

Rotten Bananas, Hip Hop Heads, and the American Individual: Teaching Eddie Huang's Memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* and Its Tropes of Literacy

By Wilson C. Chen

There was an individual inside me that wasn't Chinese, that wasn't American, that wasn't Orlando. Just a kid trying to get the fuck out, tell his story, and arrange the world how it made sense to him.

---Eddie Huang (*Fresh Off the Boat* 129)

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.

---Ralph Waldo Emerson (qtd. in Huang *Fresh Off the Boat* 203)

I. Introduction

It is apparent that restaurateur, chef, author, and media personality Eddie Huang's remarkable ability to talk to America about food has given him a significant platform to pursue his larger intellectual passion of talking about race and culture in the U.S. Indeed, in his bestselling memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* (2013), which is the focus of this essay, Huang observes, "the single most interesting thing to me is race in America" (249). He insists, moreover, that it is "very difficult to separate race, culture, and food" (241). With a brash, irreverent, pointedly humorous rhetorical style reminiscent of his popular blog of the same name, Huang recounts in his memoir his experiences as a Chinese American boy growing up in an immigrant family and struggling to find himself in the racially and culturally hostile (and, I would add, deeply patriarchal and masculinist) environments of America. In our current era marked by social media saturation and also a popular fascination with celebrity chefs, restaurateurs, and all kinds of urban food(ie) trends, Huang's irrepressible public persona extends across our media landscape, and this stream of digital chatter, which is not the focus of this essay, may be welcomed by some readers and instructors, and distracting to others. Along with an

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active Twitter feed that has provoked controversy and a successful blog, Huang hosts the edgy food and culture program *Huang's World* for Vice Media's cable television channel VICELAND. His memoir has even inspired a commercially successful ABC television sitcom, also named *Fresh Off the Boat* and very loosely based on Huang's childhood. Huang has also published a second book to considerable fanfare, *Double Cup Love: On the Trail of Family, Food, and Broken Hearts in China* (2016), in which he narrates his further journeys with food, love, and Chinese culture.

While Huang's tremendous media presence is itself worthy of serious critical study and presents multidisciplinary opportunities for teaching about race, ethnicity, masculinity, identity, and performance, this perceived "noise" and chatter¹, intriguing and symptomatic as it is, may for some potential academic readers obscure the simple narrative power of Huang's memoir. This essay focuses on *Fresh Off the Boat* as an eminently teachable coming-of-age story, provides critical contexts and directions for teaching this ideologically suggestive text, and sets forth the interpretive argument that the structures and themes of the memoir are fundamentally shaped by the *literacy narrative* at its core. As such, the text enters into conversation with other literacy narratives that have become so foundational in the teaching of multiethnic literature in the U.S. Beneath the masculine bravado and Huang's distinct urban vernacular² is a story that is quite familiar to teachers of Asian American and U.S. multicultural literature—one about coming into language, developing a voice, and gaining a sense of agency and power in a world that seems ideologically configured against him. Reading and writing, both literally and in a more expansive metaphorical/conceptual sense, are at the heart of this journey into food, culture, and ultimately successful American entrepreneurialism. Moreover, Huang's tropes of literacy, combined with his fiery, rebellious, anti-establishment rhetoric, actually draw from enduring, mythified Americanist discourses that are suggestive of a masculine individualism that, while not unique, is recognizable, instructive, and even problematic as an illustration of a powerful discourse of self-formation. All of this is well worth pondering and interrogating in literature, writing, humanities,

¹ For a short, thoughtful, and critical discussion of Huang's tendency, at least in the recent past, to pick fights in the media in unthoughtful and ultimately irresponsible ways, see Arthur Chu's *AlterNet* piece, "Dear Eddie Huang: You Don't Get to Tell Black People, or Other Asian People, How They Should Feel or Who They Should Be." Calling on Huang to "dial back the arrogance, misogyny and racial condescension," Chu discusses, among several examples, a 2015 Twitter controversy regarding Huang's boorish responses to concerns expressed by black feminists about remarks Huang originally made in an appearance on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

² Joshua David Stein, writing for *The New York Times*, describes Huang's vernacular as "a profane concatenation of Mandarin and African-American vernacular English, spiced with allusions to Jonathan Swift, Charles Barkley and Cam'ron."

and interdisciplinary classrooms, and Huang's own racialized, gendered, cultural, and linguistic positioning allows much-needed conversations and possibly even new academic vernaculars to emerge in the classroom as we engage with his account of his peculiar journey from the margins toward a counter- or subcultural center. In an effort to speak not only to specialists in U.S. multiethnic literature but also to nonspecialists/generalists, the discussion that follows offers a tripartite approach to teaching this memoir: opening the unit with a sustained, critical, and creative discussion of genre(s), including traditional and popular forms; then inviting students to hone their critical thinking skills through careful rhetorical and ideological analyses of the text's representations of race, identity, assimilation, and resistance; and ultimately setting forth a focused, conceptual argument about *Fresh Off the Boat* as a "literacy narrative" while placing the text within a broader U.S. literary history and discourse about the American individual.

