

## Eating the Vernacular, Being Cosmopolitan

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### —INTRODUCTION

Belonging is never simple. Many of us have multiple affiliations, perhaps speak many languages and possibly value our ‘world citizenship’ more highly than our local attachments. And we may also always feel the outsider in our own family, culture or nation. Yet, ultimately, most of us will be viscerally and practically attached to one or more groups, somewhere, no matter how fraught the attachment(s). These attachments will help form our *habitus*, the ways in which we think and act, our tastes.<sup>1</sup> In attaching to some we will reject others, and many of us will be lured by the promise of new horizons, flavours and ways of ‘being-in-the-world’.<sup>2</sup> Some won’t be so much desirous as compelled to venture beyond a nationally bounded existence, perhaps forced to as economic or humanitarian refugees, or to pursue (perceived) better options.

Cosmopolitanism is broadly defined as an openness to and willingness to engage with cultural Others. According to Ulf Hannerz, one cannot simultaneously be both nationalist and cosmopolitan, or feel a strong sense of belonging to both the

nation-state and the world.<sup>3</sup> However, this position has been critiqued as ‘rootless’ (unable or unwilling to engage with the location in which one mostly exists, where one might hope to do the most ‘cosmopolitan good’), and proponents such as Hannerz have been accused of being ‘deracinated intellectuals’ and elitists.<sup>4</sup> Many of these critics maintain that although cosmopolitanism and nationalism may be antithetical because of the exclusive imaginary inherent in nationalist discourse, more local (or ‘hyperlocal’) attachments can work to undermine nationalist belonging by creating ‘a critical space of local care across difference.’<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary theories bridge what Clifford describes as ‘discrepant’ cosmopolitanisms, most maintaining that cosmopolitans may retain local, particularised and even nationalist identities and attachments.<sup>6</sup> Some, such as Pnina Werbner, deliberately rescue the conceptual framework from elitist discourse—Werbner grounds her analysis in the phrase ‘demotic cosmopolitanism’.<sup>7</sup> Beck claims ‘there is no cosmopolitanism without localism’,<sup>8</sup> rejecting entirely the earlier elitist distinctions made by Hannerz between the cosmopolitans and the locals, where cosmopolitanism was painted as essentially the ‘class consciousness of the frequent traveller’ (or the domain of the white, male, middle class).<sup>9</sup>

Beck has generated a significant *oeuvre* on cosmopolitanism, in which he argues that it is a process of ‘internal globalisation’ that creates what he calls ‘cosmopolitanisation’, the third of five stages in the social sciences’ treatment of globalisation.<sup>10</sup> Beck argues that nationalist thinking presupposes a monologic imagination, whereas cosmopolitan thinking is dialogic. That is, the cosmopolitan perspective is ‘an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other’; it is ‘thinking and living in terms of *inclusive opposition*’.<sup>11</sup>

According to Beck, the contributions in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice* introduce a ‘fifth phase, namely the question of what does cosmopolitanism in practice mean’. He and other contributors to that volume attempt to move beyond merely ‘prescriptive’ or ‘descriptive’ concepts of cosmopolitanism, to ‘illustrate some of the ways in which cosmopolitanism can be used as an analytical tool to explain certain identity outlooks and ethico-political practices that are discernible in a variety of social and institutional settings.’<sup>12</sup> It is this fifth stage to which culinary

cosmopolitanism belongs: identifying cultural and cosmopolitan identities and practices through everyday engagements with multicultural foodways.

To understand everyday engagements with multicultural foodways, I use the term vernacular foodways—a set of social, economic and cultural practices around the production and consumption of food that are normatively distinctive to an ethnocultural group. For example, the vernacular foodways of Vietnam include distinctive dishes such as *phở*, *bun cha*, and *Bún bò Huế*, a reliance on rice and noodles as staples, an abundance of fresh greens, and cooking conducted predominantly over an open flame, quite often charcoal—ovens are rare in Vietnam. As everywhere, there are distinctive patterns of consumption, which include regular snacks of street food, typically a family meal at home each evening and, for those not living in multi-generational households, extended family meals are still common on the weekend. Further details of the implements used in procuring, preparing and consuming meals all contribute to Vietnamese vernacular foodways, just as syntax, grammar, vocabulary and accent contribute to vernacular language.<sup>13</sup>

Vernacular foodways are a part of one's *habitus*, and deep knowledge of them is a cornerstone of 'insider' status. As Donna Gabbaccia has written, 'Eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures'.<sup>14</sup> Transnational migrants, faced with a new country and quite often a dearth of familiar ingredients and tools, may go to some lengths to maintain their vernacular foodways in an attempt to mitigate the disruption to *habitus*. However, in order to successfully settle identities without the normal sociocultural trappings, they may also 'tactically' seize opportunities for creative substitutions.<sup>15</sup>

Those who may be 'outsiders' who seek to understand Others' vernacular foodways may insist upon replicating dishes precisely as an 'insider' has taught them, or they may take liberties, and hybridise new cuisines.<sup>16</sup> Their 'outsider' status may shift, and they may inhabit the liminal spaces of those who are 'in-between', such as so many transnational migrants who lose a sense of themselves both as outsiders *and* as insiders. The core of cosmopolitanism rests in these liminal crossings, the reflexivity that comes with losing certainty of what exactly *is* an insider or an outsider.

