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# Seeing benevolently: Representational politics and digital race formation on ethnic food tour webpages

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to extend studies of food media and racialisation by applying Nakamura's (2002, 2008) concepts of digital race formation and cybertype to the webpages of an ethnic food tour in south-western Sydney. Whilst the literature on food media, and racialisation and food practices are burgeoning, little attention to date has been given to racialization and gendering on food websites, and particularly those for social enterprises, which have hybrid commercial and social aims. Given that Nakamura has focused on a range of new media but not webpages, we draw on analytic frameworks on visual racism from Van Leeuwen (2008) and interactivity and aesthetics by Adami (2014, 2015) to provide a detailed case study analysis of how the visual and verbal meaning-making strategies and the technological affordance of interactivity produce racialised and gendered cybertyping and Othering. Our analysis shows that racialised femininity is deployed to touristify a region seen by racist media to be criminalised, masculine and foreign. We conclude by arguing that methods for analysing meaning-making strategies in new media need to be developed in food studies and that food social enterprises should see their representational work as part of their social mission.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we examine racialised and gendered representations on the website for *Taste-Tours*, a social enterprise which offers ethnic food tours in southwestern Sydney, a region with large numbers of refugees and migrants from Vietnam and Lebanon racially demonised in newspapers, radio and television. Established in 2011, *Taste-Tours* forms part of a community development programme with The Benevolent Society, Australia's oldest not-for-profit organisation. The espoused aims for *Taste-Tours* are to change 'negative perceptions' of southwestern Sydney, provide jobs for local residents and generate sales for local ethnic food businesses. The website is designed to sell both the tours and the social mission to prospective customers: providing information about the tours, their purpose and the tour guides. Such food social enterprises offering employment creation and training for refugees and new migrant groups are burgeoning in Australia (Flowers and Swan, 2015). Given their hybrid character in pursuing both commercial and social goals, food social enterprises' representational work takes on a complex hue (Douglas, 2015). Race

and gender representation form part of their social mission and often underpin their economic aims, their digital marketing and public communications.

Whilst scholars study food media extensively, for instance: television programmes (Jones and Hollows, 2010; Hollows, 2003; Pike and Leahy, 2012); food writing (Mennell, 1996; Gallegos, 2005); and films such as *Food Inc.* or *Chocolat* (Lindenfeld, 2010), analyses of food websites and representational politics are relatively rare. For instance, we acknowledge that Signe Rousseau's work (2012a/b) makes an important contribution to analysis of social media and food but note that her work gives little attention to representational politics of race and gender. Indeed, although the growing body of work by critical race food theorists show how racism and racialisation underpin the production, consumption and representation of food, including debates about the politics of 'eating the Other', the racialised representations of food websites are neglected (Guthman, 2008, 2011; Slocum, 2007, 2008, 2011; Williams-Forsen, 2006, 2010; Williams-Forsen and Walker, 2013; Heldke, 2003; Hage, 1997; Duruz, 2010; Cappeliez and Johnston, 2013; Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2009).

Analysis of food webpages and representational politics matters because the Internet forms part of daily life and is a site of racialised and gendered power. As Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2008) insists, the Internet is a race-making technology, reproducing offline

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stereotypes online, and reconfiguring them as cybertypes through distinct media processes and affordances. Whilst tourism media may seem clichéd and inconsequential, ethnic food tour websites are of particular significance because they construct and reinforce asymmetrical power relations and systems of inequality.

Motivated by the lack of writing on new media, racialisation and food, and informed by studies of touristic Othering, our paper focuses on how *Taste-Tours* does racialised and gendered touristic representational work on its website. Given *Taste-Tours*' hybridity as an ethnic food social enterprise, the site operates with both commercial and social mission webpage 'sub-genres' in a context in which circulating images and narratives of the region and its people are deeply racist (Cranny-Francis, 2007). The tours are visiting places not widely seen as tourist attractions and yet, to attract attention, commercial webpages have to advertise 'seductively' (Holman, 2011: 95).

To analyse the website meaning-making processes, we deploy a social semiotic multimodal approach designed to examine visual and verbal texts, and interactive affordances on webpages. In particular, we focus on 'digital race formation', namely how the *Taste-Tours* webpages construct race and gender through these resources to produce cybertypes (Nakamura, 2002, 2008). We identify how the website promotes the tours and its social mission, representing a region and people framed by offline racist stereotypes. Accordingly, through our multimodal analysis, we explore cultural processes of racialisation through discourses, representation, symbols and multimodal meaning-making, in contrast to food studies writers who examine economic and material practices of racialisation. Thus, we examine the representational practices of *Taste-Tours* on a website, and not material or cultural practices on their tours. We note that *Taste-Tours* operates in a context where racist representations of refugees, asylum seekers and racialised migrants dominate Australian media and politics. These sustain harsh policies towards, and austere funding of, support services for refugees and new migrants. Nonetheless, *Taste-Tours*' guides report how much they enjoy working for the enterprise and running the tours and feedback from tourists is positive.