II. Creative and Critical Approaches to Genre

Fresh Off the Boat is both a memoir and an example of the mixed, amorphous genre of food writing, and this presents an opportunity to encourage students to think creatively about the growing popularity in recent years of the mixed literary genre of food writing. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Asian American chef and food truck movement trailblazer Roy Choi's memoir/recipe book *L.A. Son: My Life, My City, My Food* was also published in 2013, and the critical pairing of these two texts may excite enthusiasts of urban food trends, the food truck movement, and popular Korean-Mexican fusion (emblemized by Choi's Los Angeles-inspired Kogi taco). Readers and followers of chef-cum-author and television personality Anthony Bourdain may appreciate tracing some telling rhetorical parallels between, say, Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* and Huang's memoir not in terms of specific thematic content (beyond common interests in food culture), but rather, with regard to style, tone, persona, and masculine irreverence. Aside from its popular reception, writing about food is rife with opportunities for rigorous cultural and ideological analysis; indeed it can shed light on the formation of individual and community identities vis-à-vis constructions of ethnic and racial difference. In making her case for the significance of Asian American literary representations of food, Wenying Xu observes that "food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others" and that "cooking and eating have far-reaching significance in our subject formation" (2). As the "most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies," food

“organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways” (Xu 2). Such narratives are loaded with ideological significance and ripe for cultural analysis, and in the context of U.S. national identity, Xu reminds us that “[h]omogenizing immigrants’ and minorities’ foodways was part and parcel of the project of assimilation” (5). We can then observe that food-themed narratives and memoirs like Huang’s function as part of a counter-hegemony in the production of alternative identities and subjectivities sustained by late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century multicultural discourses.³

As a food-themed narrative, *Fresh Off the Boat* is the coming-of-age story of a self-depicted “rotten banana” who refuses to assimilate. Unlike other presumptive Asian-American “bananas,” our narrator refuses to “act white” under his “yellow” skin—namely, refuses to buy into what he sees as a conventional economic and social upward mobility (the desideratum of a good number of post-1965 Asian immigrant families) whereby one’s measure of success is tied to the uncritical acquisition of the trappings of upper-middle-class, suburban, white-identified culture. While this depiction of immigrant upward mobility lacks nuance—and demands critical attention, as I discuss later in this essay—it is clear that Huang, a child of the 1980s and 1990s, is a misfit, not properly Chinese by the standards of his family or immigrant community, clearly not white in the world without, and refusing to assimilate into the established social structures that make up his suburban world. As Huang puts it, “I was a loud-mouthed, brash, broken Asian who had no respect for authority in any form, whether it was a parent, teacher, or country. Not only was I not white, to many people I wasn’t Asian either” (148).

Blurring the lines between autobiography (which, according to its Greek-derived constitutive elements of *autos*, *bios*, and *graphia*, we can think of most basically as *self-life-writing*) and memoir (from the Latin *memoria*, meaning “memory” or “remembrance”), the story contains a recognizable autobiographical narrative structure, with an older, mature narrator framing and giving meaning to the doings of the younger Eddie. Yet it is hard to forget that this older narrator is a mere 31 years old at the time of the telling of this story and, understandably, is still trying to make

³ For a recent popular example of twenty-first-century multicultural discourse helping to sustain a counter-hegemonic discussion about food in connection with alternative identities and communities, see journalist Bonnie Tsui’s essay, “Why We Can’t Talk About Race in Food,” in *Civil Eats* (published June 27, 2017).

⁴ For a more extensive discussion of “autobiography” and “memoir” in both academic and popular usage, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*—in particular their chapter, “Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions.” Smith and Watson also begin their discussion of autobiography by examining its Greek-derived elements to set forth an opening definition (1).

sense of the many contradictions in his life. As we might expect from a memoir by an emerging young author whose life appears far from complete, his story has an episodic quality, with descriptive, richly narrated scenes about his childhood and family, punctuated by Huang's irreverent, sometimes controversial humor. And as the humorous memoir of a young, brash, enterprising individual of color with a persistent masculine swagger, it both cultivates an audience of enthusiasts even as it can be somewhat off-putting to others. Moreover, the contemporary phenomenon of "food writing," as perhaps expected, radically mixes genres—often invoking journalism, ethnography, autoethnography⁵, autobiography, memoir, storytelling, regionalism, humor, cultural criticism, as well as cookbooks—and it is not surprising to see recipes interspersed with rich, engaging personal narrative. This may be another reason Huang finds writing about food so liberating and enabling, as his writing moves rather freely across these generic distinctions, is very autoethnographic in spirit, and is committed to practicing a cultural criticism rooted in his experience of the world. This is all developed in a vernacular infused with basketball analogies, hip hop lingo, sufficient mention of literature and critical theory to reveal a respectable grounding in the humanities, lots of 1990s culture and music, and an enduring passion for food—comfort foods of all cultures and especially Chinese/Taiwanese food.

III. Teaching Critical Thinking about Race, Assimilation, and Resistance

Early in the teaching of this text or even prior to students reading it, it is important to point out that Huang's vernacular contains a self-conscious yet possibly discomfiting use of racial epithets, the kind often directed toward Asians, and it is worth paying careful attention to the ways in which he redeploys well-worn epithets like "FOB," "Chinaman," and occasionally even "chink." The title of the book itself can be a source of discomfort for readers, especially those coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, when "fresh off the boat," or its common shorthand "fob" (enunciated either according to its spelling, "f-o-b," or simply as one word, "fob") were common slurs disparaging recent migrants to the

⁵ If we think of *autobiography* in accordance with its constitutive elements *autos*, *bios*, and *graphia*, then we can begin to define *autoethnography* in terms of *autos*, *ethnos*, and *graphia*: *self-people/culture-writing*. That is, writing about a people/culture/community, often by an individual, a self, who has a personal connection to this people/culture/community. For a more extensive discussion of the concept of autoethnography, see Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," where she describes autoethnography as "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35).

