposeful obfuscation—they are bound together through their use of humor to fracture any static conceptions of Chinese Americanness. Each of these authors uses the creole relational mode to dispel the notion that language is tied to any particular cultural essence.

In Chapter Two, “An Ambiguous Tongue: Pidgin as Hawaiian Local Strategy,” I explore how Hawaiian Creole English, better known simply as Pidgin, occupies an ambiguous place on the Hawaiian Islands and the ways in which Hawaiian Local writers use this ambiguity in order to articulate a wide range of oppositional arguments that refuse to ossify into coherent ideologies. Hawaiian Locals regard their language with a confusingly bittersweet mixture of pride, shame, and ambivalence, a set of attitudes that is expressed in the proliferation of humorous Pidgin dictionaries on the Islands. In this chapter, I analyze the work of the following contemporary Local writers: Gary Pak's *Ricepaper Airplane* (1998), Bradajo's *Avebade Bade* (2002), Darrell H.Y. Lum's *Pass On, No Pass Back* (1998), Lee Cataluna's *Folks You Meet in Longs and Other Stories* (2005), and Sage Takehiro's *Honua* (2007). These writers, while distinct in terms of style and politics, do share a concern with portraying Local identity as a unique, if somewhat endangered, cultural formation, one that needs to be documented. These

Local writers transform Pidgin's alternative culture into an oppositional one, employing the creole relational mode to bulldoze linguistic hierarchies. However, rather than expressing coherent ideologies, these writers make room for others to articulate new kinds of identity formations.

In Chapter Three, "Multiculturalist Guides: Contemporary Chinese Cookbooks in the U.S." I investigate how recent books on Chinese cookery facilitate and undermine particular kinds of multicultural encounters with Chinese Americanness, relying on a myriad of sometimes conflicting discourses including those of authenticity, nostalgia, hipster irony, and celebrations of everyday life. I closely examine the twenty-first century publication of Chinese cookbooks in the United States, focusing on Martin Yan's *Chinese Cooking for Dummies* (2000), Fuchsia Dunlop's *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes from Hunan Province* (2007), Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz's *Mission Street Food: Recipes and Ideas from an Improbable Restaurant* (2011), and Grace Young's *Breath of a Wok* (2004). I show how Americans try to work out their conflicted feelings about multiculturalist celebrations of ethnic traditions through food and the ways in which discussions about ethnic food almost always are implicit debates about whether a particular ethnicity should be allowed to participate in a national culture. While Chinese cookbooks become tools that facilitate an essentializing form of multiculturalism, their authors also embed critiques of how Chinese food and people are perceived in U.S. culture, even going so far as to promote the creole relational mode through the celebration of Chinese American culinary innovations. In the end though, they treat Chinese American food as a cuisine apart from American food, even when trying to counteract this separation.

Chapter Four, "Taste with No Shame: Local Cuisine in Hawaiian Popular Culture," addresses how Hawaiian Local cuisine rooted in the plantation era is used on the Islands as a

way to articulate a multicultural identity that marks itself as more distinctive and locally grounded than any offered by the Mainland. While Locals oftentimes use the creole relational mode to celebrate the traditions that emerged from the mixing of immigrants during the plantation days, their usage of the mode oftentimes erases the more uncomfortable moments in Island history, muting the exploitation and hunger that working-class, non-white immigrants faced and ignores the tensions between ethnic groups that persist to this day. In this chapter, I analyze the Local discourse surrounding two food items that are rooted in the plantations' legacy of exploitation and poverty: SPAM and the mixed plate lunch. While these dishes have been covered in the mainland food media, contemporary Local writing about these dishes has rarely been studied. In order to better understand the roots of Local cuisine, I analyze the oral narratives of plantation workers. I also analyze the poetry of Lee Tonouchi and Lee Cataluna, the humor book *Pupus to da Max* (1986), Ann Kondo Corum's SPAM cookbooks, and the anthology of Hawaiian food writing, *We Go Eat: A Mixed Plate From Hawai'i's Food Culture* (2008). By looking at contemporary Local writing about SPAM and the mixed plate, I hope to show how islanders not only try to distinguish themselves from mainland Americans, but also how they attempt to obscure the persistent economic woes in Hawai'i.

Threading through all of these case studies are the twin impulses of fascination and disgust. From the perspective of the U.S. deethnicized white hegemony, the desire to experience other traditions is always tempered with a fear that such exposure will lead to the loss of a privileged identity. From the perspective of Chinese American and Hawaiian Local writers, the desire to own their ethnic heritage without marginalization has to occur through the channel of disgust, the casting of aspersion on both the hegemony's insistence on using grotesque minstrel gestures and the notion that ethnicity can be simply equated with a static set of traits.

Intriguingly, these forms of desire and disgust never fully achieve their aims; instead, they perpetuate a muddled form of interethnic contact that both yields incredible social innovations and maintains a striking socioeconomic imbalance.

Ching Chong Chinglish: The Minstrelized Languages of Chinese Americans

*"I'm Asian, so no one understand anything I say
all I can do is take your order for sweet and sour soup."*
- Rucka Rucka Ali, "Talking Chinese" (2015)

*"I do know English because I am able to tell others
that I am not who they think I am."*
- John Yau, "Ing Grish" (2005)

Chinese and Chinese American individuals have dealt and continue to deal with accusations, or, at the very least, assumptions, that they cannot neither properly speak nor write the English language. The anthropologist Nazli Kibria, who studies second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, relates how her informants expressed frustration whenever Americans compliment them on their English, a form of praise that insidiously implies that the English language is not a medium of communication that is natural to them (84). However, far more prevalent than this kind of awkward person-to-person interactions is the circulation in U.S. popular culture of ossified stereotypes regarding the English used by individuals of Chinese descent. These stereotypes render the English that comes out of Chinese mouths as grotesquely abject, adorably infantile, and always damaged. These caricatures have been used since the nineteenth century to prove that not only do Chinese immigrants pose a threat to the U.S. but that they are incapable of fully participating in a North Atlantic-dominated modernity. Despite the lingering persistence of these stereotypes over the past thirty years, Chinese American writers such David Henry Hwang, Serena and Teresa Wu, Marilyn Chin, Lauren Yee and John Yau address these figures of distorted minstrelized speech with savage humor and a political acumen that renders the American insistence on connecting speech and ethnic identity as ridiculous.

In keeping with the insights of minstrelsy scholars, the distortion of Chinese Americans' speech and writing is not simply a form of racial/ethnic denigration; the practice now forms a part of many Americans' speech repertoires. For example, the phrases "chop-chop" and "no can do" are still in common usage, oftentimes divorced from their original connection to Chinese Pidgin English. This defamiliarization of English has given American writers ludic and comic possibilities, allowing them to briefly wear an attractive mask of difference in a world where linguistic, as well as other forms, of difference were, and still are, disappearing. Not only does the distortion of Chinese Americans' English mix both repulsion and fascination, it actually *uses two kinds of stereotyping*, each with its own complicated history.

The first focuses on the speech of Chinese Americans, deforming it with a set list of minstrelizing gestures formed in the nineteenth century about Chinese Pidgin English, the trade language developed in Canton between Chinese merchants and Western businessmen. These kinds of stereotypes widely circulated in books such as Charles Godfrey Leland's *Pidgin English Sing-Song* (1876) and on the vaudeville stage at the dawn of the twentieth century. While Chinese Pidgin English died out as a communicative mode in Hong Kong in the 1950s, Americans curiously continue to use it whenever they wish prove how Chinese Americans might reside within the U.S., but are not *of* the nation. Within the contemporary era, the ghosts of Leland and vaudeville have reappeared as impersonations that have been dubbed as *ching chong*. This reliance on a minstrelizing repertoire that is over a century old shows that U.S. society has not revised its stereotypes about Chinese Americans to address the changing circumstances of interethnic encounters or the shifting power dynamics between the U.S. and China. I contend that the contemporary reliance on ossified figures of Chinese American speech is an expression of the

white hegemony's nostalgia for a time period in which its power felt more assured and unquestionable.

The second method of stereotyping focuses on how Chinese and Chinese Americans write English, fixating on the types of grammatical and translation errors that are widely categorized as Chinglish. This kind of stereotyping appears later than depictions of Chinese Pidgin English, first emerging as a phenomenon with Albert Dressler's *California Chinese Chatter* (1922) and Earl Biggers's novels about the fictional detective Charlie Chan. Recently, Chinglish has become an internet phenomenon with Westerners visiting or residing in China taking photographs of signs in China employing ungrammatical English. A series of books devoted to Chinglish signage have appeared as well, the best exemplar of which are Oliver Radtke's *Chinglish: Found in Translation* (2007) and *More Chinglish: Speaking in Tongues* (2009). This kind of contemporary attention to Chinglish is not focused on Chinese Americans as much as it is on the increasing numbers of L2 English users in China. However, this kind of cruel mockery actually bleeds into contemporary portraits of Chinese Americans, emphasizing how they are products of a defective culture that cannot grasp the complexities of Western civilization.

As one can imagine, Chinese American authors of the past thirty years deal with the legacy of linguistic stereotyping both through the vehicles of CPE and Chinglish. They do so through a variety of strategies. One vein—as exemplified in Teresa and Serena Wu's *My Mom is a Fob* (2011) and Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009)—savagely attempts to take the stereotyping head-on, gleefully employing linguistic mutations uttered by Chinese mouths, but using them to find a more ethnically affirming set of meanings than those offered by U.S. popular culture. Another vein—epitomized by David Henry Hwang's play *Chinglish* (2012)

and Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman* (2011)—portrays moments of communication breakdown to propose that the monolingual American majority is ill-equipped to handle the challenges of a globalizing world. Yet another approach—best expressed in the poetry of John Yau—uses humorous disjunctions to completely sever the connection between a person's identity and the words that they use. These various strategies are all related in how they use the creole relational mode to dispel the notion that language is tied to any particular cultural essence.

The Minstrelization of Chinese Pidgin English

While there are many portrayals of Chinese Americans as comprising a scheming ethnic group, more often than not, U.S. popular culture is content to represent them as stupid and inept. These sentiments were often expressed in comedic routines borrowed extensively from the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. This trend first emerged as an artistic phenomenon in the anti-Chinese immigration propaganda circulated at the end of the nineteenth century, a practice now known as yellowface. Krystyn Moon, who studies musical and stage performances featuring Chinese characters in the nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-centuries, notes that early public performances of yellowface were not merely an entertaining diversion for white masses; these performance pieces helped to crystallize public sentiments about Chinese immigration, eventually contributing to the vicious anti-Chinese legislation that started in California and worked its way to the national level (32). Robert Lee specifically points out that yellowface songs use the linguistic sphere as the crux of their attacks upon the Chinese immigrants. As Lee states, "Minstrelsy's response to such a crisis [the crisis of Chinese immigration] was to reinforce the hegemonic power of standard English, setting the linguistic standard for

participation in citizenship” (36). Moon, for her part, highlights how, if one studies the appearance of Chinese characters on the American stage from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, the amount of nonsensical gibberish that such characters speak dramatically increases (27; 42-3). Yellowface stage performances became efficient ways to circulate models of deficient Chineseness among the American public, a method that allowed individuals who had never personally interacted with Chinese immigrants to believe they witnessed and understood how Chinese individuals speak and behave.

Yellowface performances relied on the minstrelization of a language spoken by many of the first Chinese immigrants to the U.S.: Chinese Pidgin English. Chinese Pidgin English was an actual trading language; in fact, many historical linguists would argue that is the *ur*-pidgin, a grammatically simplified mode of communication between populations that do not share a language (Ansaldo 184-5). The pidgin was largely derived from English, but it promiscuously borrowed from other tongues—including Portuguese, Tamil, Malay, and Cantonese—and its structure archives the history of Western trade in Asia. The pidgin first emerged in the 1600s when the Portuguese began trading with the Chinese and, by the 1840s, it had become codified enough that phrasebooks circulated among Cantonese merchants⁴ (Bolton 125-38). Since many of the early Chinese immigrants to the U.S. came from coastal regions used to Western trade, they employed Chinese Pidgin English with Americans.⁵

It is worthwhile to note that many of the early Chinese immigrants to the U.S. had to stake out a living on the fringes of the capitalist economy, whether it was doing laundry in California mining town or running an opium den in the Lower East Side. Pidgin became seen as

⁴ My favorite title: *The Common Language used by the Red-Haired Devils*.

⁵ Chinese Pidgin English has been studied extensively by Kingsley Bolton and Umberto Ansaldo and readers are encouraged to consult their meticulous historical research and grammatical analysis.

the language of immigrants who were driven out of necessity into servicing the demands of other nations' marketplaces, no matter how dark those demands might be.⁶ Thus, many Americans also began to associate pidgin with the cultural desires that were too base or shameful to completely acknowledge. The simple syntax and choppy verbiage of pidgin sounded to many American ears like the monstrously distorted tolling of the aspects of the economy they would have liked to ignore: their dirty laundry, their drug addictions, their sexual appetites erupting from the mouths of Chinese people desperate for economic stability. It also just reminded people of work and the menial transactions that often characterize daily life. It is because of pidgin's associations with all these things that American culture has an extended and tense fascination with the trading language even after it faded away as a form of business communication.

A particularly interesting and conflicted example of a yellowface song is "John Chinaman's Protest" from a collection titled *Choice Dialect and Vaudeville Jokes* (1901). Written from the point of view of a Chinese launderer who wonders why, despite his industriousness and thrift, he is not wanted in America anymore, this song appears that it might be an attempt to challenge or, at least, deescalate the growing anti-Chinese sentiments in the public sphere. However, due to the fact that the song is written in a distorted form of Chinese Pidgin English, its intentions are far more disconcerting and ambiguous. Also, considering how

⁶ Most of the poorer Chinese immigrants who came to the U.S. at this point would have been credit contract laborers, who would have received money for the boat passage and a three to four month advance from companies that they would have to pay off once in the U.S. This system became rife with abuses especially since the Qing government refused to acknowledge that Chinese would go overseas for anything else than entrepreneurial ventures (Tsai 11-6). Yet Peter Kwong and Dušanka Mišćević remind us that the immigrants' reasons for leaving did not always have to be desperate. Oftentimes, emigrating from one's home village was seen as a method of improving the family's standing in that village's hierarchy: "If by sticking it out alone, even for a long time, he can buy choice land and build a new home for the family, he has succeeded and can expect the respect of people who had known him from birth when he returns home" (136). The idea of returning home, even if it actually never occurred, was and still is a powerful narrative for many Chinese immigrants and it explains why simple assimilation is often not an attractive option for them. Also, there is a sense of debt that must be repaid that perennially has plagued many Chinese immigrants. As Jennifer 8. Lee tell it, this is especially the case nowadays where Fujianese immigrants will pay as much as \$70,000 to be smuggled into the U.S., a high sum that is often collected from many family members (111).

often racist portrayals of the Chinese contain sections of professed sympathy with the injured group, one should read such professions as ironic. In this particular song, John Chinaman starts out by telling his audience just how well-behaved he has been in this country:

John Chinaman no loafee lound the sleets;

He workee hald fo' makee livin';

He washee collals, shirtee, cuffee, sheets;

He do no beggin' or t'ieffin (151).

He then starts on a laundry list of all the bad habits that he has observed in Americans including being lazy and stealing from each other. In one of the more humorous passages, Chinaman observes just how rowdy and disorderly American democratic process has become:

John Chinaman he havee no votee:

Is that leason why he no wantee here?

He no go loud 'lection day, and shoutee,

Fightee evelybody, smokee cigal, or dlink beer (152).

By the end of the poem, it is clear that the audience is not supposed to sympathize with John Chinaman, rather we are supposed to meet his repeated lament of "What fo'/Melican man/No wantee/John Chinaman/Ally mo'?" with laughter. The song makes two simultaneous points. The first is that while many Americans at the time might have viewed the presence of the Chinese to be odious, the author believes that they are the most industrious and submissive of the ethnic minorities. The second point is that if a Chinese man who cannot talk English in the "correct" way can find all these flaws in American citizens, then the American populace should be ashamed of themselves. As is also the case in blackface minstrelsy, yellowface minstrelsy

allowed white Americans to use the Asian race as a mirror for their own anxieties about their position in society.

It is interesting to compare this mock protest song next to an actual protest letter written by a Chinese woman named Mary Tape who was outraged that her daughter was not allowed to attend a San Francisco school:

Dear Sirs: I see that you are going to make all sorts of excuses to keep my child out off the Public Schools. Dear sirs, Will you please tell me! Is it a disgrace to be born a Chinese? Didn't God make us all!!! What right! have you to bar my children out of the school because she is a Chinese Descend. There is no other worldly reason that you could keep her out, except that I suppose, you all goes to churches on Sunday! Do you call that a Christian act to compel my little children to go so far to a school that is made in purpose for them...It seems no matter how a Chinese may live and dress so long as you know they Chinese. Then they are hated as one. There is not any right or justice for them (Quoted in Yin 28).

Notice the grammatical errors in Tape's letter; they are largely subject/verb disagreements, which is a common mistake during second language acquisition. In other words, they are believable errors that those learning English would make, one far removed from the mutilated phonetics of "John Chinaman's Protest."

Starting in the late nineteenth-century, many of the texts that include Chinese characters begin to fixate upon nightmares of incoherence. One of the first and most iconic of these texts is Charles Godfrey Leland's *Pidgin English Sing-Song* (1876). This collection of satirical poems and short stories about Chinese immigrants and servants is written entirely in a form of Chinese Pidgin English that is so heavily distorted that it is close to being impenetrable. This is surprising

considering that by the time *Pidgin English Sing-Song* is published, American popular culture already had codified pidgin into a few key traits. Instead of following these conventions, Leland embarks on another kind of project entirely. First, he tries to capture the variety of Englishes that were placed under the umbrella term of Pidgin English. Then he tries to capture all the phonological nuances of pidgin with an elaborate transcription system. As a result, the book becomes exceptionally difficult to decipher unless the reader spends the time sounding the words aloud. Even sounding Leland's words out loud will only get the reader so far; the Tamil, Portuguese, Malay, and Cantonese words and phrases might still baffle, especially since they are often written phonetically.

Leland himself humorously acknowledges his text's word-thickets by including an alter-ego named Ah Chung, who offers commentaries at the end of many of the poems. Leland figures Ah Chung as the Chinese servant of the "author" and his role is often to authenticate particular poems and further explicate their morals. Sometimes, Ah Chung even provides an interesting counterpoint to the thrust of the songs. A great example is "The Toyman's Song":

Smiley girley, losy boy,
S'posey make buy my toy;
Littee devilos make of clay,
Awful snakey clawley 'way,
Glate black spider, eyes all led,
Dlagons fit to scare dead.
Dis de sortey plityy toy
Sell to littee China-boy.

NOTE.—My no can tinkee wat devilo Massa tinkee wat-time he make dis sing-son. It look-see my allo one piece foolo-pidgin. Wat-for Chinaman make littee devilos, smakey spiderlo an' d/agon, if no make fo' chilos to scare 'um an' makee good? My tinkee can do good pidgin, suppose Englishee-man, insteadee pay he chilos one piece p/litty dolly, all-same one littee wifey, pay 'um littee devilos an' snakeys an' talkey, 'S'ppsey you no belongey good, t'hat ting he catchee you all over, an' bitee you galaw.'

Supposey one piece gentleum who leed dis, wantchee come dis pidgin in he family—my catchee one Chineese flin in London—he catch fai-dozen box first-chop China toy—makee sell toomuchee cheap, galaw. My too-much likee do littee pidgin long-he.

AH CHUNG.” (76).

While Ah Chung's commentary is supposed to elucidate the poems, his pidgin is oftentimes even harder to read than the poems, which have the benefit of measured meters and familiar tropes. So even though Ah Chung proclaims that he cannot understand what his Master means, the difficulty of understanding his language devolves the whole affair into a humorous chaos. This is especially interesting because, as Holger Kersten notes, Leland sets many of his poems in a didactic mode (82). The act of presenting a lesson that cannot be deciphered is a quizzical one, to say the least, but it suggests that Leland is implying that underneath the elaborateness of Chinese culture, there is nothing.

The kind of alien presence created by Leland's phonetic transcription is not mere linguistic noise. Since phonetic transcription always carries recognizable regional, racial, ethnic, class or subcultural markers, its very indecipherability clearly represents the awkward and

sometimes dangerous cultural collisions that often produce those transcribed languages or dialects. In other words, phonetic transcription cannot easily escape the literary context in which it appears. Considering Robert G. Lee's definition of the alien might be helpful here: "Not all foreign objects, however, are aliens—only objects and persons whose presence disrupts the narrative structure of the community" (3). If we apply Lee's ideas to phonetic transcription, we can see that the more incomprehensible a phonetic transcription, the more potential it has to undermine notions of transparent communication, notions that often motivate the standardization movements that accompany nationalism.

The legacy of yellowface's minstrelization of Chinese Pidgin English continues into the present day. Most often, it takes the form of what is commonly referred to as ching chong speech, or the purposeful uglification of Chinese vowel sounds. Kat Chow contends that the historical roots of this phenomenon lie in a 1917 song by Lee S. Roberts and J. Will Callahan's called "Ching Chong." As Krystyn Moon's scholarship and my own analysis of yellowface songs show, the roots are actually quite deeper; however, Chow is correct in asserting that by 1917, the phrase "ching chong" had become culturally codified as a shorthand method for ridiculing Chinese American speech. Lately, discussions about the racial implications of ching chong impressions periodically emerge when celebrities use them as crutches for humor. The celebrities who have gotten into trouble for such imitations span the ideological spectrum (although I notice that they are all largely white) and include Rush Limbaugh, Rosie O'Donnell, and Stephen Colbert.⁷

⁷ Rush Limbaugh employed ching chong speech to mimic a 2011 public speech given by then Chinese president Hu Jintao. Limbaugh hostilely rendered Hu's words into 17 seconds of animated nonsense. Rosie O'Donnell used ching chong speech when discussing a drunken Danny DeVito visiting the ABC studios: "The fact is that it's news all over the world. That you know, you can imagine in China it's like: 'Ching chong. Danny DeVito, ching chong, chong, chong, chong. Drunk. The View. Ching chong'" (Silverman). Colbert used ching chong speech as a way to make fun of Washington Redskins owner Don Snyder's launching of a foundation to help American Indians. A tweet was sent

While many of these celebrities try to pass off their indiscretions as relatively innocuous, the internet has given rise to particularly mean-spirited manifestations of ching chong speech that do not try to mask their vitriolic racism under any sort of irony, perhaps an inevitable result of the internet's anonymity. A good example of this kind of anonymous, viral racism takes the form of a meme called "Ching Chong Potato," which features an Asian boy with Down syndrome as a conductor.



This meme's attempt at humor is predicated on the lack of connections between its multiple parts: the musical timing is off; the phrase "ching chong potato" refers to no existing object or commonly shared idea; the notion of a person with Down syndrome as a conductor is supposed to strike us as inherently absurd. Perhaps most disturbing, this meme portrays having Down syndrome and being Asian as two abject, ridiculous states.

Another widely circulated version of ching chong speech on the internet comes in the form of a parodic rap song by Rucka Rucka Ali titled "Talking Chinese," which not only indulges in racist parody, but actually gets confused about which ethnic group it is targeting:

from Colbert's account which read: "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever."

My English is bad but if we're talking Chinese

I talk it perfect so come talk it to me

We talk it all day long

If you come say hi, we have good time

Chong ching chong ching chong

Now if we're talking Chinese

I talk it better and I know karate

I come from Vietnam

If you could say hi, it would be nice

Chong ching chong King Kong

Before analyzing Ali's lyrics, it is worth mentioning that he adopts a strained, nasal voice in this song which I believe is intended to mimic the sonorous vowel sounds of the Chinese language. In terms of the song's lyrics, Ali has a very imprecise definition of "Chinese" since the song's speaker is from Vietnam and knows karate, an Okinawan martial art; he seems to using "Chinese" as a synonym for "pan-Asian." The ghosts of minstrelized Chinese Pidgin English are summoned in the simplified syntax, the insistence on using the present tense, and the awkward phraseology, i.e. "I talk it better." While the song's chorus seems to invite multiethnic interaction "If you say hi, it would be nice," the sentiment is immediately undercut by the repetition of "ching chong" and the insertion of "King Kong" at the end of the second iteration, a move which equates Chinese speakers with a gigantic ape monster. Furthermore, Ali's rhyming is not very developed, a move that both makes Chinese individuals appear even more infantile and unintentionally makes the listener question his ability as a hip-hop artist.

There have been some interesting responses to the anti-Chinese sentiments communicated in ching chong speech acts. One of the most blunt and succinct comes from a definition offered on the website *Urban Dictionary*:

Ching Chong: The only word arrogant non-Asians think all Asians say.

White Kid: Hey, what does ching chong mean?

Asian Kid: It means go fuck yourself.

While it would be hard to top the pointed political rage of that entry, there have been other responses to ching chong imitations. When UCLA undergraduate Alexandra Wallace made a YouTube video that used ching chong speech to complain about Asian students in the college library, one of the best responses came in the form of a song by Jimmy Wong titled “Ching Chong (Means I Love You).”⁸ Wong opens his video response to Wallace with an ironic adoption of the subservient, infantile Asian stereotype: “Good greetings, Alexandra Warrace, I am not the most politically correct person, please do not find offense.” Then Wong casts off this foreigner persona and launches into a winking, overly syrupy pop song, professing love for Wallace. During the song’s chorus, he even offers his unique translations of ching chong speech for her:

I pick up my phone and sing

(Ching chong) It means I love you

(Ling Long) I really want you

(Ting tong) I actually don’t know what that means

Wong’s parody is so effective because it attacks one of the foundations of xenophobic, racist thought: that the racialized Other presents some kind of threat. If Wallace and other practitioners

⁸ Wong’s original video response can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zulEMWj3sVA>

of ching chong speech render Chinese Americans and Asian Americans in general as incoherent babblers that tear at the nation's fabric, Wong makes the counterpoint that there is a whole lot of fear-mongering for nothing.

The Minstrelization of Chinglish

The cultural fixation on how Chinese people and Chinese Americans *write* English occurs much later than yellowface's distortions of Chinese American speech. One of the first texts to feature a minstrelization of Chinese American writing, what is now known as Chinglish, is Albert Dressler's 1927 self-published book, *California Chinese Chatter*. This collection claims to contain 120 telegrams from Downieville, California that were relayed between Chinese people in 1874 along with the trial transcript of Ah Jake, a Chinese migrant suspected of murder. It is unclear if these documents are actual telegrams and transcripts or Dressler's own inventions, but the text does little to inspire confidence in the veracity of his claims. Dressler's text has yet to receive any sustained scholarly attention; in fact, it is only passingly referred to in Gavin Jones's work on dialect literature and it is used as a source of linguistic information in an article by Ronald I. Kim. However, Dressler's text deserves more study because it offers an aggressive example of anti-Chinese sentiment and shows how mainstream American innovations could be transformed by this marginalized population.

Dressler's introduction reveals the tension between fascination and disdain that white Californians felt not only for the Chinese presence within that state, but also the ways in which the Chinese immigrants and residents were skillfully using modern technologies like the telegram and telegraph for establishing and maintaining their diasporic networks. Dressler claims that "it is not my purpose to lampoon," but within his reverential tone, one can detect a faint

whiff of sarcasm, especially in his juxtaposition of sanctimoniously-toned sentiments with a stanza from a Christian song. Dressler more openly reveals his exoticizing aims later when he tells the reader that these telegrams will provide “a glimpse into the realism of her [California’s] romance” and that the book contains “new and unexpected stimuli.”

The telegrams themselves are exceptionally short and are written in a fractured Chinglish, often composing panicked messages:

Downieville, Cal.,

March 28, 1874

Yu Wo & Co

717 Dupont St., San Francisco

What the price of opium. Answer.

6 words Pd. 75c

Fong Wo & Co

San Francisco, Cal.,

March 28, 1874, 4:05 P. M.

Fong Wo & Co

Now price hundred sixty dollars each hundred vials.

Opium will be higher.

12 Pd.

Yu Wo & Co

Virginia, Nevada

March 29, 1874, 11:33 A. M.

Yuk Tong

Yuk Tom you lie you jap boy gon Shangi come or answer.

19 Pd \$1.00

Luk Chung

Downieville, Cal.,

March 29, 1874

Luk Chung

Virginia, Nevada

Yuk Tong all right. Don't understand what you mean. Answer.

10 words Collect

Yuk Tong

Virginia City, Nevada

March 30, 1874, 1:30 P. M.

Yuk Fong

Did the girl Wah How no come here last month. I think she is kidnapped.

Answer if she was.

19 Pd \$1.00

Luk Chung” (9-10).

As these examples illustrate, Dressler’s collection provides us with an image of the California Chinese community as one involved in all sorts of illegal activities and carving out a niche from themselves within their heavily marginalized position. Of course, the terseness of the telegraph form combined with the subject matter only compounds the pre-existing racist perceptions of Chinese Americans, making them appear uncaring and sordid.

Another early set of Chinglish texts are Earl Derr Biggers’s Charlie Chan novels. Based very loosely off the exploits of Chang Apana, a real-life Chinese detective on the Honolulu Police force, the character of Charlie Chan became a beloved figure who inspired widespread public devotion. Chan is a peculiar character, to say the least: he is highly marked as being Chinese, but lacks the traditional markers of “Chineseness” as they would have existed in the mind of Biggers’s readers of the time. The detective subscribes to the most cherished ideals of American democracy and takes pleasure in its cultural practices, especially its cuisine.⁹ He also maintains a keen sense of his inferior social position and seems content to not struggle against it. For example, in *Behind That Curtain* (1928), Chan delays ending his vacation in California for two weeks because the novel’s white characters insist that he must stay in San Francisco and solve a mystery, even after he receives word that his eleventh child has been born. William Wu

⁹ Chan’s affection for American culture correlates to how Chinese Americans viewed themselves in relation to the rest of U.S. society in the 1920s. Shehong Chen notes that this era marked the peak of Chinese Americans’ willingness to adopt the norms of mainstream American culture. She notes that there were many reasons for this. The first is that the Chinese were erecting more and more permanent structures in the neighborhoods in which they lived. Second, the demographics of the Chinese-American community had dramatically shifted by this point from being a bachelor-dominated society to being one of primarily families. Third, Chinese Americans were actively seeking out coalitions with sympathetic white Americans to effectively fight against anti-Chinese legislation and promote the image of the community within the larger American consciousness (147-77).

notes that Chan often refrains from commenting on white characters' anti-Asian remarks; instead, he just silently absorbs them (177). Charles Rzepka points out that Chan's deferential nature would later create a damaging legacy for Asian Americans as he "seemed the very model of a complacent 'model minority,' personifying the status assigned Asian American citizens by the dominant white culture in its attempt to delegitimize, by contrast, the angry militancy of the African American and Latino equal rights movements of the 1960s." (1464). While Chan certainly could never be used as a mascot for an equal rights movement, Yunte Huang also points out that Chan operates as a trickster, one of the great subversive figures of American literature (287).

Chan is an undeniably sharp observer of the white characters that surround his exploits. Through his eyes and, most significantly his words, Americans could take a bemused look at their own habits as they once did in yellowface stage performances. One of the most enduring hallmarks of the Chan persona is a highly idiosyncratic way of phrasing. Overly formal, polite, and often lacking articles, Chan's words give the impression of a L2 speaker who learned English largely through books and is enamored with its vocabulary, but still has yet to grasp the idiomatic expressions that define fluency. A concise illustration of Chan's words comes from *The House Without a Key* (1925): " 'Most warm congratulations. You are number one detective yourself. Should my self-starter not indulge in stubborn spasm, I will make immediate connection with you' " (85). Compared to the easy, almost slangy fluency of the other characters that are deeply immersed in the favored idioms of the 1920s, Chan's language is devoid of identifiable sources both in terms of time and place.

From this position, Chan articulates many commentaries on white American culture, especially the habits that he observes on his journeys to California. These often take the form of

lyrical meditations that possess gnarled phrases and vague gestures to Confucian philosophy.

Towards the end of *The Chinese Parrot* (1926), two characters ask Chan for marriage advice and he uses the opportunity to employ poetic phrasings:

“Sorry to hear that,” said Chan. “Permit me if I speak a few words in favor of married state. I am one who knows. Where is the better place than a new home? Truly an earthly paradise where cares vanish, where the heavenly melody of wife’s voice vibrates everything in a strange symphony.”

“Sounds pretty good to me,” remarked Eden.

“The ramble hand in hand with wife on evening streets, the stroll by moonly seaside. I recollect the happy spring of my own marriage with unlimited yearning” (295).

