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GENERAL ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

Kampong French: A Tale of Doubtful Authenticity

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Abstract

This paper refers to accounts of previous journeys on the ‘laksa trail’ in search of Peranakan cuisine and its sensory nuances. These journeys have produced narratives of migration and diaspora, shaped by the re-location of dishes and ingredients from local villages, coffee houses and home kitchens of Malaysia and Singapore to cafés and restaurants of Adelaide, Australia and Toronto, Canada. On this occasion, however, the argument comes full circle, focusing on nostalgic tastes, smells and textures that resonate in Singapore itself. The intention is to trouble meanings of authenticity in terms of specific communities’ dishes, ingredients and culinary rituals, and to frame the argument through the rich body of scholarship emerging since Fernando Ortiz’s seminal discussion of transculturation in *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995). Kampong French, established in the lush gardens of Singapore’s Open Farm Community, provides a ‘pop-up’ example of transculturation within a specific culinary contact zone (Pratt 1996; [Farrer 2015](#))—a sense of the plasticity of dishes, ingredients and meanings. It may be tempting to dismiss these re-inventions of traditional dishes and ingredients as opportunistic seizure of the ‘exotic’ or simply as expressions of creative entrepreneurialism, or even as ‘inauthentic’ adventuring on behalf of the palates of privileged middle-class consumers. Unravelling the political implications of these experiments in nomadism, however, suggests there is more to learn about meanings of authenticity in historically ‘mixed’ communities—about authenticity’s less obvious refractions of movement, ethnicity, identity and place and, in particular, about the complex ways these meanings are ingested in twenty-first century multi-culinary global cities.

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Ethnography; Food; Singapore; Authenticity; Contact Zone; Global Cities

Grace Tay savours the sight of fish porridge, *nasi lemak*, ‘spicy, smelly, vermilion-coloured *otak-otak* wrapped in roasted banana leaves, and while she re-tells the story of her mother’s life in Japanese-occupied Singapore, and then in Malaysia in the 1960s, she wonders, ‘How is it that my dead mother’s tastebuds now coat my tongue and nudge my cravings?’

[Hsu-Ming Teo \(2002\)](#), commenting on a scene from her novel *Love and Vertigo*

[T]he familiarity of the birthland is both conjured and physically actualized through fragrant whiffs of memory. ... The frying pan has the power to melt boundaries by creating an undifferentiated territoriality between France and Guadeloupe, a ‘sensorial interstice’ that suspends spatial hierarchies through culinary reconstructions.

[Brinda Mehta \(2005\)](#), commenting on a scene from Giselle Pineau’s *Un Papillon dans la Cite*

Unlike Grace Tay, my tongue reminds me not of dead mothers and not even of Singapore, but certainly of the ‘spicy, smelly,’ fishy tastes and aromas of market cafes in Adelaide, an Australian city ambivalently positioned geographically ‘in,’ and yet, not quite culturally ‘in,’ the Asian region. I have told the story of my first taste of *laksa* many times. This is a story that continues to haunt me, prompting many retellings as a significant event in my culinary biography. The bare bones are these: having lunch with friends at Adelaide’s Asian Gourmet Café in the early 1980s, I realise I’ve never eaten before a spicy Southeast Asian soup known as laksa: ‘The heat of chilli, the crunch of bean sprouts and the softness of the bean curd and coconut milk—all of these dance on my tongue. I struggle with chopsticks and stain the front of my dress. It is a moment of epiphany’ ([Duruz 2010](#): 45).

For nearly forty years such a moment has prompted journeys on the ‘laksa trail’ in search of one of the Malacca Strait’s distinctive cuisines—Nyonya cooking— together with its sensory nuances.¹ These journeys have produced narratives of migration and diaspora, tracing the ‘mixed’ origins and re-location of dishes from the *kampongs* [villages], *kopitiams* [coffee houses] and home kitchens of Malaysia and Singapore to the cafes and restaurants of Adelaide, Australia and Toronto, Canada ([Duruz 2007](#); [Duruz 2019a](#)). Typically, these narratives have prompted questions such as: how well do historically mixed fusion dishes travel from Southeast Asian port cities to cities of the west? And does the contribution of these dishes and cooking styles to fashionable global fusions and new hybrid cuisines inevitably mean loss—producing, in Darra Goldstein’s words, simply a ‘murky mélange’ ([2005](#): iv)? Questions like these never fail to intrigue me.