U.S.—certainly those who left their native land in actual boats (e.g., Vietnamese refugees fleeing Vietnam in boats after the Vietnam War), but ultimately irrespective of their mode of transportation. It was largely the *freshness*, the uncouthness, that was to be derided. While the circulation of this epithet went beyond the Asian immigrant community, it has a particular poignancy for Asian Americans, both when directed toward Asians by others and when deployed by more culturally established or assimilated Asian Americans to characterize more recent arrivals. Yet within Asian American circles there has always existed a playful invocation of “fob” qualities that arguably isn’t meant to denigrate, but rather, underscores and in many ways even affirms the immigrant roots within oneself (as one might say, for example, “I love eating simmered pork intestines and those thousand-year-old eggs. I’m such an fob!”). Huang’s invocation of “fresh off the boat” conveys this sense of recognizing and embracing his immigrant heritage vis-à-vis others who would choose to assimilate and shed those cultural traits deemed undesirable in mainstream society. Huang even refunctions the centuries-old racist epithet *Chinaman* as something akin to a term of fraternal endearment, as when he pays homage to his paternal grandfather by describing him as a “six-foot-tall, long faced, droopy-eyed Chinaman who subsisted on a cocktail of KFC, boiled peanuts, and cigarettes” (3).⁶ In such usage Huang redeploys “Chinaman” to convey a kind of masculine pride, fraternity, and cultural authenticity. Playfully, he even refers to himself as a “crazy Chinaman” (85) and in another instance, a “wild-ass Chinaman” (89). His peculiar if problematic efforts to refunction these epithets become opportunities for discussing their significance (as well as the significance of alternative racial/ethnic identity descriptors) and even the question of their appropriateness within a broader context of oppression, struggle, and resistance in Asian American history.⁷

Huang narrates in great detail his experiences being racialized during his childhood, adolescence, and journey into adulthood, and this dominant theme in the memoir allows for a sustained discussion of the politics of race in late twentieth-century multicultural, multiracial

⁶ Some sports fans may remember the dustup back in 2004 over then-broadcaster (and now NBA coach) Steve Kerr’s reference to NBA basketball player Yao Ming as “the seven-foot-six Chinaman” in a national broadcast, on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday no less. After a public outcry led by Asian Americans, Kerr apologized, explaining that he did not know that the term “Chinaman” was offensive, and that he intended no disrespect whatsoever.

⁷ Teachers familiar with Maxine Hong Kingston’s work may also consider making a comparison with Kingston’s different sort of ideological wordplay on the racial epithet “Chinaman” in titling her novel *China Men*. Elaine Kim observes, “Kingston says she chose the title exactly because it expresses the difference between the way Chinese immigrant men viewed themselves and the way they were viewed in a racist society. They called themselves *tang jen*, or China men, while the racist called them ‘Chinamen’” (211).

America. His stories about growing up Asian American in Central Florida often emphasize the cruelty and brutality doled out by kids in school and the neighborhood, and how, encouraged by the dubious “wisdom” and values of a father himself prone to violence, the young Eddie learns to respond to racism with violence, at nearly every opportunity afforded him and eventually in peremptory fashion. As an older person, in a reflection on race reminiscent of (without suggesting congruence with) a Du Boisian “double consciousness,” Huang admits to staring occasionally into the mirror, “obsessed with the idea that the person I am in my head is something entirely different than what everyone else sees. That the way I look will prevent me from doing the things I want” (45). He is acutely aware of the social discourse of expectations, racially and culturally inflected, continually foisted upon him. This is connected with his positioning as neither “black” nor “white” within dominant U.S. racial constructions, but rather, as “Asian,” and by his own accounts, an odd-looking one that continually disrupts social expectations. He experiences keenly this otherness when he is denied a sports beat writer job with the *Orlando Sentinel* because of his “face,” a face that, his interviewer equivocally observes, will not play well at all with the individuals he would be asked to interview (208). Huang is also subject to the expectations of family and community that, as a Chinese American born to upwardly mobile immigrant parents, he follow an assimilationist model of success. His personal struggles with these expectations and his defiant, even violent responses to all perceived slights in a racist U.S. society, when unpacked, become opportunities to think critically about the politics of assimilation for racialized minorities. Even if Huang’s many pronouncements on race in America are, as we shall see, not equally nuanced, a fine-grained analysis of his representations can both grasp and push beyond the logic of his pronouncements. What is it that Huang feels he has been pressured to give up culturally in order to fit into the social structures around him—as a child in Orlando, as a college student at the University of Pittsburgh, and later as a law student and attorney-in-training in New York? Is Huang’s anti-assimilationist stance viable or persuasive, and what does “assimilation” really mean in the context of a post-Civil Rights multicultural America? Close textual analysis of the narrative representations can bring forth a thoughtful conversation about what may be gained and lost under pressures to assimilate.