Observing moments like these, Yunte Huang proclaims, “But most Chanisms, contributing significantly to the charm of the characters, sound too much like their generic cousins, fortune cookies, which are more symbols of exoticism than carriers of wisdom. In an age that had just legally codified Asians as foreigners, a pidgin-speaking, aphorism-spouting Charlie Chan would fit the label of ‘foreigner’ like a glove” (*Charlie Chan* 159-60). William Wu offers a slightly more nuanced reading of Chan’s aphorisms, arguing that “his [Chan’s] moral authority is not derived from his experience or culture as an American, but from his heritage as an immigrant” (179). However, the “foreignness” of Chan’s Chinglish speech is the key to why he was so successful. American readers could look forward with delight to see what strange contortions he would speak next while Biggers could criticize American society without angering readers because it came from a such a fascinating and socially inferior (as many would perceive) mouthpiece.

This is important especially when Chan openly criticizes white American culture. In *Behind That Curtain*, a white woman asks him if he is ambitious and Chan responds: “ ‘Coarse food to eat, water to drink, and the bended arm for a pillow—that is an old definition of happiness in my country. What is ambition? A canker that eats at the heart of the white man, denying him the joys of contentment. Is it also attacking the heart of white woman. I hope not’ ” (308). Chan’s book-influenced Chinglish is integral to his functioning as a character here. He becomes what I call a *commonsense philosopher* (a term I elucidate more in the next chapter), using simple logic to criticize the elaborate ideologies that are used to justify the structure of America’s capitalist society. Chan’s language needs to seem like it comes from nowhere so that it does not have any associations with the well-worn habits of the linguistic standard, the language in which the targeted ideologies are often articulated.

The Chinglish of Charlie Chan does not disappear with the end of Biggers’s series of novels or the 47 movie adaptations that were made about the distinctive detective. A Chanesque Chinglish style began to be incorporated in many Americans’ speech repertoires, even eclipsing the severely reductive and offensive versions of Chinese Pidgin English. A major reason for the enduring presence of Chinglish long after Charlie Chan faded from the public consciousness lies in the vast amount of fortune cookies that Americans consume at Chinese restaurants. The fortune cookie captures the American imagination in a way that few gastronomically associated innovations have and it has become as integral to dining-out in this nation as hamburgers, pizza, and fried clams. Fortune cookies not only fascinate Americans with their purported future-telling prophecies and their inane platitudes, but also because of their telegram-like and sometimes oddly phrased English. Jennifer 8. Lee describes how fortune writers for the cookie companies pull their materials from a variety of popular culture sources, including newspaper horoscopes

and collections of inspirational quotes. However, despite these banal and easily recognizable sources, the orientalist mystique wrapped around fortune cookies cause people to automatically associate the pithy sayings on those little slips of paper with ancient Confucian wisdom (Lee 286-91). In fact, the popularity of these little slips of paper with mysterious and decontextualized sayings informs American notions of how Chinese people talk, at least when they use English.

While many Americans still patronizingly associate the Chinese with takeout restaurants and low-priced consumer goods, China as a nation has emerged as a global economic power, one that not only exports massive amounts of products to Western nations, but also invests a significant amount of money into industrial projects in places ranging from Indonesia to Zambia. Starting with the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, the Chinese economy was dismantled from its communistic structure and refashioned into a capitalist one that moved with remarkable speed.¹⁰ While this unchecked growth has led to massive environmental and public health crises and has done little to address tremendous wealth gaps, it is impossible for Western businesses to ignore and they now actively court these emerging Chinese businesses. Currently, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, these ties with China have become deeply entrenched. Doug Guthrie notes that while American politicians use heated language to portray the U.S. and China entering a “trade war,” ten of the top forty exporters from China are actually American companies such as Wal-Mart, Dell, and Motorola (115-6). In the meantime, the

¹⁰ “Capitalism” is a tricky term to employ when discussing Chinese market reforms. As Doug Guthrie points out, China transitioned into a market economy *without* privatization and the central government retains a key role over the direction of that economy. Hence the Chinese example undermines some central tenets regarding Western free market capitalism, especially as manifested through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its stipulation that all national governments privatize their major industries in order to receive loans (9-10). As a result of this government intervention in the economy at all levels, it becomes impossible to untangle politics from economics in China (13). However, Guthrie cautions us against viewing the Chinese government as a crumbling authoritarian regime that just cannot seem to let go. On the contrary, despite being a one-party system, the Chinese government has dynamically experimented with a variety of policies to stimulate growth by attracting foreign investment, giving autonomy to local bureaucracies, and seeking out new markets to create jobs (38-40).

demand for learning English in China has exploded as the language has gone from being perceived as the language of Western imperialism to a ticket to international success.

Teaching English has become a big industry in China and there is a lot of money at stake. As a result, competition can be ferocious, leading to the creation of some humorous gimmicks. One of the most telling is Li Yang and his “Crazy English” programs and seminars. Yang explicitly tells his audiences that English is the language of international power and that the Chinese must learn it if they wish to master the world economy. Yang’s language method requires that participants quickly shout decontextualized English words and phrases while dancing to techno music. Amber Woodward notes that Yang’s programs often insert ultra-nationalist slogans including “Conquer English to make China stronger!” as a way to alleviate Chinese anxieties about the increasing presence of English in their lives (127). Yang even adopts a condescending paternalism towards English speaker, saying at one point, “One-sixth of the world’s population speaks Chinese. Why are we studying English?...Because we pity [foreigners] for not being able to speak Chinese!” (quoted in Woodward 128). This sentiment is extremely interesting because it is the exact reason why the Qing dynasty authorized the use of Chinese Pidgin English in the Canton trade centuries ago.

The eagerness of China to be seen as a major player in international capitalism has led to the appearance of English language signage in Mainland China and a proliferation of consumer goods that feature English language inscriptions. However, while China might have very high concentrations of English speakers, it does not mean that every speaker has a great command of that language. As a result, these signs wildly diverge from standard English in ways ranging from simple grammatical errors to the projection of Chinese language rules on English words to indecipherable nonsense. These nonstandard signs have become so numerous and prominent that

they have caught the attention of the many Westerners who now visit the Chinese Mainland and have become known as Chinglish signs. A whole cottage industry has even developed around taking photographs of the most absurd signs and sharing them on various websites and blogs.

One of the most prominent collectors of Chinglish signs is Oliver Radtke who curates the best of his collection on his website *The Chinglish Files* and in two books, *Chinglish: Found in Translation* and *More Chinglish: Speaking in Tongues*. Radtke offers some theories about why there are so many Chinglish signs in China that move beyond the usual unfair accusations that Chinese speakers cannot learn English correctly. Radtke believes that the biggest culprits for the Chinglish phenomenon are terrible software translation programs, the low-esteem with which translation is held as a career option in China, incomplete instruction in English, and the idea that English words are visual decorations (which parallels how Westerners include Chinese ideograms on consumer goods for fashion) (*Chinglish* 11-2). Victor Mair, a Chinese language scholar, offers another theory, which is that Chinglish signage is the continuation of China's belief that approximations of standard English are sufficient forms of business communication: "There is a long tradition of Pidgin English in China—more than a century—according to which it is considered acceptable to employ any sort of English whatsoever, without regard to precision or felicity, so long as one can get by" (*More Chinglish*, n.p.). However, why the signs exist is ultimately less interesting here than why they have become so fascinating to Westerners, especially during the 2008 Beijing Olympics when the Chinese government went on an aggressive campaign to eradicate ungrammatical English signs.

The signs themselves are quite humorous because they reimagine how the English language operates and constantly offer surprising turns of phrase that can range from the

blatantly scatological to the sublimely poetic. The following are a couple examples that illustrate what these signs look like and what kinds of messages they convey:

Thinking of you still makes my heart heat tastes¹¹

Public explosion chicken¹²

NO FIREMAKING IN HARDCORE SCENERY AREA!¹³

Sometimes when these signs are presented online, they are accompanied by side comments.

Besides the obvious humor, these Chinglish signs are appealing to Western audiences because their decontextualized presentation allows us to briefly encounter new linguistic possibilities in a world where linguistic diversity is being eradicated. Radtke, for his part, sees Chinglish as a rich cultural legacy threatened by the Chinese authorities' embarrassment: "My aim is to show the nowadays endangered species of Chinglish in its natural habitat" (6). By referring to Chinglish as an endangered species, Radtke is vilifying efforts at standardization because they will remove the surprising moments of humor for the Westerner navigating in the Chinese landscape.¹⁴ Radtke too likes to ponder the nonsensical directions on Chinglish signs and the inability to understand written inscriptions emanating from Chinese sources becomes an opportunity to project whatever

¹¹ <http://chinglishfiles.blogspot.com/>

¹² www.fuchsiadunlop.com

¹³ <http://www.chinglish.de/>

¹⁴ The loss of linguistic diversity is a major concern for linguists and the literature on it is massive. The best introductions to this issue are K. David Harrison's *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge* and Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine's *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Both of these books argue that each language contains systems of knowledge that cannot cross over into other languages and that when a language dies so does a particular worldview. Most linguists adopt this particular stance, arguing that languages are an irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage. Many sociolinguists have also convincingly shown that the erosion of a language oftentimes accelerates the erosion of a whole culture. As a result, there have been countless preservation projects to keep minority languages alive such as the National Geographic Society sponsored Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. There is an interesting counterargument that exists within the field, however, led by Salikoko Mufwene, which points out that languages are always in competition with each other and that speakers choose the languages that offer the most opportunities. According to this line of thought, the Western desire for minority status language speakers to keep using their languages is almost perverse because they have the luxury of belonging to the dominant linguistic group while minority language speakers are on the desperate margins of the capitalist economy. To my mind, both sides are right. It is just a shame that a few major languages have become so intimately tied to economic power.

dreams he might possess about language. Still, Radtke explicitly sees his project as using humor to promote intercultural dialogue: “The reinterpretation of language allows for a tremendous amount of humor, and humor is, and always has been, a cross-cultural form of communication. Therefore this book is about passion, not mockery. It is my most sincere hope that this book is understood as a bridge rather than a border” (6-7). By drawing attention to Chinglish, Radtke intends that both Chinese and English speakers begin having conversations about the nature of their languages and what makes them distinctive.

While Radtke might have good intentions for his project, a number of newspaper articles appeared about Chinglish signage in the years around the 2008 Beijing Olympics that were gleeful over the fact that grammatical mistakes were rampant in Mainland China. News sources ranging from the *New York Times* to the BBC to *Der Spiegel* ran features on the Chinese government’s attempt to eradicate Chinglish signs.¹⁵ After rather soberly reporting on the government’s establishment of a hot line for reporting ungrammatical English signs, many of these articles also include slideshows or allowed readers to submit their favorite examples of Chinglish. The inclusion of these peripheral features critically undercuts the serious tone of these articles and leaves the reader with the impression that China is a hilariously chaotic nation.

This gleefulness seems to be rooted in the fact that the Beijing Olympics occurred during the 2008 financial collapse in the United States and Europe. Poking fun at how the Chinese use English became a way to alleviate anxieties about China’s expanding role in Western economics. There were especially a lot of fears around regarding the fact that Chinese banks had purchased a

¹⁵ Articles of interest might include *Der Spiegel*’s reportage on “linguistic massacres” in “Waging War Against Chinglish: Beijing Wants to Clean Up English for the Olympics” (2007), Fox News’s slideshow-included “Organizers of 2008 Beijing Olympics Seek to Ban ‘Chinglish’” (2007), BBC News’s “Beijing Stamps Out Poor English” (2006). Also, many blogs covered the issue including the *Global Language Monitor*’s “Will the Beijing Olympics Finally Eradicate Chinglish?” (2008).

lot of American debt. Some economists and news observers worried that an unstable U.S. economy would drive nervous Chinese investors to sell off the debt, which would further drive down the credit worthiness of the U.S. government. Others countered that the Chinese government could possibly attempt to hold onto the debt indefinitely and use it as a bargaining chip in its affairs with the United States. The unease about Chinese interests prospectively dominating the ownership of U.S. securities was further stoked by the theory that the sub-prime mortgage was partially caused by China and its securities purchases, which kept the U.S. inflation rates artificially low (Morrison and Labonte 11-2). Of course, such theories attempt to off-load the blame for the U.S.'s economic failures—largely a product of unwise deregulation by the American government and highly risky investments by American companies—onto China, an easy way for the American public to not have to deal with making major structural changes in how corporations operate within their own nation.

The public focus on Chinglish signage allows both American and European observers to feel that China is still inferior, that it is an intruder into affairs that it cannot hope to fathom and that its global presence is nothing more than a temporary aberration. Yet this notion relies on an immense cultural blindness: the idea that few Americans or Europeans have any knowledge of Chinese, never mind a proficiency in it. As mentioned above, this contemporary fascination with Chinglish signs is largely focused on how English is used in mainland China; however, the negative attention bleeds into how Chinese Americans are perceived. The *Chinese* part in the phrase “Chinese American” is always imagined to exert an overwhelming power; as a result, Chinese Americans are automatically assumed to be rooted in an inferior China that poorly imitates North Atlantic white modernity.

Teresa Wu and Serena Wu's *My Mom is a Fob*

Teresa Wu and Serena Wu's (no relation) archiving project *My Mom is a FOB* is a fascinating look into how first generation Asian Americans view their Asian parents and their place within U.S. society. The project initially started in 2008 as a Tumbler site in which Wu and Wu would reminisce about humorous things that their mothers did or said. They then started accepting submissions from other Asian Americans and eventually collected the best of these into a 2011 book titled *My Mom is a Fob: Earnest Advice in Broken English from your Asian-American Mom*. As the title indicates, the humor in many of these anecdotes is dependent on L2 English speakers idiosyncratic speaking habits. At first glance, Wu and Wu have arranged a collection of dark, therapeutic exorcisms, a chance for Asian American youth to excoriate their mothers' refusal or inability to allow U.S. popular culture to inform their identity. However, to accuse Wu and Wu of propagating Asian American self-hate is to do them a disservice. Their project as curators is much more complex and ambivalent. In fact, I argue that Wu and Wu borrow the overused methods of stereotyping Chinese and Asian American speech in order to purposely create a monstrosity that rebels against American ethnic erasures and attacks U.S. popular culture as vapid and unworthy of adoption.

The humor relies especially on an old minstrel show and vaudeville trope of having ethnically-marked characters mistakenly turn multisyllabic words into socially inappropriate or absurd phrases, a form of humor which questions the intelligence of those characters. One reader submitted the following conversation with her or his mother:

MOM: Why is Eminem controversial? Is it because he's a white guy who acts
black?

ME: I dunno. Some people think he's misogynistic.

MOM: What? (looks really offended)

ME: It means that he hates women.

MOM (still offended): Why would you say something like that to me?

ME: Misogynistic? I know it's not a common word, but I explained what it meant.

MOM: Why would you say in front of your mother that he's . . . (flustered)
massaging his dick?! (154).

The humor in this piece derives not only from the fact that the mother breaks down misogynistic into three very different words, but that those words are sexually explicit and it obviously pains her to utter them. This form of humor is very unfair to L2 speakers who oftentimes have difficulty distinguishing between word breaks.¹⁶ Wu and Wu try to ameliorate the meanness of some of the entries in their introductions to the various sections and at one point that declare “In light of our own bilingual ineptitude—so what is the only thing we’re capable of in Chinese is ordering dim sum?—we give our moms major props for their incredible hurdles in learning an unfamiliar tongue” (9). However, an acidic embarrassment marks these anecdotes in a way that cannot be explained away. Through these minstrelizing memorials to their Asian mothers, these Asian American writers are also contemplating the distance between their mothers and themselves, how they might live in the same house, but nonetheless occupy two cultural spaces.

At the time, the anecdote casts Eminem’s project as questionable. The mother’s readiness to believe that an American artist could become popular by massaging his dick shows just the kind of low esteem she holds American music. For her, American music is a celebration of

¹⁶ This reminds me of the old schoolyard prank of mouthing the words “elephant shoes” to someone so that they mistakenly believe you are saying “I love you.”

degenerate behavior. This comes out in other anecdotes. Another remarkable piece comes in the form of a list of pop culture icons with deformed names:

Parrot Houston (Paris Hilton)

Many More (Mandy Moore)

Larry Porrey (Harry Potter)

Papaya the Salesman (Popeye the Sailor)

Bronze Pierce (Pierce Brosnan)

Goldie Whoopberg (Whoopi Goldberg)

PeeDiddilly (P. Diddy)

Joe Low (J.Lo) (152).

While this list still relies of the minstrel show's trope of linguistic deformation, it does so in a way that also makes fun of these Hollywood characters and celebrities' insistence on adopting unusual stage names and public personas. The mispronunciation of these names emphasizes just how cartoonish they are. This tension drives many of the anecdotes and it distinguishes *My Mom is a Fob* as one of the messier, more honest portraits of affiliating with a marginalized ethnic identity in the U.S.

Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*

The figure of the badass matriarchal figure who uses English and all the other trappings of American culture in an idiosyncratic manner continues with Marilyn Chin's first prose work *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), a collection of forty one very short tales that follows one Chinese American family living in the fictional town of Piss River, Oregon. Chin's book is brash, angry, and funny, mixing excessive violence, graphic scatology, campy pornography,

severely distorted Chinese folktales, and atheistic Buddhism in order to chart the tense dynamic between the sisters Mei Ling and Moon Wong and their fiercely protective, cleaver-wielding and semi-magical grandmother Mrs. Wong. The Wongs own Piss River's only Chinese restaurant, Double Happiness, an establishment which consumes the lives of Mei Ling and Moon's parents, who work twenty hour days. Largely left to their own devices, Mei Ling and Moon become rambunctious, bold, and confident women who are both hopelessly attracted to the charms of a white SoCal surfer paradise and repulsed by the violent and sexually aggressive tendencies of that dreamscape. Each sister willingly seeks revenge against individuals who try to exploit them and the recipients of their karmic retribution are most often white males.

The only sense of stability in their lives comes from their grandmother who watches them like a hawk. Mrs. Wong, who lived through the Japanese occupation of China and endured a loveless marriage, is fiercely protective of not only her granddaughters, but any victimized townspeople. She hires Ming, a Cambodian refugee, and eventually builds him a house in the back of the restaurant after he helps her bury the bodies of harassing gangsters. She also looks after the young white men who work at the restaurant, many of whom lead marginal existences as outcasts. These maternal gestures are offset by her willingness to respond to the society's violence with violence of her own and, eventually, rumors circulate in Piss River that Mrs. Wong has magical powers.

I wish to explore Mrs. Wong's idiosyncratic English and how that not only develops her as a character, but how it also responds to the tired linguistic stereotypes that haunt Chinese Americans. When talking with other characters, Mrs. Wong employs a mixture of grotesque insults and down-to-earth wisdom and her speech, while recognizably L2 and unique, does not carry any of the stereotypical tendencies of yellowface English. Through Mrs. Wong's speech,

Chin is crafting a more complex, sympathetic portrait of Chinese Americans who use L2 English, one that appreciates strange moments of lyricism amidst the awkward phraseology. Mrs. Wong constantly berates her granddaughters' for their perceived failings with vitriolic insults derived from Chinese Buddhist sayings that remind me strongly of the Chinatown bachelor talk used in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), especially that book's iconic insult, "Wow your mother!" Towards the end of the book, Mrs. Wong's ghost follows the adult Moon and scolds her in the following way:

"Empty gourd, horse fertilizer!" Moonie turned on the radio full-blast to a hard rock station. The bass rattled her teeth, but her grandmother ghost continued her vitriolic assault. "Idiot Princess, wretched eunuch, scion of pig-gas illusions! One flick of eyelash and you've destroyed the kingdom!" (185).

Needless to say, the insult of "scion of pig-gas illusions" is not in common currency in English (although it should be, by virtue of its acrid lyricism) and it marks Mrs. Wong as a person who resists adopting the American habitus, even in her ghostly form. While insults are a baroque art form for Mrs. Wong, she is much more minimalist when it comes to other forms of interaction. When Eric the Red, a white worker at Double Happiness, wishes to marry Mei Ling, Mrs. Wong offers him this brief and to-the-point counsel:

"You no love my granddaughter and my granddaughter no love you. You good boy, finish college, become somebody. Marry your own people and be happy." I [Eric] said, "But I don't want to marry my own people, I don't like my own people." She pressed her little fist against my chest and said, "Go, marry your own people, don't come back" (157-8).

Mrs. Wong's argument with Eric the Red is fascinating not because of her anti-racial mixing views, but because she offers directions without explanation or justification. She is so sure that she understands how the world works. This expression of arrogance is refreshing because Chin moves beyond the typical portrait of the immigrant struggling to adjust to American society. While Mrs. Wong looms large in the collection, she only narrates one of the forty one tales, "Monologue: Grandmother Wong's New Year Blessings." In this chapter, we see Mrs. Wong delivering New Year's presents to her friends Mrs. Faith, Mrs. Gonzalez, and Mrs. Goldstein with Moon and Mei Ling. While she does her rounds, she makes a number of observations about the challenge of being an elderly woman in a modern world and how the younger generation does not understand the hardships that she endured. As Mrs. Wong narrates what happened, we observe her picking up bits of Spanish from Mrs. Gonzalez and Yiddish from Mrs. Goldstein, becoming enculturated to the ethnic blend of Piss River, Oregon without even realizing it. In the following passage, Mrs. Wong articulates her feelings about her granddaughters and the United States in her distinctive speech rhythms:

We run out of New Year presents. Mei Ling say, can we go home now?

All this old lady stuff depressing. Moonie say, I won't grow old. I commit suicide before forty, so I won't have to grow old. Mei Ling say, you give me rat poison, kill me first when I'm thirty-nine so you can suicide at forty. Moonie say, cyanide pill faster, we use cyanide pills. Then they rip up big box of chocolate and stuff mouths.

I say, go home and memorize "life, liberty, and hirsute happiness." Read *Moby Dick*. Someday, you open eyes, TRUTH not in books, stupid girl poop!

Moonie say, you not suppose to say stupid no more. Say “in-tel-lect-ual-ly challenged.”

They put on earphones, eat chocolates and pretend I’m not in car. I don’t care. I talk loud. I talk to ghosts (46).

When Mrs. Wong substitutes the Declaration of Independence’s “pursuit of happiness” for “hirsute happiness,” I hear echoes of the kind of humor featured in Wu and Wu’s *My Mom is a FOB*. However, there is a crucial distinction; Mrs. Wong immediately declares that critical American writings such as the Declaration and *Moby Dick* do not contain truth. According to Mrs. Wong, truth can only be found in the kinds of personal experiences that she has had. When her granddaughter Moon offers a more politically correct alternative to the word “stupid,” Mrs. Wong immediately brushes off such linguistic watchdoggery as an inconsequential obfuscation of one’s intended aims. She persists in her ways despite the obstacles that she encounters. The last line in the passage—“I talk to ghosts”—is especially poignant because it emphasizes how her granddaughters are making pretend she does not exist, how only the ghosts of her past can appreciate her worldview and the wisdom that she has accrued over time.

David Henry Hwang’s *Chinglish*

David Henry Hwang’s *Chinglish* follows the humorous and sometimes dangerous exploits of Daniel Cavanaugh, a Cleveland sign-maker who is trying to sell grammatically correct English signs in a provincial Chinese city. The play premiered at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre from June-July 2011 and then opened on Broadway at the Longacre Theatre in October 2011. It then was produced by the Berkeley’s Repertory Theatre and South Coast Repertory in Los Angeles. Hwang even tried to get it produced in mainland China, but was foiled when a

scandal in China broke out that eerily mirrored some of the play's major plot points. However, the play did play at the Hong Kong Arts Festival in March 2013.¹⁷

Hwang's play is critically text-dependent and it includes Chinese ideograms, *pinyin* transliterations, and English words that circle each other in a series of hilarious mistranslations. The entire play centers around how certain cultural concepts cannot easily cross languages and that those who can translate languages often use their position to manipulate messages. One of the most prominent cultural concepts that the play addresses is *guanxi*, or the Chinese form of business networking that relies heavily on personal relationships and gift exchanges. Throughout the play, Daniel and Peter Timms, his expatriate translator, try to establish these *guanxi* relationships with the Chinese businesspeople they encounter, but they are often oblivious to how those relationships are highly changeable and how they are communicated through subtle nuances of language.¹⁸ Daniel comes to China after running his company into the ground when it got embroiled in the Enron scandal. He now tries to sell his services as a sign-maker who uses dependably accurate English translations, thus eliminating the Chinglish signs so embarrassing to Chinese authorities. The play opens with Daniel giving a slideshow of some Chinglish signs which make statements such as "Financial Affairs Is Everywhere Long," "Fuck the Certain Price of Goods," and "To Take Notice of Safe: The Slippery Are Very Crafty" (7). This positions us roughly in the same terrain explored so thoroughly explored by Oliver Radtke: a Mainland China

¹⁷ According to David Ng, a sensational scandal broke out in April 2012 when a high-ranking politician and his wife poisoned a British expat businessman. While Hwang wrote the play before the scandal broke, the plot does mirror it in some ways, especially with the British expat Peter Timms and his relationship with a conniving Chinese power couple.

¹⁸ Doug Guthrie notes that while *guanxi* is still a huge part of Chinese economic ties, it is being eroded by government's attempts to enforce a "rational-legal" system that relies more on competitive pricing and quality. Part of the reason for this is that *guanxi* is a relic of the shortage economy that China had to endure during the Maoist years, an era in which your success and sometimes survival were tied to who you knew (100).

so enamored with Western capitalism that it is adopting its methods and modes before it fully understands them.

However, while Daniel might be fluent in English, he does not understand the Chinese language at all and is often dependent upon others to translate for him, each with their own agendas. Daniel ends up getting into an extramarital affair with Xi, the vice minister of the local government to whom he is trying to sell his services. Due to the fact Daniel does not understand Xi's Chinese or her aims in the relationship, he mistakenly assumes she is madly in love with him. At one point in the play he attempts to say "I love you" in Chinese but does not grasp how changes in tone radically can change his meaning. As a result, he tells Xi various phrases including "my fifth aunt," "absolutely useless," "dirty sea mud," "snail loves cow," "frog loves to pee" (106-7). Hwang has Daniel play the buffoon here, which an interesting response to centuries of Westerners portraying the Chinese as being unable to properly pronounce the English language. In fact, Hwang's portrayal of Daniel's attempts to express his love to Xi seems to be an act of vitriolic revenge: "I love you" is rendered into bizarre phrases, implying that he somehow cannot fathom the meaning of love in Chinese. This implication becomes a critical plot point later on when Xi refuses to leave her husband and run away with Daniel; she only wished to cultivate an intimate form of *guanxi* with him, nothing more.

Sometimes Hwang's play descends into a maelstrom of linguistic confusion, especially whenever translators enter into the plot. In those moments, there are monolingual Chinese characters speaking, the play's translation of their words, and the translating characters changing those words into English for Daniel. Ben Brantley, the *New York Times*'s critic contends that the play is "so conscientious in leading us through the maze of cultural confusion at its center — with 'you are here' signs at every new twist in the labyrinth — that we're never allowed to feel

lost ourselves.” While this might have been true of the Longacre’s stage performances, the published script is not so unambiguous. When reading the script itself, the page erupts into all kinds of linguistic signs. Daniel attempts to explain his connection with Enron and apologize for it, but this does not come across to his Chinese business associates. Instead, Daniel must powerlessly go along with how the translators and the business associates are constructing a myth of him being a powerful member of the company. In the end, Daniel gets the business contract because of this mistaken translation, but leaves the situation feeling that very little was truly communicated and resolved. In moments like these, Hwang’s play is meditating on how China and the United States are talking a lot at each other, but doing very little careful consideration with each other’s words, a metaphor for the two nations’ current economic and cultural relations.

Hwang’s play is extremely skeptical that neoliberalism’s emphasis on global business relations is actually a form of cross-cultural contact. The various commercial and governmental interests that Daniel encounters in Guiyang all have their own hidden agendas, but not only is Daniel unaware of these machinations, he cannot even completely figure out anything they are trying to tell him. Daniel never recognizes his cultural ineptitude, he never learns Chinese yet this does not stop him from giving a seminar in front of the Commerce League of Ohio on how to do business in China. While Hwang’s play does not deal with Chinese American identity, the way it gently pokes fun at Daniel’s inability to speak Chinese avenges the stereotypes Chinese Americans have endured about their inability to use English correctly.

Lauren Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman*

Lauren Yee's satirical farce *Ching Chong Chinaman* (2008) follows the academic, professional, and romantic misadventures of the Wongs, a socially inept, ultra-assimilated Chinese American family who are unable to find their place within American society. Originally performed at Berkeley's Impact Theatre in 2008, Yee's play has been produced by the City Lights Theatre Company in San Jose, the Pan Asian Repertory in New York, the A-Squared Theatre Workshop in Chicago, Mu Performing Arts in Minneapolis, the fu-GEN Theatre Company in Toronto, among others.¹⁹ Despite receiving lukewarm reviews from critics, the play eventually was published in 2011 by Samuel French.²⁰ Yee's satire addresses how Americans who identify with the white hegemony (but are not necessarily white themselves) seek out superficial markers of race and ethnicity as a way to compensate for their own sense of lack. Critically, some of the most important moments of cross-cultural communication in the play center on language and the ways in which individuals automatically assume that others are linguistically deficient.

The play follows the Wong family: Ed, the father; Grace, the mother; Desdemona, the daughter; Upton, the son. The Wongs have assimilated into American society; however, for this, they are rewarded with a sense of rootlessness and existential despair that they try to mask in various ways: Grace seeks satisfaction in housework and shopping; Ed craves the bucolic pleasures of golf; Desdemona yearns to be accepted into Princeton; Upton dreams of being a video game star in Korea. These forms of escape are revealed to be shallow and temporary when

¹⁹ I culled the production history from Yee personal website.

²⁰ The most cogent (and damning) of the reviews comes from the *New York Times*'s Ken Jaworowski: "In the end 'Ching Chong Chinaman' remains a show that frequently mistakes manic energy for genuine comedy, a good-hearted play in need of a larger measure of nuance. Even though you might not recollect much of the tale after it ends, there's still fun to be had while you're watching."

Jinqiang, an indentured servant from China, joins their family. Hired by Upton to do his math homework while he plays *World of Warcraft*, Jinqiang's Chineseness both accentuates the Wongs' insecurities and becomes a canvas for their fantasies. When Jinqiang first enters their home, they are not only unsure how they should treat him; they cannot even pronounce his name:

UPTON. His name is Jinqiang.

ED. Come again?

UPTON. (*deliberately*) JIN-qiang.

ED. "Ching Chong?"

DESDEMONA. Omigod.

GRACE. Darling, that name sounds a little racist.

UPTON. "Jinqiang": spelled J-I-N-Q-I-A-N-G.

GRACE. And that's not how you spell Ching Chong, dear.

DESDEMONA. Mom: you can't say "Ching Chong." That's like the most offensive thing in the world.

ED. But if I called my fellow Asian Americans "Ching Chong"-

DESDEMONA. Racist.

ED. I didn't finish.

DESDEMONA. You *can't* say that.

ED. It's not like we're called him "Chinky" or something.

GRACE (*to DESDEMONA*) But if his name *is* Ching Chong, dear. . .

UPTON. Just call him J.

DESDEMONA. We need to return him to his natural environment. We don't know anything about his diet, his lifestyle, his basic wants. We don't even have

the right sensitivity training to even begin to cater to his needs as a displaced person.

UPTON. Dad, if we send J away, who know what kind of racism, oppression, and torture he'll face without our protection and benevolence. Plus, it's for school.

ED. Well, we are benevolent (10-11).

Yee packs a lot of humorous social commentary into this family quibble over their new Chinese indentured servant. The only clear thing to emerge from this confused conversation is that the family is collectively ill-equipped to deal with issues of race and ethnicity. Each member of the family adopts a unique yet wayward approach to Jinqiang's cultural difference: Ed uses his own Chinese ancestry as a way to appropriate damaging anti-Asian stereotypes; Desdemona subscribes to political correct terminology while treating Jinqiang as if he is a zoo animal; Grace tries to smooth over tensions and ignore the issue. Out of the whole family, Upton is the one who best understands how to pronounce Chinese, but he also thinks that China is a morass of oppression filled with people willing to do whatever Americans desire. What all of these approaches share is the fact that they allow each member of the Wong family the opportunity to feel enlightened. The tension in the scene is predicated on the fact that Jinqiang's name so closely resembles "Ching Chong," turning him into a living manifestation of the U.S.'s violent legacy of dealing with racial and ethnic difference. It is almost as if the ghosts of nineteenth century lynching parties have come to roost within the Wong home.