In my own experience as a transnational migrant (acknowledging that I have been part of the majority ethnic group in both countries) I have felt strong

attachments to both the place I left and that in which I settled ('America' to 'Australia', or more specifically, the west coast of north America to Melbourne, and yet after nineteen years neither country claims me fully. I am forever an 'outsider' in both countries now, although I feel passionately that I am in fact a reflexive insider to both). Hybridity is perhaps at the heart of the cosmopolitan ideal, to be open to and willing to engage with the Other, and importantly, to know one's own Otherness keenly.<sup>17</sup>

Authenticity is mobilised in the establishment of insider/outsider status, yet what is 'authentic' to an insider may very well taste different to the outsider, and what is at stake will surely differ. Conceptions of 'authenticity' will always be site-specific, contextual and contingent. It is worth quoting Appadurai at length on culinary authenticity:

Authenticity measures the degree to which something is more or less what it *ought* to be. It is thus a norm of some sort. But is it an immanent norm, emerging somehow from the cuisine itself? Or is it an external norm, reflecting some imposed gastronomic standard? If it is an immanent norm, who is its authoritative voice: The professional cook? The average consumer? The gourmand? The housewife? If it is an imposed norm, who is its privileged voice: the connoisseur of exotic food? The tourist? The ordinary participants in a neighboring cuisine? The cultivated eater from a distant one?<sup>18</sup>

Arguing about whether there is any such thing as authenticity isn't central to this project. Rather, understanding what it means to those seeking or producing 'it' is my motivation for interrogating the concept in relation to food. In my experience, it is common for Melburnians to express pride in living in a cosmopolitan city, a melding of cultures where people from all over the globe are living 'togetherness-in-difference', particularly in the food scene.<sup>19</sup> Yet there is an obvious tension between the (potential) symbolic violence of insisting on the performance of authentic identity and the associated very real desire to be challenged and stimulated with a multiplicity of ideas, flavours and ways that is at the heart of cosmopolitanism. As I have written elsewhere, at the heart of this is a desire for fluency in many vernaculars and to know the world's many ways of 'being-in-the-world', which also

has the consequence of distinguishing one as possessing a great deal of cultural capital within most fields.<sup>20</sup>

Using a mixed methodology of ethnography and auto-ethnography in Australia, Vietnam and India, and textual analysis of Australian migrants' autobiographies, this article explores the stories of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to show the importance of vernacular foodways and culinary cosmopolitanism—and the implications of authenticity—in the maintenance of vernacular identities and the development of cosmopolitan ones. While auto-ethnography is a significant part of my methodology, this research relies heavily on ethnographic work with Vietnamese and Italian Australians and autobiographical accounts of non-Anglo Australians to decentre what is too often an Anglocentric analysis of cosmopolitanism in Australia.

—INSIDERS OUTSIDE

My first job as a recently arrived Anglo-American migrant to Australia in 1992 was as a waitress in a bistro in Geelong, a provincial city an hour from Melbourne. On the menu, I was delighted to note, were burritos, a food Americans claim as our own. While having my tour of the kitchen, I asked the chef how she made her burritos, to which she replied, 'I use large roti bread, fill it with pieces of chicken I've fried with some onion, roll it up, and pour béarnaise sauce over the top. Then I serve it with salad on the side.' My response, withheld until I had consumed said 'burritos' at the end of my shift, was that 'this tastes quite nice, but it's definitely not a burrito'. Appadurai argues: 'quality is typically the insider's concern, authenticity that of the culinary tourist. We often admit that there is food that, though inauthentic, is good.'<sup>21</sup> However, Appadurai acknowledges that authenticity becomes the concern of insiders 'when they (and the food) are far from home'. He goes on: 'The concern with authenticity indicates some sort of doubt, and this sort of doubt is rarely part of the discourse of an undisturbed culinary tradition.'<sup>22</sup>

There were (and are) many versions of burritos in America, but my core notions of authenticity (which, as per Appadurai's point, only surfaced after migration) involved the basics of meat, beans, cheese, salads, guacamole and sour cream wrapped in flour tortillas and eaten with your hands. My early days in Australia included a constant search for this 'real' burrito, something which evades me to this day. In my narrative, it is the story of the migrant who unreflexively

believes there is an 'authentic' essence to a dish from one's original culture (even if it's a transplant in the first place).

Writing about migrant tendencies to self-essentialise, Tariq Modood observes, 'when non-Chinese speak of Chinese civilization, their starting point is often that it has coherence, sameness over centuries and a reified quality', and further argues that sometimes 'insiders' speak of their own cultures this way.<sup>23</sup> In my initial searches for an 'authentic' burrito, I didn't clearly articulate for myself or others what that item might really be like if I found it, but I knew that I would know it when I did. In twenty years in Australia I have never found 'it', but still enjoy 'homely' burritos on every return trip to the United States. And in Australia, I no longer pine for taquerías, Ranch dressing, or the flavour of American milk; I have accepted beetroot, prefer Australian bacon and adore Vegemite and lamb.