A discussion about the politics of assimilation for Asian Americans brings to the fore the historical discourse of the “model minority,” a concept against which Huang continually inveighs. It is worth examining in detail Huang’s angry rhetoric about the “Uncle Chans” of the Asian-American community, an appellation of his that plays on the historical profile of “Uncle Tom,” which is evocative of black subservience and a

deep-seated yearning for assimilation into the white power structure at whatever cost to one's integrity. Hence, an "Uncle Chan"—a label drawn from the eponymous Hollywood detective, the orientalized, emasculated, aphoristic Charlie Chan who poses no discernible threat to the dominant white power structure—is the antithesis of what Huang aspires to be, yet this is the model he finds ubiquitous among his Chinese American peers. Lacking nuance in his invective, Huang portrays an "Uncle Chan" as simply a "sell out," one who would sacrifice his culture for mainstream acceptance; an "Uncle Chan" would rather ingratiate himself with the dominant culture instead of challenge it for its narrowness, injustices, and enduring Eurocentrism. Huang berates the Uncle Chans of his world (the peers of his parents, his classmates in college, many of the Asian Americans he meets in law school, etc.) for contributing to the "model minority" myth, a widespread discourse that appears to celebrate a particular minority group's achievements in order to establish that group as the exemplar for upward mobility and assimilation into mainstream society. As many scholars of ethnic studies and activists have observed, to the extent that Asian Americans are cast as a "model minority" by dominant society (and, as a result, experience an erasure of their actual heterogeneity as a community), then conversely other minority groups are seen as a "social problem," perceived as culpable in the struggles they face, and subjected to harsh public criticism (e.g., by political figures and policymakers) for not following the footpath of the "model minority." Huang, as a freshman at the University of Pittsburgh, expresses his anger toward these Uncle Chans in the school newspaper, as he recalls:

It was all about Uncle Chans and how they fucked the game up for Asian people. For too long , I wrote, we've been lapdogs. The people who don't want to offend anyone. We hide out in Laundromats, delis, and takeout joints and hope that our doctor/lawyer sons and daughters will save us. We play into the definitions and stereotypes others impose on us and accept the model-minority myth, thinking it's positive, but it's a trap just like any stereotype. (156)

Huang's sweeping rhetorical barrage against his Uncle Chan nemeses—which relies on the too simple dichotomy between those who "sell out" and those who remain "authentic," and ignores the range of subject positions different individuals can occupy—is an occasion for a critical classroom discussion of the merits/demerits of his views and the peculiar ways in which minoritized subjects negotiate the pressures of dominant culture. Huang's preoccupation with the Uncle Chans of his world actually allows students to enter into deep, even personal

conversations about the politics of assimilation; when such conversations are largely contained by broader, more abstract sociological terms, they may lack the poignancy, anger, and sense of contradiction and injustice that drive Huang's invective, which can open up spaces for honest dialogue and critical, nuanced thought. Students should be encouraged to interrogate and even contest Huang's characterization of other Asian Americans with, ironically, such a broad, homogenizing brush. In some situations it is far too easy to dismiss an individual as an "Uncle Chan" instead of trying to understand the complex negotiation of cultural choices, conscious and unconscious, that Asian Americans face in a deeply hybridized, multiethnic U.S. society. It would also be remiss to ignore Huang's own class privilege—buttressed by his family's business successes and their impressive upward mobility as immigrants—which has enabled a sense of choice, and arguably, has provided him with a relatively wide margin for error in comparison with those exercising less economic privilege. In his repeated dismissal of Asian Americans that don't live up to his standards of authenticity, Huang shows both a narrowness in vision and a lack of awareness of his own privileges.

Notwithstanding these limitations in vision, it is clear that for Huang, assimilation is not synonymous with integration, and assimilation is far from an unqualified social good. These claims demand the careful attention of readers. If the Uncle Chans of his world "fucked the game up for Asian people," then what alternatives are suggested by Huang's life story? To what degree is his sense of identity and community truly anti-assimilationist and to what extent is the purity of his rhetoric complicated by a much messier, contradictory, or hybridized cultural existence? If indeed the trappings of white upper-middle-class culture are emphatically rejected by Huang, then how do we come to understand his enthusiastic embrace of urban African American vernacular cultures? What sorts of places/spaces does he try to create for more meaningful identities to thrive? How does music, art, space, language, culture, and food open up new possibilities for the misfits of the world? There are many rich textual examples in the memoir of the sorts of cultural spaces Huang valorizes, and these passages merit close analysis and interpretation. Instructors and readers might consider, for instance, his early encounters with African American history and social struggle in his visits to the library (60); the sustaining influence and resistance he finds in 1990s hip hop culture, which he contrasts with the "cultural cleansing" he associates with many sanctioned educational spaces of his adolescence (60, 98-99); a summer academic enrichment program held at Davidson College in which he experiences an intellectual awakening through the study of rhetoric (121-124); literature, writing, and film courses that he enrolled in at Rollins College despite his parents' conventional wishes that he pursue

a pragmatic business education (201-205); and at the conclusion of his narrative, the creation of Baohaus, which he conceptualizes as a space of belonging for young people—a “youth culture restaurant” and also a “movement” (258, 264-266, 267). Devoting class time to examining these narrative representations can produce fruitful, illuminating discussion about different sorts of cultural spaces and the identities they nurture.