On this particular journey, however, I intend to trouble meanings of authenticity—in terms of specific communities’ dishes, ingredients and culinary rituals—even further, drawing on my previous writing as well as current research preoccupations. The argument will be framed by the rich body of scholarship that has emerged since Fernando Ortiz’s seminal *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995)—scholarship that continues to focus on global movements of people and food, and the effect of these movements on ‘mixed’ communities. Primarily following the work of [Katarzyna J. Cwiertka \(2002\)](#), [James Farrer \(2015\)](#), and [Mary Louise Pratt \(2007\)](#), I intend to unravel some of the complexities of culinary interactions between different social groups, to ground my theorising in the immediacy of everyday tastes and aromas and to use the motif of ‘entanglement’ (a way of re-imagining Ortiz’s ‘transculturation,’ perhaps) to challenge sharp distinctions

1 [The Peranakan] community in Melaka traces its ancestry back to 17th century and to intermarriages/cohabitation between Baba Chinese men and local Melakan women ... The Peranakan Chinese or Baba-Nyonya identity is ‘an indigenized Chinese identity’ symbolized by adoption and adaptation of Malay language, fashion, methods of food preparation (including the use of specific local ingredients) ... Their men were known as “Baba” and the women, “Nyonya”. ...[T]he [descended] Babas were local-born [as opposed to foreign-born] Chinese ...’ ([Duruz & Khoo 2015](#): 126).

between historical examples of fusion cooking and supposedly ‘new’ chef-led examples of experiment in taste and ingredient combinations (Crang, cited in [Lisa Law 2001](#): 276; [Ortiz 1995](#): 102–03).

In terms of the methodological specifics, I tease out three narratives stemming from my fieldwork in Adelaide, Toronto and Singapore.² In regard to the first two narratives, I have written about them at some length previously ([2007](#); [2019a](#)) so the discussion of these will be brief, chiefly serving to set the scene for a more substantial reflection on the third case study. At the same time, I opt for a microcosmic approach throughout. This will involve constructing textual fragments of culinary bordercrossing as ways to deploy conceptually meanings of ‘origins,’ ‘syncretism’ and ‘traditions’ in relation to Southeast Asian food cultures, with the intention of capturing some of their slipperiness and mutability—in fact, their doubtfulness. And here I want to draw on Ien Ang’s endorsement of the concept of hybridity for analysing ambivalence of identity positioning, although, for our purposes, hybridity will be mobilised to serve the productivity of doubt ([Ang 2001](#): 200–01). Ang herself says:

[M]ixture [in cultural/racial terms] is still often inevitably thought of as a contamination, as a breach of purity, an infringement of ‘identity’ ... In short, hybridity is not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about friction and tension, about ambivalence and incommensurability, about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference. ([2001](#): 200)

It is that ‘fundamental *uneasiness* inherent in our global condition of togetherness-in-difference’ ([2001](#): 200; original emphasis) that Ang sees as a refusal of complacency and of ‘them’ and ‘us’ distinctions. This healthy doubtfulness, this questioning, will form a useful thread throughout the argument that follows.