It is a well-rehearsed lament of the new migrant that they are unable to find key dishes or ingredients like those from 'home'. Often there are unsatisfactory encounters with the dishes in question, and one will seek out restaurants run by 'real Mexicans/Vietnamese/Italians/[insert migrant group]' in hopes that they have been 'true' to the cuisine and can offer cultural succour and fulfil nostalgic desires by matching taste to memory.<sup>24</sup> When this fails, if one is resourceful, one may attempt to cook the foods at home, even if they were foods that traditionally were only eaten 'out' back home, such as Vietnamese *phở*, or for which key ingredients were always purchased ready made, such as the ubiquitous locally made tortillas in California.

In *Green Papaya*, Lien Yeomans' recipe-filled autobiography of how she 'seduced Australia with food', she tells of arriving in Australia on a Colombo Scholarship in 1962, before there were established Vietnamese communities in Australia. Her story begins aghast at the Anglo-Australian diet of the time:

I sat red-eyed looking at a lifeless bowl of corn flakes and pieces of cold toast, thinking of crowded warm Saigon with its bowls of piping hot noodle soup and the Vietnamese sounds and aromas. Tears fell into my corn flakes.<sup>25</sup>

After her initial shock and profound homesickness, Yeomans begins to make sense of the foods available in Australia at the time. Initially, she writes that she couldn't bear any more rice pudding offered by her elderly landlady, and desperately opted to buy meat pies instead.<sup>26</sup> Soon, however, she begins cooking for her landlady, and

transforms the vegetables ‘invariably overcooked in boiling salted water’ and served with ‘meat, fish or poultry’ into ‘green-bean stir-fry, fried rice with peas, plain omelette and stir-fried chips’.<sup>27</sup> As she grows more confident with the English language and the Australian tradition of barbecues with her classmates, she claims she even comes ‘to appreciate burnt chops and sausages with tomato sauce and cold beer’.<sup>28</sup> Yeomans’ recipe for stir-fried chips is prefaced with this explanation: ‘Our Friday night treat was fish and chips, and if there were any leftover chips, I would cook this simple stir-fry the next day.’<sup>29</sup> In her hybridisation of a classic Anglo Australian meal, Yeomans displays her comfort with her own increasing cosmopolitanism, much like the Shun Wah family as interpreted by Jean Duruz:

the Shun Wahs (presumably with pleasure, and without guilt) appropriate Saunders’ chips for their own invested cosmopolitanism and sense of being Australian. The ‘toong Chips!’ becomes a family joke, a disruptive ‘eating back’ into the culinary imagination of the dominant culture, as well as a refusal to ingest romanticised inscriptions of identity.<sup>30</sup>

Yeomans’ descriptions continue of a young woman who eagerly absorbs as much as possible of a new world, yet who steadily finds ways to introduce Vietnamese dishes to her teachers and other students. Her story manifests de Certeau’s ‘tactics’, where a tactic lacks spatial control, and rather ‘depends on time’:

it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’.<sup>31</sup>

After discovering Chinatown, where she was able to find some familiar dried foods, and substituting ‘ordinary mint’ for the abundance of fresh herbs she would have used in Saigon, Yeomans sets out to make *phở*, the dish ‘which every expatriate Vietnamese craves’, though Yeomans acknowledges that in Vietnam it is rarely made in the home.<sup>32</sup> Like my attempts to make tortillas, the need to create the most homely of tastes overcomes issues of prior cooking experience or access to all the ‘right’ ingredients in the new country. Luce Giard extends the point about tactics of creating opportunities in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, when she claims that ‘entering into the vocation of cooking and manipulating ordinary things make one use intelligence, a subtle intelligence full of nuances and strokes of

genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself, in short, *a very ordinary intelligence*.<sup>33</sup>

This idea of the 'ordinary intelligence' mobilised in everyday situations, but embodied in particular ways while 'doing-cooking' offers a compelling frame for migrant stories of homemaking.<sup>34</sup> In conducting her research for *Eating Between the Lines: Food and Equality in Australia*, Rebecca Huntley found many examples of gender inequality in and around the kitchen, as well as home cooks' anxieties about feeding families healthy and affordable meals.<sup>35</sup> However, she also found a great deal of agency in women's 'doing-cooking', such as among the women present at a migrant and refugee lunch in the Melbourne suburb of Preston. The lunch brought together women from Sierra Leone, Iraq, Liberia, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece and the Sudan as well as Australia, and the chosen cuisine for this third of nine such lunches was West African. Throughout the book, Huntley expresses resistance to the nostalgic lens that can elide the drudgery of quotidian kitchen work, but she leaves the lunch with this conclusion:

It was a tiring experience, but a ... satisfying one. It had sparked a small but significant conversation between the different women around the table. Food was a conduit, a means of establishing real and potentially transformative relationships between women who had the capacity to share more than just recipes.<sup>36</sup>

A gathering such as the migrant and refugee lunch, with its focus on sharing food, has obvious homely intimations, but is also still a public performance between strangers. Judith Butler's theory of gender identity as performative—that is, that identities are constructed through performance rather than an expression of an 'authentic' core—offers a useful lens for this and other such feasts.<sup>37</sup> In performing their vernacular identities for themselves and each other as well as for an Anglo Australian audience, the participants are able to maintain their sense of ethnic identity in a newly adopted country. Yet their very presence in Melbourne engaging in quotidian cross-cultural exchanges signifies their positions as cosmopolitan subjects as well. Each of the women at the gathering with Huntley is able to be educated in an aspect of distinctive cultural foodways, thus accruing more cosmopolitan knowledge while also performing their identities as cosmopolitan subjects. The interactions over the course of the afternoon, the sharing of foods and



