

**Food, Feeling, and Other Rhetorical Sensitivities:  
An Interview with Jennifer LeMesurier**  
transcript by Eric Detweiler

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays]

Eric Detweiler: Hello, hello, *Rhetoricity* listeners! This is Eric Detweiler, here to bring you a tasty new episode of this here program. This installment features an interview with Jennifer Lin LeMesurier recorded at the 2023 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago, Illinois. Our conversation focuses on Dr. LeMesurier's new book *Inscrutable Eating: Asian Appetites and the Rhetorics of Racial Consumption*, which was published by Ohio State University Press earlier this year. The book explores how the rhetorical framing of food and eating underpins our understanding of Asian and Asian American identity in the contemporary racial landscape.

My guest Jennifer LeMesurier is an Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Colgate University. Her areas of expertise include bodily and material rhetorics, genre theory, discourse analysis, qualitative research, and affect theory. In addition to *Inscrutable Eating*, she co-edited *Writing in and about the Performing and Visual Arts: Creating, Performing, and Teaching* with Steven J. Corbett, Betsy Cooper, and Teagan E. Decker. She has published articles in *College Composition and Communication*, *Peitho*, *POROI*, the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

Our conversation addresses the complexity of writing about Asian identity, the historical and present-day tropes that shape discourse around Asian foods, and the rhetorical qualities of food, taste, and sensation.

With that, I take you to Chicago, back in February 2023, for an interview with Jennifer LeMesurier.

[transition music: "Just a Taste" by Beat Mekanik]

[interview audio fades in]

D: I'm sitting here talking with Jennifer LeMesurier. Thank you so much for taking the time for this interview.

LeMesurier [L]: Thank you for having me!

D: Yeah, absolutely! I wanted to start by asking you about something at the end of your book's introduction. You end the introduction with a note on nomenclature that foregrounds the, quote, "still-present ambiguities and connotations inherent in the term Asian American." So before we go any further, I wanted to just let you discuss those

ambiguities and confusions so that listeners can better appreciate the care and complexity with which you're using or choosing to use other terms in this conversation.

L: Thank you for the question. And it's interesting—I am very curious to see what people say when the book comes out. There's been a lot of debate in sort of the Asian American community, cultural studies: a while ago people sort of stopped using the dash in between Asian and American; Professor Palumbo-Liu at Stanford, he uses a slash to sort of indicate sort of the contingency of Asian/American belonging; and I'm looking at all of these and I'm just like, I think we just need to call out the fact that people can't differentiate between quote-unquote “types” of Asians, and I feel like we need to sort of say what is on the minds of the people who are creating anti-Asian rhetoric. So I made the choice to, when it wasn't specific, if I wasn't saying, Oh, this is a Chinese immigrant,” or, you know, “a second generation Asian American,” to just say “Asian,” because I'm so interested in embodiment, and the figure of the body is a rhetorical character. And to me, it's like, especially with the rising anti-Asian discourse around COVID-19, I mean, it was the figure of the “ASIAN”—in quotes, in all caps, the sort of tropic force. And so I'm very curious to see what people say because I know it risks being reductive, but at the same time I sort of feel like we have to grapple with that fact: that reduction is still so powerful.

D: Yeah, thank you for that. So moving on from there, you know, in the rest of the book you pay a lot of attention to how people talk about food, and as an example, you know, you write about the ways that celebrity chefs discuss things like labor and authenticity and identity in relation to food. Because we're in the realm of words there, I think it's pretty easy to understand what makes that kind of talk rhetorical. But you also bring up things like food allergies and the gag reflex—all these things that we might typically think of as almost pre-rhetorical, like, these medical or bodily realities that exist before or beyond our rhetorical dispositions toward food. Now, all that said, you also intertwine those things in really thought-provoking ways, so I was wondering if you could just talk through the connections you see between rhetoric and these kinds of bodily dispositions or reactions to food that are things that people might tend to consider sort of beyond the scope of rhetorical activity.

