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# THE WORLD ON A PLATE

## Culinary Culture, Displacement and Geographical Knowledges

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### **Abstract**

This article uses claims about the local globalization of culinary culture to stage an argument about the character of material cultural geographies and their spaces of identity practice. It approaches these geographies in two ways. First, it views foods not only as placed cultural artefacts, but also as dis-placed materials and practices, inhabiting many times and spaces which, far from being neatly bounded, bleed into and mutually constitute each other. Second, it considers the geographical knowledges, or understandings, of foods' geographies, mobilized within circuits of culinary culture, outlining their production through processes of commodity fetishism, and arguing for forms of critical intervention that work with the fetish rather than attempt to reach behind it.

**Key Words** ◆ commodity fetishism ◆ displacement ◆ food ◆ geographical knowledge ◆ globalization

### INTRODUCTION

The world on a plate. From Afghani ashak to Zimbabwean zaza, London offers an unrivalled selection of foreign flavours and cuisines. Give your tongue a holiday and treat yourself to the best meals in the world – all without setting foot outside our fair capital. (*Time Out*, 16 August 1995)

We want to use this metropolitan boast from *Time Out*, a London listings magazine that details the city's cultural events for each week, as a starting point to stage a discussion over the character of contemporary material cultural geographies. We follow Daniel Miller (1987) in understanding material culture as involving processes in which cultural life is objectified, in which objects are constructed as social forms, and hence in which cultural artefacts have to be understood in relationship to their social and spatial contexts. However, maybe because we are geographers, we are particularly interested in the spatial character of those contexts of material cultural practice. As such, and drawing on the work of anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986) on the socio-spatial lives of things, as well as the insights of geographers working on the spaces of commodity chains (Cook, 1995; see also Jackson and Thrift, 1995), in this article we will be trying to demonstrate not only how foods operate as objectifications that enable and channel cultural positionings but also how complex the contextualities of those objectifications and positionings are.

More specifically, and in summary, we will be portraying *Time Out's* 'world on a plate' as a case of how globally extensive networks and flows of foods, people and culinary knowledge are being locally articulated – here in a fashioning of London as cosmopolitan metropolis. In turn, we will suggest that this local articulation, like others, works through the deployment of various constructed (and, of course, contestable) 'geographical knowledges' about where its foods, and other cultural objects and actors associated with them, come from and in what settings they can and should be situated, encountered and used. In consequence, we will suggest, these knowledges are bound up with a 'double' commodity fetishism: that on the one hand limits consumers' knowledge about the spatially distanced systems of provision through which food commodities come to us; but, on the other, and at the same time, also puts an increased emphasis on geographical knowledges about those widely sourced food commodities. These geographical knowledges – based in the cultural meanings of places and spaces – are then deployed in order to 're-enchant' (food) commodities and to differentiate them from the devalued functionality and homogeneity of standardized products, tastes and places (see also Hodgson and Bruhn, 1992, 1993, on how 'geographical product descriptors' are used by wholesalers, retailers and consumers to differentiate and value food commodities).

This portrait raises two broad sets of questions that we want to pursue in the two main sections of this article. The first, and more abstract, is concerned with how to conceptualize the kinds of material cultural geographies laid out on *Time Out's* plate, and here our response is to view foods not only as placed cultural artefacts, but also as dis-placed, inhabiting many times and spaces which, far from being neatly bounded, bleed

into and indeed mutually constitute each other. We therefore talk through the spatial figure of 'displacement' as an alternative to metaphors of cultural 'mosaics', cultural 'diffusions' and 'creolized' cultural mixings in understanding the contextualities of cultural objectifications. We follow this with a slightly less abstract analysis of the role that understandings of places, spaces and environments – what we have termed 'geographical knowledges' – play in the culinary displacements that are our concern here. In this section we outline the social production of these knowledges, the forms that they can take, the cultural politics they provoke through their constructions of cultural difference, and their potential for providing critical levers in thinking about the poetics and politics of (food) commodity systems and their material cultures.

The commentary we offer here therefore centres around two fairly traditional cultural geographic concerns; the spatial constitution of the cultural worlds we inhabit; and the knowledges we hold about those worlds and their geographies. However, it also engages with three other interrelated concerns of contemporary material cultural studies – cultural globalization, the relations of the economic and the cultural, and commodity fetishism – so to conclude this introduction let us say a little about each of these in turn. Globalization has become the social-scientific concept of the 1990s, fostering the same sort of booming publishing economy that postmodernism did in the 1980s (see, for example, Featherstone, 1990, 1995; Featherstone et al., 1995; Friedman, 1994; King, 1991; Massey and Jess, 1995; McGrew, 1992; Morley and Robins, 1995; Robertson, 1992; Waters, 1995). At its heart are two rather different contentions: the first being that a long-running history of interconnections between peoples and places has been intensified during the modern epoch, and particularly over the last 30 years or so of late modernity, producing an increasingly compressed economic, political and cultural world; the second being that there is an increasing consciousness of these compressions and their production of the world as a single place, as witnessed by all sorts of 'global babble', not least the debates over globalization themselves. Considerable debate obviously exists over both these contentions, and particularly over how they interrelate (Friedman, 1995), but putting this to one side for the moment we can see how *Time Out's* proclamation reflects both an increasing globalization of the food system (Arce and Marsden, 1993; Goodman and Redclift, 1991) and a positioning of London as a site from which to experience that globalization, through its status as a world city participating in 'metrocentric global culture' (Knox, 1995: 242). More specifically, London is being promoted as a space of what Stuart Hall has called the 'global post-modern' (Hall, 1991b: 32), marked not by the homogenizing impacts of a material culture promoted by a monolithic transnational capitalism but by the staging and (re)construction of cultural difference in a 'globalization of diversity' (Pieterse, 1995: 49).

