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Floating food: Eating 'Asia' in kitchens of the diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This article borrows fragments of memory to chart a drifting course towards an imagined 'other' of 'Asia', produced and consumed in the kitchens of the west and available for diasporic digestion. Specifically, the argument focuses on micro-narratives of 'Asian' food, with these emerging here during an interview on food and transnationalism, conducted while the interviewer and household members eat together in the intimacy of a North London kitchen. Specifically, the analysis reflects on these narratives, tracing some of their curious and disturbing nuances. The 'oddness' of such stories (identity's capacity to 'float' while 'grounded'), in turn, is used to question the figure of the consuming cosmopolitan (and its necessary 'other') that haunts cultural and culinary analyses. Meanwhile, everyday practices of 'eating back' at 'Asia' in order to feel 'at home' become resonant resources not only for identity's place-making but also for imagining a different politics of eating. Furthermore, the narrative richness of everyday interactions between strangers and familiars in the kitchen points to less usual, and perhaps more productive, ways of understanding the complexities of diasporic place-making.

1. London, winter, 2000

This is the worst English winter I can remember—train derailments, floods, a weak Australian dollar; threats of BSE, foot and mouth, salmonella. Eating in Indian or Turkish restaurants to escape the less palatable aspects of English cooking, I'm still homesick for familiar smells and sounds of cooking, for the taste of *hokkien* noodles and steamed dumplings.

2. Sydney, summer, 1960

We eat at Chopsticks Chinese Restaurant on Sydney's North Shore. Here, as an extended family, we can celebrate special occasions quite cheaply, though with the sense of abundance that a banquet offers. Fortunately, there are knives and forks on hand. The food is delicious – much more "exotic" than the usual Sunday roast, though the presence of sweet-and-sour pork and fried rice is always reassuring.

3. Adelaide, South Australia, probably autumn, and probably early 1980s

After a union meeting, lunch at the Asian Gourmet in the Central Market. We all choose the Straits Chinese dish, laksa. I have never tasted it before – the heat of chilli, the crunchiness of bean sprouts and the softness of the bean curd and coconut milk… I struggle with chopsticks and stain the front of my dress. It is a moment of epiphany.

This article is concerned with fragments of memory. Beginning with a few of my own above, the article charts a drifting course towards an imagined "other" of "Asia." This is a culinary landscape produced and consumed in the kitchens of the west and available for diasporic and touristic digestion. The personal narrative threading through these fragments is one shaped by movement through time, through space, and by multiple positions for remembering. As well, in its cultural politics, this is a narrative that embodies both a sense of curiosity for the unfamiliar—unusual tastes and textures—and traces of yearning for the homely—for the comforting reassurance of close relationships and familiar spaces. As such, it meshes well with cultural anthropologist Jeannie Martin's account of her fascination, in the 1950s, with a local Chinese restaurant in her hometown of Wellington, New Zealand. Commenting on her furtive patrol of the restaurant as a twelve-year-old's initiation into difference, Martin (1998: 228) concludes:

> Orientalist perhaps, but it did push me to the limits of my world, allow me to reflect on the enormous variability of human culture, the relativity of my own, the undecideability of meaning, and the oddness of human condition so richly captured in the symbolic layering of food practices (1998: 228).

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My article intends to continue with the project that Martin eloquently has begun here, described by her as using "otherness to work through my own cultural position" (228; see also Huggan, 2001: 32). Here, awareness of "oddness" and reflections on difference together become means of disruption—reverberations of the unexpected in everyday practices as speculative ways of "answering back" dominant theoretical and political assumptions.

Specifically, I want to focus on narratives of the "taste" of "home", told by a British, university educated student in the comforting familiarity of his collective household's kitchen in North London, and to reflect on their disturbing nuances (Highmore, 2002: 1–16). And, in the process, I hope to question the mythic figure of the cosmopolitan (and its necessary "other") haunting these culinary landscapes—to give these ghostly figures themselves a scare (Duruz, 1999: 309–310; Hage, 1997: 118). In other words, I want to question assumptions (both popular and scholarly) in which the "cosmopolitan" and "migrant" are positioned as fixed, opposing categories. I also want to unravel the potential of intimate exchanges for doing this—even between people with less familiar, more casual, acquaintanceship.

4. Exchanging beans for *otak-otak*

At the time of our kitchen conversation, British-born James Maitland is in his early twenties.[1] Describing himself as middle-class, James works as a planner with a local environmental agency, and shares a flat in North London with Eda, a design student from Istanbul, and Henri, a French-born friend from university days. As Eda prepares a meal for us all, James declares himself to be a lazy and indifferent cook. His narrative of cooking arrangements in households when he "shared with … a bunch of blokes" is the stuff of legend: this is domesticity of expedience, structured by a ready supply of English or American-style convenience foods, or, in James' words, "we'd usually … stick a pizza in the oven for our individual selves or, you know, make some beans on toast or something ridiculous like that (Transcript, 5; see also 3, 8)."