L: Yeah. That's a big question. And I want to start by saying that food allergies are real. I'm definitely not saying they're not real! You can be allergic to anything. But I'll string together a few anecdotes that I think really informed my thinking. So, I'm adopted, adopted by white parents, grew up in a very white neighborhood, white church, all the things. And I remember we took a school field trip when I was maybe seven or eight to Uwajimaya, which is like the big, you know, Japanese supermarket, cultural market in the Seattle area. And they were giving us a tour and we got to the fish market. You know, whole fish, and this is before, like, Whole Foods were super popular and you saw that more in Western-style markets. And the entire class went, at the top of their lungs, “Ewwwwwww!” And I didn't feel one way or the other because I was adopted, so it's not like I grew up eating a whole bunch of, you know, quote-unquote “exotic fish,” but

at the same time, I didn't understand the reaction of both performed disgust and what seemed like real disgust, like, "Oh, it's slimy," or whatever, I guess the fish still had eyes and heads and that grosses people out. So I had that in the back of my brain as I was writing the book. And then there are two other things that happened—sort of the inverse of that. So, one, my mom has sarcoidosis, which is where you get these sort of like small ulcers- slash-tumors in your body, and so for her she had she developed them in her mouth, and she couldn't eat mint anymore because it was so astringent and abrasive. And I mean, we grew up, like, she would chew like four or five pieces of mint gum a day. It's one of her favorite flavors, and all of a sudden it was transformed into this source of harm for her, and pain. And then the other anecdote that I was thinking about is I was told from a very young age, "eggs are good for you." I missed "they're full of cholesterol and they're gonna kill you," so, hey, "eggs are good for you!"

D: A lot of back and forth on that.

[both laughing]

L: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Eggs: the ultimate rhetorical Pandora's Box. Yeah. Anyways, I never liked them, but I would, you know, "Okay, fine. I'll have an egg on toast. I'll have a hard-boiled egg." And then I get older and I'm like, "Oh, I'm egg intolerant." So I had been sort of overriding my body's natural nausea at eggs because I kept telling myself they're so good for you. Culture is telling me they're so good for you. And then, back to my mom, you know, mint: you pop the gum before you go on a first date because mint is, like, the smooth healthy scent in opposition to, you know, just your natural odor. And so really what I was trying to think through was, how do all of these cultural messages that we get around food, how do they encourage certain forms of self-persuasion that work themselves out in our body? And it's very anecdotal in some ways, but at the same time, when I talk to people about this, people always have their own story of like, "Oh, I didn't realize I was allergic to X because of this," or, "I've always been grossed out and I've tried not to be, but, you know, I grew up in a family that didn't eat X and therefore." And so I don't think it's a one-to-one relationship, but I was trying to tease that out.

D: Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. The anecdotes, they really help crystallize that. As you get into chapter two in the book, you really start to dig into one of the key terms that's foregrounded in your book's title, which is *Inscrutable Eating*, and you talk at length about the role that inscrutability has played and continues to play in racist attitudes towards Asian people, and particularly Chinese immigrants, in the United States. So I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about the role of that term and what makes inscrutability such a significant key word for this project and the kind of things you're thinking about here.

L: Yeah. Yeah, it's funny. It's a term I didn't encounter much growing up, right? I mean, you know, the kids in the neighborhood who decide to be racist don't say, "Oh,

you inscrutable Asian.” It was really when I started reading more Asian American literature and, you know, literary criticism that sort of this idea of inscrutability as a trope came up, and again it sort of clicked into place a whole bunch of things for me. So, thinking about food and inscrutability, there is a Chinese restaurant in my neighborhood growing up that we never ate at because, from the outside, the building was sort of dingy and we just had other restaurants that we went to. And I remember the sort of running joke in our house was, “Oh, that must be a mob front restaurant. It’s probably not a real restaurant.” And there’s so much wrong with that on multiple—but thinking back to that, part of what made that joke funny was this sort of floating idea of, like, “Oh, yeah, you know, the Asians, they’re inscrutable, they’re mysterious,” in ways that are always tinged a little bit badly. It’s not like sort of the French aloofness. But I think for me it clicked into place the idea of like, “Oh, that negative sort of tone is always there hovering in the background.” And I think it underpins a lot of the other tropes that we hear about, like the model minority myth, right? On the one hand, we focus on, “Oh, if you’re, you know, East Asian in particular, you’re gonna get good grades, you play the piano, you’re gonna go become a lawyer or something,” but there’s also this idea that that’s all there is. It’s like a very beautiful surface and what’s underneath is sort of compensated for by the trappings of wealth and success. So I think inscrutability really underpins still the way we think about Asianness and Asian identity. I mean, when you look at the history of Chinese restaurants in the US, this idea of them being mysterious in a bad way has been there from the beginning. So if you go back and you read the newspaper write-ups or reviews of the various restaurants, it was pretty overt. Like, there was one guide for white tourists to Chinatown in I believe the late 1800s that said, “Try these dishes, you’ll have such a wonderful time, but just don’t ask what the ingredients are,” and this idea of, you’re sort of taking a walk on the wild side but you’re actually doing a very very bad thing. And then of course there are the sort of racist slang terms—so one of the restaurants in San Francisco was called “Roast-A-Rat” by competitors who wanted people to come to their restaurant, not the Chinese restaurant. And it’s funny because I didn’t know any of that history, but at the same time in, you know, the late 1990s, my family still had this idea of, “Oh, the Chinese restaurant is where iniquity goes to dwell in the kitchen.” So it’s—I don’t know if it’s funny. It’s definitely interesting how everything occurs.

