

Eating Together, Separately: Intergroup Communication and Food in a Multiethnic Community

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In multiethnic communities, food pathways can bring diverse residents into contact in restaurants and in the aisles of grocery stores—though the communication that ensues does not always lead to greater understanding. Drawing from communication infrastructure theory, as well as intergroup contact and racial formation concepts, this article explores the relationship between food practices and how residents perceive their demographically changing communities. The article synthesizes a survey, field observations, and interviews with Asian, Latino, and White residents in a majority-minority city in Los Angeles County. Findings suggest that, although discursive networks within commercial food spaces are often ethnically bounded, communication in and about food spaces can act as a barometer of attitudes toward community change and intergroup relations.

Keywords: food, storytelling, intergroup relations, communication assets, bridging, diaspora, identity, racial formation

From an early age, the thing that made me realize that I was “other,” that I was different, that I was weird, was food. It was always food.

— Eddie Huang, food personality, author,
and inspiration for the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*²

From *pho* to *falafel*, eating across cultures has never been easier. In the United States, globally infused foodie-ism is big business—be it fusion food trucks, vibrant online discussion boards, or colorful reality television hosts in search of the exotic around the world or around the corner. The availability of diverse flavors often parallels increasingly multiethnic populations, as the demographic makeup of many U.S. communities shifts. But what does it mean to be able to order *banh mi* or eggs Benedict from adjacent cafés, or even from the same menu?

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² Eddie Huang’s Ted Talk reflecting on food and identity can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMEyW1VtxiE&feature=youtu.be>.

This study explores how residents of one multiethnic “ethnoburb” use food to navigate their changing community and the food on its tables. Using the framework of communication infrastructure theory with theories of intergroup contact and racial formation, it synthesizes survey findings, field observations, and interviews with Asian, Latino, and White residents of a majority-minority city in Los Angeles County. The research illustrates how residents communicate via food and within food spaces. The study also examines how residents use food to culturally code and contest the meaning of places—and what it means to sit in the same restaurant when these meanings are not shared.

Food as Intercultural Communication

Cosmopolitan palates have never coincided neatly with openness to the cultures cooking the dishes on our plates. Certainly there is no clear correlation between enjoying Chinese or Mexican food, for example, and being knowledgeable about or empathetic toward people from these cultures.³ As an example, the writer Gustavo Arellano (2012) takes considerable delight in recounting the contradictions of the “ear-to-ear, tamale-induced smile” he witnessed on the face of an anti-immigration congressman who stopped to eat at a Mexican restaurant before going to a debate, “getting fueled for a night to decry the very culture that had just fed him” (p. 7).

Such paradoxical accounts fit comfortably within the messy history of cross-cultural eating in the United States (Gabaccia, 1998; Veit, 2013). Motivations for culinary exploration have always involved a tangled matrix of identity, cultural capital, class, social networks, proximity, and economics (Bourdieu, 1979; Johnston & Bauman, 2014). Ultimately, as Roland Barthes (1961) argued, food is a “system of communication.” Through our acts of cooking and eating, we exchange stories and meaning—and these are mapped upon the spaces in which they are performed. As Barthes states,

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. (p. 24)

But Barthes’ “grammar” of food begs further development. What does it mean for food to be a system of *intercultural* communication? In the communication fabric of multiethnic societies, food plays a dual role, at minimum. Through our likes, dislikes, preferences, and practices, we signify and communicate through the food items themselves (Ferguson, 2014; Greene & Cramer, 2011). At the same time, pathways for the production and consumption of food draw conglomerate communities into proximity, opening potential opportunities for interaction in “transcultural spaces,” if not necessarily understanding (Sen, 2013; Slocum, 2008).

Through the lens of communication, cross-cultural food practices have many stories to tell. Food as discourse “serves as a socializing mechanism by which we come to understand our cultures, our societies, and the groups to which we belong” (Greene & Cramer, 2011, p. xii). Food preferences can, for example, define social boundaries. Richard Wilk (2012) designed a matrix to show how food “loves” and

³ Note, for example, the cases of cross-cultural indigestion in Gupta (2013) and Maloney (2013).

"hates" could solidify cultural divides (e.g., lobster-loving Whites vs. eel-loving African Americans in 1960s Connecticut), and how preferences could be charted to track food heterodoxy, orthodoxy, doxa, and related issues of identity and acceptance of cultural others.

In the introduction to their volume *Food as Communication, Communication as Food*, Greene and Cramer (2011) call on scholars to examine food's potential to transcend "nation, race, class, and gender, even as it defines them" and to create "shared meaning" (p. xviii). They suggest that scholars go further, exploring food and the insights it offers as a way to reconsider models of communication.

It is in this spirit that this study examines food as intercultural communication. By looking at the moments not only when shared meaning is created through food practice and discourse but when meanings and stories clash or at least fail to merge, it attempts to illustrate and extend communication theory.