However, while Yee brings up the specters of Chinese Pidgin English and ching chong speech, she refuses to allow them into the play's dialogue. In fact, the script begins with this note: "At no time do the **CHINESE WOMAN** or **JINQIANG** speak with Asian accents. Or any of the characters, for that matter" (n.p.). Instead, Yee attempts to show how twenty-first century

Americans deal with linguistic difference in ways that differ from the usual methods of minstrelsy. The first of these methods is the use of what linguist John Lipski calls “foreigner talk” and it is employed by Grace when she orders Chinese takeout on the phone.²¹

GRACE. FLAT NOODLES WITH EGGS, VEGETABLE PAD THAI- (*stops, then to offstage DESDEMONA*) What’s Chinese for ‘pad thai?’ (*to phone*) The – uh. . .(*stops, checks the menu*) **THE NUMBER FIVE, THE NUMBER FOURTEEN. . .THE NUMBER TWENTY. ALL RIGHT,** uh, doomo arigato...thank you (15).

Grace masks her fear of engaging Chinese restaurateurs by assuming that they do not have an adequate command of English. She shouts into the phone, believing that the increased volume will make her better understood. Since she does live in the twenty-first century, she makes two attempts at cultural sensitivity—trying to find the Chinese term for pad thai and saying thank you in Japanese—albeit mistaken ones that reveal how little she knows about Chinese culture.

While botched, Grace’s attempts at cross-cultural interaction are still preferable to her daughter Desdemona’s mode of complete non-engagement. Desdemona even coaches herself on how she should Jinqiang: “Treat him with respect: don’t look at him, don’t make eye contact” (28). As Vijay Prashad says about multiculturalism, her form of cultural sensitivity is really an evasion of dealing with cultural difference at all. She would rather that Chineseness did not exist at all, that is, until she later discovers that her own Chinese heritage might help her get admitted

²¹ Foreigner talk as defined by John Lipski: “[N]ative speakers’ deliberate simplification of their language when speaking to foreigners or their notions of how foreigners speak their language, especially foreigners considered to be culturally or racially inferior. This is not the same as speaking more slowly, and with repetition, or speaking louder, which universally occur when one’s interlocutor has difficulties with the language of the conversation. Foreigner talk in the technical sense always carries the implicit and often explicit connotation of inferiority, baby-talk, or even ‘monkey talk,’ which is why in popular culture talking animals or humanoid creatures are often depicted as using the current local versions of foreigner-talk” (1).

into Princeton. The Chinese language itself gets revenge on Desdemona later in the play during a surreal scene in which a language lesson podcast actually *talks to and insults* her:

CHINESE LESSON. *Er.*

DESDEMONA. *Er.*

CHINESE LESSON. *San. / Si. Wu—*

DESDEMONA. *San. . .*

CHINESE LESSON. *Liu, liu—*

(DESDEMONA hits the iPod, which then begins to skip.)

DESDEMONA. *Stupid motherfu—*

CHINESE LESSON. *Liu, liu . . . (a sudden break) Can't even count to ten, you piece of shit (43).*

In this scene, Desdemona receives retribution for how she has treated Jinqiang and she also is reminded by how much distance lies between being Chinese and being an assimilated Chinese American.

What does Jinqiang think of all this? The audience does witness him talking to his mother, who is a telemarketer and phone sex operator, about his impressions of weird American habits. We also discover that despite being hired to do Upton's math homework, Jinqiang is terrible at math and that he only accepted the job because he dreams of appearing on a TV show called *America's Next Top Dancer*. The most significant interactions he has in the play involve Grace, with whom he develops a form of communication that does not involve words: dance.

GRACE. Did you just say something?

J. Yes?

GRACE. You speak English!

J. No.

GRACE. Then how are we talking?

J. Body language.

GRACE. Oh. Well, that makes sense. You *do* dance well, Ching Chong.

J. It's Jinqiang.

GRACE. Ching Chong?

J. You can just call me J (51).

Grace and Jinqiang have the most honest and intimate interactions in the play and they eventually become romantically involved with Grace becoming pregnant, as a result. However, the connection established through the body language of dance still does not completely erase the cultural gaps between them because Grace is still unable to pronounce Jinqiang's name and he gives up trying to teach her.

Much like Hwang's *Chinglish*, Yee's *Ching Chong Chinaman* uses humor to reveal how ill-equipped twenty-first century Americans—whether they be white or the assimilated Wongs—are to deal with the nuances of other cultures such as Mainland China. Also, Yee's play plays with the guilt that Chinese Americans have about become more culturally aligned with the U.S.'s white hegemony and many scenes imply that the farther Chinese Americans are from their Chinese heritage, the less chance they have of possessing an authentic, stable sense of self. In this way, Yee's play does *not* participate in the creole relational mode at all.

John Yau's *Ing Grish*

Since his first collection of poems *Crossing Canal Street* (1975), John Yau has crafted a body of abstract and deeply philosophical poems that deliver a deadpan absurdism.²² His work has deep affinities with the New York School poets John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch as well as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets such as Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, but his aesthetic is nonetheless extremely idiosyncratic. His poems essentially take apart systems of thought and tinker with their flaws in order to produce oddly beautiful aesthetic objects that are completely useless to any ideological agenda. As Xiaojing Zhou observes, Yau does this primarily by fracturing the poetic “I”, a move which reveals, “a problematic correlation between intelligibility and mimetic representation” (202). In addition to this, Yau’s poems often juxtapose contradictory voices and indulge in extensive wordplay; as a result, they almost always willfully veer into ambiguity and incoherence. His body of work could be characterized as smirking skepticism, probably the most apt position a Chinese American artist can muster in response to the reductive manner in which U.S. society imagines ethnicity. Steven Yao theorizes that ethnicity in Yau’s poems “names a (subordinated) location in the social order that thereby affords a critical perspective on existing hierarchies and apparatuses of cultural privilege” (234). I wish to push Yao’s theory here and propose that Yau’s aesthetic is even more radical: if Chineseness represents an amorphous abjection that threatens a modernity racialized as white, then John Yau’s poems twist apart conventional uses of language in order to invite us to consider all systems as abject, inherently flawed creations.

Yau is perhaps most famous for a decades-long poetic series that has spanned across multiple books, “Genghis Chan,” which winkingly responds to the character of Charlie Chan

²² Yau is also a respected visual artist and art critic. He has written studies of Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Yves Klein among others.

and, as observers such as Xiaojing Zhou and Yunte Huang have noted, sometimes plays with the sounds of Cantonese in order to critique attempted reductions of Chinese identity. Rather than discuss this admittedly fascinating collection of poems, I would rather discuss Yau's more recent collection, *Ing Grish* (2005), which has not yet received scholarly attention and is explicitly fixated with language. In this collaboration with visual artist Thomas Nozkowski, Yau explicitly addresses the ways in which Asian forms of English are deformed by a linguistic system already unstable and open to infinite mutations. The volume is remarkable not only because it contains poems that employ voices carrying markers of Asian American identities, but because Yau departs from his playful abstractions and flirts with autobiography. The most eye-catching poem is the last one, "Ing Grish," which uses an arsenal of techniques to sever the connection between one's words and one's identity: flippancy, puns, paradoxes, and absurdism. The poem is organized as a series of aphorisms which paradoxically do not offer any answers. Yau opens the poem with a purposely glib observation:

I never learned Singlish

I cannot speak Tanglish, but I have registered

the tonal shifts of Dumglisch, Bumglisch, and Scumglisch (62).

Yau begins by referring to two forms of English influenced by Asian languages, the first describing Singapore's vernacular and the latter referring to the street talk heard in Manila. He then performs the almost punk procedure of rendering the terms ridiculous through scatological substitution and simplified rhyming. This infantile distortion carries a series intent though; the mention of the tongues of Dumglisch, Bumglisch, and Scumglisch conjure memories of how Asians

and Asian Americans have been accused of trespassing on the English language. This legacy of racism reaches raw dimensions in the next aphoristic bit:

I do not know Ing Grish, but I will study it down to its
black and broken bones (62).

Yau writes the word “English” as “Ing Grish” here which reflects how Chinese L2 English speakers sometimes mispronounce English words. More specially, the L2 substitution of “l” with “r,”—a habit that occurs because Chinese languages do not distinguish between the two sounds—has long been cited by racist interests as a reason why Chinese Americans are not Americans. In this passage, Yau’s juxtaposition of this yellow English stereotyping next to the image of black and broken bones summons the legacy of violence against Asian Americans in the U.S.

The speaker in the poem—which, given the way the poem’s details correlate to Yau’s biography, seems to be Yau himself, although one always wonders with such an experimental poet—then adopts markers of Chinese American identity only to dismantle them, implying that one’s sense of ethnic identity need not be encoded with particular practices. The speaker then spends the rest of the poem declaring that he does and does not know English and Chinese. Between the flip-flopping assertions, the speaker articulates frustrations about constantly being told who he is. Witness the interplay between the following aphoristic sections:

The fact I disagree with the man who translates from the Spanish
is further proof that I am not Chinese because all the Chinese
living in America are hardworking and earnest
and would never disagree with someone who is right
This proves I even know how to behave in English

I do not know English because I got divorced and therefore

I must have misunderstood the vows I made at City Hall

I do know English because the second time I made a marriage vow

I had to repeat in Hebrew (63)

In these brief yet dense anecdotes, the speaker makes a number of affiliations and has a number of social experiences that cannot fit under the stringently reductive label of Chinese American. Furthermore, Yau makes the point that speaking a language enables particular kinds of behaviors; by switching languages, one's identity becomes more chameleon-like.

While the ability to transform through a variety of social practices could be seen as freeing, it also takes on a sad note as Yau documents the strained relationship that he has with his parents. In fact, he concludes the poem with these lines:

I do not know either English or Chinese and, because of that,

I did not put a gravestone at the head of my parent' graves

as I felt no language mirrored the ones they spoke (65)

In a society in which language is so intimately tied to ethnicity, the experiences of those who refuse to fit reductive definitions of ethnicity run the risk of having their experiences and insights silenced, or, at the very least, scrambled into gibberish. Yau contends that there is something unspeakable about the condition of being Chinese American.

While "Ing Grish" is a fascinating, complex poem, its autobiographical focus really marks it as an aberration in Yau's corpus and the rest of the poems in *Ing Grish* address ways of using language rather than individual experience. Of these poems, the one that is most explicitly

addresses anti-Chinese sentiments is “In the Words of Sax Rohmer,” which takes short phrases from the English novelist’s racist Fu Manchu novels and repeats them in jumbled fashion until they make little or no sense. The opening couplet poses the reader with a cryptic, impossible-to-completely-imagine image:

A cultured thumb

Varnished and repellent (7)

How exactly can one tell if a thumb is cultured? Who would varnish their thumbs (or any body part, for that matter)? The next couplet only further complicates matters by offering a string of articles and conjunctions:

Of the and with the

Of it and with it (7)

Through the interpretative fog, the reader is forced to stumble, receiving surprises in clusters of repeating-yet-ever-so-slightly-different phrases:

The repellent nails of a cultured tigress

The delicious nails of a long domination

The square nails of an unforgettable hand

The delicately repellent thumb (7)

The repeated words and images breed familiarity which makes the reader initially feel that they are uncovering some kind of narrative, or, at least approaching an understanding about Yau’s aims. However, this kind of comfort proves false because closer inspection of each phrase which reveals more and more images that cannot quite be put together. By using Rohmer’s orientalist phraseology, but arranging it in a manner that defies interpretation, Yau shows how racist

thinking transforms ethnicity into a paranoid collection of dark, threatening, and morphing markers that fit any situation as needed.

In other poems in *Ing Grish*, Yau targets the English language itself. The long poem, “English for You,” toys with abstraction to show how language can create impossible states:

They want to say the words
they are about to be in
the things they say
wanting the impossible
to speak with the same tongue (44)

By stringing together these pronoun-heavy phrases, Yau quickly makes the reader lose sense of the poem’s subject, inducing a sense of dislocated, abstract delirium that the rest of the poem amplifies. By section five, the reader encounters such gnarling phrasing as this:

You had to do nothing to do
With you it was another you
Who was there in it this time
Who could do nothing once
It was you and you had it all
For there was nothing about
The nothing you could do (45)

At this point in the poem, it is no longer productive to ask the question, “What is it about?” Yau is making the point that language can generate impossibility and he is reveling in reducing standardized English into a taunting noise. Steven Yao contends that these sorts of flights into abstraction are Yau’s “most notable accomplishment” because they “move beyond the limits of

conventional reference in the service of a cultural politics of recognition” (240-1). I am not so sure. In passages like these, Yau is promoting more a cultural politics of nonrecognition, an alienation so complete that it does not even wish to be articulated in relatable phraseology because those same phrases are used to limit the possibilities of individuals. Yau is not trying to construct a new kind of social or ethnic affirmation, he casts aspersions on all modes of social belonging.

Yau’s campaign to discover hiccups in the system that is the English language continues in the poem “Language Lessons.” While “English for You” adopts a sober bureaucratese, “Language Lessons” gleefully indulges in using homophones to break words apart and actually derail the poem’s own line of argumentation:

On occasion I have been known to speak *Phlegm*

A language that leaves an impression on the listeners

When the speaker is insistent or emphatic

Being the recipient of *Phlegm*

Does not mean one understands *Flemish* (56)

Through this homophonic shuffle, Yau reveals just how susceptible to misinterpretation and mutation words really are. This kind of fragility leads to an existential dilemma: should we trust words at all?:

That the tongue does not speak

Either *Irish* or *You-Ish*

It means the world

is neither crying nor smiling (57)

Here language is located is neither an I nor a You and we are given a vision of a world suspended between emotional states. Yau ends the poem with this image of cultural paralysis, giving us a portrait of a society unable to handle the shortcomings of its communicative modes. Yau's *Ing Grish* is a crucial text to study because unlike other Asian American writers such as Marilyn Chin or David Henry Hwang, Yau does not wish to respond to the damaging legacy of Chinese American linguistic stereotyping so much as to destroy the language that articulated those stereotypes.

Conclusion

This chapter covers the practice of linguistic distortion of Chinese American speech and writing from a wide variety of sources. Despite the fact that these artists do not share an ideological aim, they do all engage in shaping the ethnic as grotesque (whether as a form of discrimination or affirmation). The minstrelization of Chinese American languages never leads to a politics of affirmation, even when employed as a form of poetic revenge against the white hegemony that first perpetuated it. In this instance, the minstrel gestures and the creole relational mode responses to them only fracture ethnicity into a series of signs that do little to explain the lived experience of Chinese Americans.

An Ambiguous Tongue: Pidgin as Hawaiian Local Strategy

“A white salesman sitting about the bottle with a party of Japanese, as the evening grew more convivial, lapsed more and more into ‘pidgin,’ until one of the Japanese exclaimed in disgust, ‘Why the --- don’t you talk English?’ To share in so intimate a thing as a dialect, especially if it be disparaged, one must ‘belong.’”

- John Reinecke²³

“I cannot talk proper English in school because I gon look like one dummy. I gotta say ‘da kine’ li’dat wot, “Whozat, ‘cuz, yea das da guy right dea, eh? Das da guy.” I cannot be talking, “Hey, man, how are you doing? Salutations, my friends.” If I do that, people gon look at me like, “Eh, you da kine, eh?”

- A student interviewed in *Ha Kam Wi Tawk Pidgin Yet?*

Hawaiian Creole English, better known simply as Pidgin, occupies an ambiguous place on the Hawaiian Islands and in the rest of the United States. The only time it has appeared in broader American popular culture was in the brief wave of hapa haole songs in the 1920s (Kanahele 298). Furthermore, for a language with an extensive repertoire of concise and emphatic expressions, it occupies a most undefined space in Hawaiian Locals’ consciousness, a bittersweet mixture of pride, shame, and ambivalence. As observed by sociolinguists John Reinecke and Susan Thomson and captured in documentaries such as *Ha Kam Wi Tawk Pidgin Yet?*, Locals cannot even agree on its status as a language. Modern linguists dub it Hawaiian Creole English, contending that it is a creole complete with grammatical rules and a fully articulated vocabulary, a language that emerged in the late nineteenth century when plantation workers from many cultures needed to efficiently communicate with each other. Some Local speakers remember the severe scolding they received at the hands of zealous haole teachers and see it as broken English, a bad habit of perpetuating idiosyncratic phrases developed long ago by

²³ Reinecke, “‘Pidgin English’ in Hawai‘i: A Local Study in the Sociology of Language,” 788.

immigrants trying to grapple with English's unfamiliar contours.²⁴ Other Locals see Pidgin as an elective style that one uses to emphasize their Island roots, a way to announce to others that they are not haolified Islanders who look to the Mainland for guidance on how to live life.

Far from being a problem, I argue that Pidgin's ambiguous status in Hawai'i is exactly what it needs to survive as a parallel register of discourse. No longer needed as a medium of communication between workers who do not share a language, Pidgin has morphed into a language of strategy. Its ambiguous nature gives it situational elasticity, allowing it to speak to a variety of circumstances. Working with the pioneering scholarship of Stephen Sumida and Rob Wilson, I argue that Hawaiian Local writers have seized onto Pidgin's ambiguous nature as a way to articulate the complex identifications that Locals try to establish between each other as an Island society and with a Mainland whose economic dominance is still transforming the Island landscape. Some writers will employ Pidgin in order to stake a claim for Local culture's authenticity while others use Pidgin to explore how some segments of the Local population feel trapped by their economic circumstances. This tension is the engine that drives the production of Local literature, as more and more writers contribute their perspective of Pidgin's position in Hawai'i's social landscape.

In this chapter, I analyze the work of the following contemporary Local writers: Gary Pak's *Ricepaper Airplane* (1998), Bradajo's *Avebade Bade* (2002), Darrell H.Y. Lum's *Pass On, No Pass Back* (1998), Lee Cataluna's *Folks You Meet in Longs and Other Stories* (2005), and

²⁴ This chapter relies heavily upon three terms that describe sometimes distinct populations in Hawai'i. *Local* describes anyone who is a descendent of plantation laborers. *Native* describes anyone descended from the Islands' indigenous population. *Haole* describes anyone who is or has descended from white Mainland Americans. As one can imagine, a Hawaiian can technically belong to multiple groups. For example, one could be descended from Native Hawaiians who worked on sugarcane plantations and, as a result, qualify both as Local and Native. The decision of which term you use has major political consequences though. Hawaiians who identify as Natives, for example, often do so in order to remind others on the archipelago about the indigenous dispossession that still takes place. Haole, as is discussed further below, operates a little differently in that it describes an individual who refuses to assimilate to Island ways and is explicitly tied to Mainland capitalist interests.

Sage Takehiro's *Honua* (2007). I also investigate the landmark Pidgin dictionaries, *Pidgin to da Max* (1980) and *Da Kine Dictionary* (2005), which take a humorous look at Pidgin and at hapa haole songs from the 1920s that render Pidgin as a humorous gibberish. I have chosen to write about Pak, Bradajo, Lum, Cataluna, and Takehiro specifically not only because they represent significant voices in Local literature, but because they have not yet received academic attention and I wish to advocate their work. Local writers such as Milton Murayama, Lee Tonouchi, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka, while culturally and aesthetically important, have already received analysis. Considering how most Local writers labor in relative obscurity, I strongly believe in advocating for these authors and increasing academia's awareness about an adventurous and beautiful part of American literature.

These writers, while distinct in terms of style and politics, do share a concern with portraying Local identity as a unique, if somewhat endangered, cultural formation, one that needs to be documented. These Local writers exploit Pidgin's ambiguous status as a way to endorse its alternative culture as a form of opposition. Raymond Williams, who famously makes the distinction between the two, recognizes that the categories can collapse given the right circumstances:

But it is often a very narrow line, in reality between alternative and oppositional.

A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation, and yet still be seen only as another particular way to live. But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be seen by the dominant culture, not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it (11).

True to Williams's scenario, these Local writers transform Pidgin's alternative culture into an oppositional one, employing the creole relational mode to bulldoze linguistic hierarchies. Rather

than expressing coherent ideologies, these writers make room for ideologies, leaving space for others to articulate new kinds of identity formations.

Pidgin as the Demarcation between Local and Haole Identity

As mentioned above, Pidgin has had an embattled status in Hawai'i since its emergence in the sugarcane fields in the late 1800s. As a creole language with a grammar and vocabulary rooted in English, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and Ilocano, Pidgin's very structure is encoded with ethnic and racial difference, marking it as distinct from the Anglo American standard English used by haoles to justify their positions of economic and social dominance. Furthermore, over the course of the twentieth century, through legislation and schooling, Pidgin has been positioned as the antithesis of standard English. Interestingly enough, Pidgin advocates in Hawai'i do not challenge the perception of Pidgin as standard English's arch-nemesis; in fact, they exploit that distinction in order to reject haole interference in Island life and to assert the validity of the Local community and its customs.

Before going further into the Pidgin's use in the Local/haole divide, it is useful to consider the structure of Pidgin as a language and its historical emergence. While the creole language is now heavily embroiled in issues of cultural identity for Hawaiian Locals, it came into existence strictly for the pragmatic reason of creating an interethnic mode of communication. Starting in the 1850s, Hawai'i's burgeoning Anglo American-controlled sugar industry started to acutely feel the need for cheap, plentiful labor. Dissatisfied with both the numbers and the attitudes of Native Hawaiians, plantations started sending out recruiting agents to various areas: first to China then to the Portuguese islands of Madeira and the Azores then to Japan and Puerto

Rico and later Korea and the Philippines (Takaki 22-56).²⁵ The pioneering sociolinguist John Reinecke reminds us that while Hawai‘i’s plantation economy resembles the plantation systems of the Caribbean that gave birth to the most well-known creoles and pidgins, Hawai‘i’s situation was distinctive for a number of reasons which would later influence the development of Pidgin. First of all, Hawai‘i’s plantations used recruited laborers who signed contracts rather than the slave labor that characterized Caribbean plantations. As a result, according to Reinecke, these immigrants possessed qualities absent in other creole situations: “spatial and social mobility; in the cities contact with native English speakers was possible; immigrants could maintain their national individuality and languages, so that in their eyes broken English has remained a makeshift without sentimental value; and finally, there was free public education” (780).²⁶ Reinecke further explains that even as Pidgin was forming as a language on the sugarcane fields, the laborers’ children were receiving their education in standard English. As a result, we must recognize that Pidgin did *not* develop from social isolation and the lack of exposure to standard English. The common narrative given other pidgin and creole languages will not fit in this situation.

²⁵ Plantation owners constantly were recruiting from various areas in order to ensure that no one ethnic group came to dominate the workforce. In doing so, they were banking on interethnic animosity as a barrier to labor organization (this ploy ultimately failed). The first wave of imported laborers were Cantonese contract workers who hoped to work on the plantations for five years and return home (Takaki 34). The next wave was comprised mostly of Portuguese workers from Madeira and the Azores who were escaping destitution and famine and hoped to permanently settle on the Islands (Takaki 34). The third wave came from Japan and it comprised mostly of tenant farmers from the overcrowded southwestern prefectures who left before an impending economic crisis (Takaki 42). Korean workers came next, seeing Hawai‘i as a refuge from imperial Japanese domination (Takaki 46). The last major wave came from the Philippines and it comprised mostly of people trying to escape crushing debt (Takaki 50). Other numerically smaller groups of workers came from Norway, Puerto Rico, Germany, Spain, and Russia (Takaki 54).

²⁶ It should be noted Reinecke did not believe that Pidgin was a creole language; rather, he qualified it as a peculiar dialect of English that persisted because of the radical racial and ethnic differences in Hawai‘i. While contemporary linguists such as Jeff Siegel and Kent Sakoda among others would disagree with Reinecke’s classification, he is commonly recognized as the pioneering scholar of Pidgin studies.

Upon further study, Pidgin becomes even more singular: before the advent of Hawaiian Creole English, there was Pidgin Hawaiian. Linguists such as Derek Bickerton and Sarah Roberts have pointed out that the linguistic situation in Hawai‘i in the mid-nineteenth century was one where the Hawaiian language—which became a written language by the 1840s—was the dominant tongue in the archipelago. As Bickerton states, “Hawai‘i was an independent kingdom and Europeans were there on sufferance. And when you enter somebody else’s country, you don’t get far if you try to make them talk your language. You have to try to speak theirs” (210). Sarah Roberts, working under Bickerton, sifted through thousands of the Hawaiian Kingdom’s court records from the nineteenth century and discovered that defendants and witnesses who were not Native Hawaiian would give testimony in a pidginized form of Hawaiian (Bickerton 214-7). Tracking the changes in the defendants’ and witnesses’ Pidgin Hawaiian, Bickerton theorizes that this pidgin was poised to become a creole when it collapsed under the weight of the massive influx of immigrant labor demanded by the sugarcane plantations (218). Since English was the language of the planters, the immigrant labor force borrowed from that language in order to communicate with each other.

However, the process might not have been as dramatic as Bickerton imagines; the base language of the archipelago’s pidgin and later, creole, could have gradually, awkwardly shifted from Hawaiian to English as the American planting elite began to exert more and more influence in the islands’ economic and political affairs. Scholars at the University of Hawai‘i’s Charlene Sato Center posit that the workers’ Pidgin Hawaiian was heavily influenced in the 1850s by the Chinese Pidgin English already used as an interethnic communicative mode by the first wave of Chinese immigrants. At the same time, epidemics of measles and the whooping cough significantly lowered the numbers of Native Hawaiians in the 1850s; as a result, some Native

Hawaiians began to be instructed in English rather than in Hawaiian (“Pidgin Timeline”). After the initial wave of Chinese immigrants, planters start recruiting Portuguese immigrants from the Azores and Madeira in the 1870s and these immigrants begin contributing heavily to Pidgin’s grammar. Kent Sakoda and Jeff Siegel theorize that the Portuguese influence is so prominent because they often held overseer positions on the plantations and had to give orders to a variety of workers (14). Furthermore, the Portuguese were the first ethnic group to drop their heritage language for Pidgin, setting a precedent that would be later followed by other ethnic groups (14). By the time the Hawaiian monarchy was overthrown in 1893, standard English completed its ascent as the language of haole power and prestige on the islands and Pidgin was fast becoming the language of choice for the emerging multiethnic underclass, the forerunners of the Hawaiian Locals.

As can be inferred from these transitions, by the start of the twentieth century, Hawai‘i’s linguistic ecology went through a series of shocking transformations in little over a hundred years, changes that reflected the socioeconomic upheaval created by the increasing American interference in Island life. The rapidly shrinking and politically disenfranchised Native Hawaiian population watched its language’s burgeoning literary traditions go from occupying a prominent place in the islands’ social sphere to become an apparition exiled to the fringes, only allowed to emerge in place names and colorful Local terms. The Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Puerto Rican, Korean, and Filipino plantation laborers slowly began to lose fluency in their first languages. Confronted with making a home in a society that did not reward the maintenance of ethnic traditions, many of these laborers began to adhere to the burgeoning multiethnic label of Local. Finally, there are the haoles, who, while economically dominant, are statistically only a small part of the islands’ population and must learn to wield their dominance with a certain

amount of tact and avoid forcing their cultural and linguistic preferences too harshly.²⁷ In such a linguistic situation, there are no surefire prestige languages, no linguistic mode that is totally immune from scorn and attack. It is exactly in such an environment that Pidgin begins its contested emergence in the cultural consciousness of Hawai‘i.

Probably the earliest discourse about Pidgin took place in the Hawaiian school system where it was treated as a suspicious enemy that was preventing a multiethnic student body from assimilating into Mainland American society and enjoying the material benefits of haole life. These ideas about Pidgin were so pervasive among the haole elite that they caused the transformation of Hawai‘i’s whole educational structure, precipitated by haole-run school boards (Tamura 433). By the mid-1920s, all aspiring teachers had to pass a five minute oral examination in standard English and teacher training colleges added speech courses to their curricula. However, three years after their implementation, Benjamin Wist, the president of the Territorial Normal and Training School, expressed dismay at the lack of improvement among these future teachers in speaking standard English (Tamura 435). Furthermore, in 1924, Hawai‘i established Standard Schools, which were educational institutions that taught in standard English and required that the students be proficient in the language as well (Tamura 436; Young 408-9). The Standard Schools’ student bodies were overwhelming haole and these students received a more traditionally academic training while Local children in the other schools received vocational instruction (Young 409-10). Morris Young points out that Hawai‘i’s educational system became *de facto* segregated through the Standard School model. Young narrates how a group of Japanese families started their own kindergarten which rigorously taught standard English. Their children all passed the oral examinations required in Standard Schools, a phenomenon which dismayed

²⁷ According to Eileen Tamura, by 1920, standard English speakers only were 8% of Hawai‘i’s population (433).

haole parents who hoped that the examinations “would, by an exclusion of little Orientals, meet the demand for an ‘American school’” (Young 411). The haoles in Young’s story defined “American” as white only and positioned every other individual of a different ancestry as foreign and alien, an ideological position that foolishly ignores the fact that haoles and their culture were the minority in Hawai‘i. Young also mentions that the exclusionary agenda of the Standard Schools came out in other ways as well, most prominently in the criteria for passing the oral entrance examination. These tests, according to Young, were judged almost exclusively on pronunciation and were designed to trip up students (417). Furthermore, the structure of the examination reveals a major bias: “Standard English seemingly is equated with a cognitive ability to formulate a clear and understandable narrative that indicates intelligence” (418). According to education administrators, Pidgin was merely broken English and an indicator of a broken brain.

In the decades that followed the Hawaiian educational system would continue its assault on Pidgin. In 1943, the University of Hawai‘i implemented a policy in which all freshmen had to take a speech course and those students who did not adopt standard English after four semesters were expelled. These courses were not focused on the rhetoric of public speaking; instead they were focused on correcting perceived deficiencies in students’ speech habits (Tamura 446). Probably the most disconcerting initiative occurred in 1987 when Hawai‘i’s Board for Education attempted to ban Pidgin from the classroom (Tamura 450). Even though ten of the thirteen board members were Locals, some of whom grew up speaking Pidgin, they agreed with their Mainland colleagues that Pidgin was a debased form of communication (Tamura 452). After sparking a public debate across the islands, the board’s initiative did not pass; however, it does testify to the success that the public education system had in the devaluation of Pidgin as a language.

Fighting Pidgin's battered public image has been indeed difficult for activists especially since many Pidgin speakers view the language with indifference at best and scorn at worst. Even those who admire Pidgin believe that it is a mutant, broken form of English. As early as 1938, John Reinecke notes, "In using it [Pidgin] many [Hawaiian Locals] know that they are losing prestige with the Americans, and they condemn themselves for using it, sometimes in strong terms. The idea that the 'pidgin' might have the dignity of a dialect is foreign to them" (786). This sort of self-deprecatory attitude is observable in the documentary *Ha Kam Wi Tawk Pidgin Yet?*, a film in which Pidgin speakers from all walks of life offer their theories about the language and its role in Hawaiian Local life. In one interview, a female high school student offers a bewildering range of attitudes about her tongue in a matter of a few minutes. First, she casts aspersion on her language, stating that she uses it out of laziness: "It [Pidgin] saves a lot of your breath. From saying the whole word." Pidgin here is theorized as a shortcut, a modern version of the haoles' assertion that Native Hawaiians were lazy workers. Then the student proclaims that, "I neva learn da Pidgin, da Pidgin come to me." For this speaker, Pidgin emerged from her very soul rather than being actively absorbed from her environment. She sees Pidgin as inseparable from her identity since it plays a major role in publicly proclaiming her personality and her place in society. These intertwined ideas of Pidgin as the essence of Local identity while also being an expression of laziness come out in a later interview with an auto mechanic: "Pidgin is part of our culture, eh. It's like a part of your race wen you get brought up. Ev'rybody just get lazy and talk." What can be gleaned from these theories is that speaking Pidgin is oftentimes viewed in Hawai'i as a pathological condition, a notion that attempts to transform Local identity itself into an abject state.