D: Yeah. Actually, I’m gonna pause here. There’s one more question that kind of your answer brought up. So, you know, a lot of the stuff that you are talking about in the book and that you’ve talked about already in this interview—like the resurgence, not that it was ever not there, of racist attitudes toward, stereotypes about Asian people that have resurfaced during COVID-19, you know, some of the ongoing attitudes about food and identity that persist here. Just given that the theme of Cs this year is “Doing Hope in Desperate Times,” I was wondering as you were doing this work, are there places where, you know, as you’re thinking about the stuff that comes up in this project, that you have seen or felt moments of hope around these kinds of conversations? In addition to some of the, I mean, very salient, significant, I would

think somewhat despair-inducing stuff that you're continuing to recognize and document?

L: Oh goodness. "Doing Hope in Desperate Times" indeed. Yeah. I mean, I don't think I necessarily had put it in those terms for myself, but yes, I do think there is hope, and I think the hope is in what we teach our students. It's public communication. It's translating scientific information for lay readers. So I was contacted, I believe in late 2021, by Melissa Urban, who is the founder of the sort of lifestyle diet plan Whole30, and she had found my previous work on MSG and the racist myths underpinning that, right? And she had done, you know, a self-motivated deep dive into both pop science and actual science, and she said, "I just wanted to let you know that based on the study that I've done and my team has done, we're removing MSG from the banned substances list, and we're making a note that this was informed by implicit racism and we're really sorry." And that was, I mean, it was just such a surprise that someone would do that unbidden. It's like, "Yay, that's so nice," and it took so much effort on her part, but I think beyond that, you're seeing now more diversity—as loaded as that term is—in the conversation around food, and I think you're seeing it in relation to who's getting paid, whose products are getting bought and sold. But I also think we're starting to see some recognition in food of, "Oh yeah, there are different cuisines within Asia and there are different levels of spice, even in the cuisines that we think are the spiciest and, like, will murder your intestines if you're from the West." I think honestly TikTok has been good so far, and I say that fingers crossed. You know, hopefully the second you release this episode there won't be some huge scandal with a food blogger or something.

D: Yeah.

L: But yeah, I think people recognize that there are conversations to be had. So I'd say there's hope there.

D: Yeah, and I wanted to turn now to a connection between your book and what you're presenting on at Cs this year. So as lots of rhetoric and writing scholars have argued, emotion has often been sidelined in the field, and then rationality kind of gets given center stage. To put it in the common parlance of our first-year writing classrooms, basically logos often trumps pathos. That said, a lot of scholars have worked to recover emotion as a meaningful and valid element of rhetoric and pointed out that attempts to dismiss emotion are often deeply misogynist. However, in both your book and your Cs presentation, you point out that that doesn't mean emotion is inherently good. It's not just a matter of flipping the script and saying, "emotion is cool now and rationality is bad." in your book, you write, quote, "Although scholarship on emotion and embodiment demonstrates the intellectual paucity of definitions of rhetoric that elevate rationality above all else, attention to these arenas also requires awareness of how habituated feeling, especially when attached to commonsense definitions of intuition and taste, can be used in service of ideological commitments that do material harm."

And then, beyond that, in your talk at this conference, you point out how white people's tears can further marginalize people of color. So with all that in mind—this is kind of a chunky question I've asked you here—can you talk through the challenges you see when it comes to the relationship between rationality and feeling in rhetorical contexts? What's happening in the field with that at this time?