These "ridiculous" attempts at cooking are hardly surprising, given trends in using semi-prepared foods or in eating out (Ashley et al., 2004: 134; Duruz, 2001: 23; Warde and Martens, 2000: 40–41, 83–84). We could also speculate that these heat-and-eat culinary moments are the direct inheritance of James' time in university halls of residence when, he remembers, it was "full-on British food every day … fried foods … like a mass-produced sort of stuff (Transcript, 28)." Perhaps, this is the myth of "bad" British food, endlessly recycled, though one that is not without foundation in everyday life? After all, this is the "flavourless stodge" which Roger Scruton (2000: 51), in his elegy to a disappearing England, claims is at the very heart of Englishness. Emerging from traditions of puritanism and repression, "English" food, according to Scruton, was ritually "served up in all those institutions—public schools, Oxford and Cambridge colleges, gentlemen's clubs—which had the reproduction of Englishness as their tacit goal (51)." More recently, Nigel Slater (2007: 3), in his paean to English food, says of the much-loved stew as a national dish: '[o]urs is the unmistakable air of culinary poverty. … Ours is the colour of washing-up water and smells of old people." However, just as we are settling into forms of ritual storytelling of "blokes" in the kitchen "sticking" beans in a pot or pizza in the oven, and perhaps sighing for the "nursery food" of childhood, memories of otak-otak intrude.

James' parents now live in Singapore. Charting a map of remembered culinary pleasures associated with "Asia" (and imagined ones attached to future visits), James says:

> [T]here's a local dish out there which is a Malay dish called *otak-otak* and it's a sort of omeletty kind of mixture of onion, eggs, any sort of seafood they can find and it's all chucked in there and sort of pan fried and stuff … and it's actually wonderful. … And I often get it when I go out there and you just can't get it anywhere else.
> Jean: Yes, yes. So it's kind of a particular taste that …
> James: Absolutely. [They e]ven use different oil to over here. …You just couldn't reproduce it over here I don't think (Transcript, 28).

Through such remembering, James' kitchen identity should be recast from British "bloke" to global traveller: sophisticated, knowledgeable, at ease with the "exotic." Although traces of that "bloke" intrude in his cooking instructions, James speaks with the authority of having been "out there" on a regular basis, and having developed a degree of expertise in describing Singaporean food and its ingredients. At the same time, back in London, remembering and relishing the distinctive flavours of otak-otak, James is well aware of the value of this dish as an exclusive commodity. "You just can't get it anywhere else … You just couldn't reproduce it over here" becomes his mantra for re-inscribing "Singapore", for his audience, as a culinary imaginary of the unusual, the "different."

So, while the re-appearance of otak-otak from "out there" of expatriate belongings complicates Britishness and "blokey" masculinity, simultaneously, these fragments of memory reproduce the disquieting figure of the nostalgic cosmopolitan. Here, we could speculate that the virtual absence of "proper" otak-otak in Britain provides a classic example of Bourdieu's "distinction": consumption of particular goods, positioned in symbolic hierarchies of worth, shapes the identities of their consuming class fractions, "distinguishing" these identities from those of other class groups. These material processes of differentiation ("distinction") then become a measure of "taste, (Thomas, 2000: 201–217)" or in Bourdieu's own words in relation to food: "Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied,* helps to shape the class body (1986: 190, original emphasis)."

Otak-otak, a ubiquitous presence in Singapore's hawker food, has now become a lamented absence in central London for the classed (also read gendered, ethnicised) body of the "Anglo'-cosmopolitan eating subject (Hage, 1997: 118)." At the same time, such nostalgic remembering, with its storehouse of differentiating experiences and knowledges, actually produces this subject. Or, perhaps, drifting in a slightly different (but complementary) theoretical direction, we could see James' quest for otak-otak as an example of consumer cannibalism—a desire to literally consume difference through appropriating others' food and traditions as "exotic" (Cook et al., 1999: 230–231; Hage, 1997: 139–146; Huntley, 2008: 122–123; Probyn, 2000: 82)? This, according to bell hooks (1992: 21; see also 31), is a form of symbolic consumption in which ethnicity, losing its own legitimacy, simply "becomes spice … [for] mainstream white culture." Furthermore, argues Heldke (2003: 9), drawing on bell hooks to map the food adventurer's "quest for novelty," we need to be critical of the "absoluteness with which Euroamerican adventurers presume our right to explore whatever we want, and the concomitant belief that others have no legitimate right to deny our access (59, original emphasis)."

For such adventuring, however, it is not the case that any spice will do. Mandy Thomas (2000: 201–213) (drawing principally on Bourdieu's work on "distinction," but also substantially on Hage's

[1] All quotations attributed to James are from the transcript of an interview conducted by the author with James and other members of his household in late 2000. To preserve confidentiality, real names of those interviewed have not been used here. The interview forms part of an ethnographic project on food, Britishness, Anglo-celtic identity and multiculturalism in Haringey, London and Newtown, Sydney. The project was supported by funding from the University of South Australia. Interview transcripts are in the author's possession.