The study of Pidgin helps us to understand that the ethnic identities of haole and Local are explicitly performative in nature. Judy Rohrer in her masterful study of the concept of the haole mentions that visitors from the U.S. Mainland assume that haole merely designates a person as white. However, in Hawaiian Local discourse, the term has a much more nuanced and loaded meaning: “Local constructions of haole also emphasize performative haoleness or acting haole, the exhibiting of attitudes and actions that run counter to local and Hawaiian social values.” (35). To be a haole, one must adopt a series of personality traits that cut one off from fully bonding and commiserating with Locals, or as Rohrer states, “haole often wish it were elsewhere (usually somewhere less ‘provincial’ and always more white), it will not or cannot adapt to the island environment and culture” (54). According to Rohrer, it is also necessary to us to understand that the terms haole and Local actually help define each other, that without the one, the other could not exist as a concept: “It is through this interplay and its symbolic and material manifestations that haole gains meaning and significance in multiple, often conflicting ways” (34). Haole in particular is contingent upon the construction of the Local as an ill-defined abomination. According to the haole, the Local is a product of failed assimilation, a monument to a failed attempt to enter modernity, a Mutant American. This construction of Local identity played a prominent role during the infamous Massie Case of 1931-2 in which a group of five nonwhite Island men—Benny Ahakuelo, Henry Chang, Horace Ida, Joseph Kahahawai, and David Takai—were falsely accused of raping Thalia Massie, a naval officer’s wife. After the jury pronounced the men innocent of the crime, Horace Ida was brutally beaten and Joseph Kahahawai was murdered by Massie’s husband, mother, and a naval officer (Chan and Freeser 46-7). The violence did not stop there; Naval Rear Admiral Yates Stirling advocated for lynching the accused men. In his public pronouncement, Stirling offers an explicitly racist construction of

the Local: “What is. . .disturbing is the intermixture of races that has been going on in the Hawaiian Islands for many years. Scientists have stated that these intermixtures tend to produce types of a lower moral and mental caliber than the pure-blooded types of each race” (Chan and Freeser 48). Stirling’s blatant racism allows him to position haoles as valiantly working against the further defilement of the human race, trying to root out the Islands’ racial pathology. From this ideological position, Stirling can comfortably ignore the imperialist agenda that the very presence of the U.S. Navy in the islands represents.

The Massie Case offered Locals a chance to define themselves as well. According to John Rosa, the case allowed many people to frame their identity as immigrant descendants fighting haole oppression rather along traditional ethnic lines (94). This definition of Local as an oppressed multiethnic underclass has been sharply criticized by some Native Hawaiian intellectuals who claim that the Local label allows the descendants of plantation workers to ignore the ways in which they colluded with haole projects and helped to solidify the marginalization of Native Hawaiians. Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui writes that both haoles and Locals view “Hawai‘i as a commodified resource, not as an ancestor; a picturesque setting for people-centered stories, not as a character in ma’olelo. They also share the dominant American ideology that America (including Hawai‘i, their fiftieth state) is a land of equality, opportunity, liberty, freedom, and justice for all. Perhaps the most damaging of all is that they perpetuate the myth we are a nation made up of only immigrants” (122-3). As Ho’omanawanui’s charges indicate, the haole/Local dynamic creates a dialectic of Island identity in which there is no room for Native Hawaiians to enter.

Native Hawaiians do seem to disappear in the arguments of pro-Pidgin activists that began to emerge in the late 1970s and continue to this day. For these linguistic advocates, Pidgin

is all about Local identity and it reinforces the notion of Hawai‘i as a multiethnic paradise. In 1999, in response to charges by the chairperson of Hawai‘i’s Board of Education that Pidgin was the reason why Island children fared so poorly in national standardized writing tests, a group of linguists and educators at the University of Hawai‘i, Manoa formed an alliance known as the Da Pidgin Coup. This group released a manifesto/game plan/primer about Pidgin that sought to define the language and its role in Hawaiian Local culture. The group declares:

Language is the carrier of culture, and Pidgin is the carrier of ‘local’ culture. It is part of what makes Hawai‘i different from the rest of the U.S. Denigration of Pidgin is denigration of its speakers, a majority of the population of Hawai‘i. Pidgin is inclusive, a reflection of our historical attitudes and the value placed on getting along and trying to find common group. It is non-hierarchical and puts people on an even footing.

The document goes on to describe the nature of the language, how it is a creole, how the idea of a single correct and standard English is a myth, and how speaking and writing are two different communicative channels. Yet, to my mind, this is the most striking part of the whole declaration. It takes the common foundational narrative that pidgins and creoles are created by group of people who need to communicate and do not share a language and invests it with a utopian and political meaning. I am especially intrigued by the description of Pidgin as “nonhierarchical,” which casts Pidgin in an almost anarchist glow as the communicative register of self-determining individuals who works in concert with each other. This anarcho-utopian rhetoric only exists in the minds of the members of Da Pidgin Coup, of course, since Hawai‘i socioeconomic structure offers anything but “an even footing.” However, Da Pidgin Coup’s definition of the language does offer us a glimpse into the therapeutic significance of the label of Local; it helps Islanders

imagine and work towards a vision where the cruel inequities of Hawai‘i’s history may finally be resolved.

A more popular way to advocate for Pidgin has been the compilation of popular dictionaries devoted to Pidgin. There are two dictionaries in particular that have achieved almost canonical status within this genre: Douglas Simonson, Pat Sasaki, and Ken Sakata’s *Pidgin to Da Max* (1980) and Lee Tonouchi’s *Da Kine Dictionary* (2005). It is worth noting that both of these texts were published by Honolulu’s Bess Press, a publishing house that is the epicenter of Hawaiian Local humor. These two dictionaries are not extensive explorations of Pidgin as language; they do not detail its complex grammar and their lexical inventory is by no means complete. They are lavishly illustrated: *Pidgin to Da Max* is with large black-and-white comics of Locals humorously demonstrating how to use certain Pidgin terms while *Da Kine Dictionary* contains color photographs of young and attractive Locals making bizarre and humorous expressions. As closer analysis will show, these two books celebrate Hawaiian Local identity, but do so at the cost of exoticizing that identity. Pidgin dictionaries perpetuate the idea of Pidgin as a pathological English dialect by implying that one’s mastery of a few phrases will make one fluent in the language.

These two books both borrow techniques and approaches from the genre of the slang dictionary, which in general decontextualizes words, turning them into dead artifacts. As linguistic anthropologist Jennifer Roth-Gordon argues, slang is “the great vocabulary hoax,” in that folks outside a linguistic group oftentimes assume that the heart of a slang lies in generating unique, exotic vocabulary terms (61). On the contrary, slangs actually take existing words and reinvest them with different meanings. More specifically, Roth-Gordon shows, slang speakers practice “lexicalizing the local,” in which “speakers pick up sounds, linguistic features, and

grammatical patterns that index their local communities and lexicalize them into new (and often productive) slang forms” (73). It is exactly these kinds of terms that never make into slang dictionaries. While Pidgin is a language and not a slang, Simonson, Sasaki, Sakata, and Tonouchi’s agenda of lexical exoticism gives the impression that Pidgin operates in the same way as a slang.

These dictionaries portray Pidgin as the language of bodily functions, a sweaty, fart-filled, sex-dripping register of speech. In *Pidgin to Da Max*, bodily functions play a key role in helping to define some Pidgin terms. For example, the term *wala ‘au* is defined as “diarrhea of the mouth” while *kim chee* is “Korean mouthwash neutralizer” while *hanabata* is “what you gotta wipe when yo’ nose come runny.” In *Da Kine Dictionary*, we are treated to a number of bodily descriptors as well. Jayson Tom submits the term *poke squid*: “Da fizical ack of one man and one women doing ‘it.’ Screwing. *I like poke squid with Sarah*. See also hemo skin, puinsai, sauce” (73). Derek M. Delos Reyes submits the term *killah wiffah*: “One very, very, very, very stink fut. *Afta I ate eggs for breakfast and chili frank for lunch, everybody leff da room wen I made one killah wiffah*” (52). These humorous terms imply that Pidgin is a register of speech that comically addresses the human body and is unafraid to criticize or examine the unavoidable aspects of daily life that polite haole society may be embarrassed to openly address.

In fact, in *Pidgin to Da Max*, Pidgin is figured as the anti-haole, a superior and efficient form of communication. For the entry on the phrase *go stay go*, there is a two-panel comic that illustrates Pidgin’s economy of expression. The first panel is labeled “Haole” and there is a vaguely East Asian-looking man (a possible nod to the notion of performative haoleness) in a suit who states “Now why did you ask me to come over here and see you, and as soon as I get here, you get up and leave?” This is a long, preposition-filled sentence, to be sure. The second

panel is labelled “Local” and features a mustachioed Asian man in a striped polo shirt who exclaims “Howcum I go stay come an’ you go stay go??” Even if the grammar is incomprehensible to a non-Pidgin speaker, the Local character’s version is undoubtedly more emphatic and concise.

Pidgin dictionaries color Pidgin as a humorous slang that gussies up Locals’ speech repertoires, not as a viable mode of everyday communication. Local readers are not meant to consult the dictionaries to look up terms that they do not know, but to remind themselves of particularly funny, poignant phrases and words or to laugh at the fact that such words are exhibited in the formal context of a dictionary. After reading these dictionaries, the reader might know a couple of interesting words, but they do not come away with an appreciation of Pidgin’s grammar or an understanding of its complexities.

The Challenges Facing Pidgin Literature

In such a fraught ideological environment, Local authors who use Pidgin have had to fight to both receive exposure and respect for their portrayals of Island life. With the possible exception of the works of Lee Tonouchi, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and a few others, Local works of literature oftentimes do not occupy a large space in Hawai‘i’s cultural scene, never mind getting any attention from literary outlets on the Mainland. Local authors almost universally see their works released in small print runs. Self-publishing is not uncommon, especially in poetry. Indeed, without the tireless efforts of a handful of presses—University of Hawai‘i, Bamboo Ridge, Tin Fish, and Bess Press—one wonders if Hawaiian Creole English would even be seriously considered as a literary language. Even Bamboo Ridge Press, which has featured over 850 writers since 1978, still struggles economically. Darrell Lum, the press’s co-founder recently

told an interviewer: “ ‘Some of the criticism is that now we’ve become the canon, which is sort of bizarre to me because it went from being an outsider, which is a bad thing to be, to being a canon, which is still a bad thing,’ say Lum with a sly smile. ‘Somehow we missed out on the middle, you know, where you build careers, sell thousands of books and get rich’” (Ongley). In Local literature, esteem does not necessarily equal profit. In his pioneering study of Local literature, Stephen Sumida mentions that part of the reason for this lack of exposure is that Locals have had to battle a legacy of being silenced by haole interests: “Hawai‘i’s local people have been stereotyped as being silent or quiet, not merely reticent but deficient in verbal skills and therefore incapable of creating literature of any merit, much less a literary tradition” (227). These kinds of prejudices are truly a shame because, for the last forty years, Hawaiian Local writers composing in Pidgin have produced some of the most irreverent, experimental, and ideologically challenging works in American literature, works that, according to Rob Wilson, “recognize the global design and world market and yet assert alternative spaces, sublanguages, and local identities grounded in the otherwise and elsewhere” (11). Pidgin literary works comprise a body of work that documents a sense of place that has been rarely so methodically pursued since the heyday of the local color movement in the late nineteenth century Mainland.

Since Pidgin literature is so keen on rooting identity in the local it has “become the medium of center-periphery reversal and postcolonial flows” (Wilson 9). Yet the ability of Pidgin to assert one’s identity in the face of the Mainland’s capitalist agenda has also been seriously questioned. Sumida mentions two common criticisms leveled at Pidgin authors: “The first is that the very success and strength of pidgin in literature should lead to the development of heroic works in pidgins; the second is that pidgin badly limits and weakens the literature’s appeal to wider audiences” (101). These two criticisms are only half-right: Pidgin literary works *do* tend

to ignore the heroic and focus on the everyday and their appeal *is* severely limited to readers who are, at the very least, already somewhat familiar with Local culture. However, those two tendencies are the very goals of Pidgin authors who collectively have created a canon of literature that favors the small and the local and says *fuck off!* to our contemporary era's demand that every cultural production be instantly legible to everyone everywhere.²⁸

Pidgin literature is burdened with chasing away the racist ghosts of hapa haole songs that crested in popularity in the U.S. during the 1920s, a body of ditties that ossified the image of Hawaiians as pleasant buffoons who speak a form of English that threatens constantly to veer into nonsense. The term hapa haole is itself frustratingly imprecise, referring to musical concoctions that incorporate both English and Hawaiian words to Native Hawaiian songs recreated with English lyrics to songs that mix Hawaiian music with jazz, blues, and rock n' roll (Garrett 173). A common denominator between most of these songs, however, is that they presented a simplified, cartoonish, and idealized portrait of Hawai'i and they borrowed extensively from the Orientalist practices of the late nineteenth century yellowface tradition. As Charles Hiroshi Garrett reminds us though, a key difference exists between yellowface songs and hapa haole songs in that Hawaiians, both Native and Local, played a major role in creating and circulating this music (171-2). In fact, hapa haole songs gave rise to Hawaiian stars such as Sol

²⁸ There is a long tradition of dialect literature in Mainland U.S. literature, particularly in the late nineteenth-century. Works by Mark Twain, George Ade, Charles Chesnutt, and George Washington Cable, to name a few, are suffused with orthographically and grammatically marked local speech varieties that both entranced readers looking to experience other regions of the country and tested their patience to bear with writing so different from standard English. However, I find this dialect literary tradition to operate differently than Pidgin literature. Gavin Jones, in his magisterial study *Strange Talk*, argues much of late nineteenth century dialect writing carried the implication that, "dialect recorded the way minorities *really* spoke encoded deeper beliefs that this was how they processed and structured reality, that this language revealed their stream of consciousness, their worldview, their very stuff of self" (46). I argue that Pidgin authors employ a minority language not out of a Romantic equation of language to self, but as a way to fight a legacy of being silenced by haole and Mainland-tied interests.

Ho'opi'i and John Kameaaloha Almeida who helped to make the steel guitar and 'ukulele permanent parts of the U.S. musical landscape.

The common target for humor in these songs is the Hawaiian language itself, which is caricatured and contorted to appear as a vowel-laden, tongue-knotting stream of nonsense. The titles of some songs announce this agenda up front: "Princess Poo-Poo-Ly Has Plenty Pa-Pa-Ya," "Yaaka Hula Hickey Dula," "Yaddie Kaddie Kiddie Kaddie Koo." Even hapa haole songs that pretend to offer language lessons in Hawaiian, they wink at the listener:

Humuhumu means to swim

Nukunuku is the nose

Apua'a is the pig

So it's the fish with the pig-like nose

Humuhumunukunukuapua'a!

It goes without saying that laughter at the Hawaiian language, not increased knowledge in it, is the intended goal. Native Hawaiian culture is seen as adorably absurd, a brief diversion from thinking about more serious Mainland-focused cultural matters.

Pidgin appears a lot less in hapa haole songs. Hawaiian music historian George Kananele thinks that this occurred strictly for the commercial reason that the language would limit the audience for a song: "For songwriters who dream of a hit tune, there are reasons enough to stick to good English (298). For Mainland audiences that consumed these hapa haole tunes, Hawai'i was a land filled with exotic natives, not a multicultural society made up of Native Hawaiians and immigrants from around the world. Hawai'i is appealingly positioned as outside the global capitalist network in these songs; the use Local culture and language would instantly puncture that fantasy. Yet, butchered caricatures of Pidgin do rear their heads within this genre, borrowing

a lot from the racist depictions of Chinese Pidgin English on the Mainland's yellowface stage. Probably the best example of Pidgin within the hapa haole genre is Chas. E. King's 1934 "The Pidgen [sic] English Hula." The Pidgin in this song extensively borrows from the Chinese Pidgin English used by Charles Leland and others:

I no like you no more
You no more come my place.
Bymby this new one girl you forget
She no allee samee me.

While the song is supposedly set on the islands, the language conjures the racist fantasies of inscrutable, opium-smoking Chinese men hiding in San Francisco's Chinatown. The song does include more Island-like flourishes towards the end that more accurately mimic Local Pidgin and pepper in Native Hawaiian words:

Sure I know you going pupule
You pupule loa for me
Your number one sweetheart

As in the treatment given the Native Hawaiian language, accuracy is clearly not a goal of the artists employing Pidgin in their hapa haole songs. Besides being blatantly disrespectful to both Native Hawaiian and Hawaiian Local cultures, these songs also give the impression that these two ethnic groups have *no* culture per say, that they exist on the fringes of a globalized capitalist world, picking up odds and ends from the U.S. Mainland and European cultures and collaging them together in incongruous patterns. Since these hapa haole songs are the only time Pidgin ever blipped across the Mainland's cultural consciousness, Local authors who choose to employ Pidgin in their writings labor under the burden of appearing provincial and irrelevant by focusing

on an island archipelago whose culture is just assumed to be a more tropically fragrant version of Mainland U.S. popular culture.

There are other obstacles as well. Since Pidgin is a spoken language, a writing system for it has never been commonly agreed upon. Carol Odo did invent an orthography in the 1970s at the University of Hawai‘i, but it is highly technical and only employed by a handful of linguists and literary figures (Sakoda). As a result, Pidgin “is represented as if it were a deviant or non-standard variety of English. . .it is forced to be a literary *dialect* rather than a literary *language*” (Romaine 528). Without its own distinctive orthography, Pidgin takes on a pathological hue when it appears in literature. This is especially the case in literary works that alternate between standard English and Pidgin. The juxtaposition of Pidgin and standard English creates tension because the reader is looking to a particular mode of discourse for authority and they end up siding with the linguistic standard and its institutional aura if only because it is the more readily recognizable written language. The Pidgin mode is viewed almost an anthropological informant, meant to be appreciated from a distance, safely contained within the orderly fencing of standard English’s grammatical rules. In order to mask all of these insecurities about Pidgin’s ambiguous status, Amy Nishimura points out that Hawaiian Local literature is often suffused with over-performance, or, as she dubs it, “hyper-maintenance”: “This results in a synthetic use of the language because in an effort to spotlight their comprehension of Pidgin, a Local person might speak with a heavy accent or demonstrate her knowledge of the Pidgin vernacular in an exaggerated form” (6).

In the face of all these challenges, contemporary Local authors have devised a number of strategies that change how readers engage with Local culture and Pidgin itself. Gary Pak’s novel *A Ricepaper Airplane* introduces us to the critical Local figure of the Pidgin-talking

commonsense philosopher. Bradajo writes Pidgin poems with his own idiosyncratic orthography in a barely decipherable script, a move which forces readers to understand the arbitrariness of all languages. Darrell H.Y. Lum's short stories emphasize how Pidgin remains the source of critical Island knowledge and that a Local places him or herself in danger when they lose touch with it. Lee Cataluna's collection of poetic monologues emphasizes the socioeconomic straitjacket that confines the lives of Hawai'i Pidgin speakers, puncturing the multiculturalist fantasias offered in some forms of Local literature. Finally, Sage Takehiro's poems offer a rare glimpse of Native Hawaiian employing Pidgin to highlight the collective rage of a displaced indigenous people and their refusal to suffer their dispossession in silence. These writers see Pidgin as an oppositional tool that works in the creole relational mode, recognizing that Local culture is not a static essence, but a series of social rifts that must be constantly negotiated.

The Commonsense Philosopher: Gary Pak's *A Ricepaper Airplane*

Gary Pak's *A Ricepaper Airplane* (1998) chronicles the life of Kim Sung Wha, an elderly Local man born in Korea who once stirred up labor unrest on O'ahu's sugarcane and pineapple plantations. Rather than giving the reader a strictly chronological retelling of Sung Wha's life, Pak shifts both time periods and perspectives with little warning, casting the past in a hallucinatory glow. The novel's dreamlike nature is amplified by the inclusion of Korean folkloric elements including tales of a Buddhist monk having a passionate sexual relationship with a female tiger and a mountain woodsman who has the ability to morph into a tiger in order to fight the Japanese occupying forces. Pak also indulges in metafictional flourishes including, at one point, telling a story within a story within a story within a story.

These aesthetic decisions are very fitting because Sung Wha has a remarkable life, full of adventure, exile, and heartache. He is born in Japanese-occupied Korea at the start of the twentieth century and, the young age of fourteen, he challenges the Japanese soldiers with his friend Eung Whan. He then runs away to Manchuria to train with Korean anti-imperialist forces. Along the way, he meets the love of his life, Hae Soon, a young girl who has been tutored in the ways of revolution by her innkeeper father. Hae Soon and her father teach Sung Wha how to read and write both Korean and Japanese. Just before crossing the Yalu River into Manchuria, Sung Wha and Hae Soon encounter a Japanese anarchist named Watanaki and join him in founding a Communist press in Harbin, China. Sung Wha and Hae Soon start a family together, but Sung Wha soon joins the Chinese Communist forces in fighting the Japanese and he becomes separated from them, never to be reunited. He later is arrested by the Japanese who believe that he is Watanaki. This is a stroke of luck: instead of being executed as a Korean anticolonial fighter, he is mistakenly sent to Japan as a political prisoner. During anti-Korean pogroms, a friend ships Sung Wha off to Hawai'i so that he will not be killed.

In Hawai'i, Sung Wha works on sugarcane plantations and, using his Communist education, he decides to try to organize his fellow workers. He becomes targeted as a labor agitator by plantation owners who try to kill him using thugs in the middle of the night. Barely escaping from being murdered, Sung Wha hides in the sugarcane fields where he is almost burned alive in a massive cane fire. After surviving this, he encounters his old friend Eung Whan from Korea, who now works on a pineapple plantation in O'ahu's mountains. Sung Wha joins him and, after watching his first motion picture, decides that he is going to build an airplane out of bamboo and rice-paper so that he can return to Korea. This plan, an uncharacteristically unpragmatic moment for Sung Wha, obviously does not work and he later continues to organize

labor strikes for the ILWU on Honolulu's docks. Even in his old age, Sung Wha continues his revolutionary ways, fighting the eviction of elderly tenants from a downtown Honolulu boarding house that a developer wants to raze. He does this last bit of activism while cancer is slowly killing him too.

Interestingly, Sung Wha's bold and sometimes irrational propensity for fighting for his beliefs is not immediately apparent in the narrative. This is because the novel is framed by the perspective of Yong Gil, one of Eung Whan's sons, who cares for the elderly Sung Wha. Yong Gil sees his "uncle" not as a heroic man, but rather an everyday kind of man fighting for his dignity, but obviously needing help in his day-to-day affairs. This is coupled by Sung Wha's no-nonsense, down-to-earth stance about most issues. Despite being a lifelong Communist, he has little patience with ideological affairs and is quick to dismiss anything that does not produce immediate concrete results. In fact, in his colorful Pidgin, Sung Wha is an excellent example of what I dub the *commonsense philosopher*, one of the most persistent stock characters in Pidgin literature. The commonsense philosopher is a symbolic figure in not only in Hawaiian Local literature, but in American literature in general, one that is ridiculed for being uneducated and uninitiated in the ways of industrial modernity. However, this uneducated figure is also celebrated for using simple logic to criticize the elaborate ideologies that are used to justify the social inequalities within America's capitalist society.²⁹

The commonsense philosopher is so conducive to Pidgin literature because the figure almost always speaks in a highly-marked speech type that lies outside of standard English. It is because the linguistic standard is the language in which the targeted ideologies are often articulated and the only suitable form of linguistic attack is a language that is not tainted by these

²⁹ Other commonsense philosophers that come to mind include Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Peter Dunne Finley's Mr. Dooley, Kate Chopin's Cajun characters, and Langton Hughes's Madam Alberta K. Johnson.

ideologies' stock phrases. As Amy Nishimura points out in her analysis of Pak's novel, rather than blindly adhering to the manners and ideology of higher education, Sung Wha's "use of language is a continual process whereby the construction stems from an active cultural and highly individualized consciousness of personal relationships, intuition, and judgment" (117). In other words, Sung Wha will only accept a fact after he has personally verified it.

Sung Wha is certainly quick to attack what he deems to be oppressive ideologies, seeing nothing as sacred and unquestionable. He faces off against a drunken, abusive Portuguese luna named Souza and even criticizes a Korean priest for believing in God. His bluntness has an exhilarating yet disrespectful edge to it, as can be witnessed in the dialogue with the priest (the conversation occurs in Korean which Pak chooses to render in standard English for readers)³⁰:

“ ‘You speak. . .with much force, much power,’ the minister says. His face is tentative. ‘But I am sad that you do not embrace our Father in heaven and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If you truly want to free the soul, you must embrace Him. But your words interest me. Tell me more about your experiences. I, too, believe that Korea must be free, but only through the kingdom of God will it achieve such full glory. When we Koreans free ourselves within, when we let the Lord into our hearts to give us spiritual direction and strength, only then can Koreans experience true freedom. We must fill ourselves with the love of God and Jesus Christ for the brotherhood of all mankind.’

‘Your god is worse than a bastard dog’s.’

³⁰ While reading the novel, I often wondered why Pak rendered Korean as standard English rather than Pidgin. While I have no definitive answer, I do have some theories. First, Pak might have done this for the reader's sake; it is far easier to read a novel with bursts of Pidgin rather than one that is composed entirely in the language. Second, since Asian languages are often portrayed as gibberish in the U.S. popular imagination, Pak might be trying to avoid this association by using standard English. Of course, this theory implies that Pak would equate Pidgin with gibberish, which does not seem correct given his sympathy for Local culture.

‘Ho! You should see his face when I told him dat, Yong Gil. Da *moksa*, he almost *huli* on da floor. His face wen turn from white to pink to one green color. I seen him breathing hard, having one hard time. I know he all angry inside, but shit, I no like listen to his bullshit. I hear it all already’” (88-9).

Even if these words come from a cancer-riddled old man, the reader can hear the revolutionary fire in Sung Wha’s story to Yong Gil, the absolute impatience with any ideology that deviates from essential tangible facts of empty bellies, broken bodies, and suppressed spirits. This attitude also comes out in how Sung Wha’s critiques are delivered in the most basic and indisputable facts:

“ ‘But I going tell you something. No mattah if one Korean ruling Korea, or one Japanee, or one haole, or one Filipino. No mattah. What mattah is da buggah is ruling. You no see? And even if da buggah’s face is same-same like everybody else’s face, eh, you gotta look mo’ hard behind da scene, behind da ugly, ugly mask. Mo’ hard you gotta look. You no *sabe*? You no *sabe*?

‘You go try look who behind da scene in Korea or any place else. I tell you who. Is Americans, das who, da American imperialists, da kine guys you wen go fight fo’ like one damn stupid fool. If you maké, you maké fo’ dem, do’ dem guys’ dictators and all dey bullshit. YouknowwhatImean? Das all it is, da plain truth of da mattah and simple as dat. You see? No. . .you no see. Ho! You real hardhead Yobo!’ (108).

More interesting than Sung Wha’s contention that ethno-racial difference is not the root of imperialism, that the true source of the problem is power itself, is his insistence that all of his

insightful analysis is “da plan truth of da mattah and simple as dat.” Sung Wha perennially sells his intellectual prowess short in the novel by insisting that he is offering truths that anyone else could figure out. While this certainly gives his arguments a populist appeal, they also minimize the importance of his extreme personal experiences of facing against Japanese imperialist forces. His truths might be simple, but they are bitterly won and the sacrifices that he made still haunt him in his old age.

However, Sung Wha’s habit of selling himself short does appear to be cagey rhetorical tool at certain points. He has a sharp eye for the absurdities of life in Hawai‘i. He tells Yong Girl early in the novel:

And twenty or so miles away from da plantation, da haole tourists, dem stay wrapping demselves wit’ big beach towels, dem going shower off da salt water and stay sunburn all over. You can get skin cancer you know, Yong Gil. But dem, dey like get dark, like one beautiful suntan. But funny, yeah, dey make prejudice against color people. Shee. . .if like get beautiful suntan like all da Haolewood stars, why dem no come up here and *hanahana* under da sun? Dem going he *papa ‘a* in no time and good workout, too, if dem come up help *haipai go*. No? (26-7).

Sung Wha here performs a critical function of the commonsense philosopher: he presents himself as the yokel who cannot understand the cultural habits of those running the modern world in order to criticize the cruel and absurd contradictions of that world. Under the guise of the uncomprehending fool, he points out a central paradox in how haole tourists desire the skin tone of the very peoples they socioeconomically subjugate. By adopting this rhetorical position, he does not have to acknowledge the elaborate ideologies that the haole tourists use to justify

their behaviors; he can show how absurd their actions truly appear to others who refuse to be inculcated into their hegemonic worldview.

However, one should be cautious before turning Kim Sung Wha into an exemplary Local figure because, as Amy Nishimura points out, he might speak like a Local, but he refuses to participate in the Local community. Yong Gil comments extensively on Sung Wha's dislocation from the Hawai'i despite having lived there for fifty years. In a moment of frustration over his uncle's desire to die in Korea, Yong Gil tells the reader:

And he doesn't even know what happened to his family over there [in Korea]. But he has family here. . . us [Yong Gil and his wife]. And he has lived here most of his life. He is more from here than there. And all his friends are locals. I don't even think he has a Korean friend right now, a friend more from the old days. They're either dead or avoiding him because of all these radical things he used to do. He was always known for the strong way he talked. A lot of his friends have changed, too, becoming more middle class through the success of their children, and they just don't want to be associated with him anymore. People can be cruel (215).

In a sense though, Sung Wha's distance from Hawaiian Local culture is necessary to his function as a commonsense philosopher. His eternal dislocation allows him to pillory everything, thus showing the arbitrariness of cultural practices and work against the dangers of overromanticizing a Hawaiian Local identity. Sung Wha has eaten too much shit to find an easy paradise and, as he tries to tell Yong Gil, this is essential to the formation of the creature known as the Hawaiian Local.

Bradajo's Poetics of the Illegible

Bradajo's books of poetry provide the reader with a singular experience: they are cryptically scrawled koans of wisdom sounded in the habitual rhythms of spoken Pidgin. His calligraphic poems are also usually surrounded either by abstract designs that evoke Native Hawaiian aesthetics or lavish photographs of Hawaiian Locals juxtaposed next to sun-drenched, tropical landscapes. As Bradajo articulates in the introduction to his 2002 collection *Avebade Bade*, he wishes to divorce pidgin writing from the oral, "the talkstory, the communion of spoken pidgin" (4). Instead of attempting to be the stenographer of Pidgin speech, he uses a "phonetic frolic not related to English or any other language for that matter" (4). However, Bradajo adopts spoken Pidgin's tics—such as the use of "no?" as a question tag—and amplifies and distorts them until they playfully skirt the edges of illegibility and sense.

Bradajo's poems are a brash dare: they taunt the reader yet invite interpretation. Not only does he employ an idiosyncratic orthography, he also does not respect word divisions, merging and separating words at will. Furthermore, this is all rendered in a crooked chicken-scratch that waywardly sprawls on the page. It carries associations with an uneducated preschooler or a piece of outsider art. By creating these associations, Bradajo is choosing to erase the legacy of silence and conformity instilled by Hawai'i's classrooms. He is trying to create a Year Zero of sorts, a Pidgin persona oblivious to the language's marginalization, one who does not express any shame about using the language. The blatantly unsystematic spelling and typography also thumb their nose at the very notion of standardized language. In Bradajo's poetry, language emanates from the individual's will. Once again, we encounter Pidgin as a form of speech close to bodily desire:

awl oss tureda

so dets avei bade bade no

een. . .sai (10-12)³¹

However, unlike the Pidgin humor of Tonouchi or the writers of *Pidgin to Da Max*, Bradajo believes the body to be a site of mystical communion a la Whitman. While the speakers of his poems might wear the diminutive garb of a preschooler, he espouses grand spiritual pronouncements about the need for us to recognize our collective dignity, especially in the aftermath of tragic and potentially divisive events such as September 11th. Witness the threads of his logic here:

en

avebade

hei. .t

planee

adakala

bade

higoin

pai. .lopalah

bambai

an

dan

heegoin

baaas

wai. .yuteenk

³¹ Thankfully Bradajo offers “translations” of his poems into what could ironically be considered a more standard Pidgin. This aid is not only useful to mainland readers such as myself, but also to Pidgin speakers who would not recognize their own tongue in Bradajo’s arbitrary and idiosyncratic representational choices. His translations for the above-quoted passage: “All us together/so that’s every body’s body no? inside” (11-13).

soplanee

brokembade

wendatutawa

heebaas

noo

yawk

sai (35-8).³²

Bradajo argues that hate not only is an emotion intimately tied to one's physical state, but that it actively disrupts the interbodily communions between individuals. This disruption causes the kind of irreparable harm witnessed during the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. Interestingly, Bradajo juxtaposes the reference to the September 11th attacks with a picture of a young Native Hawaiian girl gazing at something off camera. His willingness to examine both violence and hope at the same time is what prevents his we're-all-one-body politics from descending into simplifying treacle.