As such, we can also see how this culinary culture expresses an 'inter-penetration of culture and economy' (Robertson, 1991: 74), in that local cultural difference is not posited as an external problem for, or source of resistance to, an invading global capitalism, but, rather, is seen as implicated in and produced through commodified cultural production. As Lawrence Grossberg asserts:

. . . it is no longer a matter of capitalism having to work with and across differences. If, in the past, capitalism refused any coding (difference) which tied its productivity to an external code, today it works instead by a kind of recoding, i.e. precisely by the production of difference itself . . . it is difference which is now in the service of capital. (Grossberg, 1995: 184-5)

We might wish for a slightly more subtle reading of the cultural politics apparent in the production of commodified cultural differentiations, but nonetheless what we have here is a strong argument for opposing the widespread distinction of political-economic and cultural analysis (on Marxist political economy and its exclusion of the cultural, see Habermas, 1978). Moreover, the need to reconnect them is framed not so much through emphasizing the cultural contexts of economic practice, as stressed by substantivist economic anthropologies (see Clammer, 1987), nor the cultural representations of the economic to be found in work on everyday and academic economic discourses (Godelier, 1986; Gudeman, 1986; McCloskey, 1985), but rather through a focus on the *cultural materialization of the economic*, such that the cultural is increasingly what is economically produced, circulated and consumed (Crang, forthcoming a; Lash and Urry, 1994). To put it simply, as Roland Robertson does, the argument is that cultural 'diversity sells' (1994: 29).

In turn this suggests that constructed meaningful knowledges about (food) commodities and their geographies, and technologies for the material embodiment of these knowledges (e.g. storage processes that allow constructions of 'freshness'), become a crucial means of adding value to those commodities. Thus the meanings of foods - long the concern of anthropologists and other cultural critics following Levi-Strauss's aphorism that 'food has to be good to think as well as to eat' (see Caplan, 1992; Douglas, 1972; Fiddes, 1991; Mennell, 1985; Murcott, 1986) - are not only a matter of moral and cultural significance, but are also central in differentiating food products, their providers and consumers, and in adding value in markets in which there is intense pressure on profit margins. So, in the internationalized food system:

Distant places of production are . . . brought together into a network where diverse environments interact . . . through the actions of a corporate food industry . . . [But the] objective is far from that of producing the homogenized 'world steer'. . . . Rather, it is necessary to provide a whole range of differentiated food commodities as if instantly harvested from the local field for the suburban and urban platter. (Arce and Marsden, 1993: 304)

Here, distance, both cultural and spatial, and closeness are reconstituted to forge products valued both for their global sourcing and their local availability and immediacy.

As we have said, this reconstitution involves a double commodity fetish. In the first fetishization, consumed commodities and their valuations are divorced for and by consumers from the social relations of their production and provision through the construction of ignorances about the biographies and geographies of what we consume. Thus Sut Jhally argues that commodities:

... draw a veil across their own origins: products appear and disappear before consumers' eyes as if by spontaneous generation, and it is an astute shopper indeed who has any idea at all about what most things are composed of and what kinds of people made them. (Jhally, 1990: 49)

And in a similar vein, but speaking to our subject matter more closely, David Harvey reflects on his own eating habits and talks about how 'we can in practice consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relations embedded in the system that puts it upon our table'. He considers the grapes that 'sit upon the supermarket shelves mute' and emphasizes how, as consumers, 'we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they come from' (Harvey, 1990: 422-3). In turn, Robert Sack's geographical analysis of contemporary consumer worlds further develops Harvey's suggestion that consumer ignorances are spatially as well as socially constituted, arguing that commodity fetishism is forged through the increasingly distanced spatialities of commodity systems:

... the consumer's world attempts to create the impression that it has little or no connection to the production cycle and its places. It hides or disguises these extremely important connections. (Sack, 1993: 103-4)

Indeed for Sack this hiding of and ignorance about these connections is the fundamental reason for the amorality of contemporary consumer cultures, in that 'moral agents ... must be responsible and that means know the consequences of their actions' whereas ignorance of social connections 'promote[s] irresponsibility, which is immoral' (Sack, 1993: 22-3).