'doing-cooking' together, create the kinds of 'cultural permeability and vulnerability which, in [Duruz'] view, is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference':<sup>38</sup>

the everyday work in kitchens remains a way of unifying matter and memory, life and tenderness, the present moment and the abolished past, invention and necessity, imagination and tradition—tastes, smells, colours, flavors, shapes, consistencies, actions, gestures, movements, people and things, heat, savourings, spices, and condiments. Good cooks are never sad or idle—they work at fashioning the world...<sup>39</sup>

Migrants like me, Yeomans and other competent cooks are examples of relatively successful migrants—those who have 'settled' (hybrid) identities and who have escaped the lingering melancholy, or the moment when nostalgia turns into a sort of pathological homesickness.<sup>40</sup> Through everyday creative and resourceful substitutions in 'doing-cooking', we attempt to maintain our old vernaculars while carving niches for ourselves in new ones, and develop new culinary creoles. And it is such everyday engagements with vernacular foodways which are maintained by migrant communities that enables what Beck calls 'cosmopolitanisation'.<sup>41</sup>

Each of the examples outlined here offers insight into the ways that migrants 're-enact ethnicity and culture' in the preparation and consumption of 'traditional' foods.<sup>42</sup> As Krishnendu Ray says in *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*: 'Cooking is never just about nutrition. Bengalis have loaded the process of cooking and eating with meanings about "meals", kinship, family, and communion.'<sup>43</sup> Ghassan Hage has made similar points about what he calls 'home-building': in order to 'be at home' in old or new homelands, one needs the 'affective building blocks' of 'security', 'familiarity', 'community' and a 'sense of possibility'.<sup>44</sup> He argues that nostalgia is a 'settlement strategy' that is part of 'a mode of feeling at home where one is in the present' or attempting to 'promote the feeling of being there *here*'.<sup>45</sup> Maintaining vernacular foodways, then, is just one of many such affective building blocks of home-building.

#### —OUTSIDERS INSIDE

What about the case of the outsider who seeks insider/expert knowledge and/or demands authenticity of the Other's cuisine? The 'culinary traveller' as Lisa Heldke calls them (or us)—is someone 'who moves into a cultural location other than one's

own, either temporarily or more long term'.<sup>46</sup> She includes travellers overseas, domestically, or even just to 'ethnic' restaurants in one's own town. Jennie Germann Molz, writing about culinary tourism in local Thai restaurants, argues that:

by participating in a food system, the culinary tourist is expressing and reinforcing his or her own identity while exploring the identity of the other that is represented by that food system ... As Lucy Long suggests, while culinary tourism is 'the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an Other', it often results in 'teaching[ing] us more about ourselves than about the Other'.<sup>47</sup>

Heldke and Molz speak almost exclusively of white culinary travellers, common to many in the global north writing on culinary tourism.<sup>48</sup> This article seeks a greater inclusivity and Melbourne offers a rich and diverse field for the inquiry, though that was not always the case.

In Australia, many years of the White Australia policy were followed by explicit policy development embracing multiculturalism,<sup>49</sup> which led to the now common discourse of celebrating and protecting diversity in our cities.<sup>50</sup> It seems difficult to imagine that as recently as the 1950s:

An official of the Department of Immigration became quite officially indignant at the suggestion that New Australians might be introducing their food habits into Australia: 'That's not the idea at all,' he said. 'What we want is for these migrants to become absorbed into the Australian community, not to bring their own habits with them.'<sup>51</sup>

Now, however, Australia has not only broadly accepted its multiculturalism, which is protected and promoted in explicit government policy, it publicly celebrates it, and nowhere more than in the culinary realm. The current Lonely Planet entry for Melbourne informs travellers: 'Sophisticated and slick, edgy and rough, Melbourne's physical and cultural landscape is shaped by a dynamic population, ever-ravenous for a bite of global culture. The result is Australia's most accessible multiculturalism.'<sup>52</sup> But what exactly are we accessing, and who are 'we'?

*Food Safari* is a program aired on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), 'Australia's multicultural and multilingual broadcaster', a hybrid-funded public station.<sup>53</sup> The program offers a fascinating 'insider' glimpse into Australia's diverse culinary cultures, showcasing 'authentic' migrants in the quotidian practices of

shopping, cooking and eating. There are occasional accounts that reflect migrants' unsatisfactory early experiences with Australian foodways, such as the French chef who exclaims that until he came to Australia, he had never seen 'square bread', and how happy he is now that he can buy 'real' French bread.<sup>54</sup>

As we voyeuristically tour Australia's diverse culinary cultures, host Maeve O'Meara repeatedly reminds us how 'lucky' Australia is to have such foods, and how 'we' have adopted many of them as 'our own.' In the Malaysian episode, the audience is told that 'if there's one dish Australians love, it's laksa'. Regarding *phở*, O'Meara says that this 'beautiful soup' is found 'across Vietnam and now "mercifully" in Australia'. 'Spaghetti bolognese is almost our national dish' and 'there's a real noodle culture in Japan that's *luckily* spreading to Australia.'<sup>55</sup> Much of the show seems to evince what Hage calls 'cosmo-multiculturalism', which he claims 'has more to do with the market of foreign flavours than with the market of "foreigners"'.<sup>56</sup> While such a criticism may be overly harsh, and the intentions of the show are clearly 'pro-multiculturalism', O'Meara's repetition of 'how lucky we are' discursively positions Anglo-Australian culture in the centre (mainstream) and in need of 'spicing up' by 'them'. It's pro-multiculturalism, but is it cosmopolitanism?