Also, while Bradajo clearly has a deep respect and affection for Hawai'i and Native Hawaiian culture especially, he does not hesitate to point out what he perceives to be hypocrisies in the state's self-image. He especially targets the ideology of aloha:

bachugada

lee. .vom

da. .aloha

not. .jospoodom

³² Bradajo's translation: "and everybody hate plenty other color body, he going pile up, yuh? by and by/and then he going bust!/why (do) you think (there were) so plenty broken bodies when the two towers he bust (they bust), New York Side?" (34-39).

da. .steeka

ontop

da

ka (48)³³

By referencing bumper stickers with Hawaiian phrases on them, Bradajo argues that aloha's complex code of social interaction has been commodified into a decorative flourish. Throughout the text, he implies that Hawaiian society can teach other societies about the intense connections between us all, but he also sees the potential for Hawaiian Locals to congratulate themselves for the islands' multiethnic demographics without critically interrogating the interpersonal dynamics that guide everyday interactions there.

The Dangers of Disrespecting Pidgin: Darrell H.Y. Lum's *Pass On, No Pass Back!*

Darrell H.Y. Lum is well-known in Hawai'i's literary circles for composing poems and short stories about humorous childhood events entirely in Pidgin. One of the founders of Bamboo Ridge Press, both his writing and his editorial decisions have done much to set the tenor of Hawaiian Local literature. However, rather than focusing on one of his iconic Pidgin tales, I wish to bring attention to a story that is largely written in standard English with some explosive pepperings of Pidgin. By observing the interaction between the narrator's standard English and the Pidgin employed by other characters, we can more clearly understand how Lum positions Pidgin as a subversive saboteur of haolified standard English and its ideologies.

The story is titled "Victor" and it is set in an isolated shack, set in a stretch of mountain woods surrounded by sugarcane fields. Despite taking place on O'ahu, one gets an

³³ Bradajo's translation: "But you gotta live 'um the aloha, not just put 'um the sticker on top the car" (49).

overwhelming sense of isolation since the protagonist Victor must drive several miles on an access road to reach an abode that had neither electricity nor water. Victor has borrowed this shack from his friends Mike and Jenny and he wants to hide away from the rest of the world. However, as the narrator makes clear, the mountaintop retreat might not be isolated enough; in the sugarcane fields below, a housing development is blossoming. The narrator strikes a melancholic, rueful note about such changes: “The red dirt of the area, full of iron oxides, once sustained acres of cane fields and their accompanying field mice and rats. With each new increment of development, the cane, the mice, and the rats were driven up the mountainside” (20). While the narrative voice shares a deep identification with the cane fields, by focusing on the fields’ vermin, Lum avoids casting the history of sugarcane production in a nostalgic glow. As a Local writer, Lum is all too familiar with the brutal and monotonous labor required to maintain the eye-catching sight of stalks swaying in the breeze.

Victor’s mountaintop view is not only interrupted by housing tracts; it also is infested with mongooses that perennially harass him at night. Originally brought to the islands to control the rat population, the mongooses in Lum’s story are aggressive and threatening. One morning, Victor witnesses through his binoculars a worker being impaled with a cane stalk through the eye. Victor drives down to the scene of the accident and meets a group of Filipino workers who speak in Pidgin:

The driver repeated, “Da damn mongoose know. Dey know! Dey went push or chew up da cane so that da tall ones fall in front da machine when I raising the front loader and poke me in da eye.”

Victor looked skeptical, “They not that smart. Jes accidental, I tink,”

Victor said.

“Hmmp,” the quiet one shook his head at Victor, “you donno. . .”

The driver continued, “Yeah, da damn mongoose. Dey know, da vicious little buggahs. Ass not no cute little stuffed animals like dey sell da tourist out onda North Shore. Whachucall? Willy-willy Mongoose? Goddamn little snakes. Alla time dis happen ever since dis project start. All kine little funny stuff. But nobody like believe” (24-5).

Here the Filipino workers adopt the position of commonsense philosophers and, in their succinct Pidgin, they assert the validity of their firsthand experience in the fields and contend that the mongoose is a vicious creature. They also point out the absurdity of tourist shops turning this pest into a cuddly icon of the Islands. To these men, that is tantamount to being blind about the harsh truth of Island life. Victor, however, cannot accept the workers’ accusations as truth. He sees it more as superstition that can only be admired as part of a cane field pastoral. While Victor talks Pidgin too, he clearly sees himself as separate from these men who appear to him as anachronistic creatures belonging to a sepia-soaked past. Victor is attempting to adopt the position of a skeptical haole calming down the non-Westerners.

Victor’s refusal to take heed about the mongoose’s malicious ways brings about his demise. One morning, while driving his car down the access road, Victor spots a mongoose in the backseat. He whacks it on the head with a machete, but the car flies off the side of the road into the cane. He gets out and realizes he is being watched: “The cane was moving in odd ways, against the prevailing winds. He closed his eyes” (31). At this point, the story abruptly ends. By doing so, Lum not only eerily gestures towards Victor’s gruesome demise; he also shows how the cane and its violent historical legacy remains a mystery to Victor. The Pidgin warnings of the

Filipino workers were trying to teach Victor about the violence endemic to sugarcane plantations, violence represented by stalking, vengeful mongooses.

Characters who refuse to listen to the wisdom of Pidgin-speaking Locals appear in other Lum stories. Another particularly striking example is the story “Paint,” which follows the trials of Coco, a young Local graffiti artist. Coco invests a lot of time and effort in anonymously spray-painting a rotating selection of pictures on a particular wall. Coco does not do his art merely for self-satisfaction but also to delight others. As he explains, “I try to put someting new everytime so get someting new fo everybody to see” (36). However, Coco’s exhibit space becomes threatened by two forces that try to silence his art. The first force is a self-styled revolutionary girl and the second is the Department of Public Works. By far, the most antagonistic of the two is the revolutionary who believes it is her right to spray-paint over Coco’s artwork. In Lum’s hands, she is rendered ridiculous:

Den she went little mo down and went spray out my “Coco ’84,” and
went put “WORLD WITHOUT IMPERIALISM, NO IMPERIALIST WARS”
right ovah my surf pickcha.

When she was pau she went look at me and say, “You know what dat means?”

“No,” I told her.

“Dat means we gotta tell people to fight da government. Gotta get people together and tell da governments not to have wars. Gotta give da poor people money and food and power like dat.”

“Oh,” I said. “But lady, why you went spray um ovah da wall? You nevah have to spray um ovah Coco’s stuff. You could’ve put um on da top or on da side

or write smaller. Look how you went jam up my pickcha, I mean Coco's pickcha!"

"Sorry," she went tell kinda sassy" (38).

The revolutionary not only belligerently erases the artwork of a child, she also talks to him in rhetoric that he cannot understand as a way to assume a superior position, a way to align herself with a haole-like authority. Despite the fact that she speaks Pidgin, she wants to prove that she is cosmopolitan and is intimate with world affairs. She believes Hawai'i and folks like Coco are beneath her.

The revolutionary's inflammatory message irritates other observers and DPW workers are ordered to paint over the graffiti. Now Coco's artwork has been institutionally erased as well. In the poignant final scene, a DPW workers expresses an aesthetic appreciation of Coco's work: " 'Eh, try look dis face,' one of da guys went point to my pickcha wit his roller. 'Not bad, yeah? Look almost like somebody crying wit dis red drip ovah here. You know who do dis one? Pretty good artist. Too bad gotta cover um up'" (42). Here we see Coco's art—and Local expression, by extension—only being appreciated the moment it is being erased. Local expression in Lum's world is consumed by powerful discourses that do not see anything uttered in Pidgin voices as worthy of respect.

No Escape: Lee Cataluna's *Folks You Meet in Longs and Other Stories*

Lee Cataluna's *Folks You Meet in Longs and Other stories* is a series of poetic monologues, each from a different customer or employee walking through the aisles of Longs, an all-purpose supermarket chain in Hawai'i. In a lot of ways, Cataluna's collection is reminiscent of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*. However, instead of a group of characters

talking to you from the grave, we overhear and meet Pidgin-talking folks who feel trapped by their everyday circumstances that are as confining as a grave. Cataluna's book is warmly humorous and obviously loves its characters, but it counteracts the soft-focus nostalgia that laces the work of so many other Local writers. Cataluna refuses to create any kind of idyllic zone; instead, in her poems, everyday moments carry the potential to erupt into expressions of grief, desperation, and anger. In this way, *Folks You Meet at Longs* reveals how Pidgin speakers oftentimes inhabit the lower rungs of Hawai'i's slippery socioeconomic ladder and often face precarious futures, as a result.

The only character who speaks more than once in the book is Nadine Tam Sing, a Longs employee who has worked in the store for twenty years. Nadine acts as our tired, all-too-wise-and-wishes-that-she-wasn't guide to the odd habits and bursts of desperation that can be witnessed in the constant waves of Longs shoppers. In her opening monologue, Nadine says, "People don't realize that they walk around with their needs on their faces like a grocery list pinned to their shirt. I need attention, I need distraction, I need help. I seen it. I seen it every day" (13). Nadine's words set the tenor for the rest of the book and she periodically checks in with the reader, her meditations tying together all the disparate life stories that we encounter. She returns with a narrative about a flirtatious old man who comes to Longs every morning with flowers for the female employees. In return, they sometimes give him a cup of coffee and a donut. Nadine does not just leave the reader with this curious tale; she also meditates on how the same tale is being played out in countless locations: "Come to find out, get one at every Longs. Maybe they get their own old man who bring flowers from his yard. Sometimes they still get the wife, but she real quiet or she don't leave the house. Mostly, the wife is gone already and they just get their yard. And us" (28). Nadine's pieces are so powerful because they are the sharp observations of a

population often treated as invisible: minimum-wage retail workers. It is Nadine's very invisibility that makes her such a good anthropologist of the everyday: customers do not pay attention to her so they do not bother to mask their emotions.

In the circus of raw emotion that is Cataluna's *Longs*, we come face-to-face with a wide range of stories. There is Deatra Lanning who cannot control her son Brandon no matter how hard she pleads and yells. There is Kalani Domingo whose life is hemmed in by superstitions. There is Tsukebe Uncle Richard who molests his niece. There is Uncle Choochie Nawai who is embarrassed to buy tampons for his wife and his yelling at his son on the cellphone to find out what brand he should buy. There is Dolores Kinore who shops for coffee on sale and believes that sexual relations with too many men will give you cancer and wrinkles.

One of the more interestingly sordid portrayals of everyday desperation comes in the intertwined tales of Linda Hamamoto and Junior. Linda is a bank employee who likes to get her car cleaned at McKinley Car Wash by young male employees such as Junior. First, we encounter Linda's perspective on the repeated encounters. Linda is aware of the potentially deviant sexual desire which she phrases as "feelings" and admits that "my car not even dirty and I go there on my lunch break" (41). The object of her fantasies is a particular kind of young man, "the big braddah with the jail house tattoos and the buss teeth come up to me and ask me what I want" (41). She is enthralled with the feelings of power she momentarily has over these tough-looking youths. As she states, "See, those guys, they look bad. I like them. They look bad, but they get job. I like that even more" (42). In her loneliness, Linda uses the car wash experience as a daily fantasy sphere where she is in control over men who have proven themselves hard to control in other situations.

The effect Linda's fantasizing has on the employees at McKinley Car Wash can be seen in Junior's monologue. In this piece, Junior warns a new employee about Linda and her unwanted flirtations. He offers advice about how to fend her off: "Okay, just no make eye contact and when you go for vacuum the car, tell her she gotta get out first. Say it's regulations. Or else she just going sit there in the passenger seat, make you stick the hose in between her and I sorry, but she nasty. And she not wearing nothing underneath that skirt, so if you make accident, you going get fired so just focus on the floor" (53). Junior goes on to mention how Linda sometimes flashes him too. In Junior's narrative, we see the ugly side of Linda's lonely desperation: she craves attention so much that she uses men whose jobs are on the line for stolen moments of pleasure.

A lot of the characters carry the ghosts of past abuses with them. One of the more chilling poems is the tale of the homeless man Booga Smyth. In this piece, Booga explains why he developed his characteristically loose way of speaking. He talks about his military-lifer father did not appreciate his personality and abusively sought to change it:

He said, Booga, thaT is whaT you call yourself, like the shiT you blowout
your nose.

Formless.

Useless.

Disgusting.

My father was man of few words.

Few, but with that hard clip that would nick and graze and cut.

CuT (83).

Defying his father's rigid assaults, Booga began to speak in the exact opposite way, nonviolently protesting this attempt to carve out his personality. As he tells the reader at the end, "I am the flow pushing and rounding smoothing out that hard hard clip" (83).

Cataluna also explicitly takes aim at the sugared nostalgia for the sugarcane plantation days in the poem, "Grampa Joji Still Wears Plantation Khakis." In this poem, we meet Grampa Joji, a cantankerous old man who is impatient with the youth today and believes that the cane workers of his generation were the last to know the nature of hard work:

Hard is when you bend over hoe hana so long when you pau work, no can stand
up straight anymore.

Hard work is when get one centipede in your boots and he biting, biting all the
way up your leg but you cannot stop to hemo pants. That is hard work.

Hard work is when the sickle stuck to your hand from all the blood that came out
and dried up and you gotta wash your hand in the ditch water fo' letta
go.

That is hard work.

You sleep good after that.

Your kaukau taste mo' good.

Your coffee get good flavah (125).

Grampa Joji's rhetoric is interesting: he acknowledges some of the terrible travesties he experienced daily as a cane cutter, but he does not condemn the labor or the economic system that made him perform that labor. He sees plantation labor as critical to his formation as a person and the very key to properly appreciating the pleasures that life offers. Cataluna does not extol

the plantation days here, but she does show how contemporary Local identity does not have a solid foundation anymore. Gone are the Locals of Grampa Joji's generation who used the rhythms of plantation life as a way to solidly ground their sense of self. A rapidly developing and increasingly expensive Hawai'i leave many folks wandering the aisles of Longs with the need written in bold on their faces.

Rage Against the Everyday: Sage Uilani Takehiro's *Honua*

Sage Takehiro's poems strike a note of breathless guttural rage, a venomous seething that emanates from Hawaiian history's deep wounds. Equally pissed off about Sanford Dole and his cohorts' "skanky ass beard" as she is about the low wage work at Wal-Mart, Takehiro shows the resentment that contemporary Native Hawaiians feel about being perennially displaced in their ancestral homeland (44-5). Her poems sharply differ from other Local Pidgin writers in that they are not bathed in fond memories or gentle, lighthearted humor. Taking a page from the Trask sisters, Takehiro instead positions her words as broken glass meant to prick the reader. While Cataluna's work questions the notion of Hawai'i as paradise, Takehiro takes it another step further and says that *you* are the reason that it is not paradise. In her world, there is an us vs. them and the reader, no matter what their ethnic background or socioeconomic position, is clearly not on the us side.

Takehiro does not write exclusively in Pidgin; she also employs standard English and Hawaiian in her works, strategically using each language variety to accentuate certain political ideas and garner particular emotional responses. When she uses Pidgin, it is for maximum vitriolic impact. For example, Pidgin pops out in the poem "What Stoners Think About When They're Getting Stoned," a breakneck rant from a young Local who lives with her grandparents

and works a service industry job and smokes marijuana with her friends by a seawall for a moment of escape. As the poem progresses, we discover that this ritual of pot smoking is far from leisurely recreation; it contains traces of nihilistic longing:

Fohget it. Fohget tuning out da world

fohget getting fucked up

fohget getting married

fohget graduating high sku

fohget what we neva learn in high sku

Fohget da tings we do fo' forget (43).

Here the speaker wishes to reach a state of oblivion so deep, so unreturnable that she will forget even the desire to obliterate her life. However, there is more to this poem than melodramatic despair. In fact, it ends on a note of hard-bitten resilience. The speaker counsels her friend in the following ways:

Eh fuck you!

You wish you had one job at Wal-Mart.

Bitch, nex time buy yoa own damn weed—

Eh iz not my fault you married to one broke ass haole

half rich, half pua, no can pay rent, no qualify fo' couny housing.

Shit, no bettah mary one half Hawaiian

at lea' dey put chu on da waiting lis'! (44).

I love the cynical humor in these lines. Takehiro's speaker appeals to ethnic solidarity among Native Hawaiians not to preserve cultural values, but because being Native Hawaiian allows you to game the very legal system that took your land away. Takehiro shows in this poem that many

Native Hawaiians may be caught in the service industry swamp, but they also use little acts of resistance in their everyday lives.

For a look at a more open act of resistance from Takehiro, the reader only has to move on to the next poem, “A Letter.” This piece is a bitter epistle addressed to the members of Hawai‘i’s Sanford Dole-led Provisional government, a group of ambitious haole businessmen that staged a coup against Lili‘uokalani’s regime. This letter quickly turns into a piece of hate mail, a grotesque revenge fantasy against the architects of haole domination on the islands. The first line?: “WHATCHU FUCKAS!!!” (45). The poem then specifies detailed forms of punishment including puncturing the men’s eyeballs and gripping the sinus bone and pulling off their noses. Yet after articulating all the types of punishments, the speaker claims that he or she will not do this. It is out of respect, not for Dole and his co-conspirators, but for the ‘aumākua, her family’s guardian spirit:

But no can. Not cuz you dead already
and not cuz I scayed scrap yoa great, great grandkids
But cuz da ‘Aumākua stay telling me,
“Shut the fuck up, Mutha Fucka”.”

So I going listen to the ‘Aumākua, and I going shut da fuck up. I ain’t
giving you my voice no moa (45).

According to Rita Goldman, as ambiguous spiritual beings, ‘aumākua are guardians of one’s family, symbolizing one’s connection to the land. When one dies, the ‘aumākua guides their soul into the land of the dead. By appealing to the ‘aumākua and showing the power it has over the

speaker's actions, Takehiro is emphasizing that the annexation of the islands and the political disenfranchisement of Native Hawaiians has not killed their connection to the spiritual world.

Takehiro's poetry finds Pidgin so effective because it helps a wider Island audience listen to the resentments that Native Hawaiians possess. Furthermore, if Pidgin is the prestige language of triumphalist Local identity, speaking such profane vitriol in that language questions the widely accepted notion that Localism is a harmless iteration of Hawai'i's lower classes. Takehiro, who qualifies as Local with her mixed race ancestry, shouts out that Kanaka Maoli still exist and that Local and Native are far from synonymous.

Conclusion

Pidgin is a very malleable literary tool and Local writers such as Pak, Bradajo, Lum, Cataluna, and Takehiro use the language in order to achieve their own distinctive oppositional aims. As these authors demonstrate, Pidgin works as a sort of double agent, lending power and persuasiveness to contradictory ideological agendas. It can celebrate the distinctiveness of Local identity while lampooning Locals as stupid. It can also question the power dynamics between Locals and haoles or between Locals and other Locals. It can reveal the frustrations of Locals' daily lives. The only thing that seems to connect all of Pidgins' various uses is the fact that its pariah literary status guarantees the generation of friction within a written work. When Pidgin appears in literature, it could be considered less an expressive mode of Hawaiian Local identity than a divining rod that indicates the presence of social rifts lurking underneath Hawai'i's placid surface.

Multiculturalist Guides: Contemporary Chinese Cookbooks in the U.S.

“In China, there is no one standard recipe, unlike with something like a traditional eggs Benedict. And even a chef cooking eggs Benedict can create new sauces, new flavor profiles. So in a true sense, what defines tradition is how you execute a dish. A Chinese chef can use any ingredient. If they go to Peru, they have to use ingredients from Peru. If you go to Cuba, you’ve got to use ingredients from Cuba, but you’re still basically doing a Chinese dish.”

- Martin Yan in an interview with Kevin Pang

As Martin Yan’s words above indicate, Chinese cuisine is far from monolithic. Besides the regional variations in food preferences and preparations in China itself, there are also the innovations birthed by the Chinese Diaspora’s wide geographic spread. In fact, it would be far more appropriate to speak of Chinese cuisines. Furthermore, as Yan reminds us, the spirit of Chinese cooking is not contained within specific ingredients or recipes; rather, it is more a way of approaching food, a willingness to take whatever foods are at hand and prepare them according to the principles of an ancient philosophy. By seeing Chinese cuisines in this way, Yan implies that the current foodie obsession with authentic ethnic foodways is actually a shallow form of interethnic contact. Each manifestation of Chinese cuisine needs to be seriously considered whether it is an obscure Hakka specialty eaten in the mountains of Fujian or the sesame chicken served in a lunch buffet at a Connecticut Chinese restaurant. In other words, a cuisine is not an unchanging reservoir of ethnic identity; it is a constantly changing archive where the longings of various individuals in a society are collected and shared.

In order to better understand the transformations undergoing Chinese cuisine outside of China and the social position of Chinese Americans, I investigate the twenty-first century publication of Chinese cookbooks in the United States, focusing on Martin Yan’s *Chinese Cooking for Dummies* (2000), Fuchsia Dunlop’s *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes from Hunan Province* (2007), Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz’s *Mission Street Food: Recipes*

and *Ideas from an Improbable Restaurant* (2011), and Grace Young's *Breath of a Wok* (2004).

While there have been wonderful and extensive studies of the Chinese restaurant as an iconic North American institution, very little has been written specifically about how non-Chinese Americans bring Chinese cooking methods out of the restaurant and into their homes.³⁴ Since Sara Bosse and Onoto Watanna's *Chinese-Japanese Cook Book* (1914), cookbooks about Chinese food have shaped Americans' perceptions of their omnipresent takeout fare and Chinese identity in general. As Anita Mannur states, "while culinary rhetoric is by no means an index of changing racial norms, its nuances and articulations are suggestive of ways in which to conceive of difference" (210). By focusing on cookbooks published in the past fifteen years, I show how Americans try to work out their conflicted feelings about multiculturalist celebrations of ethnic traditions through food and the ways in which discussions about ethnic food almost always are implicit debates about whether a particular ethnicity should be allowed to participate in a national culture. Discussions about Chinese and Chinese American cuisine often incorporate a muddled mix of grotesque minstrel gestures, yearning for the authentic, and nostalgia for previous forms of ethnic discourse. Through this blend of discourses, Chinese cookbooks become tools that facilitate an essentializing form of multiculturalism. However, these cookbooks

³⁴ The scholarship on the Chinese restaurant in North America is truly magnificent and is worth exploring further. Andrew Coe's *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (2009), J.A.G. Robert's *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West* (2002), Jennifer 8. Lee's *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (2008), and "Chinese Take-Out" in Robert Ku's *Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA* (2014) all investigate the fickle attitudes held about Chinese restaurants in the United States. Lily Cho's *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (2010), does an excellent job in analyzing the Chinese restaurant as a critical site of interethnic contact in the Canadian landscape, an integral part of many towns' Main Streets yet considered perpetually foreign. In the recent anthology *Eating Asian America*, Heather R. Lee's article, "A Life Cooking for Others: The Work and Migration Experiences of a Chinese Restaurant Worker in New York City, 1920-1946," details the thankless labor performed by many restaurant workers and their longing for home (Jennifer 8. Lee's book also discusses this, focusing on contemporary Fujianese immigrants). Finally, in his miniseries for Canadian television, *Chinese Restaurants*, Cheuk Kwan visits establishments in the far-flung corners of the globe including Israeli West Bank settlements, Norwegian fishing villages, and a Madagascar mountain town. Rather than focusing on the food, Cheuk interviews the owners. He coaxes out stories of heartbreak and resilience, showing that Chinese restaurants are the way stations of the Chinese diaspora. All of these works will be referenced throughout the chapter.

authors also embed critiques of how Chinese food and people are perceived in U.S. culture, even going so far as to promote the creole relational mode through the celebration of Chinese American culinary innovations. In the end though, they treat Chinese American food as a cuisine apart from American food, even when trying to counteract this separation. These cookbooks teach Americans of all ethnicities to cook Chinese food in their homes, but they ultimately do not break down the barriers of difference. Chinese American cultural innovations are allowed in the home, but only as intriguing and slightly worrisome guests.

Cookbooks as a Diagnostic Tool for Interethnic Relations

At first glance, it may seem unusual to analyze cookbooks in order to divine the nature of a society's interethnic relations. However, as a number of scholars show, cookbooks oftentimes define an ethnic group's culinary traditions for members of other ethnicities, wrangling a complicated and constantly mutating set of practices into a limited yet easily comprehensible portrait. Cookbooks also flaunt the parts of an ethnic tradition that are deemed to be acceptable and desirable to members of other ethnicities and tend to pass silently over the aspects that make folks uncomfortable.

Cookbooks, by their very nature, are archival, appearing when the oral transmission of cooking knowledge breaks down. The reasons for this breakdown are numerous: individuals of a shared food culture are geographically separated; there is an erosion of intergenerational connections in the home; a food culture shifts to prepared items largely offered in the public sphere. Arjun Appadurai adds that cookbooks "appear in literate civilizations where the display of class hierarchies is essential to their maintenance, and where cooking is seen as a communicable variety of expert knowledge" (4). Whatever the reason, cookbooks preserve and

circulate information that threatens to become lost. Janet Theophano thinks that recipes' "existence in writing offers us a kind of permanence that, if and when we want it, is waiting for us to retrieve" (51). Modern cookbooks, with their precise measurements and authoritative tones, offer people the illusion of a stable, static culinary past, an antidote for fickle day-to-day living.

Cookbooks, however, are limited (and limiting) archives as they can only represent a small portion of a food culture's regional variations and idiosyncrasies. As a result, they offer a reductive vision of a tradition. If the cookbook circulates widely enough, the book's vision could be mistaken as the food culture itself. This becomes especially problematic if the cookbook features a food tradition that is marketed to those who do not share it. Theophano concurs: "Used or not, unchanged or transformed, these recipes and the rituals in which they are embedded continue to shape a group's current image of itself" (51). Cookbooks' omissions distort culinary heritages, making individuals feel obligated to adhere to ossified conventions rather than adapting and innovating in the kitchen.

The potential distorted impressions that cookbooks can create about a cuisine are especially fraught because as Appadurai states, "the construction of a national cuisine is essentially a postindustrial, postcolonial process" (5). In other words, in the globalized capitalist network that characterizes the twenty-first century, a nation or, I would add, a nationally-oriented ethnic group, needs to construct a distinctive cuisine in order to be seen as worthy of being a major player in international affairs. Having a cuisine helps to give an ethnic group a brand that is easy to commodify and circulate, thus maintain relevance in an increasingly international popular culture that is marked by a short attention span.

Anita Mannur investigates how cookbooks are always embroiled in the ideologies of assimilation that characterize immigration policy in the United States. Taking a look at

contemporary Indian cookbooks published in the United States, Mannur shows that even when ethnic cookbooks are written with the best intentions, “these cookbooks and their innovative approach to cuisine produce a culinary logic that implicitly espouses a politics of assimilation in which foreign excess must be translated into easily digestible and overtly domesticated signs of difference for it to be palatable to sensitive palates” (186). On the flip side, if a cookbook espouses the ways in which U.S. food habits can be incorporated into an ethnic group’s foodways, Mannur argues, the text can help preserve cultural difference in an otherwise hostile cultural terrain (215-6).

Studying Chinese cookbooks published in the United States reveals what aspects of Chinese American culture individuals are willing to incorporate into their daily routines. This is especially critical because, as Robert Ku convincingly argues, Chinese food has become a “culture of complaint” in the United States, or as he humorously describes, “one wonders whether there is a ‘kick me’ sign taped to the back of all Chinese restaurants, the Rodney Dangerfield of American gastronomy” (53). Despite the fact that Chinese Americans have been a part of the United States’ ethnic hodge-podge for hundreds of years and that there are upwards of 40,000 Chinese restaurants across the country, making them more numerous than McDonald’s, Chinese cuisine is still plagued by racist accusations of serving unsanitary and culturally unacceptable foods (Ku 54-5). Yet despite this perpetual uneasiness with the consumption of Chinese foods, since 1914, there have been at least a hundred Chinese cookbooks published in the United States and Canada. The proliferation of these cookbooks attests to a cultural desire to embrace at least a part of the Chinese culinary tradition. The exact nature of this desire will be further explicated in the close analysis of the above mentioned texts.

First, I propose that Chinese cookbooks should be considered a counterpublic space, in so much as books could be considered spaces. Lily Cho argues that Chinese restaurants in North America qualify as counterpublics because they do not offer “a static and authorial claim to Chineseness” (129). Therefore, according to her logic, “they do not constitute a republic of difference, but rather a counterpublic of uncertain and constantly negotiated differences” (129). I extend Cho’s argument to include Chinese cookbooks because the interactions they facilitate are anything but certain. While authors try to convey a particular vision of Chinese cuisine, they do not know who comprises their audience or how members of that audience plan on using the cookbook. Readers pick up these books searching for a vessel for information or maybe a vehicle for dreaming, but they pick them up because they wish to experience an aspect of Chinese culture that is not accessible in their normal social relationships. Chinese cookbooks are counterpublics because they speak to a desire for a different kind of interethnic contact, even if it does occur in the privacy of one’s own kitchen.

“If Yan Can, So Can You!”: Martin Yan and Demystifying Chinese Cooking

When Martin Yan appears in one of his numerous television specials, his eyes always intensely look at the camera, almost bulging out of their sockets, and his hands quickly dance between stove flames and pans. His body is full of hummingbird intensity yet he is calmly sure of what is happening around him. His smile readily emerges, punctuating his emphatic assertions. He possesses a Buster Keatonesque mixture of knowing buffoonery and composed dignity. Ever since *Yan Can Cook* debuted in 1982 on public television, he has been on a mission to educate North Americans about Chinese food, systematically demystifying its techniques and chasing away the orientalist mist that surrounds many of its dishes. His public persona is

relentlessly friendly, almost to a pathological degree, and many have criticized him as presenting a cartoon portrait of China. In fact, one could characterize Yan's performances as minstrel gestures that distort Chineseness into a subservient and friendly essence. Yan, defending his persona in an interview, explains that, "in order for me to reach the masses, reach the mainstream, I have to show emotion. Being engaging is about energy, about emotion, so everything is about energy, energy, energy" (Pang 54-5). Despite what ones feels about his energetic shtick, Yan remains a pioneer in the realm of Chinese cookery. As the Canadian filmmaker Kenneth Bi recently said to Yan on an episode of *Martin Yan's Hong Kong*, "You were the only Asian face on TV when I was growing up."

Bi's statement becomes even more haunting when one considers the surge in anti-Asian sentiments in North America during the early 1980s when U.S. and Canadian manufacturing jobs left for China, Japan, and other nations. The most iconic expression of this ugly resentment is the death of Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death in Highland Park, Michigan by Robert Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz. Ebens and Nitz worked for the auto industry and felt angered by the expansion of the Japanese auto industry. Seeing Chin in a strip club and assuming he was Japanese, Ebens declared "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work!" Ebens and Nitz bludgeoned Chin with a baseball bat and killed him. Nitz was acquitted while Ebens eventually repealed his prison sentence (Jones). Chin's death still haunts Asian Americans and has been addressed by a variety of scholars including Sheng Mai Ma who writes: "The legacy of Vincent Chin sharpens the Asian American predicament: he was an American, but not to Americans; he was not an Asian, but he died as one" (92). In the face of such violence, does Yan's relentless friendliness formulate a kind of denial of ethnic marginalization? It is a hard

question to dispel; however, extended analysis of Yan's rhetoric reveals the ways in which he tries to complicate notions of what it means to be Chinese to varying degrees of success.

Yan has popularized the idea that Chinese food could be more than just a rare exotic feast you tried out to impress friends; it could become an integral part of the cooking repertoires of North Americans. Yan seeks to empower individuals on their journey of cross-cultural education through a disarming amiability, exemplified by his most popular catchphrase: "If Yan can cook, so can you!" In doing so, Yan emphasizes how Chinese food is a part of the United States' heritage. Yet, in doing so, he sometimes gives the mistaken impression that China's vast cultural legacy is simple to understand.

Since 1978's *Chinese Recipes*, Yan has published at least seventeen cookbooks, ranging from companions to his television series such as *Yan Can Cook Cookbook* (1982) to travelogues through food such as *Martin Yan's China* (2008). He openly acknowledges working with an enormous staff and a long list of corporate sponsors, and it is unclear how much of each book Yan actually composes. A good example of the size crew that assists Yan can be found in the acknowledgments section in *Martin Yan's Chinatown Cooking* (1995), in which he gestures towards coordinators, test kitchen chefs, recipe writers, ghostwriters, editors, photographers, food stylists (!), prop stylists, and jacket photographers. Clearly, when we discuss Martin Yan's cookbooks, we must let go of the notion of the singular author. When one reads a Yan publication, they are looking at the orchestrated effort of a group of individuals organized under a particular brand. That is not to suggest that Yan is absent; far from it, he stamps everything he does with his particular vision of what Chinese cooking should be.