However, this emphasis on ignorance, important as it is in thinking about the disconnections of worlds of production and consumption, does have problems in dealing with a second fetish apparent in the consumer's world according to *Time Out*, a fetish of locality related to what Scott Lash and John Urry have termed the 'touristic quality' of much contemporary consumption. They stress the ways in which consumers in various retail spaces are increasingly being 'encouraged to gaze upon and collect the signs and images of many cultures' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 272). Seeing this as part of a broader aestheticization of everyday life (see also

Featherstone, 1991) they emphasize the proliferation within consumer culture of a diverse range of commodity-signs, all drawing on and adding to existing imageries of peoples and places. Extreme, and much cited, exemplars of this process are those instances of 'global miniaturization' where postmodern time-space compression is embodied in various sorts of 'global collections', of which *Time Out's* worldly plate (and palate) would be a far from unique example. Certainly in Britain, many individual food retail spaces increasingly promote themselves as cornucopia of globally sourced produce, in the process providing, as a British super-market executive put it to one of us, 'a geography lesson or trip round the world' (Cook, 1994: 244). The touristic quality of these constructions of food as material culture is particularly apparent when dipping into this constructed diversity is promoted as allowing consumers to bring the experience of travel to their own domestic culinary regimes (after all, a key element in holiday experiences is often the tasting, or not, of local foods). As one shoppers' guide to 'exotic' fruits puts it:

. . . the new found wealth of curious and intriguing fresh produce daily arrayed before us in street-markets, shops and supermarkets . . . [means] you need not go to India, Singapore or the West Indies – stay at home and relish them here. (Heal and Allsop, 1986: 1)

Or as a Sunday newspaper supplement special on 'tropical treats' advises:

. . . travel is the theme this spring, but if you can't get away to the fascinating places you've been reading about, you can at least cook up a little of the atmosphere in your own home . . . turn your kitchen into a Caribbean cook-house and treat yourself to some tastes you've never tried before. (Anon., undated: 113)

Arenas for dining out mark urban public space in similar ways. Particular neighbourhoods – often sites of gentrification and multicultural populations – can display a 'babel of national dishes', such that 'in one area of north London there are French, Vietnamese, Italian, Lebanese, Singaporean, Thai, Mexican, Japanese, Indian, Columbian, and Chinese restaurants within ten minutes walk of one another' (Murcott, 1995, pers. comm.) (see also Pillsbury, 1990 on the spatial locations of varying sorts of restaurants and eateries in the United States; May, 1996 on the connections of gentrification and displays of global culture; and Martens and Warde, 1995 on eating out as an urban pleasure). And these urban spaces not only allow the digestion of foods but also practices of *flânerie* in which, even if not eaten, constructions of the global and its parts can be gazed at and provide imaginary gratification (Smart, 1994).

Here, though, we want to sketch out some parameters for critical interventions in these gratifications. First, we think this means analysing the spatial formations that make them possible. And second, it means thinking about the kinds of geographical knowledges that they deploy to

produce gratification, and the understandings of self and other, here and there, bound up with those knowledges.

## GEOGRAPHIES OF DISPLACEMENT

At one level the plate *Time Out* lays before us conforms to and re-presents a long-established conceptualization of cultural geographies, one rooted in the figure of the '*cultural mosaic*' (see also Friedman, 1994; Hannerz, 1992; Rosaldo, 1993). Comprised of bounded cultural regions or areas, this figure has long inspired geographical and anthropological imaginations committed to documenting Herder's plurality of cultures and relativizing the more evolutionist and hierarchical senses of a single cultured state (see Hatch, 1983). Here, it is constructed in terms of a range of national and regional cuisines, a range that literally exhibits an A-Z of placed tastes. This draws on and reinforces a long history of constructed associations between foods, places and peoples, associations epitomized in conceptions of national, regional and local cuisines, and in the use of foods as emblems and markers of national, regional and local identities (see Murcott, 1995). But the mosaic is not the only spatial figure that this globalized plate draws on. It also depends upon, and refers to, a variety of '*cultural flows and networks*' (Appadurai, 1989; Chambers, 1990), in particular of migrations and of tourisms. We can 'give our tongues a holiday' because a world of 'foreigners' and 'foreign flavours' has come to cosmopolitan London. One of the key conceptual agendas raised by this fragment of material culture is therefore how these two differing figurations of the geographies of culture are to be articulated.

Perhaps the most usual relationship constructed is one of a mutually supportive opposition of locally meaningful cultural artefacts and practices and homogenizing invasive flows. In pessimistic portraits of culinary culture the spectre of McDonaldization looms large here (Ritzer, 1993), as fast-food standardization provides a contemporary echo of much longer fears of global homogenization, and, at least in Britain, Americanization (Hebdige, 1988). The growth of globally distributed fast-food franchise chains is claimed to 'erase [*sic*] the differences between "this place" and "that" ' (MacClancey, 1992: 193) through the establishment of 'a new order and scale of experience . . . a powerful culture which overwhelms local and regional experience' (Peet, 1989: 176). In more optimistic accounts the cultural outcomes are viewed differently, but the logic remains the same, as local cultural creativities are seen as indigenizing the standardized cultural materials of global commodity flows (see, for example, Hannerz, 1992). In culinary culture particular emphasis might be laid on how the arts of cooking and presentation allow food ingredients to be locally and creatively re-worked. Evidential support might be drawn from histories of how 'foreign' foods and 'imported' cuisines have been adapted to fit in

with the availability of key ingredients and culinary expectations in their new settings (Levenstein, 1985; MacClancey, 1992).