Moving away from television-mediated voyeurism to material interactions, how does the 'outsider seeking insider knowledge', or what Duruz has called 'identity grazing' manifest?<sup>57</sup> While attending a conference in Kolkata in the Indian state of Bengal in 2006, I spent time with a diverse group of Indian academics. Many of them told me independently about Kolkata's fantastic Chinese food, and how there is 'more authentic Hakka food' in Kolkata than you will find in China today. The conference dinner was held at an upscale Chinese restaurant and the Kolkatan hosts expressly pointed out the markers they read of its authenticity, from the dishes and chopsticks to the bok choy in a thickened sauce with garlic. It seemed important to the group that we eat an authentic representation of Hakka food, and equally important that one could discourse on it at some length.<sup>58</sup>

Bell and Valentine argue that cosmopolitanism 'involves the cultivating of "globalised cultural capital" as a form of lifestyle shopping which, crucially, involves possessing considerable knowledge about the "exotic", "the authentic"... [It is] often referred to as a colonialism ... of popular culture'.<sup>59</sup> I, as an equally self-conscious cosmopolitan subject, was rather predictably seeking Bengali cuisine in my short

time there, and found this foray into Chinese to be an unwelcome distraction from my own culinary tourism—and the food to be very similar to that I could easily access in Melbourne.<sup>60</sup> However, the Indians present were adamant that Bengali food was ‘dull’, and that we were much better to select from the cosmopolitan offerings in Kolkata. I recount this event primarily to contest the common claim that only ‘white’ people find their own culture in need of spice. As bell hooks has famously argued, ‘within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture’.<sup>61</sup>

Moving from commercial dining rooms to homely kitchens, one sees that to become ‘expert’ in cooking the vernacular cuisines of Others, the home cook must learn a new language, become fluent in the Others’ vernacular foodways and, in doing so, contribute to the many instances of ethnic boundary crossing that make up a cosmopolitan society. While the maintenance of ethnic identity performed by insiders who import, grow and cook foods from their countries of origin maintains a vernacular, those who experiment and deepen their knowledge of cuisines outside their own heritage, ergo fostering the exchanges that are so crucial to a cosmopolitanism, are essential to the cosmopolitan imperative to openness and willingness to engage with the Other. A critical point here is that it requires *both* the sometimes intense parochialism of the insider maintaining their vernacular foodways (while also performing a ‘banal’ cosmopolitan subjectivity simply by virtue of their status as a transnational migrant) and the cosmopolitan ‘identity grazing’ of the various outsiders.

In these crossings, the outsiders who are ‘imagining how to eat into the borders of ethnicity’ will inevitably also hybridise, or creolise, the foods at their disposal in ‘doing-cooking’.<sup>62</sup> And while there is the potential to read hybridity as the new homogeneity that results from the increased flows of global capital, we could alternatively write this as a cosmopolitan narrative, whereby fluency in many vernaculars and the flexibility to use the most appropriate ingredients in both predictable and innovative ways helps break down fears of difference. This is the reflexivity which can result from a disrupted *habitus* in a multicultural society.

How do outsiders to a cuisine define authenticity when ‘dining out’ at ‘ethnic’ restaurants?<sup>63</sup> And how are the ‘ethnic feeders’ interpellated in what is potentially (but not necessarily) a cosmopolitan interaction?<sup>64</sup> According to Hage, ‘any reality worthy of the title of multiculturalism in Australia has to involve a certain degree of homely forms of intercultural interaction in which both the eater and the feeder experience themselves as subjects’.<sup>65</sup>

After a brief overview of the ways that outsiders might classify authenticity when dining out, I will return to the question of how the eater and the feeder might ‘experience themselves as subjects’. First, there are the markers of authenticity in the aesthetic of ethnically distinctive restaurants. The important symbols usually include ‘authentic’ owners and waiters from the country of the cuisine and a culturally coded etiquette and technique of eating. In Melbourne, at least, authentic-Vietnamese credibility often comes from looking a bit downmarket and preferably kitsch, with laminate tables and indifferent staff, whereas a Thai restaurant might be expected to offer heavy teak furniture and the option of some low tables, and be attended by smiling, thoughtful waitstaff. There should also be authentic ethnic eaters in the restaurant, which is often taken as the most significant sign of authenticity.