The cookbook that I think best distills his persona is *Chinese Cooking for Dummies* (2000), part of IDG Books' popular *For Dummies* series of instructional manuals. Despite the

title's joking tone, *Chinese Cooking for Dummies* is a smart collection of dishes heavily inspired by those found in many American Chinese restaurants. The book's tone is slightly hammy, keeping with Yan's trademark approach. To make the reader feel comfortable, he eschews the overly pious tone adopted by some ethnic cookbooks and indulges in puns and intentionally bad jokes. Yet this buffoonery still teaches readers about cooking techniques. Observe the shifts in his tone in the following passage:

How do you cook your fish with a Chinese accent? (No, the answer is not Berlitz.) Doing so is actually a lot easier than you may think. The Chinese love to steam fish because this simple cooking method accentuates the clean, natural flavor of the fish. Just add a little simply seasoning from a marinade of green, onions, soy sauce, sugar, and pepper, and the result is pure magic (129).

In this passage, Yan uses the bad pun to make the reader feel that they are equal to him, that he is not an unapproachable genius. Then he emphasizes the simplicity of Chinese fish cookery, gives precise directions, the reasons why the technique is done, and caps it off with a statement that once again underlines the ease of it all. The undercurrent of this rhetoric is the looming question, "Why wouldn't you try it out?"

Whenever he can, Yan likes to point out cognate practices between Euro American and Chinese American cooking practices. For example, a section that describes the traditional Mongolian grilling is titled "An Old-fashioned Eastern barbecue?" (69). After describing the methods of grilling, Yan ends the section by urging readers to "[t]ake advantage of your own griddle or barbecue grill and give an Asian-style barbecue a try" (69). By pointing out the cultural similarities, Yan gives the illusion that Chinese food is just a variation of Western

cuisine, a slight modification of already beloved techniques. There is a utopian undercurrent here. For Yan, recognizing cultural similarities might make us forget the sometimes confrontational differences between cultures.

While Yan's approach lures people into new ways of cooking, he unintentionally feeds into the notion that by cooking a few simple dishes, one grasps Chineseness. Lisa Heldke talks about this troublesome attitude: "various experiences made me feel uncomfortable about the easy acquisitiveness with which I approached a new kind of food, the tenacity with which I collected adventures—as one might collect ritual artifacts from another culture without thinking about the appropriateness of removing them from their cultural setting" (xv). This collect-'em-all attitude detrimentally transforms cultural heritage into a series of consumer objects. According to Heldke, this attitude value cultures less for inherent characteristics and more for their novelty (15).

Yan seems to be aware of the limitations in his demystifying approach and he tries to counteract it. He portrays Chinese culture as a corrective to many Western woes. He extols aspects of the Chinese diet: "Statistics show that the coastal region of China has the highest consumption of protein in the world, and most of it comes from fish. Maybe that's why we Cantonese are so healthy and smart. You know what they say when it comes to fish and smarts: It's a no-brainer" (125). Underneath the playful tone, Yan contends that the Chinese cooking tradition is not mere novelty; it is also a reservoir of knowledge. He also works against the North American tradition of slumming in Chinatowns. He tells readers that there is more to Chinese cooking than exotic ingredients: "Granted, some rare ingredients are bound to call for a trip to Chinatown, but always check your local supermarket first, just in case. You can put the time to better use in your kitchen" (35). Yan is gently asserting that one cannot simply *buy* one's way

into Chinese cuisine; one must patiently and dutifully learn its techniques and philosophies. According to him, Chinese cuisine might be simple, but one still needs to be serious about it.

Finally, Yan has an ambivalent relationship with the American Chinese restaurant. He explicitly addresses the misconceptions these establishments have created about Chinese cookery:

The popularity of dishes such as broccoli beef, beef and tomatoes, and tangerine peel beef—all wonderful recipes in their own right—may give the dining public the impression that the Chinese eat a lot of beef.

In fact, they don't. Beef's high cost and limited supply make it a luxurious dish for most Chinese diners. Furthermore, many don't care too much for beef's strong flavor and fibrous texture (as compared to pork's)" (190).

Yan does not denigrate the restaurant fare. He views it as something as a distinct and separate form of Chinese cookery. The Chinese restaurant is an important site of cultural diplomacy in North America. However, in the end, the American Chinese restaurant matters little to Yan; his main concern is getting people to cook Chinese food in their homes. He wants Americans to stop seeing Chinese food as a cheap form of tourism and he wants it to be part of this nation's culinary vernacular. The question of whether or not Americanized Chinese restaurant fare could be considered legitimate form of Chinese cookery would be the concern for another type of cookbook writer that emerged roughly at the same time as Yan.

Fuchsia Dunlop and the Ethnographic Hunt for Authentic Chinese Food

Around the 1970s, a new species of ethnic cookbook appeared, presenting itself as a colloquial ethnography through food. The ethnographic cookbook insists on following traditional

cooking practices no matter how impractical and needlessly complicated they are in an American context. For Chinese Americans, this cultural focus on authenticity can have damaging results.

Robert Ku describes the toll:

Chinese Americans, by virtue of residing in the United States for too long, cannot qualify as bona-fide Chinese, and the food they cook up can best be described as ersatz Chinese, a poor imitation of the original, and not original in its own right. Chinese Americans, using this logic, are either poor imitations or irredeemable corruptions of the real thing (73).

Besides erasing the Chinese American culinary innovations, authenticity hunters of Chinese food also privilege individuals with plenty of disposable income and time. Their search for the essence of Chineseness denigrates all who slaved away in the kitchens of American Chinese restaurants and the moments of enjoyment created by this cross-cultural cuisine.

Ethnographic cookbooks engage in what Lucy Long has dubbed *culinary tourism*. According to Long, “culinary tourism, utilizing the senses of taste, smell, touch, and vision, offers a deeper, more integrated level of experience. It engages one’s physical being, not simply as an observer, but as a participant as well” (21). In order to move into being a participant, these cookbooks encourage readers to become actively involved in all stages of the cooking process. No short cuts here. For example, Barbara Tropp’s *China Moon Cookbook* (1992) includes an extended meditation titled “Why bother making it when I can buy it?” (Tropp 6-7). Tropp argues here that culinary labor is emotionally rewarding. However, she is quiet on the subject of cost. For example, to buy all the spices necessary to make five-spice powder would cost at least \$15. One can buy five-spice powder for as little as \$1. The hunt for the authentic is ultimately not

about food consumption; it is about briefly performing an ethnicity different from one's own.³⁵

When an American cook makes their own five spice powder, they can momentarily play the part of a Chinese peasant in the mountains of Sichuan.³⁶

A nuanced example of an ethnographic worthy of close analysis is Fuchsia Dunlop's second book *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes from Hunan Province* (2007). Dunlop is a British culinary researcher whose claim to fame is being the first Westerner to graduate from a Chinese cooking school, the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine in Chengdu. Dunlop poses as a pioneer who can safely school the curious Westerner about Chinese cuisine. She sees herself as a person living between two cultures, almost losing her English identity to the charms of Chineseness. In her memoir, she explains:

My good English table manners, so carefully instilled by my mother, have been ruined by my years in China. When I'm there, I spit my bones out, I raise my rice

³⁵ The ethnographic cookbook is the fullest expression of a tendency that lurked in earlier Chinese cookbooks. Take a look at Craig Claiborne and Virginia Lee's massive tome, *The Chinese Cookbook* (1972), which oscillates between two paradoxical attitudes. First, it demands that the reader recreate an authentic Chinese eating experience. At the same time, it tells the reader to relax when cooking and not get hung up on minor issues. The two contrary impulses can be witnessed in a single passage, as in the recipe for Sing Fong Chicken: "The following recipe calls for two spices—tsao kao and shan yau—which are difficult but not impossible to obtain in spice shops in any Chinatown. The dish is excellent, however, even if it is made without them. They are included for the sake of authenticity" (83). Underneath the helpful tone, Claiborne and Lee are implying that while substitutions may be fine for some folks, those who truly love food will seek to match the original recipe exactly.

³⁶ The use of recipes as a form of mental travel has deep roots in Chinese cookbooks in the US, appearing as early as Sara Bosse and Onoto Watanna's 1914 *Chinese-Japanese Cook Book*. The sisters include recipes for dishes that most non-Chinese Americans of the time probably would not eat, but were nonetheless fascinated by, including bird's nest soup and boiled whale. By including such recipes, Bosse and Watanna highlight the touristic undercurrent for many Chinese cookbooks. Let's look at their bird's nest soup recipe. After giving instructions for how to make the soup, they explain the backstory of the bird's nest, partially misidentifying it as "a species of seaweed, with which certain Chinese birds, the esculent swallow and the white-backed swallow, build their nests" (it is not a seaweed, but made by the bird's saliva) (16). I doubt many neophytes rushed to their stoves after reading this description. This recipe is all the more curious considering that the authors mentioned their book contained "only such Chinese and Japanese dishes have been selected as would appeal to the Western palate" (4). The bird's nest recipe is a springboard for daydreams of feasting rather than instructions for actual cooking. Part of the ethnic cookbook's pleasure is that we can imagine meals that we do not actually put into our bodies. Later Chinese cookbooks would also introduce readers to previously unheard-of foods exists while protecting them from directly experiencing those foods. Bosse and Watanna's cookbook is indicative of how some Americans viewed Chinese culinary culture as a reservoir of fantastic factoids and exotic images that could be freely mixed and appropriated, useful to a popular culture grown bored with its own homegrown traditions.

bowl to my lips; I slurp along with everyone else. In my first years in Chengdu, I even picked up, for a while, the unsavoury habit of spitting in the streets. ‘You are half-Chinese,’ my friends there tell me. And, as I look at them out of my round Caucasian eyes, I have to acknowledge that, inside me, there is someone who is no longer entirely English. I’m not even sure if I know, anymore, precisely where the cultural boundaries lie (*Shark’s Fin* 310).

While Dunlop proudly showcases her “half-Chinese” identity, she does not assume that she is yardstick for measuring authenticity in Chinese cooking. Instead, she consults friends, family members of her friends, renowned chefs, rural peasants, and noodle-stand owners for recipes and culinary secrets. In other words, Dunlop does not wish to be seen an expert; she wishes to be seen as the guide who leads touristic readers to best cooks.

Dunlop’s cookbook reads like series of quests for ever-elusive authentic dishes. She does not remain in urban restaurants; she travels down rutted country roads in Sichuan or Hunan, looking for that hidden cooking genius. Her focus on China is so intense that she acts as if the Chinese diaspora never occurred. This silence about Westernized Chinese food is intriguing since it is the reference point for most of her readers. I wonder if Dunlop is trying to erase two centuries of racist misperceptions about Chinese food by ignoring the rumors altogether. Instead, she reintroduces the cuisine as if it is brand-new. In *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook*, there is a rare moment when she addresses a classic of American Chinese restaurant fare: General Tso’s Chicken. Rather than celebrating this dish as it exists on countless menus, she hunts for its original version. That way, she can show how the American Chinese restaurant betrayed the Chinese culinary tradition. Dunlop echoes the logic of early food historian E.N. Anderson who, in the analysis of Robert Ku, presupposed “a transcendental culinary standard that is violated or

betrayed when Chinese food travels beyond the borders of China, and especially to the United States” (69). After some sleuthing, Dunlop discovers that the dish was invented by Pen Chang-Keui, a Hunanese chef living in exile in Taiwan after the Communist Revolution. Peng eventually moved to New York where he made the dish sweeter to cater to American tastes. Later, his apprentices started making the dish in their own restaurants, spreading its fame. In summation, Dunlop offers this meditation:

But even if General Tso’ chicken is not an ‘authentic’ Hunanese dish, it has to be seen as part of the story of Hunanese cuisine. It doesn’t tell the same story as the dishes eaten in remote Hunanese villages, where some cooking methods haven’t changed for millennia, but it is a key part of recent culinary history. After all, it embodies a narrative of the old Chinese apprentice system and the Golden Age of Hunanese cookery; the tragedy of civil war and exile; the struggle of the Chinese diaspora to adapt to American society; and in the end the opening up of China and the reestablishment of links between Taiwan and the Mainland (119).

Here Dunlop finally acknowledges the Chinese diaspora and argues that it possesses a compelling story. Yet she also portrays Hunan’s rural landscape as an eternal pastoral, the very image that the ideology of authenticity (which she questions by placing the word authenticity in quotation marks) relies upon.

The eternal pastoral continues in many of the poetic anecdotes she offers with her recipes in order to emphasize their authenticity. She wants readers to travel to a static, idyllic Hunan with her:

When I stay with my friend Fan Qun at her parents’ farmhouse in northern Hunan, we sit outside in sunny days, looking out over the narrow fields and gently

rising hills. The road is a track, and there is virtually no traffic, but neighbors walk past often, and usually stop for a chat or a cup of tea. One occasional visitor is the local bean curd-maker, an old man in a blue Mao suit, who carries a bamboo slat on his shoulders, from which hangs a basket of freshly made bean curd, and a basket of the bean curd dregs that can be made into soup. Fan Qun's mother sometimes fries the bean curd, and then simmers it in a sauce with chiles and other seasonings (186).

Here the Chinese countryside exists outside of time. The hard, unmechanized labor on small plots that characterizes Chinese farming is absent. So is the mundane day-to-day tasks of the faceless, unnamed bean curd maker, whose Mao suit must be worn away to rags at this point in time. What is left is a photographic snapshot of artisanal consumer products, giving the illusion that China exists for pleasuring one's senses. The Chinese countryside is a magical realm where everything is delicious. According to Robert Ku, observers who are obsessed with the authenticity of Chinese food in China offer a distorted perception of the culinary reality: "We are thus compelled to ignore the possibility that poor Chinese food abounds in China, too. Surely the notion of subpar native food that caters to local denizens, wherever in the world they might reside, is a culinary fact of life" (74). The almost endemic poverty of the Chinese countryside, the dire economic circumstances that allow Dunlop's culinary pastoral to exist, surely must have forced many Chinese individuals to subsist on less than appetizing meal options.

Within this rural-tinged simplicity, Dunlop is seeking to correct Western modernity's worst excesses. This drive to escape oneself is one of the hallmark reasons for searching out the authentic Other. Dunlop is obviously in love with Chinese cooking and possesses a deep respect for it, but her rhetorical strategies sometimes continue the Western trend of seeing China as the

polar opposite of Western ways, a move which obscures much about the Chinese cooking tradition, especially the story of Chinese Americans. By omitting Chinese Americans from her cookbook, Dunlop implies that Chinese food can never become American; only in China can it ever be properly expressed.

The Nostalgic Hipster: Mission Chinese Food and the Embrace of the Inauthentic

While the search for the authentic is the ideology that dominates the ethnic cookbook marketplace, there has been a push back against this with cookbooks that are laced with nostalgia for a time when Americans' understanding of "ethnic" was far less complex. This attitude is perhaps best illustrated by the publications associated with Mission Chinese Food, a New York City restaurant headed by a young Korean American chef named Danny Bowien. Eschewing the traditional trappings of fine establishments, Bowien instead crafts an atmosphere of kitschy chaos: Maoist-era propaganda posters paper the walls, David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* memorabilia in the bathroom, Led Zeppelin blaring on the stereo. Mission Chinese Food's menu offers Chinese classics that have been idiosyncratically warped: kung pao pastrami, lamb tongue and cuttlefish salad, salt cod fried rice.

More striking than these dishes is the way in which people approach the flavors. Take the ecstatic prose Brett Martin uses in a *GQ* interview with Bowien: "Sichuan peppercorn, with the numbing property known as *ma*, and red chile, with fiery heat known as *la*, the yin and yang of a venerable centuries-old cuisine—are essentially drugs. They leave you coughing like a bong hit; buzzing like a line of coke; blasted skyward like a volleyball, and then spiked down into the dust, a speedball of spice." Sichuan's five hundred year-old flavoring principles are compared to

contemporary American drug practices. Such a comparison indicates that Sichuanese food is seen less as comfort food than a form of extreme experience.

Viewed through this lens, eating at Mission Chinese Food participates in a very old tradition of slumming. As Andrew Coe writes, slumming in Chinatown appealed to self-fashioned bohemians at the end of the nineteenth century, who saw in Chinatowns “a milieu that more accurately reflected the true nature of the city than all the Fifth Avenue ballrooms” (157). Bohemians wandered through Chinatown so they could observe a rawer form of existence, one they felt was more in touch with life. Slumming was a way to react against bourgeois morality. As a writer in *The New York Herald* wrote in 1902: “When he [the bohemian] chooses a Chinese dinner he must have some restaurant where no white man has ever before trod, if he can find one...As soon as others begin to frequent it also, again he flies” (Coe 169). Bohemians and gentry alike used slumming as a way to distinguish themselves through consumer choices. J.A.G. Roberts amends Coe’s ideas by detailing how Chinatown tourism was partially orchestrated by Chinatown merchants seeking to expand their customer base beyond the small pool of neighborhood residents (145-6). Whether spearheaded by bohemians or neighborhood merchants, visiting Chinese restaurants did not bring a greater appreciation of Chinese culture. If anything, as Coe and Roberts point out, the cheap fare of chop suey houses gave Chinese culture—previously thought to be a highlight of human civilization—a gutter stench in the minds of many white Americans.

Eating at Mission Chinese Food indeed echoes the slumming trips of early twentieth-century bohemians, but there is one critical difference: it is trying to erase the *Chinese* from Chinese food. Bowien himself even concedes to this ethnic effacement: “Bowien has had no luck employing cooks with previous Chinese-cooking experience or who have even used a wok

before. ‘As soon as you get a wok cook, it's all, “No, this is the right way to do it,”’ he says. ‘I'd rather have people who are earnest and humble and want to learn.’” Bowien’s dismissive attitude towards chefs trained in American Chinese restaurants not only denigrates a whole American food tradition, it also refuses to appreciate the experience these chefs gained from working long hours in sometimes exploitative situations. Unfortunately, Bowien actually replicates the long tradition of chefs being disrespected and exploited in American Chinese restaurants. As Heather R. Lee notes in her study of Toisanese restaurant workers in the early twentieth century, “Managers treated their kitchen staff disrespectfully because many of them believed that cooking was an unskilled occupation In the words of one Chinese, ‘A person who knows how to prepare a dish of chow mein or chop suey or any other Americanized version of a Chinese delicacy is not a considered a chef by the Chinese’” (62). Bowien embraces Chinese cuisine, but only after exiling Chinese workers from the kitchen. I imagine that Bowien would claim that he is not interested in cooking traditional Chinese takeout fare, that he is instead constructing a highly personal, idiosyncratic vision based on such fare. Yet how can one transform a tradition if they do not fully understand and respect its roots?

Bowien and Mission Chinese Food did not start in New York City. It all began as Mission Street Food, a “pop-up” venture in San Francisco that rented space in a neighborhood Chinese takeout joint. Spearheaded by Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz, Mission Street Food did not serve Chinese food. It served *haute* cuisine in the setting of a somewhat rundown Chinese restaurant. The two consciously used the American Chinese restaurant as a comforting place that would disarm customers and add a veneer of urban grime to their fussy culinary creations.

Mission Street Food and its offspring are an expression of hipsterism, the ironic reinvestment of value into what is commonly considered to be trash. By calling Bowien, Myint, and Leibowitz hipsters, I am not insulting them. Rather, I am naming their attitude towards popular culture. They are using knowledge about other cultures' practices as a way to claim status for themselves. They are hunting for the ever-elusive cool. Lisa Heldke characterizes hipsters obsessed by food: "Like the explorers Richard Burton and Henry Schoolcraft, contemporary white American food colonizers set off on brave adventures down unfamiliar streets filled with people-who-aren't-white in search of the newest, most exotic dining experience possible. We are bold, willing to eat anything—once—and to go anywhere—so long as we're the only ones of Us there once we arrive" (12-3). While people who like to try new foods are not actual colonizers, Heldke reminds us that we should examine our motivations for sampling new cuisines. Is it really cross-cultural curiosity or is it about something else? Contemporary hipster restaurateurs and their customers are what Mark Greif dubs "rebel consumers", or "person[s] who, adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinces [themselves] that buying the right mass products individualizes [themselves] as transgressive." Chinese takeout restaurants are now considered so mundane because they are everywhere. Myint, Leibowitz, and Bowien embrace these establishments to appear transgressive. It is a move that looks revolutionary, but relies on the association of Chinese food as "trash" in order to succeed.

Recently, Myint and Leibowitz published *Mission Street Food: Recipes and Ideas from an Improbable Restaurant* (2011), a memoir interspersed with complex recipes that one should not try at home (I speak from experience). There are no recipes for Chinese food, but the Chinese restaurant and its orientalist ghosts haunt the whole text. The book is threaded with an interesting

tension: Myint and Leibowitz portray the Chinese takeout restaurant as a grimy place of badass authenticity, but they know this is an orientalist portrait and they feel guilty. The oscillation between these two attitudes drives the text. Greif points out that this is one of the hallmarks of modern-day hipsters: “contemporary hipsterism has been defined by an obsessive interest in the conflict between knowingness and naïveté, guilty self-awareness and absolved self-absorption.” True to form, Myint and Leibowitz mistake self-absorption for self-examination; the self-criticism never yields any lasting insights about the legacy of the Chinese restaurant.

Originally, Myint and Leibowitz rented space in a Guatemalan taco truck, but quickly discovered that they were drawing too many people for the location. So they approached restaurants in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco to see if they could rent space one night a week. The only one that agreed to the arrangement was Lung Shan, “a remarkably unpopular and pretty run-down Chinese restaurant in a Hispanic neighborhood” (34). (A side note: notice their pattern of renting space in cheap, ethnic eateries.) They are not afraid to voice their impressions of Lung Shan. In big red letters: “Life lesson: A decrepit Chinese joint with a reputation for long waits and communal seating doesn’t really scream romance” (46). The century-old American suspicion of the Chinese restaurant as a server of dubious food has reappeared in a book that aspires to culinary cosmopolitanism. For Myint and Leibowitz, Chinese food is so abject that it kills all attempts at romantic portrayals; as a result, they feel free to minstrelize this food tradition for their own purposes.

The two never describe the food that Lung Shan serves, but they are fascinated and revolted (and fascinated with their revulsion) by the restaurant’s appearance. In fact, Lung Shan’s state gives them pause. However, they soon realize that they can ironically celebrate elements of Lung Shan’s decor: “Fortunately, Lung Shan already had an amazing collection of

surreal large-format posters from China—Communist leaders on horseback, soaring phoenixes and such” (47). In order to complete the experience, they even try their hand at absurdist fortune cookies:

There’s no such thing as a lesbian dragonfly.

A two-story-tall wolf is scarier than Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Man is the only animal that flies airplanes.

Mounds of organic trash are piled up on your naked, supine body, my friend

(50).³⁷

I admit that it would be funny to open cookies with these kinds of fortunes; yet there is something disquieting about their project. The American Chinese restaurant’s décor and its standard practices are equated with modernity’s trash, an expression of contemporary world’s most absurd impulses.

Once again, the historical echoes are too loud to ignore; the association of the Chinese restaurant with food that cannot be trusted unfortunately has a long lineage in the U.S. One of the earliest and most disquieting examples I have found dates from 1898 when Louis J. Beck wrote a travel account and exposé titled *New York’s Chinatown: An Historical Presentation of Its People and Places*. In this text, Beck examines topics ranging from Chinese religious beliefs to the prospect of Chinese immigrants becoming naturalized American citizens. While Beck holds Chinese immigrants as a people apart, he is more generous in his observations about Chinatown

³⁷ This project is not as unique as it initially seems. Jennifer 8. Lee mentions that the performance artist Marcus Young distributed absurdist fortune cookies in Minneapolis area Chinese restaurants in 2004. Fortunes included cryptic instructions such as “Dream of a place that will never be. Dream of a happiness that will never be. Dream of a peace that will never be.” Young told Lee that many customers were upset by these fortunes and that one young threatened to never return to the restaurant, thus showing how some folks can internalize their fortunes (279-80).

than some of his contemporaries. Still, Beck's acceptance has its limitations and he is not above propagating unfounded racist rumors:

The menus might be extended with undoubted satisfaction to the Chinese customers by these additions made from a bill conspicuously displayed as a special attraction over the door of a restaurant in Canton, China:

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------|
| Cat's flesh, one basin..... | 10 cents |
| Black cat's flesh, one small basin..... | 5 cents |
| Wine, one bottle..... | 3 cents |
| Wine, one small bottle..... | 1 ½ cents |
| Congee, one basin..... | 2 cash |
| Ketchup, one basin..... | 3 cash |
| Black dog's grease, one tael..... | 4 cents |
| Black cat's eyes, one pair..... | 4 cents |

The price put upon these delicacies are to be commended, even though the viands themselves be not relished (53).

After this all-too-brief comment, he moves on to other minutiae of Chinatown everyday life. The way that he reports on this rumor clearly conveys his viewpoint however: Chinese immigrants can never be considered Americans. His tongue-in-cheek approval of the prices shows the amused distance at which he places Chinese foodways. For him, Chinese foods are interesting objects of spectacle, but not meant to be embraced. Also, notice how he does not focus on staple foods such as beef and cabbage, items that his Euro American readership would have found boringly normal. Instead, he hunts down an unverifiable rumor about fringe eating habits and devotes extensive space to it, giving the impression that this is standard fare of *all* Chinese.

More than a hundred years have passed, but Beck's sentiments, both the explorer's curiosity and the desire to be horrified like a patron at a carnival freak show, have not disappeared. These ideas are now glossed in a veneer of self-aware cool. Recently, *Lucky Peach*, a food magazine released by the Korean American chef David Chang and closely associated with the founders of Mission Street Food, published an issue on Chinatowns. Inside there is a short piece by editor Chris Ying called "Walnut Prawns." Ying opens his mini-essay by declaring that American Chinese restaurants *do* have secret menus for Chinese patrons. Once again, the Chinese takeout joint is portrayed as a zone of mystery, guarded by menus scrawled in indecipherable characters. Ying, a Chinese American, offer this conspiratorial advice: do not order the walnut prawns. He gleefully and grotesquely explains why: "It's not even the sperminess of it, though there is an undeniable sperminess to it. It's just. . . I've seen it made, man. I've worked in a Chinese kitchen where a big yellowing tub of industrial mayonnaise, premixed with liquid glucose and honey, sits at room temperature on some high and dusty shelf" (49). After acting as the reader's undercover agent, Ying indulges in a disgusting simile: "it festers and churns like the slime flowing under New York in *Ghostbusters II*" (49). This piece's tone and imagery reactivate many Americans' dormant suspicions that Chinese people will eat anything. I do not doubt that Ying's place of employment violated health codes. But this is also true of restaurants that serve other kinds of cuisine. Ying gives the impression that American Chinese food is *by its nature* unsanitary. As with Beck's cat's eyes, Ying implies that such food is dangerous.

While it may be a suspect site full of modernity's trash, the American Chinese restaurant nonetheless exerts a powerful pull on these restaurateurs' imaginations. Eventually, Bowien took

over the reins from Myint and Leibowitz and collaborated with the Lung Shan staff to launch Mission Chinese Food in 2010. Myint describes the vision of Mission Chinese Food:

We characterized the new venture as ‘Americanized Oriental Food’ on our blog—a phrase I suggested as a compromise with Danny, who wanted to name the whole endeavor ‘Mission Oriental Food.’ Though the term ‘Oriental’ sparked some controversy, we weren’t trying to be provocative—Danny was just making a nostalgic reference to his childhood in Oklahoma, where ‘Oriental’ had been in common use. In order to defuse some of the public outrage, I plated the race card, calling it a commentary on culinary Eurocentrism and citing our ‘Eastern backgrounds (106-7).

While Myint is worried about being labeled orientalist, Bowien’s attachment to the word *oriental* has more to do with nostalgia. While hipsters like Myint, Leibowitz, and Bowien desire to be cosmopolitan, they appropriate styles and attitudes from earlier time periods in which the world was arguably less connected. It is an intriguing paradox, one that indicates a desire to appropriate markers of Chineseness without maintaining a sustained engagement with Chinese Americans.

Chinese American Innovations: The Methods of Grace Young

Lately, there have been books that investigate Chinese American cookery through the memories and anecdotes of Chinese American authors. In particular, they celebrate the innovations home cooks of Chinese descent made in their local contexts. These cooks had to contend with unavailable ingredients and, more importantly, neighbors who did understand their dishes. They portray Chinese cuisine as a Wikipedia of sorts that can be accessed and

transformed and they argue that if tradition is exiled to the past, it withers and dies, no longer able to help individuals cope with their current situations.

The author who best exemplifies this trend is Grace Young, whose texts act as scrapbooks of Chinese American foods. Young seeks to educate readers about interesting local twists on Chinese classics and they document her journeys in learning by profiling and naming her teachers. The book that best distills her project is *The Breath of a Wok* (2004), which is solely devoted to wok cookery. In this book, Young not only readily gives credit to home cooks, she argues that they should be considered on the same level as culinary professionals. At one point, she tells of a “wok-a-thon” she hosted. She was hoping that her family member would show off their favorite wok dishes. However, she found them to be reticent. They worried that they would not measure up to her standards. Young responds “I also had to reassure them that what I wanted was exactly the thing only they could teach me. They believed that their everyday cooking could not compare to a complicated dish like Peking duck, beggar’s chicken, or dim sum. I assured all of them that I was not in search of something ‘exotic,’ I wanted family home cooking” (166). She believes that expertise resides in the home cook. This counters the current trend in food media of learning from professional chefs rather than family and friends. It is certainly empowering. Richard Wilk discusses the political ramifications of home cooking in an industrialized food system: “Metaphorically *home cooking* means a cuisine grounded in familiar, shared history and in common knowledge of places and people. Home cooking is always concerned with quality, because people you care about will eat the meal. *Home making* is a social process of transformation, the magic that makes the anonymous commodity into something unique, with an individual identity, a *name* instead of a brand” (202). Young tries to

be a catalyst for Wilk-style home making. She positions herself as a conductor between home cooks who fill in each other's gaps of knowledge.

Furthermore, Young does not view innovations as betrayals to tradition. She marvels at them instead: "Mrs. Kam Toa Miu is a naturally innovative home cook. She is not fond of the tough skin on green pepper, so she removes it with a vegetable peeler. This is easier to do on peppers that don't have a lot of crevices. When I tasted the pepper, I loved the unexpected velvety texture" (71). Young loves to watch the tradition mutate; in her eyes, Chinese identity is actively remade by each individual, a freeing sentiment for Chinese Americans burdened by trying to measure up to the specter of authenticity.

Yet Young still believes that the Chinese cooking tradition has survived the ravages of time and trauma. She even believes there is deep, ancestral instinct operating with her. After purchasing her first wok, Young goes to buy some Chinese chives because she's heard that stir-frying them in a new wok is a good way to season the pan:

At the produce stand, the vendor spied the wok handle sticking out of my bag. 'Ahh, you must be seasoning your new wok,' he said with a smile. It was a revelation. Not only had I unwittingly discovered an ancient cooking secret, it seemed, but I'd made a culinary soul connection...Here I was a Chinese American, in modern-day New York City, and I'd accidentally stumbled upon a valuable piece of traditional Chinese wok lore (6).

In this anecdote, Chinese identity is a dormant entity that can be activated by participating in certain rituals. Yet Young is also anxious that this resilient cultural thread will be cut by the exigencies of contemporary existence. She is distressed to discover the lack of woks at her family's wok-a-thon: "I am surprised and saddened to see that many of them [aunts and uncles]

have brought skillets: except for Aunt Betty's, there is not a wok among them" (166). In these moments, Young echoes the ethnographic cookbook's hunger for authenticity.