However, it may be more profitable to break out of the mutually supportive opposition of homogenizing and invasive commodity flows and either submitting or resisting, but always distinctive, place-based traditional cultures altogether. Instead, we want to suggest that we might think of foods, and other material cultures, as geographically constituted through processes of '*displacement*' (see also Crang, forthcoming b). Never a tightly defined concept, the notion of displacement has nonetheless been used by a number of writers to evoke a sense of a geographical world where cultural lives and economic processes are characterized not only by the points in space where they take and make place, but also by the movements to, from and between those points (Clifford, 1988, 1992; Robertson et al., 1994). To elaborate, in terms of food consumption the figure of displacement might be used to suggest an understanding whereby: processes of food consumption are cast as local, in the sense of contextual; but where those contexts are recognized as being opened up by and constituted through connections into any number of networks, which extend beyond delimiting boundaries of particular places (see also Massey, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1993, 1995); furthermore, where imagined and performed representations about '*origins*', '*destinations*' and forms of '*travel*' surround these networks' various flows; and where consumers (and other actors in food commodity systems) find themselves socially and culturally positioned, and socially and culturally position themselves, not so much through placed locations as in terms of their entanglements with these flows and representations.

More specifically, this suggests three interrelated geographies that constitute food-consuming worlds. First, the geographies of the local places of food consumption or usage, operating as '*spaces of identity practice*' (Friedman, 1994). Second, the spatial structures of often globally extensive '*systems of provision*' (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 20) that stretch beyond places of food consumption but which are vital in their constitution, providing resources not only of foods themselves, but also of knowledges about how to value and use them, domestic technologies for their use, and non-domestic sites for their consumption. And third, there are the geographical knowledges associated with the materials that flow through these systems of provision, which for consumers form part of the discursive complexes within which they are increasingly asked reflexively to manage their food consumption habits and their selves. These three constitutive geographies suggest something other than the opposition of placed culinary cultures and imported/exported global commodity flows. The geographies of these foods and culinary cultures are not to be cast in terms of location in fenced-off spatial arenas, and need to be divorced from what Doreen Massey calls introverted senses of place in

which a them and us mentality is sustained through constructions of there and here (Massey, 1993). Instead, emphasis is laid on an extroverted sense of place in which boundaries are seen as contestable and contested social constructions and where any here/us is constituted through its connections into the there/them. Thus, any placed cuisine depends upon those connections, not simply historical accretion or stasis within that place. And, in turn, there is no simple or unconstructed association of foods and places; rather, placings of foods are active social constructions (Mintz, 1985), as borne witness to most obviously by the contemporary fabrication or simulation of many 'ethnic' cuisines (e.g. *chilli con carne* as a Texan construction of a Mexican dish) (see Smart, 1994: 177) but, crucially, equally true of all such placings including those more commonly valued as authentic.

As an aside, this means that the figure of displacement is not synonymous with conceptions of cultural *creolization* or *hybridity* (see Hannerz, 1992), inasmuch that it is not about a cultural mixing due to a 'leaky mosaic' (Friedman, 1995: 85). Instead, it suggests that there are no pure cultures to mix, if purity means bounded exclusivity. And it emphasizes how processes of displacement are not some recent disturbance of past cultural forms. Indeed, it is important to note that these geographies of 'displacement' are not solely a contemporary phenomenon, though they may be increasingly notable and noted in the modern world's cultural economies. For example, Jack Goody has pointed out how:

It is difficult to conceive of Italian food without pasta and tomato paste. But the use of pasta may have arrived from China via Germany only in the 15th century . . . Stouff's study of the 14th and 15th centuries concludes by denying that there was an original Provençal cuisine in the late Middle Ages. . . . The outstanding feature of 'traditional' Provençal cooking of the 19th and 20th centuries, olive oil, was used only for eggs, fish and frying beans. Otherwise it was the fat of salted pork, used particularly to flavour the soup of peas, beans and above all cabbage. This was the basic food, he claims, of the ordinary folk of Provence, just as it was in the rest of Europe at that time. . . . 'Traditional Provençal cooking', like many other folk-ways, only emerged in recent times, a salutary thought for those attached either to the holistic or timeless view of culture. (Goody, 1982: 36, cited Murcott, 1995: 12)

Thus regional cuisines are invented traditions (inventions in which the genre of cookery books often seem to have played a particularly important role; see Appadurai, 1988). Many of the most basic, and 'traditional', ingredients in European culinary cultures such as tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla and chillies were 'discovered' overseas in the early stages of imperialist 'adventure', brought back 'home', and 'domesticated'. And many characteristically European foods – for example the English 'cuppa' of tea – were produced through, and continue to depend upon, networks

of imperial connections, connections that comprise 'the outside history that is inside the history of the English' (Hall, 1991a: 49) (see also Smith, 1992). In these cultural spaces, designations of cultural hybridity, with their emphasis on previously separate cultures mixing, are not inherently illegitimate, but they must themselves be recognized as constructed geographical knowledges, locally produced as part of situationally specific identity projects, and, like all such knowledges, constructed from within the spaces of material culture and not from some Olympian viewpoint above them. Jonathan Friedman makes a similar point using the example of the dominant non-hybrid understandings of pasta-based Italian cuisine:

The introduction of pasta into the cuisine of the Italian peninsula is a process of globalization, and the final elaboration of a pasta-based Italian cuisine is, in metaphorical terms, a process of cultural syncretism, or perhaps creolization. But such mixture is only interesting in the practice of local identity. . . . Thus the fact pasta became Italian, and that its Chinese origin became irrelevant is the essential culture-producing process in this case. Whether origins are maintained or obliterated is a question of the practice of identity. (Friedman, 1995: 74)

So, foods do not simply come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of various imaginative geographies. The differentiation of foods through their geographies is an active intervention in their cultural geographies rather than the passive recording of absolute cultural geographic differences. In consequence practices and modes of differentiation require critical analysis. With that in mind we now turn to a sketch of some of the 'geographical knowledges' being used to differentiate foods in contemporary 'British' culinary cultures.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGES**

So far we have suggested that consumers' knowledges about foods' geographies are significant in both culinary cultural practices and to the economics of the food industry (in the latter vein Alberto Arce and Terry Marsden have argued that '[a food] product's monetary value is increasingly associated with consumer knowledge about the commodity in question' [Arce and Marsden, 1993: 303]). These knowledges are not just images projected on to commodities and gazed at by those encountering them but are also resources for incorporating meaningful commodities into varying social selves and arenas, in part through embodied performances of those meanings. In thinking about them, we clearly need to ask questions of quantity (how much do consumers and other actors within food systems know about the commodities that they are involved

with?), but this in itself is not enough. It examines only the first commodity fetish, the construction of ignorance. We also need to understand historical and spatial variations in knowledges, their textual constructions, and their operations within fields of power. We need to deal with questions of source (where are these knowledges produced?), quality (what kinds of knowledges do consumers have?), and economic and cultural effects (in particular the economic and cultural surpluses extracted through them; see Chow, 1993: 144–64).

Let us begin with questions of source, or the production of these geographical knowledges. The notion of what we have called the 'first' commodity fetish stresses how the displacement of commodities from worlds of production into worlds of consumption produces a vacuum of meaning and knowledge to be filled. Those pessimistic about the politics of consumption tend to emphasize the dominance of various corporate knowledge providers, in particular the promotional industries, in this refilling process (see, for example, Sack, 1993). On the other hand, more optimistic portraits of consumption and the geographical knowledges bound up with them stress the potential for fetishized commodities to be re-filled by consumers themselves, through their own uses of them. As Susan Buck-Morris puts it:

... this does not prevent them [commodities] from being appropriated by consumers as wish images within the emblem books of their private dream world. For this to occur, estrangement of commodities from their initial meaning as use-values produced by human labour is in fact their pre-requisite. It is, after all, the nature of the allegorical object that once the initial hollowing out of meaning has occurred and a new signification has been arbitrarily inserted into it, this meaning 'can at any time be removed in favour of any other'. (Buck-Morris, 1989: 182)

But perhaps rather than choosing between these two options – of provided images or consumer arts – the production of geographical knowledges in displacing commodity systems might better be seen through an analysis of the 'circuits of culinary culture' within which foods and knowledge about them are provided and consumed (see also Jackson and Thrift, 1995). The concept of 'circuits of culture' was developed in the field of media studies (Johnson, 1986) to stress how flows of values and information are not simply imposed on passive viewers or readers by media institutions, but rather constructed and reconstructed through the interrelations of the full range of actors involved in the production, circulation and consumption of those meanings. So, the geographical knowledges associated with foods can potentially be produced at a variety of sites within the 'worlds' of those products by a variety of actors involved in their provision and consumption. And within these circuits there are two-way interrelations between providers and users, in that consumers actively use the resources provided to them but in turn providers attempt

to direct these uses (for instance through recipes and serving suggestions or through provision outlet design). In turn, the geographical knowledges associated with foods will be forged through the interrelations – and significant non-interrelations – of actors throughout these circuits. These interrelations involve a variety of what we might call 'representational' processes: (1) of voicings and 'mufflings' (both being active processes, as we cannot assume the presence of pre-existing voices awaiting either opportunities for expression or repressive silencings); (2) of knowledge translations (aimed at both informing others and protecting self-interest); (3) of interest constructions, in which actors claim to know and represent other actors in the commodity system (see Marsden et al., 1994); and (4) of surplus extractions, in which economic and cultural capitals are increased through these various representational acts.