L: Goodness. Yeah, I mean, it is a challenge, and it's one we need to keep pressing against clearly. So I remember when I was talking to a friend who works on anti-vaccination rhetorics and she was talking about Jenny McCarthy, who has a sort of infamous interview where I believe she was talking to a scientist on a talk show, and the scientist is like, "What about this piece of evidence, what about this piece of evidence?", and finally Jenny McCarthy says "My son, he's my evidence. He's my evidence."<sup>1</sup> And that was a weird sort of moment for me in my thinking about people who are anti-vaccination, but also just the primacy of this idea of intuition in making sometimes really bad decisions. And I think what I'm trying to do in the book and in my Cs presentation are, I don't want to just tear it down. I don't want to be like, "your emotions are bad and these emotions over here are good," because I don't think that helps. What I think, what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to unpack the intersection between the individual and cultural ideas of what makes sense, and not just what makes sense but what makes *good* sense. And that's really hard. That requires leaning a little bit into the, you know, what people accuse liberals of doing—just, like, overthinking everything. But at the same time, I feel like the idea of the unquestioned good creeps in in ways that we don't recognize. So to go back to food, lots of times people say, "Oh, well, food is the best way to experience someone else's culture," and I don't disagree, but part of what I was trying to address is you can't stop there, because if you stop there you're prioritizing this very cheap—pardon the pun—fast-food sort of emotion, and the discourse then never moves forward. So I don't know if I'm answering your question. It's also a really big question.

D: It's just a big question, yeah. I mean, one way—maybe I'll ask a follow-up, and if you're, like, "Nope, this question is also too dense. Get out of here." You mentioned the phrase "good sense" in your response there, and, you know, the panel you're on is very focused on sensation, sensory rhetorics. What does it mean to think about, like, embodied sensation, as we've already talked about a little bit, as rhetorical rather than something that exists outside of or in opposition to rhetoric? So maybe even when you're talking about "good sense" there in terms of what that means for maybe notions of, like, "common sense" that we typically think of as associated with rationality, or sensitivity, which we tend to think about in terms of emotion? I guess the crux of this question that I'm asking is, like, what does "good sense" mean to you in the context of this project, if that's a helpful angle on this question?

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<sup>1</sup> LeMesurier is likely referencing McCarthy's 2007 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where she stated, "My son is my science."

L: I think your use of the word “sensitivity” is helpful. So I grew up as a dancer, and I am very unflexible. Like, I was not one of those Gumby kids who could just slide into the splits or, like, bend over backwards and touch their head to the floor. So I had to really work at stretching, and it got to the point where I really enjoyed the sensation of my muscle fibers being slowly pulled until they ripped a little bit and then repaired, you know, which is what stretching is.

D: [chuckling] A good reminder.

L: Yeah. And I mean, you have to stretch, you know, and cause that damage to improve. And I mean, that's what you do in your exercise. But I remember when I started teaching dance and I had to get kids to push past their natural limit and say, “Well, if you want to get better at this move, you have to stretch, and yes it does hurt, but there's a difference between pain and discomfort,” and trying to explain that to, like, a seven-year-old is really hard.

D: Yeah.

L: I'm like, “Is it like stabbing?”, and then if they're like, “What's stabbing?”, it's like, “Oh my gosh, never mind.” Those are always fun conversations to have, and you're like, “Are your parents watching through the window?” But that's in the back of my head as I think about how do we define what a “good sense” is? How do we define what a good level of sensitivity is? And we could think about, you know, racial sensitivity, emotional sensitivity, all these sensory sensitivities. And so I think, ultimately, for me, I believe that senses are the result of pedagogy that's either implicit or explicit, and if that's the case then I think we need to do what we do in our field, which is, you know, metacognate a bit and self-reflect.

D: Thank you for that. And I promise I won't share this recording with any of your former dance students' parents. So finally, as we get to the end of the interview here, I wanted to ask you a question that comes from the previous episode's guest—or actually *guests* in this case, since that was a roundtable discussion. And for a little bit of context for folks who haven't heard that episode, this was a roundtable of Black rhetoricians, and much of the conversation in that roundtable focused on the extra kind of pressures and expectations that are often put on faculty of color by universities to do things like be the face of new DEI initiatives or, you know, do various kinds of recruitment work or things like that, and just take on all of these additional service obligations that take up time and emotional energy and all those kinds of things. And so at the end of that conversation, when they were thinking about what's the question they wanted to ask the next interviewee with that in mind, the question was this:

[clip from previous episode]

Ersula Ore: How do you determine the ways you show up and why?