Theoretical Framework

Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) offers a particularly valuable framework for assessing the discursive cohesion of multiethnic communities. That is, are residents creating shared meaning—or, in CIT terms, are they connecting to a shared *storytelling network*? According to CIT, the storytelling network is a dynamic communicative process involving multiple levels of storytelling actors: interpersonal conversation between residents, community organizations, and local media. Like Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities, CIT starts with the idea that neighbors who share a common story about their local community will feel more connected to one another and more invested in the well-being of their community (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Residents access storytelling networks within a *communication action context* that includes infrastructures that either help them connect or hinder them from connecting to storytelling actors. For example, residents may be hindered from taking their children to a neighborhood playgroup if the local park is perceived as unsafe or difficult to get to because of poor transit links. On the other hand, the creation of a café that hosts arts events and offers meeting space for community groups may facilitate residents in discursively developing a shared understanding of what is happening in their neighborhood.

The case of the café offers an example of what CIT researchers call *communication assets*. These assets include communication "hot spots" (places where residents naturally gather to talk) and "comfort zones" (institutions or spaces to which residents feel connected) (Villanueva, Broad, Gonzalez, Ball-Rokeach, & Murphy, 2015; Wilkin, Stringer, O'Quin, Montgomery, & Hunt, 2011). These assets might be a local library, clinic, or barber shop where residents congregate and share experiences about their community. As part of their street-level mapping efforts, researchers working with community members also identified food-related spaces such as restaurants and grocery stores as communication assets (Villanueva et al., 2015). This suggests that food spaces such as restaurants have the potential to act as comfort zones where residents engage with one another—and, by doing so, they tap into a storytelling network.

Working in multiethnic communities, CIT researchers have also examined the potential for shared storytelling to enhance opportunities for intergroup bridging. Several have integrated the complementary framework of intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) into their work. Although a meta-analysis of 515 studies conducted in 2011 concluded that “intergroup contact typically reduces prejudices” (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011), scholars have called for studies using the theory to do more to integrate social context and longitudinal analysis and account for negative intergroup perceptions (Pettigrew, 2008). Responding to this, Broad, Gonzalez, and Ball-Rokeach (2013) examined relations between African American and Latino communities in South Los Angeles, finding that the combination of interpersonal contact and connection to the storytelling network influenced intergroup perceptions—though, at times, connecting to “bad stories” in ethnically bounded networks led to negative perceptions of the other ethnic group.

Following these findings that access to communication assets such as food spaces can increase connection to storytelling networks (Villanueva et al., 2015) and that connection to these networks combined with intergroup contact can influence intergroup perceptions (Broad et al., 2013) and community belonging (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2013; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Ognyanova et al., 2013), this study examines what is happening when multiple ethnic groups share food spaces. It explores the interactions that do or do not take place, the kinds of stories that are shared, and how these spaces may influence how residents perceive their community and one another.

Through this process, this study also extends CIT by exploring it in the context of multiethnic foodscapes in a community experiencing demographic change. By focusing on communication assets in the communication action context, this study responds to calls in recent CIT scholarship for greater attention to the communication action context, as an “understudied element of the communication infrastructure” (Wilkin, 2013, p. 195) with potential to inform outreach interventions. It also extends the application of CIT by complementing it with not only intergroup contact theory but also concepts of racial formation and cultural studies concepts of living with difference. To understand multiethnic sites, concepts such as racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) add value by explaining how the layering of power and place may shape or fragment storytelling networks. This is particularly useful when making sense of cases where groups share the same spaces but not the same stories. Food practices act as a staple within the everyday experiences that scholars of racial formation suggest are critical sites of observation (Cheng, 2013; Lipsitz, 2011; Omi & Winant, 1994; Saito, 1998). Interrogating the layering of food, race, and place can lead to deeper understandings of hidden racial assumptions etched upon physical sites and how racially coded spatial imaginaries can contribute to a structure of feeling (Lipsitz, 2011). Discourse surrounding food spaces can at times function as coded expressions—dog whistling about the “dubious” food of the “other” (Ku, 2014; Lopez, 2014), or more broadly about changing community demographics (Cheng, 2013; Saito, 1998) and ownership of public space (Brown-Sarancino, 2009).

At the same time, affective concepts such as conviviality (Gilroy, 2004) offer another explanation for how residents process everyday encounters in multiethnic communities. Conviviality offers a way to grapple with the question of what it means to notice difference in spaces like restaurants, even when customers from different backgrounds are not interacting directly. As Wise and Velayutham (2013) argue, ordinary moments in the presence of the “other” can produce “at ease relations of coexistence and

accommodation" (p. 407). They advocate for a multilevel approach to conviviality that accounts not only for interpersonal encounter but cultural, structural, and spatial elements—including the built environment, in a way paralleling CIT's communication action context. Wise and Velayutham's nuanced concept of conviviality responds to Sarah Ahmed's (2008) critique of a naively "happy multiculturalism"—which pointed out that what people take away from affective exposure to difference depends on their histories and starting points. As theories of racial formation point out, people are not observing one another drinking tea or filling grocery baskets in a power vacuum.

This study, then, holds that putting communication infrastructure theory in conversation with intergroup contact theory, and concepts of racial formation and conviviality, provides a robust framework to make sense of multiethnic food spaces within the context of local racial power dynamics.