There are, then, a number of potential research areas in thinking about the social production of such cultural geographical knowledges: the historically, spatially and socially variable economic valuations associated with differing kinds of geographical lores and the cultural meanings they embody (which are clearly not only dependent upon those knowledges but also the market and other regulatory conditions under which they are deployed); the degree to which homological valuations exist across commodity-specific systems; the extent to which particular kinds of knowledges may be becoming an increasingly dominant strategy in some markets for product differentiation and value addition; the reasonings used by the range of actors in commodity systems both to value differing knowledges and to guide their production (and here the degree to which knowledge producers construct knowledges for others' interests as well as their own, and the ways in which these other interests are represented, seems a crucial issue); the changing institutional landscapes of who produces knowledges and the degrees to which those knowledges are trusted/valued; the active knowledge constructing and critiquing processes of consumers (paying particular attention to where knowledges are gained and how they are used); and so on. But answers to such agendas will have to be developed elsewhere, as we now want to move on to the forms of geographical knowledge that can be gleaned by consumers within the circuits of culinary culture, leading into a speculation about their potential for critical commentaries and critical consumer practices.

Cultural circuits' representational politics produce and deploy varying kinds of geographical knowledge about food commodities. Schematically we can consider three that may be constructed for and by food consumers, concerning: *settings* (the contexts in which they can and should be used); *biographies* (how they move about the food system); and *origins* (where foods come from). Geographical knowledges about settings evaluate the appropriate uses of foods and contexts for their consumption. This involves knowledge about the resources needed for domestic

preparation, such as recipes and kitchen tools, and judgements on the appropriate physical and social environments for consumption. Knowledges concerning the biographies of foods' production and distribution (i.e. knowledges about how foods have been made and how they have reached consumers), whilst more generally apparent, are stressed most explicitly in various 'ethical' food products, whether those be fair-trade products such as Cafe Direct, or meat products that are 'animal friendly'. Knowledges about 'origins' can take varying forms. They might construct geographies of specific places or regions of product origin, constructions often associated with meanings of tradition and authenticity. A highly codified example are the 'geographical indications' attached to various agricultural products - including *appellations d'origine* (which specify the locally distinctive character of production) as well as more general indications of source - which are used in and contested through international trade agreements such as the GATT and the regulatory practices of national governments and bodies such as the EU. And/or they might involve constructed geographies much more loosely expressive of cultural differences; examples include 'foreign' foods, or, increasingly commonly, 'exotic' and 'ethnic' foods, and their apparent opposite, 'everyday' and 'familiar foods' (see Anon., 1986; Gallini, 1995; Henderson, 1992; Keynote, 1988; MSI, 1988; Mintz, 1985; Paulson-Box and Williamson, 1990; Vietmayer, 1985).

Let us take as our starting point this last set of knowledges that loosely associate products with 'other' peoples and places, for example through constructions of 'ethnic foods'. At the outset it is important to note that much of what we now refer to as 'ethnic cuisine' has a long history of entanglement in 'British' culinary culture, and, indeed, what we now refer to as 'British' culinary culture has a long history of entanglement in these 'ethnic' cuisines. There is a well-documented history of Chinese eating houses in port cities like Liverpool, London's Limehouse and Cardiff, frequented by members of the Chinese (and other) maritime working classes; of a taste for Indian food being built up through the spice trade and later boosted by the returning British Raj; of French cuisine being brought back to the UK by the British military billeted in Paris in the years after the battle of Waterloo; or of cuisines being brought to the UK in the 1930s by Jewish refugees settling in areas of London such as Hendon, Finchley and Hampstead (for this history see Bishop, 1991; Driver, 1983; Lauriou, 1985). So any distinction of 'British' and 'ethnic' food is a very particular way of understanding these culinary geographies. However, contemporary commentaries, especially in the food trade press, increasingly do employ that distinction, and claim that it is in the last 20 years or so that 'ethnic cuisines' have really proliferated in the 'British diet'. This is seen as a response to: increased levels of international tourism, promoting awareness of and experimentation with such foods;

the increased exposure of 'ethnic cuisine' in the media, through travel and cookery features and most notably the growing cookery book market; the association of some ethnic cuisines with healthy eating practices; new innovations in distribution technologies increasing the speed, quality and year-round availability of produce from worldwide sources; the massive growth in the 'ethnic' restaurant and take-away trade; and the increase in disposable incomes of British consumers. So whilst we need to question any distancing of 'ethnic foods' from a constructed traditional and ethnically homogenous past, with its implicit denial of past multicultural British cultures, we can recognize that notions of 'ethnic' food are increasingly being 'served up' within culinary circuits themselves. One form in which they appear is as loose expressions of cultural difference. They may signal this difference through associations with particular constructed ethnicities. Warren Belasco highlights the large-scale corporate commodification of ethnicities so as to offer '[i]n an otherwise bland, highly rationalised and bureaucratic environment . . . authentic foods suggest[ing] a smattering of spice, irregularity, and eccentricity, of real people and places, of old-fashioned honest labour and honest materials' (Belasco, 1989: 262). Or a more mix-and-match difference may be constructed within individual eateries or cuisines: at the upper price range an example is 'haute-California' cuisine, which 'crosse[s] boundaries not just within the same room or menu but on the same plate – as in crispy potato latkes (pancakes) with creme fraiche and three caviars, mu shu fajitas, and pasta squares with Japanese herbs and shredded chicken in ginger broth' (Belasco, 1989: 236); or, to take a more mid-market UK example, the Beefeater restaurant chain's recent introduction of 'ethnic' fare under an appeal to '[d]iscover the world and eat it', where its 'traditional' menu items are complemented by one dish each of Indian, Mexican, Italian, Thai, Louisianan and French food (chicken tikka masala, vegetable chilli skins, chicken pasta supreme, pork satay, cajun seven spice prawns, and halibut and spinach florentine respectively).

