

Understanding What It Means to Be Asian American

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Different literary works surrounding concepts of the New West have conjured thought-provoking discussions. The New West is a redefining of the American frontier, touching on topics such as race, class, and gender within the history of the United States. One pair of topics that seems almost inseparable within these conversations are identity and race in America. For Asian Americans, there is a struggle of not knowing where or whom they identify with. Pinpointing the exact definition of being "Asian American" proves to be unhelpful due to the wide range of topics and cultures this term extends towards. Rather than focusing one's attention on a definitive answer, it is much more impactful to one's learning if one instead examine factors that influence this identity. Race consciousness provides a starting point to how attitudes, relationships between people and food, and outcomes of assimilation can ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of what influences Asian American identity.

Childhood is often associated with fond and youthful memories. While many of them focus on the happier moments, the bad memories leave just as big an impression. They have the power to influence the construction of one's identity and relationship with the world. In Eddie Huang's memoir *Fresh Off the Boat*, growing up in the United States with Chinese immigrant parents proves to be challenging in his adolescent years, but his interaction with food is what puts a different take on his story. This is because as he is eating these meals, he is also consuming his identity. Food culture is very unique because it is almost inseparable from race. An aspect of critical race theory touches on the notion of race consciousness: "race consciousness is a normative behavior that develops in a society where racial stratification is present" (Pitts 667). It is also a "racially conscious group...more than a mere aggregation of individuals zoologically distinguishable from other ethnic groups. It is a social unit struggling for status in a society" (Pitts 667). Throughout the novel, Eddie is continuously trying to figure out who he is and where he belongs in America. This is crucial in understanding his relationship with food because he uses food as a means to find a place in America, since it is difficult for him to assimilate on his own. Food is very unique to a culture since it reflects on the people and history of where those ethnic groups originate from. For those who are not familiar with those particular sights and smells, the initial impression may not always be positive. In the book, Eddie transfers to a new school where majority of the student body is White. When he unpacks his Chinese based lunch, his peers bully and harass him because they are not familiar with those foods, "...they'd

stand across the room pointing at me with their noses pinched, eyes pulled back, telling ching-chong jokes. It was embarrassing so I asked my mom to start packing me some white people food" (Huang 30). The Chinese food he is familiar with is foreign to the rest of the American students, so he concludes that in order to fit in, he must mimic the American student's food. Huang writes, "I proudly pulled out my Kid Cuisine, still cold in my hand, penguins grinning, and got in line. I was third in line so I wouldn't have to wait too long" (32). As he is trying to fit in with the rest of his peers, he immediately gets rejected. He explains, "I was getting ready to pop open the oven door when Edgar grabbed me by my shirt and threw me to the ground. 'Chinks get to the back!'" (Huang 32). Another instance that showcases the interaction with food resurfaces when Eddie is about to eat dinner at his friend Jeff Miller's house. Jeff is the son of a doctor, and as a result lives a very luxurious life. Social status is a key aspect that contributes to Eddie's perception on White culture. He walks into their house and shockingly exclaims, "Everywhere you walked: toys, games, huge television, stuffed animals, it was like living in a Toys 'R'Us. I remember thinking to myself that if I died, I wanted to come back a white man" (Huang 39). It is not just their means of living Eddie wants to be apart of, it is their lifestyle in general. At dinner, he sees something completely new and different: tuna fish sandwiches and macaroni and cheese. He describes what it looks like in confusion, "The bowl was filled with goopy orange stuff...The other bowl was gray and filled with a fibrous material mixed with celery" (Huang 40). Being the son of second-generation Chinese immigrants, the smells and tastes of the food are completely different to him. The next sentence illustrates how unfamiliar he is with these foods, "I took a deep breath, clutched my orange juice, and forced myself to take a bite. Right on cue, gag reflex, boom went the orange juice" (Huang 40). Although Eddie takes an immediate dislike to the food, he forces himself to endure it because he believes that is what is needed to be done in order to assimilate. Food in this scene becomes symbolic because it relates to class structure, race, and most importantly, hierarchy. In her book *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, Jennifer Ho finds that, "analyzing and understanding foodways in the shaping of our identities allows us to see food as a sustenance for our bodies as well as our minds" (147). For Eddie, food is central to his adolescent development because it plays a prominent role in shaping his life. It acts as a medium for consuming an identity that he associates with White culture. By looking at the relationship between food and identity, one can understand how food influences Asian Americans conception of race.

George Herbert Mead was a sociologist and psychologist primarily known for creating the theory of symbolic interactionism. He asserts that:

The central theme of symbolic interactionism is

that human life is lived in the symbolic domain. Symbols are culturally derived social objects having shared meanings that are created and maintained in social interaction. Through language and communication, symbols provide the means by which reality is constructed. Reality is primarily a social product, and all that is humanly consequential—self, mind, society, culture—emerges from and is dependent on symbolic interactions for its existence. (Gecas and Tsushima 1611)

According to Mead's theory, individuals create symbols and associate meaning to it by interaction. In relation to *Fresh Off the Boat*, Eddie absorbs these symbolic interactions with his peers and deems them as paths to social hierarchy. In his eyes, in order to fit in, he must mimic that exact same lifestyle. The reality he constructs is that he needs to do this not just for his peers to accept him but to gain that power and dominance they have over him and assimilate into white culture.