Next, there is the knowledge of which are the ‘authentic’ dishes of a cuisine—simply to know that *tom kha gai* is Thai, *phở* is Vietnamese, *tamales* are Mexican, and so on. If one therefore finds, say, *kim chee* on a Japanese menu, one might remark, ‘but that’s Korean!’ scoring cultural capital points with any who didn’t already know that (and who care that you do). While insiders are usually experts at this level of distinction, a culinary traveller has no predetermined expertise with the cuisine, and the amount of symbolic capital accruable depends on the relative knowledge and interest of those around one. One could take the knowledge of which dishes ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’ be on the menu to a particular level if, say, one has knowledge of the regions of the country in question (for example, ‘What’s *bun cha* doing on the menu of a southern Vietnamese restaurant?’) or perhaps contest the authenticity of the dish based on its own historical trajectory (‘Sure, *som tam* is Thai, but it actually comes from Laos, and has variants in Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma as well’). It is obviously pleasurable to be expert in the knowledge accrual of the minutiae of

culinary traditions, just as accruing knowledge in any area can provide a great sense of agency. Knowing to ask Peruvians and Chilenos about which of them *really* invented *pisco sour*, or Australians and New Zealanders about the origins of pavlova, is one form of demonstrating cultural capital, usually more readily available to those with the economic capital to have travelled to the countries in question.<sup>66</sup>

The deepest level of knowledge requires close engagement with the ingredients, cooking and serving methods, and appropriate utensils, as well as social customs around eating the dish. Quite often, to be able to speak to these questions, one must have spent a great deal of time in the region in question, or at least within the associated migrant community. Here it gets even more problematic than knowing the dishes, of course. Not only are dishes not fixed in time, most are by their very nature flexible and adaptable to local ingredients, climate, and the region's primary flavours. Insiders will typically be more flexible about this in their hometown or when at home in a new country. But try to give them the dish away from either of these homely environments and they can be the most scathing critics of the 'authenticity' of the dish, as discussed previously. Alyssa, a second-generation Vietnamese Australian, described how on the rare occasion her family went to Vietnamese restaurants growing up in Wollongong, New South Wales, they would spend most of their time criticising everything from spring rolls ('they're obviously Chinese if they serve them with sweet chilli sauce rather than *nuoc mam*') to soups ('the seasoning is just wrong').<sup>67</sup>

Vietnamese scholar Hũu Ngoc's articles about his search for 'authentic' *phở* while travelling overseas offer some insight into the competing discourses of cosmopolitanism and self-essentialism. He writes:

Alas, in San Francisco, Frankfurt, Paris, Tokyo ... patrons of *phở* serving stalls and restaurants are only tasting imitations. The real *phở* can only be eaten in Vietnam, more precisely north Vietnam (*phở Bắc*: *phở* in the North), more precisely still, in Hanoi. The food is rightly called Hanoi soup.<sup>68</sup>

In his insistence that there is a 'real' *phở*, Hũu Ngoc is asserting a parochial allegiance in defiance of the homogenising tendencies of global modernity, and in other articles he writes at length about the effects, both positive and negative, of what he considers the interchangeable terms of Westernisation or modernisation.

However, he is also more simply exhibiting a strong sense of belonging to place, specifically Hanoi, the widely-recognised distinctive 'home' of *phở*, after the disorienting effects of international travel.

In a chapter on Turkish identities in Europe, Kevin Robins writes at length about cultural reactions to Westernisation, 'involving the reassertion of origins and traditions':

There was a reversion to the language of 'authenticity', which, like other forms of essentialism, postulates a cultural identity that is 'self-identical, essentially in continuity over time, and positing itself in essential distinction from other historical subjects'. Adonis describes it in terms of regression towards a 'foetal relationship' to the traditional past.<sup>69</sup>

Robins goes on to argue that the 'dualist logic' whereby the only choices are the impossible retreat to origins or the 'assimilation of an alien modernity' must be dismantled, and creative alternatives found. The cosmopolitan project offers some possibilities that need be neither essentialist nor Western/modern assimilationist, yet there is always a danger in cosmopolitanism of precisely these two trajectories.

Outsiders who are not seeking a taste of home, but rather a taste of the imagined exotic or a memory of some travel or residence away from home, require authenticity for different reasons. Does the quest for authenticity essentialise the Other—is it merely a manifestation of the conquering spirit of modernity? It is undeniably essentialist to hold a fixed notion of what is authentic about another culture or dish. As Modood asserts, 'a culture is made *through* change; it is not defined by an essence which exists apart from change, a *noumenon* hidden behind the altering configurations of phenomena.'<sup>70</sup> Appadurai advocates a complete disavowal of applying the word 'authenticity' to cuisine, calling it 'spurious'.<sup>71</sup>

John Dewey's experiential learning theory is fundamental in understandings of learning as socially constructed, and prior experiences as shaping the way events or objects are subsequently experienced.<sup>72</sup> Lisa Heldke argues that Dewey's experiential model affords us an opportunity to reflect upon the 'conversation' between the 'dish itself (via its creator) ... [and] the contributions of the experiences of the experiencer (the eater)'.<sup>73</sup> 'The culinary traveller will *taste* the dish differently from the diner who has grown up eating it.' Heldke uses this notion of authenticity in which the transaction between dish and eater is understood to be contextual and

contingent. Reading authenticity in this way seems a sensitive and sympathetic way to understand the ideological work which often underpins demands for authenticity, be it parochial, celebratory, colonising or something else.