Questions of authenticity vs. inauthenticity are especially pressing for members of a ethnic community who may feel that their separation from an ancestral homeland makes their practices questionable or who may also feel that folks in their ethnic homeland disparage their innovations. It is a question that many scholars of Chinese food in North America have addressed. As mentioned before, Robert Ku mentions that American popular culture's preference for Chinese culture in China over Chinese American culture makes Chinese Americans feel they are "either poor imitations or irredeemable corruptions of the real thing" (73). Jennifer 8. Lee, a Chinese American herself, narrates how, as a child, she always preferred Americanized dishes such as beef with broccoli over the more traditional fare that her parents craved. That is, until she visited China, and discovered the vast and various nature of Chinese cuisine. After that point, she develops a feeling of disgust and shame over liking the takeout specialties of American Chinese restaurants: "I began to roll my eyes at the take-out Chinese food I had grown up with; it wasn't authentic" (15). However, as Lee begins exploring the history of Chinese food in the United States and collecting stories from chefs, fortune cookie makers, soy sauce brewers, and others, she comes to the conclusion that authenticity is a malleable and problematic concept: " 'Authenticity' is a concept that food snobs propagate, not one that reflects how people really cook and eat on a daily basis. Improvisation and adaption have defined cuisine throughout history. . . At a certain point, that which is exotic stops being so. It becomes, in a way, 'authentic' to its new home" (256-7). This understanding of authenticity less as a static source of identity than a rhetorical tool used to invalidate the cultural creations of others is, according to Lily Cho,

one of the strengths of the perspective of Chinese people in North America. In her analysis of Fred Wah, a Chinese Canadian poet, Cho offers this theory:

Wah's deceptively simple answer—"I feel Chinese because I like the food my father cooked," immediately turns in on itself when he declares, "But I don't know what it feels like to feel Chinese." I read in Wah's answer not a contradiction but a contralateral positioning of Chineseness. To know what it feels like to feel Chinese works in conjunction with its opposite, with not knowing what it feels like to feel Chinese. Knowing Chineseness can only emerge in dialectical tension with not knowing. Within this uncertainty, the ebb and flow of memory emerges (155).

While Cho's prose is quite theoretically dense, I take away the notion that the very experience of being Chinese in North America—its separations, its nostalgias, its innovations, its hybridities—make individuals realize that authenticity is a notion that does not belong in a constantly changing, internationally connected network of human societies.

Young herself avoids positing an authentic Chinese essence by questioning her enterprise. More importantly, she includes the voices of other cooks who do not see the wok as a portal to some static Chinese essence. During a cooking lesson with the famous teacher Florence Lin, Young asks her if she seasons her woks with Chinese chives. Lin laughingly dismisses such specific caretaking practices by saying, "The wok is indestructible. In China I've even seen cooks use a brick to clean away sticky residue" (154). At another moment in the text, Young's Aunt Frances explains why her family uses skillets rather than woks: "A wok! We didn't even have a refrigerator. We put our food outside the window to stay cook. We made do with what we had" (168). In these moments, Young acknowledges that the thread of tradition has indeed been

broken numerous times, but it still survives because individual revive and reinvent it, guided by a craving to access a body of knowledge with the ability to bring folks together around a hot meal. In Young's book, Chinese food is no longer an exotic meal for special occasions; it is a home tradition of many Americans.

Far more than just an exploration of the transformations to Chinese cooking, Young's book also implicitly defines the relationship of Chinese Americans to the national entities of both China and the United States. While Young includes a large amount of recipes from overseas Chinese cooks, her opening chapters about the wok largely focus on her travels in China. The book's gorgeous photographs are also focused on street scenes throughout China. In this manner, Chinese cooks, even Chinese American cooks, are positioned as separate from American cooks, practicing a tradition that has not entered into the United States' culinary memory. Anita Mannur argues that many second generation ethnic cookbooks knot themselves into a paradox: "[M]any second generation texts seem to pledge culinary allegiance to the United States because that gesture of avowal implicitly repudiates a connection with elsewhere. And yet, paradoxically, the only safe way to articulate otherness might be through a culinary register, but only if eating otherwise happens over there, and not here" (170). While Young refuses to romanticize Chinese American cooking traditions, the very structure of her book presents those traditions as esoteric knowledge.

Conclusion

Martin Yan, Fuchsia Dunlop, Anthony Myint, Karen Leibowitz, Danny Bowien, and Grace Young are all innovative and knowledgeable culinary professionals who take part in a vast cultural fascination with China and Chinese identity. Increasingly, Chinese food in China has

captured the attention of a U.S. food media hungry for lush images and unusual practices. At the start of 2015, I noticed a small explosion of articles about the foods consumed during Chinese New Year in colorful magazines such as *Food Network*, *Saveur*, and *EveryDay with Rachel Ray*. Anthony Bourdain, whether for the Travel Channel's *No Reservation* or CNN's *Parts Unknown*, has traveled to China and Singapore at least eight times. In the episode about Chinese New Year on Penang, an island off the coast of Malaysia, Bourdain begins the episode: "When I first fell in love with the East, deeply and hopelessly, it was something like this. . . watching delicate fingers opening a nasi raman, like origami, a sexy little package of rice and sambal, shrimp paste, and chilies, wrapped beautifully in a banana leaf. That was it for me. From then on, there was no going back. I felt, seeing that for the first time, I need more of this." While Bourdain expresses genuine affection for the heavily Chinese-influenced cuisine of Penang, he exhibits the behavior of Heldke's food adventurer, the authenticity hunter, who needs to acquire faraway practices. And, in the meantime, whenever I look in cookbooks that feature "American food," Chinese dishes are nowhere to be found. A culinary heritage that has existed in the U.S. for hundreds of years and produces food eaten by hordes of Americans every day is absent from the food literature. The creativity and hard work of countless Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans has become a specter that is ignored in cultural celebrations of Americanness, an omnipresent ghost that many curiously love yet choose to ignore.

Taste with No Shame: Local Cuisine in Hawaiian Popular Culture

The foodways of Hawaiian Locals are largely a blank spot in the minds of most white, Mainland Americans if only for the reason that they do not gel with the notion of Hawai‘i as the Paradise of Friendly Kitsch, the American place where one can forget the troubles of America.³⁸ Even as Mainland U.S. culture becomes more aware of the food habits of Hawaiian Locals, it zeroes in on what it dubs the truly weird. Witness the Mainland fascination with Hawai‘i’s unironic reverence for SPAM. During the past decade, news shows and cultural programs on cable television have visited Hawai‘i to amusingly, almost sneeringly, comment on how the islanders, along with residents of Guam, consume the most SPAM on earth. The chef Anthony Bourdain, who fashions himself as an adventurous eater, came to Hawai‘i to sample the myriad uses of SPAM during one episode of his television show *No Reservations*. After being presented with a plate of SPAM musubi, a sushi roll consisting of SPAM, rice, and seaweed, Bourdain exclaims, “Oh man, that’s really fucked up, I gotta have that.”³⁹ *That’s fucked up*, that summarizes how many Mainland Americans treat Hawaiian Local foodways that are not featured on the menu of a Polynesian cocktail lounge in suburban New Jersey.

³⁸ This impression of Hawaiian cuisine tellingly erases a significant portion of Hawaiian history, mainly the colonization of Native Hawaiians and the massive importation of plantation labor from East Asia. As Christine Skwiot points out in her comparative study of U.S. imperialism in Hawai‘i and Cuba, tourist companies and Mainland media outlets erased Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean (I would also include Portuguese and Puerto Ricans) individuals from depictions of Hawai‘i (142).

³⁹ According to Paul Lyons, travel writer Paul Theroux echoes Bourdain’s sentiments by asserting that the Polynesian affection for SPAM is due to the islanders’ alleged cannibal past (77). Islander food habits are held in such low esteem that they are equated with one of the most horrific acts of violence. For a similar critique of Bourdain’s attitudes towards certain culinary practices, please consult Martin Manalansan’s article “Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Culinary Diaspora.” Manalansan closely analyzes an episode of *No Reservations* in the Philippines during which Bourdain uses iconic “Filipino” foods as a way to make his diasporic Filipino sidekick feel more at home. While Bourdain ostensibly does this to alleviate his partner’s anxieties, he also briefly assumes to be more knowledgeable about “authentic” Filipino practices than a member of the Filipino diaspora.

Ignoring Hawaiian Local foodways or making them appear foolish or unpalatable helps U.S. society as a whole maintain an imperial relationship with Hawai‘i. The imperial mindset runs along these lines: If Hawaiians did not have the culture of the United States to show them the way, then where would those islanders be? *See, they don’t even know how to eat properly.* Of course, Hawaiian Locals have not been silently digesting this narrative. In fact, Island discourse has exploded with discussions about foodways. Cookbooks, culinary histories, memoirs, stand-up comedy, and television programs have been produced by Locals celebrating and affectionately lampooning their foodways and the socioeconomic circumstances that have produced them. In these Island-produced works, Hawaiian Locals fight the Mainland perception that they live in an escapist wonderland meant to service the needs of others. They not only claim that they have a food culture worth celebrating, but that it might be better than what’s on the dinner plates of families living in North Dakota or Atlanta because it is a locally-grounded cuisine that draws widely from many immigrant traditions.

An anecdote offered by the famous Hawaiian chef Sam Choy illustrates the politics of Local culinary practices. In his 1996 book, *Sam Choy’s Cooking: Island Cuisine at Its Best*, Choy describes a visit he made to some chef friends in Philadelphia. Outside, the temperature fell to twenty below zero and Choy’s Mainland friends were at a loss over what to serve people at a party. Choy decides to make a pot of Portuguese bean soup to warm up the chilled crowd. However, before he can start cooking, Choy must make his friends understand what he means by Portuguese bean soup, what Hawaiian Local cuisine is: “They [his friends] went, ‘Oh, Boston has a lot of Portuguese people.’ I said, ‘No, no, no, Hawaiian-style, Island-style.’ Bean soup on the mainland is a thick potage with beans cooked until very soft and sometimes pureed, whereas Hawaiian-style Portuguese bean soup is really stew-like with a thin, tomato-based broth, whole

beans, and chunks of spicy Portuguese sausage” (11). With this moment of miscommunication, both Choy and his readers realize how much of a blank space Hawaiian Local cuisine is in the Mainland U.S. imagination. Rather than being discouraged by this, Choy cooks his soup with missionary zeal, ready to convert his Mainland audience to the taste of Hawaiian Local food. After serving his soup, Choy expresses satisfaction that people loved it: “Hey, let me tell you, it was a smash. Not only did it hit the spot, but everybody thought I was a god” (11). Choy here presents a scenario where he not only gave Hawaiian Local traditions some acknowledgement, but that this locally-grounded cuisine has the power to colonize Mainland taste buds as well.

The talk about food in Hawai‘i operates as an antidote to the typically Mainland American cultural imperialism, employing the creole relational mode to position Island ways as cosmopolitan while ignoring the powerful presence of multinational capitalist interests in the archipelago. Islanders also use discussions of food to erase the persistent class and ethnic divisions in the state, sometimes propagating a facile form of multiculturalism. In order to distinguish themselves from the Mainland, Island commentators have focused on the working-class cuisine that emerged from sugarcane and pineapple plantations and processing plants. The valorization of Local food—heavily influenced by Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, and Korean immigrant workers—allows Hawaiian Locals to construct an image of Hawaiian foodways that escapes the trap of the tourist brochure. This valorization, while delicious and ideologically useful, nonetheless erases history’s more uncomfortable moments. It mutes the exploitation and hunger that working-class non-Euro American immigrants faced and ignores the tensions between immigrant groups that persist to this day.

The Ghost of the Plantation Shack Kitchen

On Mau‘i, tourists and locals in the mood to splurge can visit Kō, a fine dining establishment run by O‘ahu native Tylun Pang. Kō continues the Asian fusion practices of Pacific Rim chefs and previous Hawaiian celebrities such as Sam Choy, but it uniquely conjures the ghost of the island’s plantations.⁴⁰ Kō’s menu even has a section titled “Plantation Traditions.” Evoking Mau‘i’s historical legacy has garnered Pang and his team praise in the local press and on the internet. Blogger Frank DiMarco appraises: “Distilling and adapting the recipes into the new Ko menu turned into a labor of love as Chef Pang and his colleagues realized they has found, to a great extent, the down-to-earth, honest cuisine of Maui” (4). Like the sugar mills of old, Kō’s team of chefs take the raw routines of plantation workers and transform them into a refined sampler that satiates the contemporary U.S.’s novelty-craving culture. However, the finished products bear little resemblance to the meals that tired plantation workers devoured in their cramped shacks. From the “Plantation Traditions” section of Kō’s menu, the diner can order a \$47 bowl of zarzuela, a stew of lobster, shrimp, scallops, mussels, clams, chorizo sausage, and onions. Calling this decadent meal a plantation tradition signifies a lack of historical perspective, at the very least. Yet Pang is not alone in tinting the legacy of the plantations with a rosy glow. It is a chronic tendency in contemporary Hawaiian culture. While this cultural nostalgia obscures the hardships endured by plantation workers, it also critically helps Hawaiian Locals explain the peculiar nature of their multiethnic society.

⁴⁰ Pang continues the haute tradition of what has been dubbed Hawai‘i regional cuisine, an initiative started in the mid-1980s that was spearheaded by Island chefs who were dissatisfied with the lack of fine dining options on the archipelago. Besides Choy, other major figures include Alan Wong and Roy Tamaguchi. While each of these chefs maintains their own unique culinary visions, they do share a desire to use Local food products and culinary traditions in a Continental European-style dining setting. For more information about this movement, consult Samuel Hideo Yamashita’s “The Significance of Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine in Postcolonial Hawai‘i.”

As Ronald Takaki has documented in his wonderful history *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii*, before Hawai‘i became a Pacific Rim tourist mecca, it endured a twin invasion of missionaries and planters from the Mainland U.S. The first American-run sugarcane plantation was established in the 1830s. From there, a tightly-knit group of haole elites controlled the economic destiny of the islands, eventually becoming known simply as the Big Five: American Factors, C. Brewer, Alexander and Baldwin, Castle and Cooke, and T.H. Davies (Takaki 20). Adria Imada points out that the Big Five later would orchestrate the creation of Hawai‘i’s tourism industry, consolidating their control of the islands’ economy even when it shifted focus. The haole-run sugarcane, and later pineapple and coffee, plantations, in their eternal search for cheap and reliable labor, forever changed the demographics of the islands. As Takaki mentions, the planters felt Native Hawaiians were lazy and that their numbers were too scarce for large-scale agricultural production (10-23). As a result, they sent recruitment agents all over the world to find workers receptive to immigrating to a strange land. They found receptive audiences in locations that recently experience overcrowding and famine: southern China, the Portuguese islands of Madeira and the Azores, the Ilocos region of the Philippines, late imperial Japan, among others (Takaki 22-56).

The sharing of food is a critical part of the cultural narrative of the plantation as a multiethnic meeting place. The irony in this narrative is that there was not much food to share. Despite devoting their lives to the production of food commodities such as sugar, coffee, and pineapples, Hawai‘i’s plantation workers did not have access to many foods themselves. Early workers demanded their beloved staple of rice, but if they did not wish to die from malnutrition, they had to resourcefully find ways to supplement their diets (Kirkendall 166). Interviews with plantation workers from multiple islands reveal the ingenuity of those workers desperately

seeking adequate nourishment. Vegetable gardens were lovingly tended. Plants from faraway homelands added some color to dilapidated shacks. Immigrants snuck seeds in their hair or clothes (Laudan 109). Familiarity with wild plants in the region became essential not only for vitamins, but also moonshine liquor (Fuentevilla). Plantation workers would set up small gardening plot wherever there was space, even in public lands, a habit that has continued among some present-day Hawaiian Locals: “Frequently, one sees a thriving squash vine wreathing the base of a tree or a chili pepper plant nested among flowering plants in present-day public gardens in Hawaii” (Kirkenstall 251). This cottage industry of food production eventually gave birth to a network of vendors that sold everything from Filipino sweets rich in coconut milk to homemade beer and tofu.⁴¹

Plantation workers often had access to kitchens that would be termed rustic by optimistic observers. Many had dirt floors in a region that receives rain almost daily. Open beam ceilings were blackened by kerosene stoves. Mice and cockroaches freely roamed at night while noxious outhouses sometimes only a hundred feet away from the site of food preparation (Yamamoto 24-5). A lot of cooking was done outdoors over open fires. For example, Portuguese immigrants from Madeira and the Azores built communal ovens so they could bake their beloved bread (Laudan 142). A lot of workers did not clean their shacks with regularity, exhausted from field work and feeling that such effort was futile in their precarious social position (Cariaga 57).

Empty bellies were not uncommon in Hawaii during the heyday of the plantations. Older island residents tell anecdotes of almost surrealistic hardship. Hungry children would chew clumps of tar softened by the midday heat. Families fried grasshoppers in empty sardine tins still

⁴¹ This is a compilation of bits of information from the oral histories compiled by the University of Hawaii-Manoa. See interviews with Baldomera Pervera Labrador, Martina Kekuwa Fuentevilla, Tokusuke Oshiro and the ones compiled by Michael T. Yamamoto, Nina Yuriko Sylva, and Karen N. Yamamoto.

slicked with oil. Families who sometimes had to dine on grass were not unknown (Hiura 59-60). Savings were a fantasy for many plantation workers since the cost of living ate up meager wages (Hiura 61; Yamamoto 36). Tokusuke Oshiro remembers: “The plantation became hard on us. In those days there was a thing called a processing fee for contract jobs. The processing fee made contracting unprofitable. Consequently, all of us became \$1.50-a-day laborers. But for \$1.50 a day, 10 days of work would only make \$15. The plantation took away our incentive to work” (386). In such an environment, frugality became the guiding principle in cooking. Okinawan plantation workers remember that a common meal was canned salmon—which cost 15 cents a pound—on a bed of udon noodles (Hokama 455). This dish certainly sounds tasty, but it must have been depressing to consume day after day. The complex food traditions of the plantation immigrants were stripped to their most skeletal elements. Food historian Richard Wilk notes that this process of simplification or “compression” is quite common in creole societies. Wilk argues that “this process is an essential part of creolization and mixture of different foodways, because it compresses a whole variety of dishes and modes of preparation into a single category lumped together, and a few emblematic dishes can be used to stand for the whole thing” (118). Wilk implies here that, in a society where multiple cultures are colliding together and blending, individuals do not have the time nor the inclination to learn the intricacies of multiple culinary traditions; instead, they try their hands with a few basic dishes. Furthermore, individuals use basic, emblematic dishes as talismans that can reactivate sensory memories of their ancestral homelands. An example of this in Hawaiian Local circles is sushi. While many folks think of sushi as a decadent, expensive meal of exotic fish, in Hawai‘i, sushi often takes a more spartan form as rolls filled with canned tuna, imitation crab, pickled turnips, and egg strips (Sakamoto

and Suzuki 6-7). Through substitution and compression, sushi transforms into a dish that members from any ethnic group can make at relatively little expense.

Surprisingly, the first generation of Local children born on the plantations has generated a nostalgic perspective on plantation life that dominates Hawaiian food discourse to this day. These children of plantation workers—many of whom did *not* spend their whole lives doing agricultural labor—sometimes regard the heyday of the plantation as a simpler time. This kind of nostalgia initially seems counterintuitive because these Locals must have witnessed firsthand the hardship their parents endured. However, further analysis shows why this nostalgia is such a useful rhetorical tool for Locals. First, the mutual hardship of the plantation created harmony among workers of different backgrounds, thus giving rise to the Local identity itself. This must have infuriated the plantation owners who recruited diverse workforces in order to breed animosity among workers and prevent them from organizing (Takaki 24). Hawaii's multiculturalism started with the rich haoles' exploitation their workers and the workers' recognition that they all were getting the short end of the stick. This recognition of mutual suffering makes the plantation exist as a zone of cultural authenticity for Hawaiian Locals, a working-class heritage that individuals can summon to show that they are in touch with Island issues and prove that they do not work to advance Mainland interests.

One of the best archives for the nostalgia for plantation-era foodways is the corpus of locally-centered cookbooks that offer “vintage” recipes paired with memories from older Island residents who spent their childhoods on plantations. As Lucy Adams states on her website

Recipes from Old Hawaii:

I've heard it said that, 'Nature made Hawaii beautiful, but her people made her great.' Hawaii is a wonderful mix of cultures and each of these peoples brought

with them their customs and foods. The early plantation days saw these combining cultures creating foods that are unique only to Hawaii. We thank these early pioneers who planted and nurtured these plantation fields, and created many of these amazing recipes.

Adams's celebratory sentiments are echoed in the spiral-bound *Original Plantation Village Cookbook* initially published in 1985 (reprinted in 1990) by the Friends of Waipahu Cultural Garden Park. This volume of recipes helped raise funds to create a living museum of a plantation village in Waipahu, one of the first such communities in Hawai'i. In the foreword written by then Executive Director Cal Kawamoto, the book was inspired by the ways in which the plantations' multiethnic workforce would share their treasured ethnic foodways with each other (viii). The group received recipes from Locals across ethnic groups and longtime U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye even submitted a recipe for sweet and sour spareribs (9). Most of the recipes are presented in a very spare format, starting with the list of ingredients and ending with the cooking instructions; however, a few are prefaced with anecdotes that conjure up evocative tales of plantation life. Before offering her recipe for pork kau yuk and bamboo shoots, Lani Ishikawa Nedbalek paints us this scene:

In the late 1930s my father and a few friends met for a game of mah jong in the back room of a Chinese general store in Wahiawa. On that evening, their game was interrupted by a delicious aroma and a shout from the adjoining area. The call summoned not only the proprietor's family, but also enticed the mah jong players to a dinner (12).

Nedbalek's anecdote casts plantation life in the warm glow of camaraderie and shared meals, making the past into a source of comfort and stability.⁴² Intriguingly, despite the repeated appeals to interethnic solidarity in a cookbook such as this one, the recipes are still grouped by ethnic group, a move that echoes the ways in which plantation villages were divided into different ethnic camps. This arrangement shows a tendency to see ethnically-marked culinary habits as static practices that taxonomize an ethnic group.⁴³ It also potentially testifies to a Local tendency to see ethnic traditions as comfortably coexisting with each other, but not freely mixing or creolizing into a completely distinct tradition. The logic behind this cookbook organizational practice is echoed in other areas too. For example, the Koloa Plantation Days festival on Kaua'i allows folks to come and serve food, but the "vendor's food choice must represent a cultural group, Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Okinawan, Portuguese, Korean, Filipino, Puerto Rican, and other Countries." In both the cookbook and the festival, part of being a Local is having a culinary practice that stems from a group of people that can clearly be said to be from elsewhere.

Nostalgically imagining the plantation through foodways is useful to Locals because it creates visions of a multiethnic community free of haole interference. In other words, nostalgia

⁴² Using nostalgia to market cookbooks is not exclusively the province of these plantation-focused tomes, however. Hawaiian Local culinary discourse is oftentimes nostalgic for the pre-WWII era on the islands, a time when the haole presence was not as inescapable as it is nowadays. For another example, consult Kauai Philpotts's *Hawaiian Country Tables: Vintage Recipes for Today's Cook* (1998). While Philpotts's book includes a remarkable range of dishes, she has a very Local-focused mission: "This book is an attempt to keep alive the memories of Hawai'i's country tables in the days before Burger King and McDonald's Before we were absorbed into the homogenized union of the United States. Before chic young chefs created a new regional cuisine for stylish restaurants" (vii). Philpotts takes target not only at the expansion of Mainland restaurant ventures and the process of turning Hawai'i into a U.S. state; she also sees the Hawaiian Regional Cuisine movement as a betrayal of the unpretentious nature of Hawaiian Local food.

⁴³ Another notable Local cookbook that separates dishes by ethnicity is Ann Kondo Corum's *Ethnic Foods of Hawai'i* (2000). Before offering recipes from each ethnic group, Corum offers a pseudo-ethnographic summary of each group's food habits. These sections are certainly informative; however, Corum's tone suggests that all members of an ethnic group share the exact same food habits: "The Portuguese have a rather starchy diet" (95); "Japanese in Japan as well as in Hawai'i prefer the white polished rice" (58). In the introduction, Corum states that her cookbook is an attempt at cultural preservation and that "keeping ethnic traditions alive is meaningful in a multicultural nation" (vi). In such a comment, I detect a note of anxiety that the widely celebrated Hawaiian multicultural model may cause erasures in an individual's identity.

for the plantation-era may have very little to do with the past; instead, it might be using the past as a source for imagining a Hawai‘i free from socioeconomic hierarchies. In these nostalgic memories, very little is actually said about the monotonous, backbreaking field work; instead, Local memories frame scenes of interethnic and intergenerational *togetherness*. In a contemporary Hawai‘i where the majority of job options are service industry positions dependent on mainland tourists and the U.S. military, one can imagine that many Locals feel that like barely tolerated guests in their home (a sensation that Native Hawaiians must feel even more acutely). The plantation communal scenes that can be found in Local cookbooks undoubtedly obscure the hard labor and even harder haole bosses, but they also remind these perpetually alienated descendants of immigrants that Hawai‘i is *their home* too, a home purchased with blood and memory, not all-inclusive vacation packages.

Making Poverty Tasty: Hawaiian SPAM Cuisine

SPAM is a slab of pressed pork shoulder stuffed into a can with a tear-off top that currently retails for \$2.50. That is all it is. Yet according to American popular culture, it is the apocalyptic sign that John of Patmos forgot to write into Revelation, monstrous proof of an industrial food system gone awry. On the Mainland, SPAM looms as a culinary boogeyman, a product that many individuals claim is below them yet stands neatly stacked in nearly every supermarket, waiting to be grabbed by eager if ashamed hands. There must be many eager hands. The Hormel Company consistently reports healthy sales, having sold seven billion cans by 2007.⁴⁴ Of course, good sales do not equal cultural esteem. Robert Ku explains that in the

⁴⁴ According to a rash of recent news stories, Hormel’s sales of SPAM have only improved since the economic recession of 2008. In a *New York Times* article, a leader of a Hormel workers’ union offered this prophecy: “We’ll probably see Spam lines instead of soup lines.”

Mainland U.S., SPAM “epitomizes lamentable dining at a time when gastronomic authenticity is feared to be in decline due to relentless industrialization and globalization of the world’s foodways” (192). A reminder of low-class status, SPAM operates as a pink badge of shame in the mainland United States, an indicator that one not only has defective taste buds but also a defective sense of taste.

As food historian George H. Lewis has investigated, the reasons for SPAM’s low esteem in American popular culture are numerous. Widely consumed during World War II both by the Allied troops and civilians facing rationing, SPAM later reminded Americans (and the British too) of the deprivations of that time period. After the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, Lewis contends, SPAM became a symbol of “an earlier time of innocent-but-hokey pride and patriotism—something to be collectively embarrassed about but, at the same time, secretly prideful” (87). Over the course of the next couple decades, SPAM’s ambiguous status became more and more just plain embarrassing. Lewis believes all canned goods became associated with the urban poor after widespread food drives held during the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons (90). SPAM’s cheap price tag, the very thing that made it into such a widespread provider of meat, painfully reminds many Americans that poverty still exists in a nation that claims to never lack opportunities. SPAM’s persisting presence on the supermarket shelf testifies to the failure of the American Dream.

Interestingly, the cultural embarrassment over SPAM has not stopped the fascination with the pork product. There is a small, but devoted cult to SPAM, one that can be witnessed in websites such as the SPAM Haiku Archive. A database of thousands of haikus devoted to SPAM, this site has offered the world such goofy comic gems as this one from Tom Elliot:

Made a SPAM puppet

To entertain my doggie

Need a new hand now.

These haiku are sincere in their love, but they also wink at the reader, implying that it is absurd to give such a low status foodstuff an exalted literary treatment, especially in the meditative genre of haiku and its ties with Zen Buddhist mysticism. These poems profess a love that carries a residue of shame. Robert Ku mentions other cultural productions that slam SPAM with ironic affection including songs from accordion-wielding Weird Al Yankovic and the ska band Save Ferris, Monty Python sketches, and a Muppet character named Spa'am which prompted a lawsuit from Hormel (202-4).

This residue of shame so characteristic of the Mainland disappears when Hawaiian Locals meditate on SPAM's role in their daily lives. Hawaiians consume roughly six million cans of SPAM a year, making them by far the largest consumers in the U.S. ("The SPAM That Isn't Via Email"). In Island discourse, SPAM is an important tool in proclaiming what it means to be a Hawaiian Local. By embracing SPAM and creatively using it in a wild number of recipes, many Hawaiians connect to their immigrant, working-class heritage. Linking SPAM to plantation culture serves many rhetorical purposes. First, Locals can celebrate the ingenuity of their parents and grandparents to feed their families on a shoestring budget. Second, the shared experience of deprivation symbolized by SPAM allows Locals to assert that they belong to Hawai'i, no matter their ethnicity or family history. Third, the creation of a SPAM cuisine creates a Hawaiian culinary identity that avoids the pretentious hierarchies of Mainland foodie culture. These are all important functions, but sometimes these island celebrations of SPAM fall victim to nostalgia. They avoid the specter of hunger that has loomed over parts of Island history,

the legacy of American militarization, and the ways in which canned products can be detrimental to one's health.

SPAM's popularity in Hawai'i and other Polynesian islands is due first and foremost to a practical reason: eating fresh meat on tropical islands is difficult. Cheap canned meat in the form of not only SPAM, but also Vienna sausages, corned beef, and sardines, was a boon to residents in these locations. Since SPAM was preserved with salt, farm workers could bring lunches out into the fields and not have to worry about food spoiling (Hiura 97). This also explains the popularity of canned meat in other tropical locations that are culturally distinct from Hawai'i such as the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Second, Hawai'i, like Guam and Okinawa, was a launching pad for U.S. efforts against Japan in World War II. American military bases often supplied surplus canned goods to local populations, sometimes donated as aid, sometimes sold on the black market (Cwiertka 116). Lastly, many Hawaiian Locals are descended from cultures that have held pork in high esteem: Native Hawaiian, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Portuguese, and Filipino (Lewis 95). SPAM easily fit into their existing eating preferences with little accommodation. Furthermore, Hormel has a great economic stake in perpetuating SPAM consumption on the archipelago. On Hormel's SPAM website, the company responds to the question of "Why is SPAM so popular in Hawaii?" with a bit of strained humor: "We know what you're thinking; SPAM products must grow on trees there. That would be neat, but to believe it you must have taken a coconut to the head." The website goes on to proclaim that World War II is the reason for the product's Pacific Island popularity. However, the use of humor and history do obscure Hormel's active attempts to keep Hawaii well-stocked with SPAM. The company endorses the Waikiki SPAM Jam Festival in Honolulu and it releases flavors unique to the Islands including Portuguese sausage (Jones).

In Island culinary literature, eating SPAM rekindles social connections between Hawaiian Locals. In the anthology, *We Go Eat: A Mixed Plate from Hawai'i's Food Culture*, Thelma Chang has a short essay called "SPAM I Am." In the piece, Chang reminisces about being a flight attendant around the world. Along the way, she is introduced to new foods and comes to see herself as more cultured than if she stayed in Hawai'i. Nonetheless, she maintains a love of SPAM, a food that hearkens to the days when her mother packed her lunches. SPAM also occasionally provides her opportunities to comfort other Hawaiian Locals under stress. One time, she serves meals to soldiers flying to the Vietnam War. She spots a young Local man who does not seem to be touching his food. She offers assistance:

"I got some SPAM sandwiches, also lop cheong [a dried Chinese pork sausage that tastes like a sweeter salami] and rice." His eyes lit up. He chomped on my SPAM sandwich as if it were filet mignon. He scooped up the lop cheong and rice. The Caucasian soldier sitting next to him simply stared at the both of us: "Ya'all like that stuff, huh?" Yeah. We do" (13).

Here Chang refuses to be apologetic for her food and her heritage. There are no placating statements of "I know some people think it's gross, but..." In that moment, Chang and the young soldier already hungry for home define themselves as Hawaiian Locals through their mutual love of SPAM. Critically, their identity assertion also requires the presence of a Mainland American's suspicion of SPAM in order to be complete. Chang offers us a simple equation for ethnic identity: to be a Hawaiian Local is to love what Mainland Americans hate. Embracing SPAM sets Hawaiian Locals apart, making them culturally distinct from the other forty-nine states that are thousands of miles offshore.

SPAM also allows Hawaiian Locals to escape stereotypical ethnic labels. “Culture Day,” a humorous poem by Lee Tonouchi illustrates this rhetorical strategy. In his trademark Pidgin style, Tonouchi remembers when a grade-school teacher assigns his class to bring in food from their respective cultural groups. Tonouchi, who is of Okinawan descent, figures that the most Okinawan food is pig, but he finds such traditional fare as pig’s feet or pig’s intestines to be “kinda gross” (26). Instead, he brings SPAM cubes speared with toothpicks to class. His reasoning:

I figgah
Teacher going love
my Spam pupus
cuz it’s like instead
of all da pig organs
being in separate dishes,
everyting all stay
in one dish.
It’s like eating twelve
Okinawan dishes
all one time (27).

He surmises that his SPAM appetizers must be “SUPER Okinawan” (27). Unfortunately, Tonouchi’s reasoning is not a success with the teacher who desires a more authentic expression of Okinawan essence. Rather than letting his instructor get the last word, Tonouchi declares:

But from da grade I get
I can tell

Teacher must not be into

da kine MODERN

Okinawan cuisine (28).