Theoretical Directions

To map further co-ordinates for this doubtful travel, we briefly consider, first of all, resonances from the writing of Fernando Ortiz. It is productive here to imagine that transculturation, a term originally coined by Ortiz and employed by other writers since, might offer further nuance to the argument ([Ortiz 1995](#): 97–103). With its meanings both of cultural acquisition and loss within zones of contact, and meanings of creating something new to replace stories of origins, transculturation becomes a useful tool for confronting definitive interpretations of authenticity and ownership while shaking the illusion of a necessarily equitable exchange ([Ortiz 1995](#): 102–03; [Pratt 2007](#): 7–8; [Millington 2005](#): 228–30; [Farrer 2015](#): 8). I would never argue, for example, that my ‘borrowed’ laksa is not conveniently and enthusiastically appropriated by the Anglo-Celtic mainstream to enhance its own positioning within cultural imaginaries of cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, Ortiz argues against transculturation as a simple act of appropriation by a dominant culture (usually assumed to be ‘the West’) from a less dominant and exoticized culture but instead insists that complexities in the process of exchange must be taken into account. He outlines these complexities in the following terms:

I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture [acculturation] ... but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. (102–03)

² Interviews were conducted in 2003 with Khut Chee Lan and Khut Kok Chin, proprietors of Malacca Corner, a market restaurant in Adelaide, South Australia and in 2015 with Lauren, Zenn and Trish Soo at their restaurant Soos in Toronto, Canada.

Implicit in these arguments is that such interactions between two cultures are not necessarily one directional or even symmetrical but both cultures are affected, indeed changed, as a result. Cwiertka expresses this as ‘the continuous tension between homogenisation and heterogenization, the interconnectedness between the global and the local’ (2002: 1–2). Perhaps echoing this tension, my first-taste laksa story could be reworked as a specific migrant dish becoming mainstream (and, concomitantly, absorbed into meanings of ‘Australian’ identity) on the one hand, while its tastes are localised, together forming distinctive signifiers of everyday ‘ways of operating,’ on the other (de Certeau 1984: xi). This mix of gain and loss held in tension, I argue, is significant for understanding the politics of food exchanges. Cwiertka’s discussion of ‘imagination as a social practice’ (2002: 7) becomes important for shaping contemporary arguments focusing on the value of recognising such interconnectedness, together with the new cultural forms, vested in hybridity, that emerge.

As well as processes of transculturation, the concept of place itself as a site of human activity, is central in framing my argument. I am indebted to Pratt for her discussion of contact zones which she defines as ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—such as colonialism or slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today’ (2007: 7). Furthermore, Pratt, in an oblique acknowledgement of Ortiz, declares ‘Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone’ (2007: 7). Farrer, in his turn, reworks Pratt’s conceptualisation of contact zones (2007: 8) as culinary contact zones (2015: 8–9). While Pratt (2007: 8) views such zones as spaces of unequal encounter in which ‘people geographically and historically separated come in contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, racial inequality and intractable conflict,’ Farrer uses food as a medium through which such encounters may occur, their textures shaped by culinary negotiations and exchanges. Farrer elaborates: ‘As cuisines and the people producing them move across borders, the spaces of food production and consumption become culinary contact zones or spaces of cultural friction and creativity, including settings such as kitchens or virtual spaces such as online communities’ (2015: 8). The tensions of unequal encounter and the identification of spaces of ‘cultural friction and creativity’ implied by these potential analytic tools are ones I am keen to explore through the doubtful narratives outlined here.

With these conceptual tools—transculturation, contact zones, culinary contact zones and imagination as social practice—and with recognition of their intellectual genealogies—I return to two earlier sites of research before entering and spending longer with the third. I pay tribute to the extant writers mentioned to date, and others like Lisa Heldke (2003: 45–59), Uma Narayan (1997: 183–84) and Elspeth Probyn (2000: 81–83), who have grappled with issues of authenticity and appropriation, particularly in relation to mobile food cultures, but wish to build on this intellectual heritage and, perhaps, add further nuance and indicate points of tension within it.