Just what the actual representational politics associated with such geographical differentiations are will depend on the varied processes of voicing, translation, interest construction and surplus extraction going on in particular circuits. But the broad terms of the debate over them is signalled by Anneke Van Otterloo, in her study of the place of 'Indonesian', 'Italian' and 'Greek' food in Dutch culinary culture, where she poses the question, 'if nationals and foreigners sit down at each other's table, [do] the two groups become closer?' (Van Otterloo, 1987), and by bell hooks's more critical and pessimistic reading of 'eating the other' where, although accepting that 'the message that acknowledgment and exploration of racial difference can be pleasurable represents a breakthrough', she argues that '[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning, that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (hooks, 1992: 39,

21). hooks's pessimism stems not least from the fact that, as Dena Attar has observed, while we may 'report that "ethnic" foods are becoming more popular, meaning that particular category is doing well, the categories themselves have not changed' (Attar, 1985: 13–14).

One way to adjudicate such claims is to take hooks's argument as one about the superficiality of the knowledges provided in consumer cultures, a superficiality that prevents any real engagement with cultural difference and promotes instead the use of signs and voices of difference which are recouped for the self-designated mainstream's own ends. In this vein hooks writes about:

... the commodification of difference [and how it] promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualisation. (hooks, 1992: 31)

The question then becomes what re-contextualization is required. If we focus on the superficiality of consumer knowledges, then we might argue that what is required is more knowledge, and more accurate and realistic knowledge, about those 'Others' being consumed. We might suggest, then, that what is needed is more geographical knowledge about specific places and peoples of 'origin', and less loose expressions of difference. And we academics could claim our traditional and well-sanctioned didactic role of providing that more accurate and specific knowledge, correcting the misapprehensions and ignorances propagated in culinary circuits and consumer culture more generally. Geographers like us might especially appeal against the decontextualization apparent in consumer cultures in terms of how they cheapen our relations with place and promote inauthenticity (for a case of this, see Sack, 1993).

But whilst such a critical tack fits neatly with comforting and easy conceptions of pedagogy and can fulfil a role in complicating our engagements with difference, it obviously has its dangers. It can parallel and support the cultural and economic valorizations made through constructions of 'authenticity', and is thus easily recuperated into existing and elitist consumer and producer cultures. Focusing on wine, for example, Warren Moran has argued that geographical indications are a form of intellectual property, and 'a means for the social and industrial groups with rights to them to protect and distinguish their products', thereby controlling supply and increasing price (Moran, 1993: 264). And Jon May has noted how such identifications likewise valorize consumers' tastes (May, 1996). Moreover, providing more deeply textured accounts, as critical analyses of academic geographical and anthropological knowledges have shown, does not in itself escape the broad construction of a non-ethnic national identity to which 'ethnic' Others are opposed, though

this may be enacted more tightly through interlinked conceptions of regional and institutional differences (Fardon, 1990). And these tighter understandings of regional differences enact a particular way of conceptualizing place and its cultural geographies. For example, Bodenhausen defines *appellation d'origine* as 'the geographical name of a country, region or locality which serves to designate a product as originating therein, the quality or characteristics of which are due exclusively or essentially to the geographical environment, including natural or human factors' (Bodenhausen, cited in Moran, 1993: 265). Here, essential qualities of a product are associated with some essence of place, an essence rooted in the soil and climate but also in traditions of production (so that, for example, French vineyards when mechanizing cultivation were very careful not to change row widths or vine spacings, instead developing new tractors that could deal with this). Regions are defined by the character of their physical and cultural environments; and we have a clear example of a conception of a mosaic of traditional regional cultures being mobilized against the spectre of invasion and homogenization. As we have seen above, for many cultural commentators the cultural locations of difference and similarity set out in such meaningful mosaics need to be thoroughly 'scrambled' (Clifford, 1989: 179) through the recognition of rather different sorts of cultural geographies, geographies that mean that any attempt to reassemble such mosaics is doomed to gross symbolic brutality.

