



Professionalism, place, and authenticity in *The Cook and the Chef*

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ABSTRACT

The ABC television production, *The Cook and the Chef* explicitly embodies a dichotomy that operates around a series of binaries including cook/chef, domestic/professional, and local/global. While the privileging of the domestic, and the female, over the professional and the male is a common trope in television food programmes, what is less common is a privileging of the local over the global. In this article I will examine the way in which the domestic, local cook (Maggie Beer) is portrayed in a valorised position, over the professionally trained, cosmopolitan chef (Simon Bryant). The show positions Beer in her own place, the Barossa Valley in South Australia, but in a way that evokes an imagined Italy. On the other hand, Bryant's place—the impersonal, commercial kitchen of the Adelaide Hilton—is rarely shown, and the chef is depicted as an aloof cosmopolitan figure, drifting through the world, but not at home anywhere. Through recourse to theories of place-identity and cosmopolitanism, the paper will demonstrate the way in which these themes of the local and the cosmopolitan are mediated by discourses of the natural and of community, creating a sense of authenticity, which privileges the grounded figure of the cook, over the mobile cosmopolitanism of the chef.

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1. Introduction

Cultural critics are increasingly turning to theories of the local as a way of discussing a popular suspicion of globalisation, as evidenced by a range of movements, from the Friends of the Earth, with their “Think Globally; Act Locally” slogan, to the Slow Food Movement with its valorisation of the simple and the regional, to an increasing focus on *terroir* as a way of describing and understanding produce other than wine (see Parrott et al., 2002). Increasingly, cultural geographers and social psychologists have used the term “place-identity” (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Manzo, 2003), or “sense of place” (Stedman, 2003; Brown and Raymond, 2007) to theorise the importance of place in modernity. For example, Dixon and Durrheim (2000), following Korpela, see place-identity “as a psychological structure that arises out of individuals’ attempts to regulate their environments” (29), while Brown and Raymond (2007) refer to “the positive emotional bonds that develop between individuals and their environment” (90). Place-identity becomes the basis of belonging, around which a range of social, cultural, and biological meanings append, such that “‘home’ places are organized and represented in ways that help individuals to maintain self-coherence and self-esteem, to realise self-regulation principles”

(Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 29). But more than this, a sense of place is a political and ideological tool of inclusion and exclusion. Manzo (2003) recognises this and, in calling for more empirical research into the field, suggests that discussions of place-identity cannot be taken apart from their “social, historical and political milieu” (54). If one is to talk about place, it is almost inevitable that the discussion will be drawn to the absent opposite of place: whether it is constituted as a lack—a “placelessness” that marks the position of the outsider—or as an encompassing inclusion that sees all places as home—the “citizen of the world” rhetoric that marks the more optimistic versions of cosmopolitanism (as in, for instance, Hannerz, 1996). It is the contention of this paper that even if one does give credence to those more optimistic versions of cosmopolitanism—I will discuss this further below—there are certain structures of value that increasingly value the local over the global, and one of the most powerful of these is the deployment of that much-maligned term “authenticity”.

In order to illustrate my argument this paper will examine the ABC television production, *The Cook and the Chef*, as an example of a text that playfully examines common dichotomies such as domestic/professional, female/male, and local/global, and inverts the binary, privileging the previously devalued term. While there are some voices in the academy who would advocate dismissing the term “authenticity” as no longer relevant (Grossberg, 1993: 203), or too unstable to have any explanatory power (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006: 66), I maintain that authenticity is a cultural

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category of meaning, which operates ideologically, and is motivated through a number of discourses including those of community, nature, and creativity. In this paper I will demonstrate that using this conceptual framework as an explanatory mechanism is a productive way of discussing the importance people attach to those things that tend to be subsumed in globalisation, and demonstrate that themes of authenticity are implicated in the valuing of place and in a person's emotional connection to that place.

2. Food television

While food programmes have been around since the 1940s (Adema, 2000), this style of show gained greatly in significance during the 1980s in the US—largely because of the rising popularity of Martha Stewart (Adema, 2000)—and during the 1990s in the UK (Brunsdon, 2003) and Australia (de Solier, 2005). Originally they were simply short, instructional shows, providing advice to the 1950s housewife, or selling the burgeoning range of labour-saving devices, and frequently embedded as cooking segments in general lifestyle or makeover shows. But over time, as their popularity increased and particular presenters gained in prominence, cooking shows started to stand alone. Food television, along with the rest of the lifestyle genre, is frequently dismissed, ignored (Smith and Wilson, 2004: 176; Bonner, 2003), and even accused of wasting the airwaves (Brunsdon, 2003: 17), but in many of these types of show the unchallenging format masks a complex intersection of values and assumptions. Depending on the style of show, and the time of day it is broadcast, the viewer will be presented with different attitudes concerning such things as the use of dried or tinned ingredients; the importance of particular techniques or utensils; or whether price and simplicity is more or less important than the faithfulness of the dish to its original context. For instance, shows produced by public broadcasters and telecast in prime-time are far more likely to stress the authenticity of techniques and ingredients, while those shown on commercial networks during the day tend to encourage the viewer to substitute exotic items for common ones, or to use pre-prepared ingredients. But in both cases, there is more happening than simply entertainment or instruction. As de Solier (2005) puts it:

Through the transmission of practical culinary knowledge, cooking shows perform implicit ideological work, in particular the indoctrination of viewers in hegemonic regimes of gender, but also of national identity, ethnicity and class. (470)

While my focus in this article is on themes of professionalism, gender, and place, *The Cook and the Chef* reveals a range of ideological formations that underlie its largely middle-class assumptions about food, its preparation, and its importance, and while it subverts a major ideological construction around the intersection of gender and professionalism, it leaves issues such as class untouched.

Implicit in the chef/cook dichotomy that the show sets up in its title, is an underlying male/female binary that marks an interesting twist in relation to the way these sorts of television programmes are constructed. Much has been written about the role of women in kitchens, and their comparative absence from the professional food industry (see Goody, 1982; Bonner, 1994; Silva, 2000; Swinbank, 2002; Ketchum, 2005), and it seems that this tendency is not set to change anytime soon: the 2007 Michelin Red Guide to France—the bible of French Gastronomy—awarded a coveted three-star rating to Anne-Sophie Pic, only the fourth woman ever to be so honoured, and the first in 56 years (Observer Food Monthly, 2007). While there are undoubtedly structural reasons for the fact that male food professionals significantly outnumber their female colleagues, it is

not the place of this article to explore them. Rather I am more interested in the fact that instead of mirroring this widespread gender bias, many television food programmes tend to privilege the female and the domestic. Of course this is not universal: the various shows starring Gordon Ramsay for instance rely on the explicit professionalism of the star, and in the quasi game show *The Best* (BBC2, 2002), the two professional male chefs (Paul Merrett and Ben O'Donoghue) frequently outscored Silvana Franco who, despite her professional training, was consistently constructed in the show as the non-professional member of the team. But documentary or reality-type shows aside (for instance, *Jamie's School Dinners*; or the various versions of the *My Restaurant Rules* franchise), cooking show presenters are frequently portrayed as domestic. Most famously, neither Jennifer Pattison or Clarrisa Dickson-Wright of the *Two Fat Ladies* (BBC, 1996–1998), nor Nigella Lawson had professional training, which did not hinder their careers—and possibly even enhanced them. It has been argued that the disproportionately hostile response to Martha Stewart's conviction for corporate fraud was because of the apparent disparity between her expressed domesticity and her very obvious financial success (see Stabile, 2004; Cohen, 2005). This privileging of the female over the male is interesting because it is not a simple inversion that places the female within the professional role, but because of the way it privileges the domestic over the professional. This is made even more obvious when you consider that it is not just female cooks who are presented as domestic. Even when professional, male chefs make television shows, it is rare to find them in commercial kitchens: they will either be on location, or in a kitchen that is either their own home kitchen, or at least coded as such. Again, this depends partly on the genre and style of the show: Ramsay's shows are obviously set in commercial kitchens, as are those of *The Great British Menu* (BBC, 2006–2008), where it is the professionalism of the chef that is at stake. And of course the “Kitchen Stadium” of *Iron Chef* (FujiTV, 1993–1999) fame is modelled on a commercial kitchen. However, the portrayal of the professional, male chef, working in his commercial kitchen is much less common than the opposite. The classic example here of course is Jamie Oliver whose inner city apartment from the first few seasons of *The Naked Chef* contributed to his hip, laddish image—an image that Hollows (2003) describes, quoting Hebdige, as “a culinary ‘extension of mod’” (2003: 235). Bonner points out that food preparation “is never presented as work”, and that this “is most clearly demonstrated in Jamie's separation of his being a cook on television from the serious business of being a professional chef” (Bonner, 2005: 44). The primary reason for this is that the cooking shows that I am discussing here are largely aspirational: playing on the possibility—if not the actuality—of personal transformation. The techniques, utensils, and repertoire of a professional chef do not articulate well with a programme rhetoric that is all about simplicity and achievability.

3. The Cook and the Chef

In order to examine these themes in more detail, I will turn to the main example of this article: *The Cook and the Chef*. Presented by well-known Australian food personality Maggie Beer (the cook) and Simon Byrant, executive chef at the Adelaide Hilton, the show has so far run to three series, showing between 2006 and 2008 on the publicly-funded ABC network, and is typical of the genre of television cooking shows that have increased in popularity over the past decade or so (see Brunsdon, 2003; Bonner, 2003; Adema, 2000). It fits into the category that Strange (1998) describes as “Cookery-Educative”, in that it is primarily instructive, but an important aspect of the show is the personality of the presenters, which fits another of Strange's categories. That it also includes elements of the “Tour-Educative”

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