‘Knowing Laksa’: Nyonya Secrets Relocated and Transformed

In remembering my epiphany in a laksa-stained dress in Asian Gourmet Café in the early 1980s, I am not alone. Tastes of chilli, lemongrass, belachan, coconut milk and candlenuts haunt Adelaide Central Market’s, and indeed the city’s, collective imaginary. It is customary for local non-Asian residents to indulge in the nostalgic exercise of exchanging laksa stories: ‘Do you remember your first taste of laksa?’ they now ask, licking their lips, wondering at, and proud of, the extent to which strange tastes have become normalised. Among my friends it is the Asian Gourmet Café or Malacca Corner that they remember, with both businesses still thriving in the depths of Adelaide’s Central Market. For others it is Hawkers Corner (the forerunner of current Adelaide Asian food courts) or Twains. Although the latter is no longer in existence it is fondly remembered by Anglo-Australians for their first encounter usually as university students or workers from nearby offices, with meanings of ‘hawker’ associated with the lingering tastes of cheap, spicy, ‘exotic’ street food and its providers (Duruz 2007: 193–95). While for some this was the taste of home

itself, for non-Asian generations, these cafes became invested with meanings of coming of age—culinarily, culturally and multiculturally. As Catherine Murphy observes: ‘On Friday nights customers still queue for tables at these cafés where they first tasted authentic Asian food’ (2003: 129–30).

Central to this narrative example of the localisation of laksa in Australia and in Adelaide,³ are the figures of Kut Chee Lan and her husband Khut Kok Chin.⁴ After her marriage in Melaka in 1959, Khut Chee Lan became the chief cook in her husband’s household, not only achieving mastery of Hakka dishes (both sets of parents were from Guandong Province, China) but also of classic Nyonya dishes, their recipes learnt from neighbours. Returning to this story nearly twenty years after its first telling, I am once again struck by its complex threads: earlier mixed relationships of Chinese traders and local women in the port of Melaka; the culinary heritage of their Peranakan descendants; food cultures of recently arrived (at least, in this case) Hakka Chinese in Melaka; relations of reciprocity among port city neighbours across borders of ethnicity and gastronomy (‘we exchange, we learn,’ Chee Lan says). The striking feature of this narrative is the mobility and plasticity of food cultures. After all, insists Lily Kong, ‘Cuisines are not fixed things’ (2016: 230–31). With this culinary flexibility in mind, my story now has laksa leaving Melaka for Adelaide, an Australian city that is ‘not-Asian,’ at least according to Mahathir, Malaysia’s Prime Minister at that time (‘Mahathir’ 2004).

The Khuts arrive in Adelaide from Melaka, Malaysia in 1978, several years after the relaxation of Australia’s discriminatory restrictions on Asian immigration (commonly referred to as the White Australia Policy) (Jupp 1995). In 1982, they establish a homestyle café, and name it Malacca Corner.⁵ Unlike the nearby Asian Gourmet, where customers were remembered as mostly Asian students, the Khuts’ clientele was, according to Chee Lan ‘mostly Australian[s] ... [who] have been to Malaysia ... That’s why [the name] Malacca Corner because ... they know Malacca and ... [t]hey know what laksa is.’ For those who do not ‘know ... laksa’ the Khuts embark on a gentle campaign of taste education: ‘We give a little bit for them to try,’ says Kok Chin, and ‘once you try it, you will like it, you know,’ says Chee Lan. Here, in the contact zone of a small café and others like it, lingering traces of the mixed histories of others, of their (sometimes enforced) travel,⁶ remembered palates and creative strategies of reproduction in new settings achieve moments of local recognition from those who, on the other hand, savour their first taste of authentic Asian food or savour the memories of their own youthful travel to find it.

We pause to reflect on the thread of local belonging—a sense of ‘hereness’ in contrast to its obverse, a sense of ‘elsewhere’—running through this account, together with hints of the dish’s distinctive flavours and its consumption rituals. For this tale of acquired belonging, the flavours of Pratt’s contact zones take on particularly benign meanings, with less obvious signs of the ‘clash’ and ‘grapple’ of ‘disparate cultures’ in conflict (Pratt 2007:8). However, as we continue to ponder on local belonging we find, in fact, complex intersections of here and elsewhere within a cuisine borne simultaneously in migrational movement and

3 For the localisation of Chinese food, see Tan 2011, 30-35. Note too that I am not assuming that Adelaide was the only city where laksa attained popularity and ubiquity. For discussion of its reception in other cities see Duruz 2019c: 215. Nevertheless, Ann Oliver, a local food writer and restaurateur muses, ‘For some reason laksa is peculiar to South Australia, evidenced by people returning home and heading straight for the nearest laksa shop lamenting that neither Sydney nor Melbourne have a decent laksa’ (Oliver cited in Duruz 2019c: 215).