Research Design

Study Location

Alhambra, California, an incorporated city in Los Angeles County, offers a particularly rich space to explore intergroup relations and the role of food-related communication assets. The city, part of the San Gabriel Valley, consists of three ethnic groups (Asian, Latino, and White)⁴ who are connected to ethnically bounded storytelling networks with few discursive bridges between them and low levels of civic engagement (Chen et al., 2013). Alhambra's population reflects national U.S. trends—rapid growth of Asian and Latino communities and increasing numbers of immigrants moving directly to suburbs.⁵ Over the past 50 years, the city has shifted from primarily White to a primarily ethnically Chinese "ethnoburb." Waves of demographic change have corresponded with changing dynamics of political and economic power. Exclusionary legal and business practices that long encouraged residential segregation and White privilege were first challenged by the in-migration of Latino and Japanese American residents, who eventually made gains in local government and community institutions. More recently, an influx of ethnically Chinese first-generation immigrants changed this dynamic, altering racial hierarchies and alliances—which have fluctuated as groups seek resources or access to political power (Cheng, 2010; Saito, 1998).

The city's restaurant scene mirrors its shifting demography—vibrant and varied Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese offerings, a smaller number of mostly aging Mexican and Euro American establishments, a new wave of fusion cuisine, and a smattering of mainstream chains. Newer developments tend to be associated with the Chinese community, and the ethnicity of proposed restaurants and grocery stores are a recurring source of controversy.⁶ Researcher Wendy Cheng recounted that before an Applebee's was built on Main Street, there was a sign, "Wanted: American restaurant." The sign, "read in the context of

⁴ In Alhambra, White Anglos make up 10% of the population, 53% are Asian (primarily ethnically Chinese), and 34% are Latino (primarily Mexican American) (Chen et al., 2013).

⁵ For more on how Alhambra foreshadows national trends, see Gerson (2015).

⁶ The closing of the Super A Foods in 2013 (see Uc & Gerson, 2013) and Ralphs in 2015 (see Garcia, 2015) both sparked heated debate in local media.

local history as an expression of nativism and barely veiled racism via consumer desires, or the idea that restaurants serving Chinese food, and, by extension, ethnic Chinese people themselves, could not be ‘American’” (Cheng, 2010, p.466). Sociologist Leland Saito also traced how race and identity have been negotiated through debates over development and public space in the San Gabriel Valley, in which “good restaurant” has been used as code by White and Latino residents to signify Euro American restaurant: “More than a symbol of ethnicity, restaurants represented control over cultural and economic matters” (Saito, 1998, p. 48).

Instruments and Procedures

The first phase of this project invited residents to share information about their food practices—including where they ate and shopped—through an online Qualtrics survey. Survey questions were asked as part of a larger survey conducted between April and May 2014 (with 99 survey participants) associated with a local trilingual community news site, the *Alhambra Source*. Survey respondents were recruited from a convenience sample of community contributors to the news site, and additional participants were recruited from their extended networks via snowball sampling. The survey covered a range of community issues, including measures of community belonging and perceived quality of experiences with other ethnic groups. This preliminary phase of survey research on food practices was analyzed using linear regression. No significant causal relationship was found between eating in multiethnic food spaces and perceiving more positive experiences with other ethnic groups, or between eating in multiethnic food spaces and feeling a greater sense of community belonging.

At first glance, CIT would suggest that, if multiethnic food spaces were functioning as comfort zones, they would connect eaters to shared stories. If these residents were sharing a common story, previous research would suggest they would be more likely to have higher levels of community belonging (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Because the survey did not support this, a second phase of interviews and field observations sought to go beyond *what* people were putting on their plates, to better understand *whether* and *how* they were interacting at sites of cross-cultural eating. By exploring the quality of experience taking place within these food spaces, the study attempted to understand what was happening in these comfort zones—what was stopping spaces from playing a bridging role and whether residents from different ethnic groups were sharing the same stories.

The study, then, addressed the following research questions for sites of cross-cultural eating in Alhambra:

RQ1: Is interaction taking place between ethnic groups?

RQ2: What is the content of stories circulating within these spaces?

By mapping dining locations (see Figure 1), eight restaurants were identified as sites where participants ate cross-culturally.⁷ These were then observed by the author over the period from June to August 2014 at mealtimes on various days of the week. Criteria for selecting restaurants included: (1) venues listed by participants from multiple ethnic groups on the online survey and (2) venues that included a range of cuisine genres and eating environments (table service, informal outdoor seating, café, etc.). The eight restaurants observed were a large pan-Asian noodle restaurant, a small Chinese restaurant, a Vietnamese fusion restaurant and bar, a café specializing in Asian-style tea drinks and sandwiches, a Mexican restaurant with outdoor seating and a drive-through, a sit-down Mexican restaurant, an American retro-themed diner, and an American grill known for craft beers.