Historian Vijay Prashad’s concept of “horizontal assimilation” may further shed light on these issues by fostering a discussion of the ways in which different communities of color influence each other. Prashad explains, “Yet all people who enter the United States do not strive to be accepted by the terms set by white supremacy. Some actively disregard them, finding them impossible to meet. Instead, they seek recognition, solidarity, and safety by embracing others also oppressed by white supremacy in something of a horizontal assimilation” (x). This concept of “horizontal assimilation,” with its emphasis on the powerful and intimate cross-cultural influences among nonwhite minoritized groups, provides an academic lens for discussing Huang’s steady embrace of African American culture. At the same time, several important critical questions should be asked concerning Huang’s investment in African American urban vernacular culture (e.g., hip hop), given its commodification in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century entertainment-media industry. Students should consider carefully whether Huang’s self-presentation is more reflective of coalition and solidarity with other communities of color—as Prashad’s formulations and even Huang’s own statements would suggest—or if it is complicit at some level with a kind of cultural appropriation of black culture, a historical practice deeply entangled with the workings of a dominant consumer culture that includes within it a rebellious brand of American youth culture. Again, Huang’s relative economic privilege is worth examining here; as his enterprising immigrant family ascends economically to suburban living in the wealthy Bay Hill subdivision of Orlando, the adolescent Eddie increasingly finds his mode of resistance and rebellion in urban hip hop culture. This could be an opportunity for a discussion of a longer, complex history of the appropriation of African American culture.

IV. Critical Literacy and the Literacy Narrative

At its core, I would argue, *Fresh Off the Boat* is a “literacy narrative,” and by identifying the text in this way, I am also placing it into a distinct genre within U.S. multicultural literature and Asian American literature. Moving beyond the more common and still useful genre label of *bildungsroman* (put simply, a novel of education, formation, or development), Morris Young has described in helpful ways the more

specific genre of the literacy narrative, which for Young traces “personal growth and development but with special attention to an individual’s relationship to language or literacy” (13). Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen observe that literacy narratives are stories “that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy”; these narratives “sometimes include explicit images of schooling and teaching,” and they can “both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (qtd. in Young 32). Furthermore, as Young has remarked, for racialized minorities, demonstrating literacy has been fundamental to demonstrating that one belongs in U.S. culture; it is “key in the construction of a person’s identity, legitimacy, and citizenship when that person is racially marked as Other” (2). As an early twenty-first-century literacy narrative, Huang’s memoir not only traces the establishment of his identity in a racially stratified yet profoundly multiethnic, multilingual U.S., but it also proves to be quite didactic or pedagogical in its presentation. That is to say, Huang conveys in precise, nearly step-by-step detail his pathways toward mastering language and rhetoric, claiming a public voice, and gaining increasing agency and power as an individual in American society. Worthy of textual analysis are the descriptions of his many complicated, ideologically mixed learning experiences in classrooms from grade school through law school, as well as the wisdom gained from the alternative spaces and cultures his memoir valorizes.

It is also worth examining closely his rigorous engagement with literature at crucial moments in his intellectual development, including for example the effects on Huang of studying the rhetoric of Jonathan Swift’s satire “A Modest Proposal” and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s essay “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” and the inspiration he drew from reading Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar” (122-124), among several intriguing literary examples throughout his journey. As a narrative of minoritized and racialized self-formation viewed through the lens of the literacy narrative, *Fresh Off the Boat* can be placed into dialogue with a long, rich tradition of literacy narratives in U.S. multicultural literary history. The intention here is not to conflate distinct ethnic literary traditions or to neglect the very different historical meanings of literacy across different racial histories; rather, it is to construct a cross-cultural dialogue around a theme that is deeply significant for many communities, as evidenced by their literary histories.⁸ Consider, for instance, the

⁸ Morris Young helpfully observes, “Writers and readers respond to the anxieties and crises that they face in their present cultural-historical circumstances by reading and writing in the genre of the literacy narrative. Whether it is responding to slavery in nineteenth-century America, Americanization campaigns of the early 1900s, or the ‘literacy crisis’ of the 1970s and 1980s, the literacy narrative has emerged in many instances when marginalized peoples have been forced to prove their legitimacy as citizens or potential citizens” (34).

centrality and thematic complexity of literacy in the history of African American narrative, whether we are examining autobiographical writings by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Paule Marshall, or a contemporary figure like Ta-Nehisi Coates—all of whom take up questions of literacy in complex, expansive, and varied ways.⁹ Or consider the significance of literacy themes in such diverse Asian American autobiographical writing as produced by Carlos Bulosan, Amy Tan, and Eboo Patel, or in U.S. Latino/a autobiographical narratives by authors as different as Richard Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Victor Villanueva.¹⁰ In texts that explore the self-formation of racialized subjects in the U.S., issues concerning an “individual’s relationship to language or literacy” (to return to Young’s formulation) are quite central.