4 All biographical details and quotations attributed to either Khut Chee Lan or to Khut Kok Chin are drawn from transcripts of interviews conducted in Adelaide in November 2003.

5 Throughout, I have opted for the Malay spelling of ‘Melaka’ except in cases where the English/colonial spelling ‘Malacca’ is appropriate. The Khuts chose to use the English spelling for their café in Adelaide.

6 The Khuts claimed the reason for their travel and re-location was mainly economic while others interviewed mentioned racial discrimination (against ethnic Chinese) in Malaysia at that time, including the 1969 race riots in Kuala Lumpur (Duruz 2007: 193-95).

local place-making, and in one that continues to travel yet engage with other locals. At this point, perhaps, doubt creeps in, questioning these engagements as necessarily benign or uncomplicated, and raising additional questions to those I posed initially. What do authenticity, origins and traditions mean for cultures whose culinary habits enshrine a deep history of travel, mixing and exchange? At what point do borrowed tastes cease to be foreign and become firmly entangled in the local? And echoing my earlier reflections, do these doubts render a dish inauthentic? I suspect that for this laksa narrative specifically, meanings of authentic as signalling attachment to a bounded place or community, may not be so useful after all; likewise meanings of authentic tied to singularity and exclusive truths too rigid to accommodate movement and plasticity of a changing, globalising world. Here, Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of place as mobility and connection is possibly more useful. For Massey, place is 'accumulated history ... with that history imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world' (1994: 156). Shaped by this definition, place becomes characterised by fluidity and connection to other places.

Food and food cultures then are subject to movement and change. It is also productive here to trace Ortiz' phases of transculturation (1995: 102–03) with laksa arguably removed from Peranakan neighbours and its familiar identity as a traditional Malaysian dish of 'mixed' origins to be re-introduced in a predominantly white Australian context, its identity changed to fit the national narrative of Australian cuisine as hybrid and multicultural (Duruz 2019c: 247). However, while both parties involved in negotiations (ethnic entrepreneurs and their customers) undergo productive changes (the Khuts' business flourishes, Adelaide's foodscapes acquire new meanings especially of 'Asianness,' defined by consumption in the marketplace) (Yoshino 2019: 1–7), there are moments of counting the costs. When discussing the success of the business, Mrs Khut, for example, in an aside murmurs: '[Having the shop was] so much effort. ... [We] never stopped ... so much effort.' Ortiz's discomfiting mix of 'uprooting' and 'creation' and its inequities resonates deeply in these moments of culinary migration and re-production. So the mobility of food cultures in turn produce its own 'mixed' blessings.

Cuisine Faux: Poutine, Tacos and Reconstructed Nasi Lemak?

Leaving behind Adelaide Central Market's 'colour and chaos as fresh as its abundant produce' (Murphy 2003: 18), we now travel to the inner suburbs of Toronto, Canada, and to Ossington, an avenue multi-layered in its history and in its communities. The most recent layer, shaped by council development suggestive of international trends in urban planning (and possibly influenced by Richard Florida's creative class philosophies) (Florida 2003), could be a textbook case in gentrification, with the strip currently promoted as a 'hot' destination of bars, restaurants and cafes, especially for young people of a 'green' persuasion—artists, bohemians, hipsters, professionals (Ossington Community Association 2013).