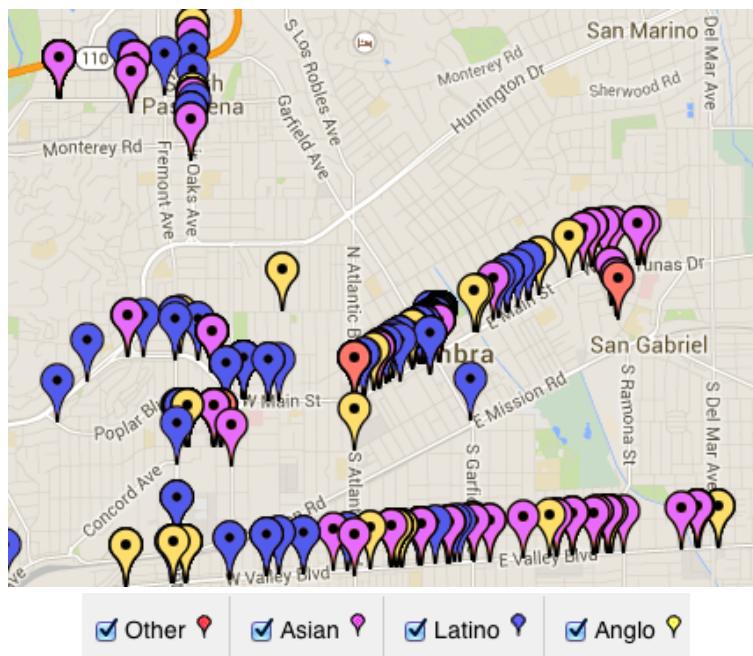


Figure 1. Restaurants from the online survey mapped by ethnicity.

In June and July 2014, one-on-one interviews were conducted at these restaurants, over a meal, with 13 survey respondents (four Asian, five Latino, three White, and one African American, ranging in age from 29 to 78) who reported eating at the selected restaurants, and for whom eating involved crossing cultural boundaries—e.g., a Mexican American man eating at a Vietnamese restaurant. After discussing the food they ordered, participants engaged in an implicit word-association (Coleman, 2015) exercise in which they were sequentially handed sheets of paper with a food phrase and asked to write the

⁷A total of 849 references to restaurants in the online survey were mapped by ethnicity (see <https://www.zeemaps.com/map?group=973419>).

first things that came to mind. Prompts included the phrases “food in Alhambra,” “Chinese food,” “Mexican food,” “American food,” and “ethnic food”—varying in order depending on where they were eating and their ethnic background. The exercise was intended to elicit automatic associations as well as to prime participants to reflect on the food available in Alhambra and the relationship between food and cultures.

In the semistructured interviews that followed, I asked people about their food practices, including their experiences eating foods associated with other cultures throughout their lives and specifically in Alhambra. The conversations ended by reflecting back on the initial words generated from the word-association test. All interviews were conducted by me and lasted about an hour.

To provide context on Alhambra’s culinary landscape, I conducted interviews with three food writers (one Asian, one Latino, one White) who focus on the area. I also observed a walking tour of Chinese restaurants in the area and interviewed the tour organizer to better understand how the San Gabriel Valley is perceived as a hub for regional Chinese cuisine. For all interviews, thematic analysis (Kvale, 1996) was conducted by comparing and contrasting all transcripts to identify and then code common themes. These were then analyzed along with observations from restaurant sites.

Findings

Over the course of my interviews with Alhambra residents, I noted several themes, including the presence or absence of intercultural interaction, valence of intercultural interactions, attitudes toward customer service norms, attitudes toward community change, and interpersonal facilitators/barriers to cross-cultural eating.

Eating Apart

“Where’s everyone else eating?” Steve, a 29-year-old Chinese American resident and interviewee, said he asks this question when visiting “authentic” Asian restaurants.⁸ Looking around the dining areas, he said he only sees other Asian faces. “I know Alhambra is not all Asian. . . . It’s kind of scary to me” (personal interview, June 23, 2014). Steve worried that eating in his city has become a largely “siloesd” experience.

Steve’s observations squared with those of local food writers, who spend a lot of time in Alhambra’s Asian restaurants because the area is known as a hub for Chinese and Vietnamese cuisine. Food writer Javier Cabral grew up in and around Alhambra. Cabral, who is Mexican American, said his fellow diners are almost always Chinese families. “It’s kind of embarrassing sometimes,” he recalled of his experience at a Szechuan restaurant watching small children eat spicier food than he could handle. “We go there and we ask for the smallest amount of heat imaginable. And it’s still like the spiciest salsa out of a Mexican restaurant” (personal interview, June 25, 2014).

⁸ All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

"There's a language barrier, and there's a taste barrier," said Tony Chen, a food writer who often finds himself in the reverse situation—the only Asian person at a Mexican restaurant. He explained that, given the high percentage of Asian residents, there is no economic incentive for Asian restaurants to appeal to non-Asian audiences. "It's just too much of a hassle. There's too much work, culinary, customary differences, that they just can't crossover" (personal interview, June 25, 2014). With the exception of a few places serving Vietnamese *pho*, a noodle soup that Chen and Cabral agreed appeals to many Mexicans due to its similarity to *menudo*, the area's booming Asian restaurant scene primarily draws Asian patrons.