#### —CONCLUSION

In a focus group with four Vietnamese women in Saigon, aged twenty-three to thirty-eight years, I closed with two questions, the first being: 'When is a dish required to follow certain rules to be authentic?' All agreed that the traditional dishes such as *phở*, *banh xeo* or *bun bo hue* had to use traditional ingredients. (Which, of course, are contested in different regions of Vietnam, but the region of origin is usually allowed to trump the others.) It makes sense that dishes that achieved distinction should be required to maintain it by use of much the same ingredients, otherwise I suppose these dishes must become something else, which may be tasty but not what they profess to be.

My second question of the two in the Saigon focus group who had travelled overseas was: 'How do you judge if something is "not authentic Vietnamese" when overseas?' Their answers varied from the 'broth being wrong' or 'missing vital ingredients' such as the correct vegetables or herbs, to a final judgement which I think most succinctly highlights the instability of authenticity as a category, when one of them said, 'maybe [if it has] no MSG.'

So the important question is not whether it's possible to determine whether something is authentic, but what does the search for authenticity mean to different people: insiders, outsiders and those in-between? And what one finds upon probing is that it is indeed a useful concept by which people assert and maintain ethnic identities that allow them to settle their homely identities in new lands. It is a means to achieve social distinction and a way to engage with Otherness as a cosmopolitan principle. It is a way for migrants to strategically mobilise their own ethnic identities in order to accrue economic capital from the outsiders who seek it, and an essentialist assertion that can exclude those perceived to be 'authentic' from the project of modernity. Ultimately, however, discourses of authenticity will always be disrupted by individual 'tactics' at settling both vernacular and cosmopolitan identities, as well as by 'conversations' between dishes and diners, feeders and eaters.



Cosmopolitanism is developed through a fluency and interest in vernaculars, through living across the local, not in order to be universal but rather to understand the everyday, making sense and meaning through each lived vernacular. As Robbins writes:

Instead of renouncing cosmopolitanism as a false universal, one can embrace it as an impulse to knowledge that is shared with others, a striving to transcend partiality that is itself partial, but no more so than the similar cognitive strivings of many diverse peoples. The world's particulars can now be recoded, in part at least, as the world's '*discrepant cosmopolitanisms*'.<sup>74</sup>

So when new migrants 'form ghettos', and retreat to vernacular languages, foodways, music and fashion, the extant cosmopolitan subjects of the world's diverse cities will use their openness to the Other to engage, just as the transnational cosmopolitan migrants themselves are engaging, even if sometimes in shorter forays at first from the relative comfort of a so-called 'ethnic enclave'. It is only in understanding and explicitly valuing the importance of maintaining (without freezing) distinctive vernaculars that any of us can hope to regularly engage with difference, meet its challenges, and develop further as cosmopolitan subjects.

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—NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice, Routledge, London, 1979.
- <sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper & Row, New York, 1962.
- <sup>3</sup> Ulf Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in Culture' in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalisation and Identity*, ed. M. Featherstone, Sage, London, 1992.
- <sup>4</sup> See Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998; Ulrich Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Manifesto', *New Statesman*, vol. 127, no. 4377, 1998, p. 127; Pnina Werbner (ed.), *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted, Feminist and Vernacular Perspectives*, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2008; and Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco (eds), *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, Ashgate Publishing, Surrey, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Amanda Wise, 'Everyday Multiculturalism: Transversal Crossings and Working Class Cosmopolitanism in a Suburban Contact Zone', paper presented at Everyday Multiculturalism conference, Macquarie University, 28–29 September 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> James Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. A. Treichler, Routledge, London, 1992.
- <sup>7</sup> Werbner.
- <sup>8</sup> Ulrich Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 19, no. 1–2, pp. 17–44, 2002, p. 19.
- <sup>9</sup> Craig Calhoun, 'The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2002, pp. 869–97.
- <sup>10</sup> Ulrich Beck, 'Foreword' in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, ed. M. Nowicka and M. Rovisco, Ashgate Publishing Company, Surrey, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Society', p. 19.
- <sup>12</sup> Nowicka and Rovisco.
- <sup>13</sup> Of course, to speak of a singular 'Vietnamese foodway' is too simplistic, as regional variations contribute significantly to the ways in which people across the country distinguish themselves through food, just as they do through language and music. In any analysis of migrant foodways, there is always a danger of homogenising a population by eliding the distinctions of home. The ensuing analysis tries to be sympathetic to this concern, while limited by space.
- <sup>14</sup> Donna Gabbaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1998, p. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. S. Rendall, 2 vols, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984.