Here on Ossington I am curious to chart the merging of Singaporean and Malaysian food cultures with those of downtown Toronto. In other words, I want to unravel historical elements of gastronomic fusion as found in traditional Peranakan (Nyonya) food, from those dishes of fusion that are currently fashionable forms of industry entrepreneurialism. I suspect it may not be so easy to differentiate sharply the so-called traditional from its modern permutations. Does the quest for post-industrial urban creativity inevitably lead to loss of cultural integrity and heritage? What would 'my' laksa taste like here (and what right do I have to even ask this anyway) (Heldke 2003: 45–6)? What role does authenticity (if any) play in a restaurant's project of 're-imagining Malaysian street food' (Interview with Lauren Soo, November 2015) and how does this re-imagining capture tensions and contradictions of contemporary globalisation? In other words, how does this creative play with dishes and ingredients trouble accepted meanings of authenticity?

More specifically, my focus of this re-imagining here is Soos, a Malaysian restaurant on Ossington, established by Zenn Soo and his wife Trish, with Zenn having arrived in Toronto from Kuala Lumpur in

the late 1970s, Trish a few years later. Joined in the business by their Toronto-born and now-adult children, Lauren (responsible for marketing and for front-of-house alongside her father) and Zac (chef-trained, working in the kitchen alongside his mother), the Soos have developed a small bar-restaurant that is both stylish in décor and innovative in menu.⁷ However, as my diary entry shows the first encounter with this menu raises doubts:

[M]y heart sinks a little. Mention of poutine, tacos and “reconstructed nasi lemak” suggests a certain degree of playfulness of ingredients and technique. Are these current examples of the “bad fusion” associated with the 1980s that Gabbaccia (1998: 216) claimed was “often pricey and faddish”? How does a Québécois dish like poutine or a Mexican staple like the taco or traditional Southeast Asian street food like nasi lemak, its ingredients “reconstructed” to produce a different dish in appearance at least, if not in flavour, reference the tastes and smells of the remembered everyday in Malaysia? (Duruz 2019a: 17)

Good fusion, bad fusion. At what point could creative combinations of ingredients, flavours, techniques be considered as having cut loose from their culinary heritage (even from the already mixed and plastic traditions of Nyonya cuisine)? Is Singapore and Malaysia’s contribution to world cuisine to be its faux reproduction in diaspora? Is this a reproduction in which culinary playfulness and fashionable, market-driven references supersede those mixed culinary traditions of the Nyonya with their deep historical roots (Ripe 1993: 78)? If we pursue this line of this questioning, the ghost of inauthenticity is lurking, a ghost which Cherry Ripe ridicules in the face of cuisine mobility (‘what is now “tradition,” was once itself innovation’) (1993: 82).

Lauren Soo, in her turn, is adamant on the question of authenticity or otherwise of lemongrass-flavoured chicken tacos: ‘Clearly our food is fusion. After all, you won’t find tacos on the streets of Malaysia! Our concept is re-imagining Malaysian street food.’ For Soos’ non-Southeast Asian diners the aim is to provide a subtle referencing of the unfamiliar in the context of the familiar as a means of educating the palate (remember Khut Chee Lan’s ‘Once you try it, you will like it?’). Lauren’s mantra of ‘fusion with respect’ begs the question: in deliberate cuisine bordercrossing, what constitutes respect? Like authenticity, respect is elusive and difficult to define. Given that no cuisine could be said to be static and beyond the influences of history, geography and politics, respect and authenticity might simply become questions of degree and subjective judgment. However, my preference would be to tie respect to the possession of cultural and culinary capital—to one’s knowledge of flavour combinations that, culturally speaking, ‘work’ and those that don’t. As Charmaine Solomon, popularly hailed as the Queen of Asian cooking in Australia says: ‘If the person who is doing it doesn’t really have a deep understanding of the cuisines he [sic] is trying to fuse it can end up as confusion ... but many young chefs ... here in Australia ... seem to have a good instinct and feel about what will work and what won’t’ (Britain 2002: 75).

Possibly for Lauren the ‘what will work’ includes knowledge of the multi-ethnic, multi-culinary community in which she has grown up—the widespread, popular tastes of fast food such as tacos or tzatziki—as well as her family’s experimentation with flavour combinations that, at the very least, do not contradict each other: the mild, chewy textures of taco with the soft yet sharp spiciness of Nyonya-style lemongrass chicken. Meanwhile, the deconstructed nasi lemak becomes a playful nod for those who know *real* Malaysian food—for Southeast Asians in diaspora, for other well-travelled Toronto residents, and, if we’re mindful of Soos’ customer base, for savvy hipsters—and who will only get the joke if they are familiar with fully constructed, ‘authentic’ nasi lemak.