Steve said the "silo" impulse goes the other direction as well. He rarely sees Asians at the area's traditionally Euro American restaurants. Many Asians, particularly of his parents' generation, view these restaurants as "a White place to go," and he associated "American food" with "not for Asians" (personal interview, June 23, 2014). Steve added that stories of friends being subjected to racial slurs have kept him from trying certain Euro American and Mexican restaurants.

Eating Together

Nevertheless, there were exceptions. Steve explained his concerns about a vegan tofu-and-curry concoction offered at an American grill. The restaurant was akin to a culinary embodiment of Homi Bhabha's notion of a culturally hybrid "third space"—"the location of shared practices which, while generated in response to particular historical and geographical conditions, cannot simply be said to belong to one discrete culture or another" (Bridge, 2011, p. 72). Like the fusion of the grill's menu, where one can order Korean tacos or a turkey burger, the grill's clientele is diverse, though slightly more Latino and White. All communities, it seems, are drawn by the lure of craft beer. But does sitting in close proximity equate to the kind of substantive cross-cultural interaction or negotiation that facilitates the formation of shared storytelling?

Observations at this grill, over repeated visits, revealed a lack of interaction between tables. This was not surprising given that nearly all interviewees said the only time they spoke with diners outside their own party was to ask the name of a dish they ordered, to comment on a cute toddler, or exchange occasional pleasantries—particularly if they found themselves dining alone or traveling. Exceptions occurred when viewing important sports matches, which might evoke acknowledgement of shared fandom or even a high-five. Intertable norms of insularity were even more pronounced at the other restaurants. No interactions were observed between tables at sit-down restaurants, and only a few were seen at the Mexican restaurant with informal outdoor seating. Consistent with observations of sociality at other restaurants (Lum, 2013; Simon, 2010), the built environments of these food spaces seem to contribute to the likelihood of interaction—a flirty exchange between adjacent picnic tables was observed, but conversation between booths where parties had their backs to each other (see Figure 2) was not.



Figure 2. Diners at a Pan-Asian noodle restaurant in Alhambra.

Most conversations I observed took place at monocultural tables—between families or groups of friends from the same ethnic background. Mixed tables were more common during weekday lunchtimes, when groups who were presumably coworkers (some visibly branded as such with a shared uniform) were a common sight. Evening meals often featured more family groups, although these, and groups of friends, were also ethnically mixed on rare occasions.

Customer Service Scripts (Lost) in Translation

Cross-cultural dialogue was most likely to occur through commercially structured interactions between customers and restaurant staff. These conversations rarely ventured beyond questions about dish recommendations. Some particularly gregarious restaurant staffers did engage in unsolicited banter, and some customers were clearly regulars. These cross-cultural exchanges were seen most commonly at the two Mexican restaurants and the American grill. At the sit-down Mexican restaurant, for example,



Figure 3. Henry enjoying a taco at a Mexican restaurant in Alhambra.

Rene, a 62-year-old African American, greeted the restaurant owner and asked permission to practice her Spanish. But most exchanges I observed, even if cordial, followed transactional service norms.

Even the commercially structured script can hit a snag when customers and restaurant staff do not share the same language or cultural expectations. "You can't read the menus, so then you just call the waiter over. If they can't speak English, then you have a problem." Henry, a 78-year-old White resident (see Figure 3), reported running into this problem at a Chinese restaurant in the area:

I sat there for 20 minutes and they wouldn't . . . because, I think, I'm American, they didn't wait on me. . . . I have no idea why. But I just got up and left because nobody would wait on me. (personal interview, June 19, 2014)

Henry, and several Latino participants, said because of language barriers, they preferred eating in downtown Los Angeles' Chinatown, a long-established area with restaurants that cater to Western palates and customer-service norms.

Food writer Javier Cabral said that, because of differing cultural expectations, he stopped going to many Chinese restaurants with his father. "If service doesn't treat you like a king, he [Cabral's father]

wouldn't go back." Cabral explained that, for many from older generations coming from Mexico, "you're used to whenever you give money for food they should treat you good." Eating at many Chinese restaurants required a different mind-set:

The concept of customer service doesn't really exist in a Chinese restaurant where they can barely speak English. . . . They'll just take your order and walk away without even saying OK or thank you. (personal interview, June 25, 2014)

Whether interviewees saw differing customer service norms as a barrier generally depended on whether they prioritized novelty versus comfort as criteria for assessing restaurants. Often the same people who prized familiarity placed heavy value on acknowledgement of their needs. On the other hand, those who ate to satisfy curiosity sometimes referred to the food itself as a "connection" (Heather, personal interview, July 1, 2014) and were not deterred by language barriers or the failure of someone to refill their water glass.

In addition to individual-level preferences regarding customer service, diners' reactions also can be read in the context of local hierarchies of race. Scholars focusing on the region (Cheng, 2013; Saito, 1998) have previously pointed to the discomfort felt by longtime White and Latino residents eating in Chinese restaurants as the result of a rupture of norms of Whiteness. For White residents, and some Latinos who allied themselves with Whites, eating in places catering to Chinese immigrants made them feel, for the first time, "economically superfluous and culturally marginal" (Saito, 1998, p. 50).