Much like Chang and her hungry soldier, Tonouchi issues a gentle rebuttal to his instructor who is denying the fact that SPAM is key to the diet of Okinawans who immigrated to Hawai‘i. By insisting on traditional dishes, the teacher straitjackets Okinawan culture into some distant past, erasing how Okinawan Americans are an integral part of Hawai‘i’s modern landscape. Also, the teacher ignores how SPAM is a crucial part of Okinawan Islands’ own culinary culture, prominently featured in such dishes as chanpuru, a stir-fry with SPAM, egg, and bitter melon. Tonouchi is stating that, in order to understand him, you have to acknowledge that he is a Hawaiian Local first and foremost.

Tonouchi’s use of SPAM to break out of ethnic labels is far from unique. SPAM’s integration into Hawaiian Local food habits is an example of Americanization, the transformation of immigrant foodways through the introduction of new ingredients and the substitution of unavailable ones.⁴⁵ Just look at the SPAM musubi, a marvelously unpretentious food creation. At its core, it is an ode to minimalism and striking flavor contrasts. A piece of SPAM is placed between two bunches of white, short-grained rice. The whole thing is then wrapped in a piece of nori seaweed. If you wish, you can place the sheet of nori inside an empty SPAM can. Then you can add the rice and SPAM. Then plop the whole thing out in a ready-to-eat bundle. There are variations with some individuals adding a soy sauce glaze or a dollop of

⁴⁵ Muria Miura’s *Hawai‘i Cooks with SPAM* (2008) thoroughly explores the ways in which SPAM can act as a substitute ingredient in a variety of ethnically-marked dishes, including Korean bibimbap, Portuguese bean soup, Japanese katsu, etc. Miura presents SPAM as a versatile product that adds a Hawaiian Local *and* American touch to any dish from around the globe. The Localization of ethnic food traditions is a topic close to Miura’s heart as she hosted a TV show and published a 1974 companion cookbook called *Cook Japanese Hawaiian Style*.

oyster sauce. The SPAM musubi is usually served at room temperature and is widely purchased at gas stations, drug stores, and markets (Laudan 53). It is the archipelago's contribution to fast food, joining such esteemed company as the McDonald's hamburger, Quebecois poutine, and Cajun boudin. The musubi originally came to Hawai'i during the late nineteenth-century, when Meiji-era Japan dumped parts of its overcrowded populace onto Hawaiian plantations. Originally a triangle-shaped rice-bundle wrapped in nori, the portable musubi became a favorite lunch for Japanese field workers. Unlike sushi, musubi rice is not seasoned, but it sometimes contains an ume, or pickled plum inside (widely believed to help preserve food). Other fillings might include fish seasoned with soy sauce (Laudan 53). Over time, musubi began to be stuffed with whatever was most available. More often than not, that was SPAM. From the pragmatic perspective of flavor, SPAM's concentrated saltiness perks up the mound of white rice, which tends to be rather tasteless (Hiura 97). This innovation struck a chord with Hawaiian Locals of all ethnicities and it has become an iconic tradition. As the product of culinary cultures mixing by necessity, the musubi is a testament to the Locals' ability to create tasty innovations despite a lack of resources. However, it is worth noting that the SPAM musubi is not a Local dish made from *local* ingredients; rather, it is a Local mutation of a transnational industrial food product that threatens to wipeout variations in foodstuffs.

Despite its importance in the reinforcing Hawaiian Local identity, SPAM is not treated with humorless piety. Hawaiian Local writers and artists use SPAM to lovingly rib their humble, working-class roots. Some artists use humor to criticize the way in which SPAM is everywhere on the islands, acknowledging the darker side to a diet dependent on items such as canned pork. While these Local artists do not share the shame that Mainland Americans express about SPAM, they do argue that SPAM represents the lack of opportunities in a service industry-based

economy. I refer to writer and cartoonist Ann Kondo Corum's *Hawai'i's SPAM Cookbook*.

Corum is enthusiastic about SPAM as well as Vienna sausage, corned beef, and sardines, seeing these staples as easy ways to feed a lot of people. She offers many recipes of Local-style staples, interspersing them with cartoons portraying Locals' love of canned goods. Most of these cartoons are lighthearted and goofy, but the specter of hunger and bad nutrition appears in a few of them. In one cartoon, a woman contemplates a weekly meal schedule. The caption reads "Mrs. Bozo gives a lesson on how to feed a family of 4 on \$10.00 a week" (82). The menu reads:

MON: Corned beef patties (use ½ can), plenty potatoes

TUES: Spam & veggies (1/2 can Spam & sprouts)

WED: Corned beef & cabbage (1/2 can from Monday

THURS: Spam'n'eggs (1/2 can Spam), plenty rice

FRI: Sardines & onions

SAT: Eat at in-laws'

SUN: Fast (82).

While this is a humorous caricature of a struggling Local's diet, it acknowledges that sometimes food cannot appear on the table. When it does appear, it is in the form of cheap combinations of starch, fat, and salt. While SPAM might be a marker of pride, it also is intimately tied to poverty's pain.

There are other similar snippets of criticism in Hawaiian Local humor. In *Pupus to Da Max*, a book that offers wiseacre definitions of island delicacies, there is an entry titled "SPAM, HOW TO CAMOUFLAGE": "You can cook it shoyu sato style, fry it in an egg batter, mash it up and cook like hamburger patties, put in casseroles, or put it in with your rice. You can even make SPAM MUSUBI" (137). SPAM here is imagined as the repugnant daily food a Local

cannot escape. Despite the bewildering variety of dishes, all one's meals still contain the same canned pork essence. One could laugh off the passage as another version of a child's complaint "Oh, SPAM again, Mom?" Yet this cartoon implicitly condemns how poverty limits one's food choices and makes the case that a balanced diet is the privilege of those with a full wallet or pocketbook.

Beloved and controversial comedian Frank De Lima has addressed SPAM in a song titled "SPAM Musubi." The song parodies the Village Peoples' "YMCA," using the synthetic strings of 1970s disco to create an absurd atmosphere. In the opening verses, De Lima extols how SPAM musubis are "one reasonable price" and that they contain rice, Hawai'i's most beloved staple. However, he begins to sneer at the SPAM musubi and those who crave it:

HUNGRY

I need something with grease.

Yes, I'm HUNGRY

Wanna really big piece.

Yes, I'm HUNGRY

That will make me obese

I don't care at all.

Why bother you?

By evoking grease and obesity, De Lima makes SPAM into a symbol of disgust. By extension, those who consume it are disgusting as well. Working-class Hawaiian Locals are portrayed as an abject population so stupid that they are killing themselves with food, something meant to keep them alive. For the sake of the joke, De Lima ignores the fact that the SPAM musubi is only one

manifestation of the modern industrial food system, a system whose ills no population, no matter how rich or poor, is escaping. De Lima then moves onto a class critique:

TASTY

I don't need caviar

Yes, it's TASTY

Nothing whipped from one jar

Yes, it's TASTY

That I can't eat in my car

Nothing fancy please.

SPAM musubi is now figured as the food of the poor who are content with their lot. Once again, Hawaiian Local intelligence is attacked. This assault is amplified by the fact that De Lima singing in a grotesque parody of Pidgin. Humorous portrayals such as De Lima and Korum's show that Hawaiian Locals' SPAM love is more complicated than it initially would seem. Despite all that, SPAM retains a special place in the Hawaiian Local diet. Probably the best articulation of this comes from Corum's *Hawai'i's 2nd SPAM Cookbook* in a section titled "Aunty Momona's Predictions for the Future of SPAM Luncheon Meat":

- Zero-calorie SPAM luncheon meat will be developed, and it will taste as good and greasy-salty as ever.
- The SPAM Diet will be the new training diet for triathletes.
- Celebrity chefs will fuse SPAM and Euro-Asian and Mexican cooking with Pacific Rim cuisine to create the ultimate dining experience in Hawai'i.
- The Tropic of SPAM, running through the Hawaiian Islands, will be created and all maps and globes will have to be reconfigured.

- Travelers flying between Hawai'i and the Mainland will be able to request SPAM musubi, only if they call ahead.
- Transplanted Hawaiian will be able to download SPAM musubi from the Internet (4).

SPAM imagined as the focal point of Hawai'i's future; it is an interesting if goofy mental exercise. Corum's work shows how a product invented in Minnesota, a wandering symbol of the U.S.'s military presence and its hokiest mid-century popular culture evolved a distinct and *localized* set of meanings. Hawaiian Locals might be bombarded by Mainland products, but they will use them in the ways that they see fit. It posits a sober worldview that proposes that a marginalized culture cannot escape global capital networks; it can only mutate them in unintended ways.

The Plate Lunch: Multiculturalism on a Plate?

The Hawaiian plate lunch is a mountain range of mostly starch, almost resembling the crinkled topography of O'ahu. The plate is predominantly occupied by two peaks of white, short-grain rice and a dome of macaroni salad. Other scenic highlights include a strip of protein, usually seasoned in a Pan-Asian manner, some kimchi, eye-catching with its alarming red, and a torrent of brown gravy.

At its core, the plate lunch is a heap of calories meant to chase away hunger. Yet this meal looms large in the Hawaiian Local imagination and it is available from mom-and-pop lunch trunks on the streets of Honolulu to the dining rooms of the popular Zippy's chain. If SPAM is the ingredient most intimately tied to Hawaiian Local memory, then the plate lunch is the meal that best reflects Local experience. In the plate lunch, the macaroni salad ubiquitous in Mainland

U.S. summer barbeques sits comfortably next to Japanese-derived beef teriyaki and Korean-inspired kimchi. It is “anything goes” dish that freely mixes ethnic food traditions. Many observers of the plate lunch’s interethnic gastronomy have felt that the dish symbolizes a breezy, conflict-free multiculturalism often propagated as the hallmark of Hawaiian Local identity. The plate lunch totes Hawai‘i’s distinctiveness as a multicultural paradise, which can lead to misperceptions both about the dish and the society it represents.

Allow me to discuss two texts—one from a Mainland observer and the other from a Local insider—in order to illuminate how the plate lunch is tangled in Hawai‘i’s interethnic politics. The first text is Sarah Vowell’s *Unfamiliar Fishes*, a book that recounts the Mainland fascination with Hawai‘i that culminated with the annexation of the Island kingdom at the close of the nineteenth-century. Vowell mostly deals with history books and the diaries of early missionaries, but she begins her discussion at the modern-day Rainbow Drive-In, a famous plate lunch spot. In the few pages that she addresses the plate lunch, she recounts the major aspects of its mythology. She repeats the meal’s widely-touted origin myth: “Sugar plantation workers used to share food at lunchtime, swapping tofu and Chinese noodles for Korean spareribs and Portuguese bread. That habit of hodgepodge got passed down, evolving into the plate lunch now served at diners, drive-ins, and lunch trucks through the Hawaiian archipelago” (8).⁴⁶ Vowell then turns the plate lunch into a metaphor for assimilation:

Rainbow Drive-In’s menu, offering teriyaki, hot dogs, mahimahi, and Portuguese sausage, reads like a list of what America is supposed to be like—a neighborly mishmash. Barak Obama, the Honolulu-born presidents of the United States, mentioned once on a trip home his craving for plate lunch, listing Rainbow Drive-

⁴⁶ I wish to point out that some of Vowell’s examples of foods that workers would swap are odd. Spareribs seem like a luxurious food for poor people with little or no land, one that would easily spoil in the tropical heat.

In as a possible stop. Makes sense, considering his Kansan mother met his Kenyan father at the University of Hawaii and his mother's remarriage blessed him with a half-Indonesian sister. He's our first plate lunch president" (8-9).

Notice how quickly Vowell moves from Portuguese sausage to miscegenation. The unspoken assumption of the plate lunch mythology is that people who share foods will soon have families together.

While Vowell is not a Local insider, she is not at odds with the ways the plate lunch is used in Local discourse. The plate lunch's proximity to Hawaiian Local hearts is taken to humorous, absurd extremes in Lee Tonouchi's short essay "Da Zippy's Zip Pac Personality Test." The Zip Pac is an \$8.50 ode to the frialated arts. It includes a piece of fried chicken, some fried fish, a slab of SPAM, and a slice of beef teriyaki on a bed of white rice sprinkled with furikake (shredded nori seaweed, sesame seeds, sugar, and salt). Tonouchi uses this plate lunch permutation as his crystal ball, predicting that an individual's personality shines through in how they approach the Zip Pac's formidable heap. For example, if a person attacks the SPAM slab first, Tonouchi declares them to be spontaneous. Why? He explains: "You live for da moment cuz you love Spam even if da ting get one rep for being unhealthy. Your motto in life is 'chance 'em'" (22). Tonouchi is obviously having fun with his presumably largely Hawaiian Local readership. In fact, Hawaiian Locals' recognition of the humor in Tonouchi's proposition indicates the lowly plate lunch's prominent place in Local social memory. Tonouchi's piece does not explicitly address interethnic mixing like Vowell's meditation on Obama, but it does address an interethnic Hawaiian Local audience by focusing on a fast food chain that markets itself for everyone on the archipelago. The Zip Pac is free of exclusionary ethnic markers. The only requirement is hunger and a high tolerance for frialator grease.

As detailed above, the plate lunch is often assumed by Locals and food historians alike to have descended from the lunches shared by plantation workers in the fields.⁴⁷ While this celebrated genealogy most likely has some truth, there is little textual evidence for it. Ultimately, however, I am most concerned with *why* the plantation is consistently asserted as the plate lunch's birthplace. Local discourse locates the plate lunch on the plantations of the past—with their multitudes of immigrant workers—so the dish can operate as a symbol of interethnic harmony.

The commonly retold narrative is charming and seductively evocative: The hot noonday sun. Always shining. No escape. The luna always watching. The heat trapped in your protective gear. The sharp sugarcane stalks pierce your skin. Again. And again. The wasps attack your head. The sweat runs down your back, its salt irritating your cuts. The luna says it's time for lunch. A half-hour. No more and don't push him. You join the other workers in a clearing. You open your *bento* box that your wife made for you at four in the morning. You look at the ball of white rice. It doesn't look like much, but inside is an ume waiting, a salty plum filling. There's a little pickled *daikon* on the side. You love this meal. You do. But months of eating it has killed all your joy. It's become a daily torture. Lunch is now merely fuel. You look over at the guy next to you. He's a Portuguese man. He's eating some bread and cheese. It's been a long time since you've had bread. You remember the sweet rolls your neighbors shared during their Christmas

⁴⁷ This mythology has even leaked into the Mainland U.S. press. For example, Jennifer Steinhauser wrote an article about the plate lunch for *The New York Times* shortly after Barack Obama's reelection that quotes multiple Locals telling the story of plantation workers sharing lunches. Steinhauser's article is also worth mentioning for the following passage: "It all seems like odd fare for a man as bookmark-thin as Mr. Obama, who seems to treasure his treadmill. 'I think it is really funny he still eats plate lunch,' Ms. Philpotts said. 'Because he is so healthy.' But she strongly suggested — at least to my ears — that the plate lunch in part accounts for his strong showing in Hawaii. 'I think it is because when he comes back here he is so cool, he just kind of slips back into local ways.'" Here to eat plate lunch reaffirms one's Localness.

holiday. They were tasty. The guy next to you looks at you now. You hold up your rice ball and gesture towards his sandwich. He smiles. Today lunch will be about more than fueling up.⁴⁸

The legend teaches the importance of being tolerant and respectful of others' cultures. It also uses a simple-to-imagine scenario as a way to explain the complex process of cultural mixing. The legend also appears suspect upon further contemplation. The sharing could not always have been as enthusiastic as it is commonly portrayed. Arnold Hiura has written extensively about Hawai'i's creole cuisine and he argues that the when foods first cross ethnic lines, the process is far from amiable and simple. For example, he describes the sharing between plantation workers as a form of natural selection:

That is, over time, certain dishes gained broader and broader acceptance and popularity across ethnic lines, while the more esoteric, exotic, or bizarre items either faded from the menu or were relegated to the privacy of people's homes. Rather than a random conglomeration of ethnic delicacies, in other words, Hawaii's mixed plate today is a representation of those foods that appealed to the broadest base of people over time (58).

As Hiura argues, some foods never entered the interethnic exchange. Take bagoong, for example, a pungent Filipino fish sauce. Thicker than the Thai and Vietnamese fish sauces that found in many mainland U.S. supermarkets nowadays, the paste contains half-pulverized shrimps or anchovies. Needless to say, it is an acquired taste. To Filipinos, however, especially those from dry, famine-prone regions such as Ilocos, it is a wonder product. It gives food taste. In Hawai'i, bagoong has been treated with suspicion by non-Filipinos and it never enjoyed the wide interethnic circulation experienced by other Asian condiments such as soy sauce. Judith

⁴⁸ This paragraph compiles information about plantation life that I gleaned from Ronald Takaki (57-91; 113-5) and Arnold Hiura (56-7).

Kirkendall notes that the odors of bagoong were used by Locals to justify anti-Filipino sentiments that lurk underneath Hawai'i's multiculturalist discourse. In 1983, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration even halted the importation of bagoong, alleging that there were high amounts of rodent feces in collected samples (248). Given the dubious reputation of bagoong and low social status of anything Filipino, I doubt that workers of other ethnicities were begging to get a taste of their Filipino coworkers' lunches.⁴⁹ Furthermore, plantation lunchtimes were short and considering how tired the workers must have been from hours of intense physical labor, I cannot imagine that they were chatterboxes on their breaks.

Beyond my own doubts, a few workers' anecdotes contradict the legend of the shared lunches in the plantation fields. Martina Kekuewa Fuentevilla, who grew up surrounded by Kona's coffee plantations, remembers the following about lunchtime at her school:

MF: The Japanese would bring their own kind and we Hawaiians would bring our own. The Japanese kids would bring rice and whatever kind of fish or meat thing they had to eat with their rice. But we Hawaiian kinds would take *poi*, we kids, Hawaiian kids living up in the *ma uka* region, we'd take just *poi* and the Hawaiian kids down at the beach, they would bring the fish and then we would eat together.

Interviewer: And did the Japanese kids join you in eating during lunch time?

MF: No, they ate together on their own and we Hawaiian kids we ate on our own during lunch. But of course we had a few Japanese kids who were good

⁴⁹ Readers are encouraged to consult the work of Jonathan Okamura about the Filipino American experience in the Islands.

friends with us and they ate with us, they were the ones but not all of the Japanese kids (1037).

Fuentevilla's testimony reminds us that while individuals of different ethnicities interacted on a daily basis in the plantation communities, they were also aware of the persistent divisions between the groups. Not everyone was willing to cross ethnic lines.

The plate lunch also possesses a distinctly urban hue. Arnold Hiura notes that many people compare the plate lunch to the bento boxes carried by Japanese plantation workers. However, according to Hiura, bento lunches consist of separate, self-contained foods rather than the plate lunch's groaning pile. Furthermore, plate lunches were always served in restaurants and plantation workers had to eat in the fields (90). The first plate lunches on record were served on the docks on Honolulu in the late 1920s and early 1930s, suggesting that plate lunches were an evolution of urban Hawaiian eating habits rather than a descendent of plantation worker practices (101).

While the plate lunch is often evoked as an emblem of Hawai'i, it is not unique to the archipelago's dining culture. Besides the meal's architecture, the plate lunch features food items that can be found in many Mainland U.S. diners. This resemblance is not unusual since Hawaiian Locals absorbed many Mainland American food habits in the immediate aftermath of World War II (Hiura 85-90). Take the loco moco, for example. It is a Salisbury steak, topped with a fried egg and placed on a bed of rice. This simple comfort dish reputedly was invented in 1949 by Nancy and Richard Inouye at Hilo's Lincoln Grill. The Inouyes put the dish together to please a hungry teenager nicknamed "Loco" who wanted something that mixed Asian and American elements and, most importantly, would fill him up (Ku 220; Kelly 42). It is a plausible story. Yet this legend is similar to other stories of harried restaurateurs improvising new foods to please

impatient customers. Robert Ku also mentions that other restaurants claim to have created the loco moco too (220). They probably all did independently; the dish is not exactly an imaginative stretch. I have seen variations of it done with potatoes in diners in New York and Maryland. In the end, who invented the dish does not concern me. I am interested that all the legends place the dish's birth in the late 1940s, after the close of World War II. This points to a mainland connection since the war not only brought bombs and the persecution of islanders with Japanese last names, it also brought soldiers. These soldiers brought their preferences, culinary and otherwise. The archipelago's economy accommodated them, if only because many residents had grown used to the widespread haole desire to recreate mainland life (Hiura 85). As a result, Hawai'i became plugged in to midcentury mainland trends such as drive-in restaurants and coffee shops (Hiura 85-7). Furthermore, Christine Yano and Wanda Adams detail how the Western-based menus of Hawaiian school lunches helped to facilitate "culinary assimilation" among Local children, "a kind of subjective assimilation convincing eaters that they were partaking of a dominant force and, quite critically, that it tasted good" (31-2). The result of sharing Mainland-inspired foods out created what Yano and Adams dub a "deliciously shared citizenship" (32). In such a climate, why could not the blue plate special be indigenized? As with SPAM cuisine, the plate lunch is an example of Hawaiian Local culture contending with how Mainland economic and military interests actively begin to shape their food preferences.

The plate lunch's birth gets rooted in the archipelago so that it expresses the idea of Hawaii as a multicultural society. Think back to Vowell's description of Obama as the plate lunch president. The plate lunch is the perfect promotional tool for Hawai'i as a multicultural paradise. Its starchy comforts make folks feel good. How can one argue against Japanese culture when they eat teriyaki? The plate lunch takes broadly appealing foods out their tangled cultural

contexts and presents the lot as a groaning cornucopia. The macaroni salad and beef kalbi piled on a plate cannot help but touch, those Korean spices zesting up the mayonnaise. A full belly also gives the momentary illusion that everything is fine.

Yet is Hawai‘i as multicultural as it proclaims? While Locals tell stories of harmonious ethnic mixing on the personal level, there are persistent economic gaps between Hawaiian Locals of different ethnicities. It started back in the plantation days, when workers are different ethnicities were placed on different pay scales with the Anglos and Portuguese at the high end and the Filipinos at the bottom (Takaki 76-7). More recently, in 1999, the median income of families of Japanese descent was \$69,000 while the median income of families of Samoan descent was \$33,000 (Okamura 51). Jonathan Okamura argues that islanders talk too much about interpersonal relations when discussing multiculturalism. This obscures the ways in which Hawaiian workers are at the mercy of powerful transnational corporations (118). Also, the archipelago’s economy is heavily dependent on tourism, which means most islanders find themselves in service jobs with little chance of advancement (Okamura 57). With little opportunity for mobility, the economic gaps between ethnicities cannot be repaired.

Beyond the economic dimension, interethnic tensions can be observed in the Local brand of humor published in newspapers and cartoon anthologies. These publications oftentimes focus on a Local character which Okamura describes as “overweight, non-White male who eats plate lunches, wears a T-shirt, speaks pidgin English, has a carefree attitude toward life, and know much local trivia about Hawaii but perhaps not much about the rest of the world” (115). We have already seen Frank De Lima’s portrayal of Locals’ love of SPAM. Roderick Labrador has taken De Lima to task for using “Mock Filipino to belittle the image of Filipinos in Hawai‘i. De Lima has mentioned that he thinks Hawaiians can laugh at themselves because they are a ‘chop suey

nation.”” However, Labrador accuses, “When ‘we laugh at ourselves’ do ‘we’ acquiesce to the extant structures and systems of white and Local domination while reducing ethnic groups to stigmatizing stereotypes?” (302). Labrador’s question highlights an undercurrent of disgust in Local humor. Another example is a cartoon strip about ordering plate lunch in *Pupus to da Max!* In the first panel, we see a lunch truck parked by a beach frequented by surfers. The dialogue is as follows:

“Say. . .What’s in your HAWAIIAN PLATE?”

“Teri beef, macaroni salad, two scoops rice!”

“What about your HAOLE PLATE?”

“Same t’ing!”

In the second panel, we meet our speakers. A lanky youth of an indeterminate ethnicity is the customer facing a plump Hawaiian woman who is smoking and elevating her feet on some boxes. The youth decides on the Hawaiian plate. In the third panel, the two characters stare at each other. Neither move. In the last panel, the youth asks “Hey—what’s the DIFFERENCE between the Haole plate and the Hawaiian plate?” The woman who is still reclined in a chair, lackadaisically responds, “About two hours” (114-5). In this cartoon, we meet the nonwhite Local unconcerned with the rushing gears of today’s world, the very figure that Okamura describes. This portrayal in fact echoes haole planters’ first impressions of their Hawaiian workers as undependable and lazy (Takaki 7). The perpetuation of this stereotype in a humor book that only Hawaiian Locals can fully appreciate shows that Locals have internalized certain stereotypes about themselves.

The plate lunch’s wide availability has also made it into a symbol of the limited possibilities given to many Locals. Check out Lee Cataluna’s humorous poem “Cheryl Moana

Marie Sakata.” Cheryl, our narrator, is sitting at a Zippy’s, that plate lunch emporium, waiting for her “chili cracka.” She remembers that she will need to grocery shop at Foodland or Long’s, two big chains on the islands. Then it occurs to her that “My whole life is Zippy’s, Foodland, Long’s/Zippy’s, Foodland, Long’s” (25). She tries to think of a time before she was caught in the dreaded cycle. She reminisces about going to a “real restaurant”:

I remember thinking that it took a really long time for the food to come, but nobody else looked pissed off so I figured that’s just how it is. I guess people who go to real restaurants have the time. They don’t have to run to Foodland or Long’s after (26).

As she waits for her chili cracka, Cheryl realizes that she will be stuck in this cycle even as an old lady “[e]xcept going be real early in the morning” (26). Here the Zippy’s plate lunch is not a comfortable affirmation of a Hawaiian Local’s identity. It is a reminder of how small this island world can be for those without opportunities.

Conclusion

For the past few years, the Mainland food press—always hungry for novelty and small but unexpected twists on old standby dishes—has been paying slightly more attention to Hawaiian Local cuisine. While SPAM musubis may never grace the display coolers of 7-11s and Starbuck’s across the North American continent, interest has definitely been piqued. A smattering of plate lunch joints have even opened on the West Coast.⁵⁰ The most active

⁵⁰ In Klamath Falls, OR, hungry folks can visit North Shore Hawaiian Plate, an establishment that serves plate lunches. Diners receive white sticky rice and their choice of macaroni salad or tossed salad. Entrees include Kalua Pig, Aunty Sally’s Shoyu Chicken, Taipin’s Teriyaki Chicken, or Korean Chicken. On *Yelp*, Portland, OR resident Ryan A. offered this assessment: “Like I said, though, the food was good. I have to admit I’ve had better, but usually Hawaiian places are worse and disappointing. This place seems popular, and it seems to be for good reason. If you want solid Hawaiian food, you may be surprised to know that you can find it in Klamath Falls.” This review is intriguing because it condemns Hawaiian food as “worse and disappointing” yet also offers pleasant surprise at

Mainland voices spreading the gospel of musubi are a part of the loose syndicate of chefs and foodies who fancy themselves as rebellious tastemakers: Anthony Bourdain, Roy Choi, Peter Meehan, and Jonathan Gold among others. For these Mainland media figures, Hawaiian Local cuisine is exotic yet also American, operating as comforting proof that America is not one endlessly replicated, prefab strip mall, that at least in one state, your server asks “Do you want rice with that?” instead of the oppressively omnipresent French fry. Hawaiian Local food is also working-class grub which appeals to contemporary American foodies who wish to repudiate haute cuisine’s pretentiousness and assert that they have not lost the democratic touch. Yet the prospect of Mainlanders’ appropriating Hawaiian Local food threatens to turn the plate lunch into a twenty-first century tiki bar phenomenon, a free-floating signifier of tropical loveliness that would no longer summon sugarcane ghosts.

A good example of this attitude is Jonathan Gold’s profile of Roy Choi’s trip to islands. According to Gold’s article, Choi has visited family in Hawai‘i every year, but has never lived there. In other words, he is a regular mainland tourist trying to act as the promotional agent for Local cuisine. Like the Euro American bohemians who ventured into early Chinese chop suey parlors, Choi self-consciously uses Hawaiian food to reject the pretensions of the culinary world:

I think we should try the *musubi* at He’eia Pier General Store & Deli, which was just reopened and has been getting good notices for its reinvented lunch specials made with organic, island-grown ingredients, or at least at Iyasume, where *musubi* is the specialty of the house. Choi thinks we need to go down the street to a 7-Eleven. I’m not sure I agree with him, but I admire his style.

finding this cuisine in the middle of Oregon. This contradictory attitude expresses an essential aspect of the contemporary foodie philosophy: value novelty over all else when assessing foods.

Style is the key word here because Choi's food choice is based less on the musubi's qualities than it is with building his image as a culinary raconteur. A Hawaiian Local specialty at the 7-Eleven becomes a tool in crafting an idiosyncratic media personality.

Choi replicates the class-based skepticism of some local specialties such as loco moco, “‘This isn’t delicious,’ says Choi, ‘Or, rather, this is a different kind of delicious. When you come out of the ocean after surfing all day, loco moco is the best thing you ever tasted.’” Choi has genuine affection for Local foods such as loco moco, but he does so by holding such foods as *apart*. Unlike Hawaiian Locals’ paeans to their beloved foods, Choi’s affection for loco moco cannot escape traces of shame. Cho’s attitude towards Local food expresses a central attitude about Hawai‘i that runs deep within mainland U.S. culture. The imperialistic notion that Hawai‘i is a resource for Americans to enjoy, a reward for belonging to the American nation, appears once again in Cho’s comments and Gold’s article. These recent attempts to take Local cuisine back to the mainland are not merely expressions of desire to experience the foodways of an ethnic Other. They are unvarnished appropriation.

When taken outside the socioeconomic situation of Hawai‘i, Local food loses its crucial function as an anti-mainland articulation of identity and a way to temporarily ameliorate interethnic tensions. While the capitalist marketplace seeks to commodify regional cuisines into freely circulating brands, not all cooking traditions can travel undamaged. For example, without a Local’s deep familiarity with plantation poverty and Hawai‘i’s interethnic connections, iconic dishes like SPAM musubi are no longer foods that index cultural memory; they become seen as nothing more than idiosyncratic departures from other food traditions, an opportunity for mainlanders to gawk and wonder at the curious ways in which Hawaiian Locals have tried to adapt to modernity.

Epilogue: The Persistence of Ghosts

When exploring the portrayals of Chinese American and Hawaiian Local languages and foodways in contemporary U.S. popular culture, one begins to realize the overwhelming and persistent presence of nineteenth-century ghosts: buck-toothed, inscrutable Chinamen with dangling queues flit in and out with cane cutting, SPAM-slurping Local rapists. Despite the narratives of social progress that oftentimes frame discussions of ethnic and racial relations in this country, there seems to be remarkably little complexification in how the U.S. white majority articulates other ethnicities, largely relying on a distorted, simplistic repertoire of factoids and stereotypes. While multiculturalism as a philosophy has ostensibly attempted to overcome prejudice, its emphasis on the existence of authentic ethnic essences has actually helped to ossify the cultural formations of some ethnicities. Chinese American and Hawaiian Local authors have tried to break out of this reductivist identity prison through the creole relational mode, a way of brashly celebrating culture as an always incomplete and changing entity. However, as we have seen, the creole relational mode yields mixed results: it certainly fractures ethnic essentialism, but it also can obscure ethnic conflict, unintentionally reinforcing multiculturalist philosophies. The danger seems to be here that the creole relational mode produces a sort of widely shared self-satisfaction that then ossifies into a tired set of conventions.

Furthermore, while these ethnic artists' use of the creole relational mode often brings liberating possibilities, does it completely dispel the grotesque gallery of nineteenth-century ghosts? They very well could someday, but as of right now, those ghosts still linger, paradoxically revived with each attempt to annihilate them. I do not mean to suggest that racial and ethnic marginalization are inevitable facets of American life; instead, I wish to emphasize that liberation from such marginalization will be a messier process than many of us would like to

acknowledge. The danger here is to think that being aware of a problem and having a method of articulating another kind of social relationship will rectify a long legacy of socially sanctioned cruelty. This kind of confidence is what helped to create the surface-level interethnic contact espoused by multiculturalism. True interethnic contact will require more than sampling SPAM musubi or chuckling at Chinglish captions on a Chinese takeout menu; it will force us all to confront our boundaries and question just how much we are willing to allow another culture to transform our sense of who we are.

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