Huang’s memoir, in its didacticism and pedagogical implications combined with an insistent enterprising spirit, is also reminiscent of qualities found in one of the most mythified, iconic narratives of the American individual, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the putative “quintessential American” whose life story has traditionally been received as a literary template of sorts for how to become an empowered, effective, consequential, and enterprising American individual. Containing within it a literacy narrative that has become central to the articulation of American individualism, Franklin’s widely read success story foregrounds his experiences reading and writing (from childhood through adolescence and continuing in adulthood) as essential to the development of his mind, communication skills, entrepreneurial abilities, and subsequent political leadership. The parallels do not end here, and if Franklin positions himself as an exemplary American citizen, whose (literacy) narrative provides a key for a successful life in this developing nation, then Huang’s memoir can be seen as claiming and refunctioning in certain ways this powerful strand of Americanist discourse. A purposeful multicultural vernacular remix of this mythified discourse, Huang’s narrative maps out the steps toward a kind of *critical literacy* central to his own story of success in a post-Civil Rights era in which race continues to matter. While Huang has crafted a transgressive persona in many ways, some of his intellectual antecedents are actually quite canonical. This association with Franklin is not without its problems, for if Franklin’s narrative in its didacticism appears blind to his own privilege as a white

⁹ See, for instance, Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Wright’s *Black Boy*, Malcolm X’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Marshall’s “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” and Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, among many other texts.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*, Tan’s “Mother Tongue,” Patel’s *Acts of Faith*, Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, among many other possible texts.

male subject in eighteenth-century America vis-à-vis women and racial minorities, then we are reminded that Huang's own empowered literacy, even as it is a movement from the margins, carries with it its blind spots concerning his own gendered and economic privilege. Nevertheless, by fashioning himself in this way, he anchors his narrative within a historical discourse of empowered American individualism.

Still, it is not simply empowered literacy for which Huang strives nor is he seeking the tools that would ensure his integration into mainstream American culture. In his oppositional stance, Huang emphasizes his own eclectic accumulation of knowledge and the many unsung intellectual heroes of his world. This intellectual development can be seen through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's understanding of "critical literacy." In theorizing a relationship between literacy and liberation, Laclau, drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, has in effect described critical literacy as a situation in which you have a "proliferation of discourses"—this is the condition in which "emancipatory struggles start" (136).¹¹ As a child and adolescent without access to the range of discourses that would allow him to contest meaningfully the intellectual and institutional forces of his immediate environments, the younger Eddie seems to alternate between attempted engagement, withdrawal, submission, and explosive violence. Laclau's conceptualization of critical literacy aptly describes the kind of writing, speaking, and authorial space that Huang, after years of struggling to make sense of his world, is eventually able to create for himself, enabling an intellectual maturation that should continue well beyond the conclusion of this particular narrative. Laclau's emphasis on the start of "emancipatory struggles" suggests that this is just a beginning and part of an ongoing process, not an end point. If indeed this is the space from which Huang, as comic and critic, restaurateur, and entrepreneurial success, pens this memoir, then it is necessary to examine how literacy is inculcated by the dominant educational institutions in his life, his rebellion against this instruction, and the intellectual pathway he ultimately carves out for himself.

The narrative underscores an early formative experience in grade school, in which the young Eddie experiences powerful lessons on the social pressures to conform and the invidious politics of assimilation. Parodically described as "Baptist Soccer Mom heaven," First Academy Christian School becomes the site of trauma and intellectual repression on the one hand, and individual struggle and resistance on the other. This episode portrays an institution intolerant of the critical thinking,

¹¹ By contrast, in "situations of oppression," observes Laclau, these "tools of liberation struggle—discourses—are not present" (136). When these discourses "start being present, we are in a situation in which oppression begins to be radically a question and in which different outcomes are possible" (Laclau 136).

imagination, and intellectual recalcitrance of an inquisitive child like Eddie. First Academy—both the institution and the peer culture within its walls—symbolizes the sort of monologic (no proliferation of discourses) *miseducation* that he spends many years resisting and subsequently overcoming, and establishes a major arc of the narrative. His daily experiences at school are revealed as a series of lessons about ethnocentrism, racism, and perhaps most of all the risky politics of assimilation into a dominant culture. Not only were he and his brother the “only Asian kids” at the school, but Eddie was also raised in a household where religion “wasn’t a big deal” and his parents were nominal Buddhists if anything (25). Add to this mix Eddie’s penchant for questioning authority, including a persistent questioning of the religious “truths” both assumed and inculcated by his grade school teacher, and Eddie quickly becomes a social pariah at school. Overwhelmed by the classroom pressure and especially peer pressure, Eddie soon decides, in his words, to “sell out,” to join the believers by assimilating into this community to which he has become an unwelcome outsider subject to such ignominies as being seated in the corner facing the wall while his classmates made Christmas cards, being penalized with “time outs” for classroom impertinence, and feeling the disapproving judgment of his peers. Huang admits: “I waved the white flag and asked Ms. Truex what I needed to do to be like everyone else. She told me that if I wanted to participate in class and go to Heaven, I had to ‘let Jesus into my heart.’ So for the first time in my life, I sold out. . . . I didn’t know what to expect, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to be down” (27). The metaphor/concept of “selling out” is introduced in this early institutional scene of literacy, and Huang’s struggles in his subsequent adolescent and young adult years can be seen as his efforts to “be down” in a way that is truer and more authentic to his experiences of the world. This grade school scene inaugurates a journey toward a more meaningful and powerful literacy with which to engage his world. He makes progress in this journey as more discourses become available to him, and these subsequent scenes of intellectual growth are rendered in almost epiphanic fashion.