Overall, the structures of dining spaces—both the literal booths and tables and the structures of the capitalist exchange—may have combined with local racial "structures of feeling" to create barriers to meaningful cross-cultural interaction. The restaurants I observed functioned as discursive communication assets—storytelling networks were largely confined to ethnically bounded tables. Restaurants such as the American pub attracted residents from multiple ethnic groups and acted as a comfort zone for all. But, as Sarah Ahmed (2008) points out, "bodies do not arrive in neutral" (p. 40). Each patron brings his or her historical baggage to the intercultural space. Even when in the same restaurant, patrons were connecting to separate storytelling networks—explaining why this study's survey did not find a link between eating in multiethnic spaces and having a sense of community belonging. To better understand the impact of connecting to ethnically bounded networks, it may help to explore in more detail the content of the stories being shared about food and the community.

Dining Storytelling

Study participants spoke about food often connected to what was said, or left unsaid, about diversity and change in the city. The most common and contentious narratives related to the growth of the city's Asian population, development seen to cater to that population—including restaurants and grocery stores—and a lack of interaction between ethnic groups. The valence attached to these narratives varied and did not fall neatly along lines of ethnicity or age.

People who were willing to be flexible in their interpretation of customer service tended to emphasize the benefits of diversity in the region, both in culinary and economic terms. For example, Victor, a 44-year-old Latino father, did not see the growth in exclusively Asian stores and restaurants as a negative. He said this was “positive for them culturally,” and “it’s a positive for everyone generally in the city. It attracts revenue.” Victor regularly brought his entire family to restaurants where they were the only non-Asians. “I want to try everything. . . . I don’t have any real fear of it. I want my kids to understand, hey, you can go wherever you want” (personal interview, June 25, 2014). For Victor, eating out in predominantly Asian spaces signaled mobility and put forth a resistant narrative of community belonging.

Ana, a 55-year-old Latina, drew a different conclusion from the growth in Asian restaurants and groceries:

We’re in a sad state. . . . We’re letting them, take over, buy all these properties. . . . I think we’re going to be overpowered by the Asian communities. . . . They’re pushing all of us out. Slowly. (personal interview, June 18, 2014)

Ana was skeptical of the Chinese restaurants near her house. “I get kind of leery about what I’m eating. You know, you never know what they’re putting in there” (personal interview, June 18, 2014).

Ana was also a frequent reader of the *Los Angeles Times*’ Pulitzer Prize-winning food writer Jonathan Gold—though she acknowledged writing to him in the past to complain that he recommended restaurants with slipping health standards. Gold said he still gets letters from readers concerned that they have been surreptitiously fed “tender bits of donkey or dog” at Chinese restaurants. “My standard thing has become, actually dog is prestige meat and they would actually charge five times as much for it” (personal interview, June 30, 2014). Such suspicions were disappointing to Gold, because part of his mission for the past 25 years has been to remind readers: “We’re all living in the same city. We’re all neighbors. You shouldn’t be freaked out by each other.” And yet Gold was not surprised that Latinos in Alhambra were not embracing Chinese culture or cuisine in their community. “If you’re Latino, and you’re already feeling ‘other.’ And you feel like your neighborhood is being invaded by people who are other ‘other’—and they seem to be the ones that everybody’s interested in.” He said he’s seen similar divisions before, such as between African Americans and Mexican immigrants in Compton:

It’s like they’ve already had to bend over backwards in order to accommodate the majority culture. And they’re finding out that it’s not enough, that they have to bend for another minority culture. And they just don’t want to do it. (personal interview, June 30, 2014)

Skepticism and fear went the other way as well. Several participants mentioned Asian family members who are reluctant to eat in non-Asian restaurants. Cynthia, a 34-year-old Chinese American, conceded: “For my parents, it doesn’t matter where in the world they go, they want to eat Chinese food” (personal interview, June 25, 2014).

Food writer Tony Chen recalled being taught to despise Mexican food by his parents, and he believed this held true for many first-generation Chinese immigrants: "They don't want to eat Mexican food, ever. They tried it. They hate it." For Chen, cross-cultural eating required investment, and overcoming fears rooted in historical experiences. "I think people are really comfortable where they are. It takes a tremendous amount of magnanimity and tolerance to reach out" (personal interview, June 25, 2014).