David Green: I like that.

Andre Johnson: I like that one.

Green: And for whom.

Ore: To what extent for what purposes.

[sounds of agreement, clip ends]

D: And that's particularly in the context of academic labor.

L: I mean, that's a good question, and I think if you ask me this again—well, if you'd asked me it two years ago pre-tenure, I would have given you a very different answer. Now post-tenure, I think, I've been reflecting on this question. So you mentioned recruitment, and that's interesting, because I feel like so often the example that gets floated when we talk about labor is, "Oh, are you just trying to recruit more students of color who are going to get thrown away?" Which is an issue—not discounting that. But I think sometimes that overshadows that recruitment is also about recruiting new faculty and retaining new faculty, and I'm at a teeny little liberal arts college in central New York, which is very white, and very cold—and I love it, I swear. It's real nice.

D: The cold included. [both laughing]

L: So with thinking about recruitment and retainment of faculty, that's something that's very near and dear to my heart because for me, I feel like that sort of labor and that sort of cost-benefit analysis is different than recruiting students of color, and so I feel like I have the space to sort of ask myself, Okay, am I being asked to be on this committee to put more tuition dollars here? To get more students for the website so it looks diverse? Or am I being asked to think about myself as an ambassador because, you know, I am one of very few Asian faculty at my university? So thinking about it that way, I think, is a little bit different. I also show up for my students in ways that aren't necessarily related to DEI but are also a form of unrecognized labor, but at the same time, it's the sort of Labor where very few people will do it. So I don't have a good straightforward answer except to say that I think you have to let yourself be okay with the fact that it fluctuates and it can fluctuate wildly from, you know, week to week, semester to semester.

D: Yeah. And if you want to leave this strategically vague, that's fine, but when you're talking about those ways that you find yourself showing up for students, are there particular kinds of work or kinds of support for students that you have in mind there that are the kind of work that you find yourself willing to take on because it does feel meaningful to you?



L: Yeah. So, I mean, my work is so concerned with affect, and I think I'm also very concerned with affect in daily life. And so, you know, I get the students who cry in my office for various reasons, huge and tiny, and that's part of it. But I also think that some of the work that I do that will never be recognized by a committee is helping students figure out the pre-cry, right? You know, we've all had those moments where the student comes in and, like, they bite someone else's head off for no reason, and you as the professor who's—you're outside of it a little, you can see, like, "Oh, there's an affective thread that's being tugged on or, like, hammered, and something's happening." And I'm not paid to do that; I'm not a counselor, and so, you know, I've definitely made some mistakes and poked my nose in where it shouldn't have belonged, but I've also had students say, like, you know, at the end of that process, "I didn't realize that's where I was emotionally," in so many words. And so, you know, I'm not holding myself that I'm always going to do that labor, but that I have the capacity to do that in my role as a professor, and so I take that very seriously as a responsibility.

D: Yeah. Well, with that said, last but not least, what is the question that you would like to pose for the next guest on the next episode of this podcast?

L: So this is a very practical question because I would like to know, especially as I am going to be chair of my department within the next couple years—

D: Congratulations and I'm sorry.

L: Yes, exactly. Exactly. What makes for good academic leaders? And I know that's really broad, but I mean, that's something that we aren't necessarily taught to do in grad school, and we sort of get shoved into these leadership positions, I feel like, once we've landed a job. So yeah, I'm honestly really, like: What makes a good academic leader?

D: All right. Well, Jennifer, thank you again for your time and this conversation.

L: Thank you so much.

[drumbeat from *Rhetorcity* theme fades in]

D: Thanks so much for tuning in to this episode of *Rhetorcity*! I'll be back in a couple weeks to bring you an interview with Keith Gilyard, featuring returning guest interviewer Derek Handley. Till then, you can visit [RhetEric.org](http://RhetEric.org) for more about this podcast and my other projects. That's r-h-e-t-e-r-i-c dot o-r-g. You can also find me on Bluesky at [ericdet.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/ericdet.bsky.social), and you can find related podcasts via the Facebook group Podcasts in Rhetoric and Composition. The URL for that group is [facebook.com/rhetcompcast](https://facebook.com/rhetcompcast). This is Eric Detweiler, off to stretch my muscles for a bit.

[*Rhetoricity* theme plays]