While analyzing Eddie's relationship with food is one way of understanding how relationships form with second-generation immigrants, it is not the only way. The looking-glass self is a social psychological concept by Charles Cooley. He theorizes that "...our self-concepts are formed as reflections of the responses and evaluations of others in our environment" (Gecas and Schwalbe 77). In other words, through the perceptions others hold on a person, that individual begins to develop an identity that is very similar. Immediately after Eddie's classmate pushes him on the ground while waiting in line to microwave his Kid Cuisine, he becomes violent. "Finally, something went off in me...I grabbed his arm and threw it in the microwave. With my other hand I grabbed the door and slammed it on his arm as hard as I could. I wanted to kill him" (Huang 32). This act was a result of the violence Eddie endures. His identity assembles through this interaction and he becomes a reflection of his peer. With the combination of Mead and Cooley's theory, it can be concluded that one's identity cannot form without the influence of others. It constructs symbolic interactions with others, in which the individual absorbs their perceptions and makes it a reality.

From the information above, it becomes clear that Eddie struggles with assimilation. This concept is not new to second-generation immigrants, but by introducing other theories of assimilation one can understand the different factors that contribute to it and how each individual is uniquely different. The outcome for each individual and their families vary depending on lifestyle and societal factors, so generalizing the paths each second-generation immigrant takes into a singular outcome is close to impossible. Segmented assimilation is a theory with a set of three different paths second-generation immigrants tend to follow. These include: "upward assimilation, downward assimilation, and upward mobility...These paths correspond to three processes that summarize

the relations between immigrant children, their parents, and the wider ethnic community – consonant, dissonant, and selective acculturation" (Waters et al. 2). "Consonant acculturation occurs when the children and parents both learn American culture and gradually abandon their home language and 'old country' ways at about the same pace", and selective acculturation "occurs when parents and children both gradually learn American ways while remaining embedded, at least in part, in the ethnic community" (Waters et al. 2). Eddie would be categorized into the dissonant acculturation path, where Portes and Rumbaut argue that "children learn English and adopt American ways far faster than do their immigrant parents" (qtd. in Waters et al. 2). As a result, they struggle with racial discrimination far more harshly because there is a disconnect between the child and the parents, which causes the children to receive less support. What these three paths suggest is that the outcome of assimilation for second-generation immigrants and their families varies per household. A survey was conducted with "young adults aged 18 to 32 at the time of the interview in 1999-2000 who were born in the U.S. to parents who immigrated after 1965 (the second generation) or who were born abroad but arrived in the U.S. by age 12 and grew up in the U.S." (Waters et al. 4). In order to assess the various results of assimilation, the following socioeconomic outcomes were investigated: "being a high school dropout, being unemployed, having been arrested, having been incarcerated, being a teen parent by age 18, being a college graduate by age 22, and being in a professional/entrepreneurial occupation by age 25" (Waters et al. 5). The study was taken by "Dominican, Chinese, South American and Russian Jews...and Puerto Rican" (Waters et al. 5) second-generation groups. The data from the survey represents the following: "though groups vary, only 10 percent of our respondents experience dissonant acculturation, whereas 20 percent can be classified as consonant and another 70 percent as selective acculturation" (Waters et al. 8). The negative and positive adaptations from these different ethnic groups, combined with various socioeconomic outcomes, illustrate that assimilation is not only about trying to mimic the same lifestyle as the dominant culture. As Eddie puts it after seeing Jeff's luxurious lifestyle "...I was ready to convert. I wanted to be white so fucking bad" (Huang 40). When he is speaking about converting to White culture, he is not taking into account the different factors that shape the outcome of one's life, nor is he realizing that it is not that easy to assimilate. Eddie Huang's voice is just one of the many voices that make up second-generation Asian Americans; each of their stories and upbringings are uniquely different.

While this information may seem like common knowledge, it is still very crucial to present this, especially within the topic of race. When Asian Americans share stories with each other about their childhood, families, and relationships, they take comfort in being able to

relate to one another. They relate to the story, feelings, and emotions that they express. However, what they cannot relate to is the individual's personal life. In his book *Disoriented: Asian Americans, Law, and the Nation-State*, Robert Chang "...reveals 'Asian America' to denote something more than communities held together by residential segregation, language, or culture of the ancestral homeland. 'Asian America' is not located in the bodies of its constituent members. Rather 'Asian America' conveys a sense of community, place, and cultural space..." (6). Although each individual has their own unique story to tell, as a whole there becomes an overwhelming sense of connection and belonging; this is where we can understand another part of how Asian American identity comes together.

The common thread running through symbolic interactionism, the looking-glass self, and segmented assimilation is that there is not one unifying definition of what it means to be Asian American. If one's understanding of themselves is based on the people they interact with every day and they become a reflection of those around them, it is very difficult to point out where exactly their identity stems from. The same thing can be said with assimilation. There are various socioeconomic factors that contribute to this, making the outcome different for each individual and family. Race consciousness allows others to see the strain put on individuals who are trying to find their racial identity. When Asian American immigrants connect with other individuals who share the same experiences within their own cultural space, they can see another way of how Asian American identity forms. These different points showcase the variety of ways socioeconomic factors influence identity; it is not just based on how they view themselves or who they want to be. Defining what it means to be Asian Americans is not enough. Understanding the different parts that contribute to its meaning, however, opens up a deeper connection between the individual and their relationship with the world.

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