These anecdotes illustrate how the valence of stories circulating about cultural others within a storytelling network can shape how residents code communication assets such as food spaces. For example, when Chinese food becomes associated with the threat of cultural displacement, restaurants and stores and the blocks they sit on become coded with that threat—changing how residents move through their community. Likewise, even when residents do share the same spaces, if they are connected to ethnically bounded storytelling networks, those stories mark the lens through which they view other diners. This notion recalls Sarah Ahmed's (2008) critique that multicultural conviviality must account for threads of power and feeling attached to people when they enter a space. For example, Steve, who lamented the segregated nature of many dining experiences in Alhambra, voiced concern about "growing racial tension." He shared a story of a Latino child taunting him and his girlfriend with racist remarks on their street. Even though the perpetrator was just a boy, the experience left Steve speculating about whether the child learned such sentiments from his parents. This cast a shadow on how Steve viewed other diners: "Part of me wonders, will I ever see that person—him and his kids that said questionable things—will we ever be in the same restaurant?" (personal interview, June 23, 2014). Traces of Steve's earlier negative encounter follow him into the food space. At the same time, small encounters of goodwill may influence him in a more convivial direction.

Food as Facilitator?

In this community, where food spaces are culturally contested, restaurants seem unlikely sites to foster shared narratives of belonging. If diners see difference across the room, their view may be filtered through a prism of negative stories and from a position intertwined with larger dynamics of racism, marginalization, and displacement. In addition, the physical and economic structures of these commercial spaces make meaningful cross-cultural exchange improbable.

This is not to say that there is no role for food as a facilitator of cultural bridging. Several participants referenced noncommercial interactions around food that offer more promise and warrant additional research. Sam, a 62-year-old White woman (see Figure 4), shared an experience she had when a Vietnamese neighbor invited her over for a backyard party:

Nobody knew them, but they were inviting us over to share a meal. And so we all went. And we had awkward conversation and enjoyed their *pho*. And talked to them and petted their dog and stuff like that. But as a result of that, we're all friends now and we look out for each other. (personal interview, June 23, 2014)

Other participants mentioned the need to revive block parties as well as existing city initiatives involving food and music on Main Street.

The role of friendship and interpersonal connections played a considerable role for many, a finding that resonates with Wendy Cheng's (2013) research and points to the importance of relationships formed in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and community organizations. Even the 78-year-old Henry has started eating ceviche thanks to the influence of a Mexican "lady friend" he met at the American Legion (personal interview, June 19, 2014).



Figure 4. Sam eating beef rolls at a Chinese restaurant in Alhambra.

Several interviewees noted that interpersonal pathways to cross-cultural eating sometimes intersect with restaurant culture—particularly given the common practice of restaurant staff gaining exposure to food from different cultures. Victor, the culinarily adventurous Latino father, said that his father's and brother's involvement in food service led him to try new cuisines (personal interview, June 25, 2014).

Likewise, Tony Chen said that, in Los Angeles' Koreatown, home to a sizable Mexican Oaxacan community, he commonly sees Oaxacan families eating at Korean barbecue restaurants: "They're willing to go and eat all this meat for 25 bucks probably because one of the family members grew up or works in a Korean restaurant where they're exposed to these foods" (personal interview, June 25, 2014).

Food writer Clarissa Wei set up an enterprise that attempts to simulate the experience of having a knowledgeable foodie friend offer insider information. Her walking tours of area restaurants attempt to

convert the “foreign” to the “friendly.” She said she understands what it feels like to be intimidated by cuisines perceived as other through personal experience. She gave the example of driving through Thai Town and Koreatown, where not knowing the language made her worry she was wasting time and money. She understands how people might feel the same about the Chinese restaurants on her tour:

A lot of these restaurants, they don't make any sense. They're all named tasty-whatever or garden-whatever, and they don't tell you what regional specialty. And these menus . . . have hundreds of items, and you don't know what to order. (personal interview, July 27, 2014)

Wei acts as a navigator, and does a bit of “hand holding.” On her Spicy Tour, she offers historical context about regional dishes, warns guests about the infamous Szechuan peppercorn, and helps them procure ice water. As a tour guide, she is a buffer between the restaurant staff and her clients—on the day I observed her tour, they were three White people and one American-born Chinese man new to the area. Wei's initiative aims to replicate the experience of having interpersonal cross-cultural connections, but the potential for bridging has limits. This is partly due to the fact that, at more than \$60 per ticket, the people on her tours tend to be dedicated foodies who drive an hour to get to the area rather than local residents. Wei suggested that other initiatives, such as night markets, with booths where residents can interact and sample food from multiple cultures, offer more promise for intergroup bridging.

Food-related initiatives attempting to bridge storytelling networks may do well to consider some of the factors Wise and Velayutham (2013) suggest contribute to the potential conviviality of shared spaces. These include the interaction between interpersonal relations, intercultural habits, and spatial orderings. Bridging is more likely to take place when multiple ingredients are combined into a stew—a mix of individuals who thrive as cultural intermediaries, physical infrastructure of a space and its furnishings (lighting, seating, etc.), “invitations”—to specific events as well as “mundane norms” and “accommodation”—that is “the process of adapting or adjusting to others in order to get on with living” (Wise & Velayutham, 2013, p. 411).