An alternative response to a perceived superficiality of consumers' knowledges of commodities might therefore be to emphasize commodities' biographies of distribution and production. So when British supermarkets tap into discourses of the paradisaical Golden Age to present us with tropical produce along with images of fruit falling off trees for relaxed collection and consumption, we can point to all too many histories of colonial conquest, exploitation and duplicity in the tropics, as well as contemporary conditions of production, to counteract them. As Cynthia Enloe does with the banana, and its promotion through the figure of Carmen Miranda, we could show the veil of fetishism for what it is – a mask of myths and smokescreens – and lay bare the real histories and geographies of connection in which commodity production and consumption are implicated (Enloe, 1989). To use Harvey's description cited earlier in this article, we can apply a critical dusting to grapes and other foods and pick up the fingerprints of oppression on them. We can expose these truly obscene geographies, upsetting our consuming pleasures and maybe even making us feel a little sick. But whilst there may be a certain purifying de-toxification in emptying our consuming stomachs like this, this is again – inevitably – not an unproblematic critical practice. Thickening the connections into systems of provision runs the danger of evacuating the realm of consumption altogether. At its worst, this may

mean ignoring realms of usage altogether, or at least viewing them as totally determined by systems of provision, as consumers are guided by those who give them various knowledges. More mildly it focuses critical intervention on providing other voices and stories for consumers to hear, and pays less attention to these processes of listening. And, in casting consumption as a place of choice between competing moralities – those provided by commodity suppliers and their promotional entourages and those provided by more critical commentators – it can only wish away culinary and other consumer cultures' roles in flexible self-identifications and pleasurable sociality, and position itself in opposition to the hedonistic possibilities of modern consumption (a positioning that is located nearer to some consumer cultures than others, hence, perhaps, the socially and sectorally differential adoption of 'ethical' consumerism).

A complementary set of critical approaches may therefore be to focus less on deepening and thickening superficial consumer knowledges, and more on working on the surfaces that commodities have. It might mean that we endorse Michael Taussig's call to:

. . . neither resist nor admonish the fetish quality of modern culture, but rather to acknowledge, even submit to its fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions. Get with it! Get in touch with the fetish! (Taussig, 1992: 122)

One rather fashionable way of working on commodity surfaces is to polish them up and smooth them out, in pursuit of a radical passivity that refuses to find or construct meaning at all and that thereby resists reclaiming cultural difference into an economy of the self. Here, culinary circuits' geographical knowledges might be deconstructed in order to resist all attempts to reclaim geographical difference in terms sensible to a constructing 'us' (see Doel, 1994). Alternatively, we may aim (as critics and consumers) to rough up commodity surfaces, playing on and with them with the aim of recognizing, perhaps creating, 'moments of rupture in a cultural fabric that appears all too continuous' (Willis, 1991: 42), for example through various practices of montage and juxtaposition (see Pred, 1995). This too can be aimed at refusing closures of meaning: for example by reworking surfaces, as when Carmen Miranda, banana and tropical fruit icon and movie star, is repositioned into a symbol of hyper-exotic kitsch and camp; or by converting exoticism into a troubling 'aesthetics of the diverse' that refuses capture but escapes blandness (see Clifford, 1988: 152–63 on the writings of Victor Segalen). Or it can, in the spirit of multi-locale ethnography (Marcus, 1995), involve counterposing surfaces from different moments and places in a commodity's biography, not claiming any as more real, but disrupting their separation from each other. Significant absences could be made present, supposed heres and theres could be juxtaposed, and relations between places – perhaps

causal, perhaps paradoxical, perhaps based in simultaneity – could be made central (see Said, 1993; and also Crang, 1992). An example of this aesthetic, although it is structured within a narrative of reaching behind the fetish in its move from spaces of consumption in San Francisco to those of production in Hawaii and the Philippines, is Amos Gitai's documentary film *Ananas*, as it orchestrates the meaning of the Dole pineapple through overlapping and interrupting fragments of sound and vision drawn from its mobile life (Cook and Crang, 1996; Willeman, 1992). Or, the montage might be concerned with setting surfaces of today with their historical precursors in a disruptive commemoration: for example, setting supermarkets' use of paradisaical discourses of tropical fecundity and simplicity next to their past legitimations of colonial conquest and exploitation (see Cook, forthcoming).

There are many ways, then, to get with the fetish. But in all cases they mean paying less attention to deepening or thickening surfaces, and more to thinking about their productivities, what they are used for. The issue becomes not, then, the authenticity or accuracy of commodity surfaces, but rather the spatial settings and social itineraries that are established through their usage.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our intention in this article has been to use one set of cultural materials, foods, and one particular cultural conceit – a fashioning of London as a collection of the world's cuisines – to work through a broader argument about the character of material cultural geographies. Claims that London provides the world on a plate to its diners, and the material interconnections and flows underlying such claims, cannot, we have suggested, be understood unless we break out of two very powerful framings of the spaces of cultural life: on the one hand, that of the mosaic of distinctive local cultures; and, on the other, that of the flows of materials between them. Instead we have argued for an understanding of the cultural geographies of displacement, an understanding in which the local contextualities of cultural practice are stressed, but within which that contextualism is always understood as produced through networks of connections and disconnections, circuits of cultural flows, and constructed representations or knowledges of the geographies of those circuits and the materials flowing through them. We have paid particular attention to the last of these, the geographical knowledges constructed for and by those encountering cultural materials. These knowledges, we have argued, can be critically engaged with through a variety of tactics, and it has not been our intention to promote one of these to the exclusion of others. However, our contention has been that it may be more productive to pursue those tactics of intervention that conceive of them-

selves as working with the surface fetishisms of commodities rather than as reaching behind surface veils to reveal the 'real' material cultures hidden behind them.

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