This chapter, provocatively titled, “God Has Assholes for Children,” presents a series of recognizable grade school scenes for discussion, analysis, and interpretation. This includes the brutal treatment Eddie receives on the basketball court from the other kids, and the shame he experiences each day in the lunchroom opening up his lunchbox and releasing the pungent odors of home-cooked Chinese foods, which make him feel like the “stinky kid” with whom no one wanted to sit. Still bent on ingratiating himself with his peers, Eddie insists that his mother pack him “some white people food,” which in this case turns out to be “Kid Cuisines and Juicy Juices” instead of, say, seaweed salad and

“braised beef and carrots with Chinese broccoli” (31-2). The politics of race erupt violently when these lunchroom adventures in food lead to a confrontation between Eddie and the one African American boy in his class, Edgar, who “had the same trouble I did: he was a loner without many friends. But he was Christian, so at least that was going for him” (12). A potential coalition built upon shared otherness (a discourse ultimately inaccessible to the two boys in this time and place) becomes instead a battle for social status between two minoritized students in a scene with Eddie waiting in line for the microwave with his much-prized ticket to lunchroom acceptance—his “white people food”/Kid Cuisine that he had worked so hard to procure—and Edgar throwing him out of line and on to the ground, insisting that “Chinks get to the back” (32). Eddie’s explosive retaliatory violence actually signals a new pattern in his life of returning the violence of racism with equal if not greater violence. In this episode he is led to the principal’s office, his lunch is taken away, and he is locked in a walk-in closet without access to a bathroom; he ends up “drenched” in his own urine (33). Huang’s depiction of First Academy paints a troubling picture of an institution blind to its own ethnocentrism and determined to foreclose meaningful dialogue, creativity, and critical thinking. His depiction of himself reveals a young Eddie determined to fight back against perceived injustices with his own violence and remaining blind to the consequences of his actions:

From that day forward, I promised that I would be the trouble in my life. I wouldn’t wait for people to pick on me or back me into a corner. Whether it was race, height, weight, or my personality that people didn’t like, it was now their fucking problem. If anyone said anything to me, I’d go back at them harder, and if that didn’t work, too bad for them: I’d catch them outside after school. (33)

Further informing readers that this troubled attitude resulted in his attending five different schools over a mere seven years, Huang then goes into considerable detail throughout the chapters narrating in hilarious, shocking, and heartbreaking fashion the many destructive episodes in his life, leading eventually to a felony conviction.

At the same time another arc emerges in the memoir tracing Eddie’s intellectual development whereby he gradually comes to replace the physical violence he relied so much on with a growing understanding of the power of language, rhetoric, and interpretation in order to confront not only individual adversaries but also dominant institutions and discourses that, he finds, continually threaten to stifle him. Gaining access to new discourses (proliferation of discourses) enables a different kind of literacy that rekindles his inquisitive mind and eventually allows him to

claim a viable voice in this world. In an intellectual journey involving an eclectic mix of hip hop, gastronomy, and a substantial engagement with academic culture, Huang in effect constructs himself as a kind of exemplary (multicultural) American individual whose creative sensibilities, intellectual imagination, and access to new discourses (including antagonistic and counter-hegemonic discourses) open up a path toward successful entrepreneurialism and, ultimately, interpretive authority and authorship.

The music and culture of hip hop—a lifeline in his youth that provides a sense of community in his experience of otherness and also makes available an alternative social lens for interpreting the world in which he finds himself—become a lifelong passion that informs his cultural, intellectual, and entrepreneurial endeavors. Law school, perhaps an unlikely choice for a self-styled rebel like Huang, becomes an occasion for the training and disciplining of his mind. In a passage evocative of Ben Franklin’s model of intellectual training and self-improvement (that is, a mental discipline central to Franklin’s notion of the empowered American individual who can then go on to accomplish things in this world), Huang explains: “I wasn’t meant to be an attorney, but I was meant to go to law school. It made me a disciplined thinker, it forced me to think logically not emotionally, and it taught me to respond in an organized manner. . . . I had no intention of being an attorney, but I was down for another round of mental training” (211). This is one emphatic profile of the maturing individual Huang constructs by the end of the narrative. No longer the short-sighted, unfocused, and hot-tempered Eddie relying largely on the means of physical violence, the twentysomething Huang (while far from a finished product according to his own narrative) demonstrates disciplined thinking, devotes himself to “mental training” and continual self-improvement, and equips himself with the power of language, rhetoric, and interpretation. This is the sort of individual, the text suggests, that can be of some consequence in this world.¹²

¹² While this essay is focused on Huang’s memoir, it is perhaps worth noting that this particular conception of the American individual is belied by the arguably much more rhetorically careless media personality Huang has conveyed outside of/beyond this text, where he has gained attention of all sorts for his more outrageous, highly masculinist, at times misogynist, sophomoric commentary. In addition to the Chu article mentioned above, see Jenevieve Ting’s blog essay for *Ms. Magazine*, “We Need to Talk About Eddie Huang’s Misogyny,” which shares important concerns about Huang’s “blatant misogynistic language being fashioned as a way to ‘reclaim Asian American masculinity.’” Huang’s newest book, *Double Cup Love*, begins to address some (certainly not all) of these issues in the context of his ongoing journey of personal growth/maturation.