Similarly, in changing communities, any attempt to leverage food initiatives to bridge cultures must be considered in the context of place, shifting populations, and perceived community vitality. As Brown-Sarancino (2009) points out, some “old-timers” in areas experiencing gentrification and demographic change discuss their community's decline more in terms of a lost sense of ownership of public spaces than physical displacement. She shares the example of a family who no longer felt comfortable going for an ice cream due to the increasing number of openly gay men in their town. They perceived the character of the public space to have shifted, and they felt alienated. Seeing an “other” group thrive, either as restaurant owners or other consumers, can leave some with a sense of cultural disruption or threat. However, as variation between old-timer residents such as Victor and Ana affirm, there is great variety in the ideology and practices adopted by old-timers as well as newcomers, who may be more or less reflexive about their privilege and impact on the character of multiethnic communities (Brown-Sarancino, 2009).

Conclusion

Alhambra's food scene illustrates the utility and complexities of using food practice and discourse to diagnose multiethnic relations and power dynamics. Food communicates a great deal in Alhambra. The mushrooming expansion of Asian restaurants and *boba* cafés tells a story of a growing and thriving ethnically Chinese population. Grocery store controversies on social media frame Asian grocery stores as a harbinger of impending displacement. But it is sometimes the food silences that are the most deafening: the fading away of Mexican and Euro American restaurants, the lack of non-Asian patrons tasting hot pot and shaved ice at popular Asian establishments. Residents use food to tell stories of who they are, who they are not, and what they want their community to be.

Food also shapes the way residents navigate, negotiate, and code their cities. Those who ascribe to a culinary imaginary that is ethnically bounded may find that cultural geography trumps spatial geography—as they trek an extra half hour to buy a tomato at an “American” grocery store rather than the Chinese American grocery across the street. Others who subscribe to a more inclusive narrative about Alhambra may deliberately seek out difference and food spaces where they are in the minority, or where they are at least in more heterogeneous company. But food also leads residents down messy pathways where they find themselves sitting in the same dining room with others whom they view with skepticism, if not threat, eating in proximity but discursively isolated.

Alhambra's multiethnic food spaces also illustrate some of the theoretical challenges of assessing intercultural relations in a city with changing demographics and complicated racial histories and hierarchies. Communication infrastructure theory suggests that residents can use comfort zones such as restaurants or cafés to connect with one another and exchange stories of how they see their community changing. But Alhambra's restaurants have demonstrated that groups can share a comfort zone without sharing a storytelling network, and that the content of stories circulated can reflect how residents code and assign meaning to communication assets. In addition, intergroup contact theory can be used to explain a failure of bridging—most restaurants fell short of availing optimal conditions for sustained, meaningful, noncompetitive contact. Racial formation theories offer context to explain what different groups have at stake and what histories they bring to the table. When applied with communication infrastructure theory, these theories also help to articulate the circumstances under which the communication action context is likely to either facilitate or impede residents from different cultural backgrounds from connecting to a shared storytelling network.

For good or ill, this study of food as intercultural communication demonstrates that superficial intercultural contact in food spaces cannot be assumed to indicate subscription to shared storytelling networks. At the same time, several participants did attest to the cultural and affective power of food. Whether the act of being open to the cuisine of an “other” can be transformative remains debatable. Food writer Jonathan Gold has had a considerable amount of time to reflect on this:

I think hospitality is hardwired. And I think that the pleasure of being on the other end of hospitality is also hardwired. So if you've experienced graciousness at the hand of

someone you ordinarily think of as other, even a hostile other, it's sort of hard to remain as hostile. (Personal interview, Los Angeles, June 30, 2014)

Gold is not naïve about the ability of food alone to heal serious cultural or socioeconomic rifts. He concedes that narratives about the food of the other can at times come off as patronizing or alienating. However, given the symbolic value of public spaces that reflect one's culture, as well as the interpersonal pathways to greater cross-cultural connection hinted at here, researchers may do well to explore the potential of noncommercial hospitality initiatives involving food—at least ones that push beyond the structures of traditional restaurants.

Apart from what participants in this study self-reported in interviews, this study was primarily limited to commercial spaces and intercultural interactions observed at a distance. Future research may do well to observe noncommercial interactions involving food—whether that be potlucks or place-making initiatives. In addition, finding opportunities to enter as a participant observer or even manufacturing culinary interventions that are more social may provide insight into how discourse about food and community change is formed in action. Research may also explore the influence of multisensory interaction beyond direct conversations. Food spaces contribute to a texture of difference constructed of layered encounters with visual, audio, and gustatory experiences. Future research could pose questions of interaction and contact not only in terms of conversations but about what it means to see, hear, and taste difference on a regular basis—and whether multisensory experiences offer opportunities for interventions that build more convivial spaces. Finally, although this study focused on food consumption, additional research might explore the perspective of food preparers through interviews with industry professionals and home cooks.

The culinary dilemma Alhambra residents face may be repeated across the United States as changing demography transforms towns associated with white bread into towns more closely connected to *tortas* or *bao*. Community change and the fear of displacement (whether justified or not) can take a toll on tastes. Flavors that may have once symbolized the exotic or cosmopolitanism can be transformed into a taste of threat. Monitoring these relations through a combination of food practice and discourse can offer a barometric reading and, perhaps with time, a better understanding of how food initiatives and intervention may be used to create opportunity for dialogue—if not some shared recipes for community.

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