- <sup>16</sup> I use the capitalised Other to indicate, as John Frow does, 'the making of a mythical One out of many', John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1995, p. 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Clifford.
- <sup>18</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'On Culinary Authenticity', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 2, no. 25, 1986, p. 25.
- <sup>19</sup> Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Tammi Jonas, 'Essentially Cosmopolitan or Cosmopolitan Essentialism?', *AntiTHESIS*, vol. 18, 2008, pp. 67–75.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 93.
- <sup>24</sup> For exploration of migrants seeking 'tastes of home', see Ghassan Hage, 'At Home in the Entrails of the West: Multiculturalism, Ethnic Food and Migrant Home-building' in *Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Sydney's West*, ed. G. H. Helen Grace, Lesley Johnson, Julie Langsworth and Michael Symonds, Pluto, Sydney, 1997; Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2004; and Alice Pung (ed.), *Growing up Asian in Australia*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2008.
- <sup>25</sup> Lien Yeomans, *Green Papaya: New Fruit from Old Seeds*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 2001, p. 52.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 53.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 57.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 55.
- <sup>30</sup> Jean Duruz, 'Haunted Kitchens: Cooking and Remembering', *Gastronomica*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2004, pp. 57–68, p. 59.
- <sup>31</sup> de Certeau, p. xix.
- <sup>32</sup> Yeomans, p. 59.
- <sup>33</sup> Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. T. J. Tomasik, 2 vols, vol. 2: *Living and Cooking*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p. 158.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Doing-cooking' is Giard's term for body rhythms, techniques, repetitive gestures, daydreaming, and 'certain tastes, smells and colour ... all the sounds' associated with food preparation. Certeau, Giard and Mayol, p. 58.
- <sup>35</sup> Rebecca Huntley, *Eating Between the Lines: Food and Equality in Australia*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 132.
- <sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1990.
- <sup>38</sup> Jean Duruz, 'Eating at the Borders: Culinary Journeys', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 23, 2005, pp. 51–69, pp. 66–7.

- <sup>39</sup> De Certeau, Giard and Mayol, p. 222.
- <sup>40</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Routledge, New York, 1998.
- <sup>41</sup> Beck, 'The Cosmopolitan Society', p. 17.
- <sup>42</sup> Ray, p. 52.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 47.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 102–4.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 104, 108.
- <sup>46</sup> Lisa Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 393.
- <sup>47</sup> Jennie Germann Molz, 'Eating Difference: The Cosmopolitan Mobilities of Culinary Tourism', *Space and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2007, pp. 77–93, p. 67.
- <sup>48</sup> See Jill Terry Rudy, "'Of Course, in Guatemala, Bananas are Better": Exotic and Familiar Eating Experiences of Mormon Missionaries', in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. L. Long, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2003; John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, Sage, London, 1990.
- <sup>49</sup> See Meaghan Morris, "'Please Explain?": Ignorance, Poverty and the Past', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 219–32; and Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001.
- <sup>50</sup> *Future Melbourne*, <<http://www.futuremelbourne.com.au/wiki/view/FMPlan>>.
- <sup>51</sup> Hage, 'At Home in the Entrails of the World', p. 113.
- <sup>52</sup> Lonely Planet, *Melbourne*, <<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/australia/melbourne>>.
- <sup>53</sup> SBS, <[www.sbs.com.au](http://www.sbs.com.au)>.
- <sup>54</sup> *Food Safari with Maeve O'Meara*, episode 2: 'French', SBS TV, 2008.
- <sup>55</sup> Interestingly, spaghetti bolognese is one of Australia's most popular dishes.
- <sup>56</sup> Hage, 'At Home in the Entrails of the World', p. 120.
- <sup>57</sup> Jean Duruz, 'A Nice Baked Dinner ... or Two Roast Ducks from Chinatown?: Identity Grazing', *Continuum*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2000, pp. 289–301.
- <sup>58</sup> It should be noted that this was a food conference, and so all of the participants were explicitly and somewhat self-consciously discussing food and its meanings throughout the four days.
- <sup>59</sup> David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We are Where we Eat*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 135–6.
- <sup>60</sup> I have given a detailed account of that story in Jonas, 'Essentially Cosmopolitan', pp. 67–75.
- <sup>61</sup> bell hooks, 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance', in *Eating Culture*, ed. R. Scapp and B. Seitz, SUNY, New York, 1998, p. 181.
- <sup>62</sup> Duruz, 'Haunted Kitchens', p. 68.
- <sup>63</sup> I do not use the term 'ethnic' unproblematically, as I understand it to mean a way of identifying any group of people sharing a cultural or national background, including 'Anglo-Australians'. For the

purposes of discussing restaurants, I use it to indicate those that purport to offer 'authentic' cuisine from a single country of origin. Ray has discussed the common distinction between 'foreign' and 'ethnic' foods in the American context more fulsomely than I can do here.

<sup>64</sup> Hage, 'Lost in the Entrails of the World'.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>66</sup> I readily admit to having participated in these games of distinction myself, and have experienced the pleasure of a burgeoning understanding of cultural norms distinct from my own, a pleasure derived from a feeling of competence or mastery, but also of knowledge accrual deepening my capacity to engage with cultural Others.

<sup>67</sup> Alyssa, interview by the author, Saigon, November 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Hữu Ngọc, *Wandering Through Vietnamese Culture*, Thế Giới Publishers, Vietnam, 2004, p. 347.

<sup>69</sup> Kevin Robins, 'Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe' in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Sage Publications, London, 1997, pp. 61–86, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Modood, p. 93.

<sup>71</sup> Appadurai, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, Collier Books, New York, 1938.

<sup>73</sup> Lisa Heldke, 'But Is It Authentic? Culinary Travel and the "Genuine Article"', *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, Berg, Oxford, 2005, pp. 385–94, p. 389.

<sup>74</sup> Bruce Robbins, 'Comparative Cosmopolitanism', *Social Text*, vol. 31/32, 1992, pp. 169–86, p. 181.