V. Huang's American Individual — Inspiration, Entanglement, and Contradiction

Huang's early attempt at building a sustainable business—e.g., his hip-hop streetwear line prior to his restaurant venture—becomes a series of lessons about entrepreneurialism, business savvy, and maintaining his own sense of cultural integrity. Furthermore, as Huang gains confidence in his perception of the world and in his emerging voice, he reveals even a kind of Emersonian individualism, in this case a quasi-Transcendentalist sensibility underscored by his fixation on the passage from “The American Scholar” quoted in the epigraph to this essay. He insists on his own instincts, filtering experiences through himself and rejecting insalubrious influences from without (as this is a world populated with imitators and Uncle Chans), and claims an invigorated, masculine individuality in the face of forces that threaten to corrupt and coopt. Huang arrives at the realization that he “can't idolize and emulate forever,” that he has “gotta cut the cord and go for dolo,” and declares in Emersonian fashion, “I needed to build arguments, philosophies, and a style grounded in my era and experiences” (203). Yet Huang's insistent, deeply masculine individualism, while functioning as a bulwark against a dominant society he continues to battle, also limits his social critique and diminishes his efforts to invoke feminist discourses as part of his stance against the larger world. And while he insists on the socially progressive nature of hip hop culture, his own use of language continues to reflect some of the less progressive elements in a broader hip hop culture, such as the hypermasculinity and rhetorical swagger that, while frequently playful, can also reproduce dominant patriarchal discourses. All of this can be discussed sensitively and productively in the classroom. In tracing Huang's masculinist persona and noting the limitations this places on his social vision, readers may wonder about Huang's further growth ahead and how he may negotiate these ideological conflicts in his continuing-to-develop brand of resistance.

It is also evident that his form of individualism, echoes of American Transcendentalism notwithstanding, is very much an *entangled* individualism, clearly a part of and not apart from the contradictions of U.S. consumer culture, the ideological messiness of the food business, and the all-powerful, all-encompassing entertainment-media industry with its attendant risks and distortions. Indeed these real-world, material entanglements seem to be part of the memoir's appeal to students and their own enterprising spirits. That is to say, Huang's individualism clearly is not a Thoreau-like removal into the woods; while there are certain career choices and business models Huang emphatically rejects, there are also a variety of “hustles” and business ventures that earn his

admiration, respect, or simply acceptance. In addition to reminding us of Franklin's entrepreneurial spirit, Huang shows a deep immersion in popular culture that may be surprising to readers who enter the classroom with more traditional expectations about what constitutes "literature" and what themes and rhetorical practices are appropriate for "literary analysis."

It is apparent that our narrator has traveled a great distance from the voiceless days of his youth, where violence was his primary means of making his presence felt. Gastronomy then becomes his privileged space for interpretive contestation whereby he claims a voice, interpretive authority, and a significant stake in American culture. It is no accident that Huang narrates the establishment of Baohaus eatery—his first truly successful, legitimate business endeavor—side-by-side with a narrative about his *blog* about opening this restaurant; indeed he writes in great detail about his writing/blogging about the restaurant. Huang's writing voice and growing rhetorical power are underscored throughout this section devoted to the establishment of his business. Interestingly, he even places into the narrative as inserted texts his actual employment advertisements—in all their vernacular quirkiness, showcasing the peculiar eccentric, egalitarian ethos of this cultural space—along with the verbatim responses of certain job applicants. This correspondence, which merits textual analysis (their richness sometimes a surprise to student readers), is suggestive of the kind of community he hopes to cultivate through his eatery. These advertisements are effectively a hailing or interpellation of creative, disaffected, somewhat rebellious young people ready to join an entrepreneurial movement they find meaningful. Huang insists that "there was a genuine workforce and customer base that grew up on the ethos of golden-era hip-hop and wanted to do something positive in an honest, real, socially progressive way" (267). He goes so far as to claim, "My main objective with Baohaus was to become a voice for Asian Americans" (264), which might seem like an ill-conceived goal for a young, brash owner of a roughly 400-square-foot eatery on the Lower East Side.¹³ Yet in many ways he has managed to give himself a huge platform from which to speak, which consists of no less than Baohaus (now in both New York and Los Angeles); his bestselling memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* along with his newest chronicle *Double Cup Love*; a fairly regular stream of essays about food, culture, and race; a popular cable television program, *Huang's World*, devoted to explorations of food and culture; and his nearly impossible-to-ignore online media presence.

¹³ In November 2016 Huang opened a second Baohaus location in Los Angeles, in the historic Chinatown district.

One purpose of this essay is to engage instructors who may not immediately embrace or feel especially well prepared to teach *Fresh Off the Boat*. I have tried to demonstrate the ideological richness of this text; in bending genres, manifesting tension/contradiction, exploring questions of literacy, and contributing to discourses of the American individual, the memoir is a wonderful opportunity for critical thinking, literary analysis, and even intellectual history (revisiting the very idea of America and the American individual). I teach *Fresh Off the Boat* in the context of an undergraduate U.S. Multiethnic Literature course in which questions of assimilation, cultural authenticity, cultural hybridity, language and literacy, and the peculiar spaces of diaspora feature prominently. *Fresh Off the Boat*, while not revolutionary in its representations, is intellectually rewarding to teach in this context and can actually be quite invigorating for students who enter the class with overly restrictive notions of what constitutes literary studies.

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