To situate our analysis, we discuss briefly how texts make meaning. Richard Johnston's (1986) influential cultural circulation theory emphasises the need for a holistic analysis of how meanings are produced through stages of production, representation, consumption and lived experience. We recognise the complexities of meaning-making in relation to the production and consumption of the *Taste-Tours*' website, including how actual users negotiate the meanings of the *Taste-Tours* pages and how actual web designers put together the website. We suggest, however, that a single case study enables a close-up analysis of verbal, visual and interactivity meaning-making strategies, which whilst partial, offers important insights into representational politics, digital racialisation, and Othering on websites. Such an approach is useful because websites are a relatively new genre and yet, ubiquitous and more work is needed on how website-specific strategies activate meaning-potential, draw on conventionalised meaning-making resources and position imagined users in distinctive ways (Cranny-Francis, 2005). Webpages reverberate with culturally resonant ways of thinking and at the same time, provide glimpses of oppositional ideas (Fürsich, 2009: 247).

Drawing on these ideas, we ask how *Taste-Tours*' webpages promote the organisational social mission and represent a region framed by racist stereotypes 'seductively' to tourists (Holman, 2011: 95). In focusing on one case study, we are able to examine in detail how the modes work to produce digital racialisation through Othering. Our paper makes three contributions to studies of food, media and politics. First, we extend media analyses through our focus on food websites; secondly, we build on studies of racialisation and food, extending Nakamura's concepts of digital

racial formation and cybertyping to food websites through applying analytical frameworks on visual racism and interactivity. Thirdly, we show how visual and verbal strategies produce gendered racial Others and cybertypes, positioned in relation to an imagined non-other. The paper begins by introducing Othering, racialisation, and cybertyping, followed by an explanation of our analytic framework and a detailed analysis of how distinct webpage modes of the visual and verbal and inter-active affordances represent race and gender.

## 2. Touristic Othering

Tourism has been described as the industry of Othering. Scholars have analysed how tourism media objectifies, essentialises, exoticises and homogenises the Other, reducing rich and complex lives to negative stereotypes (Mellinger, 1994; Santos et al., 2008; Santos and Buzinde, 2007). Typically, racialised Others are ascribed deferential, passive, subservient or demeaning roles. Tourism brochures, advertising, TV programmes, and guide books consolidate racist stereotypes, shape how people look at objects, people and places, and racialise the tourist's gaze: all of which affect how locals are treated (Crawshaw and Urry, 1997; Bunten, 2013; Jaworski et al., 2003; Santos, 2006). In essence, tourism media constructs knowledge about racially minoritised people in harmful ways, erasing histories of colonialism and racism. Through these processes of Othering, tourists can affirm their sense of superiority. Moreover, racialised Others rarely have access to systems of representation and thus become the object rather than the subject of touristic 'representational work' (Hanna et al., 2004).

As we argue elsewhere, Othering works in highly specific ways depending on a range of relations, histories and contexts (Flowers and Swan, 2012). Research on ethnic neighbourhood tourism as urban regeneration reveals how particular forms of Othering are used to produce 'touristified' ethnic suburbs. Hence, ethnic suburbs are marketed as 'somewhat exotic and alien places that are quasi-foreign, where interesting food can be found, exotic people can be observed, and even a lurking danger... can be sensed (Conforti, 1996: 831). Whilst a whiff of danger and risk are part of touristic Othering, these are balanced with more positive qualities of ethno-cultural heritage and novelty. Too much fear would keep the tourist away. Touristification creates a desirable but contradictory version of the Other as safe and friendly, and simultaneously exotic and foreign. Hence, race is 'repackaged' into an 'inviting commodity' within the contours of a discourse 'celebratory of diversity and multiculturalism' (Santos et al., 2008: 1003). The 'touristification' of ethnic suburbs can produce an attenuated version of ethnic culture, amplify media-driven racial stereotypes and marginalise other representations of people, places and culture (Conforti, 1996; Santos et al., 2008).

Writing on culinary tourism shows how touristic processes Other ethnic food to sell 'marketable and attractive identities' (Long, 2004). To analyse these processes, Tanachai Pandoongpatt insists that studies of 'ethnic food' should deploy the concept of racialisation because 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic' are reductive forms of Othering. Indeed, 'ethnic food itself is a racialised term used to invoke the "exotic" non-white Other, and that some ethnic foods are indeed more "ethnic" than others' (2011: 85). Scholarship which sees 'food practices, its procurement, representation, and consumption as [only] a reflection of ethnic or cultural traditions', essentialises culture (2011: 85). Racialising ethnic food means we can examine its embeddedness in social hierarchies, racial thinking and power asymmetries. To do this, in the next section, we discuss how racialisation has been defined, and then show how Nakamura extends it in relation to the Internet.

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