⁷ All biographical details regarding members of the Soo family and all quotations attributed to Lauren Soo are drawn from the transcript of an extended interview with Zenn, Trish and Lauren Soo, conducted in Toronto in November 2015.

The offerings at Soos are neither without historical roots nor without experimental, educative and market-driven inflections. This is a menu of re-imaginings that references both a past elsewhere—a complex heritage—and a present grounded in the richly, nuanced foodscapes of a twenty-first century cosmopolis. It may also intimate the significance of generation for global cuisines and their culinary futures. After all, it is Canadian-born Lauren who has spearheaded for her family and for the business this project of re-imagining. Although Betsy Donald and Alison Blay-Palmer sound a warning note against unreflective celebration of multiculturalism and creative entrepreneurialism—celebrations that tend to overlook issues of inclusivity and sustainability—these writers, quoting Ken Wiwa, define the continuing challenge in generational terms:

[T]his fusion generation with its bicultural or multicultural heritage is the face of the new Canada. A face more visible in the country's big cities, it comprises a generation in the process of negotiating new spaces at the juncture of its cross-cultural past and its Canadian future. (Wiwa cited in [Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006](#): 1911)

Reflecting on this as a doubtful tale of authenticity, tradition and cosmopolitan modernity, we return to this section's subtitle of Faux Cuisine. This balancing of meanings of past and present, of authentic and inauthentic (or perhaps, instead, experimental), this subtle referencing of here and elsewhere, is never easy nor without cost. However, according to Ang, such negotiations are critical, especially in global cities where the presence of mixed populations demands creative strategies for living 'together-in-difference' ([Ang 2001](#): 193–201). This, after all, reflects Cwiertka's 'imagination as a social practice' in action ([2002](#): 10). Put differently, relations within an urban contact zone are likely to involve workers in food businesses (such as restaurants, cafs, food shops and markets) needing to engage in tricky 'tactics' of encouraging empathy and recognition while damping down cultural friction and suspicion among their clientele ([de Certeau 1984](#): 96). The culinary contact zone of the 'ethnic' restaurant then demands ingenuity and compromise.⁸ The requirement is to meet the competing needs of its customer base—those of mainstream Anglo-Canadians together with the fastidious middle class of Toronto's Malaysian communities, as well as the proprietors' own need for business survival.

Yet a lemongrass-flavoured chicken taco is still a mundane object. Nevertheless, with its origins simultaneously positioned in remembered local foodscapes, in migrational movement and in creative entrepreneurialism, this taco becomes, like laksa, a motif of mutability and 'entanglement' (Crang cited in [Law 2001](#): 276). Ironically, as with laksa in Australia, the taco already has been borrowed/appropriated from its Mexican origins to become a ubiquitous global street food ([Pilcher 2012](#)). In the process, an accepted casual, everyday dish re-works itself in meanings of belonging into global cosmopolitan cultures (hence Pilcher's 'Planet Taco') and, at the same time and contradictorily, into cultures of global ordinariness, rather than remaining simply an authentic sign of a community's exclusive ownership. Furthermore, in answer to Masakazu Tanaka's posing roughly sequential histories for relations of colonialism and globalisation in urban landscapes (2007 cited by [Farrer 2015](#): 8), the strands of the traditional and the colonial/postcolonial might be more 'entangled' and continuing than supposed. Entanglement now begins to look a little like Ortiz' transculturation, especially in its final neoculturist phase.

Kampong French: 'From Paris with Kampong Spirit'

Towards the end of 2017 Open Farm Community, an innovative farm-to-table food business in the lush grounds of a day spa in Singapore, announced an upcoming event. With Open Farm's philosophy of 'bringing fresh seafood and meat specially curated using herbs, vegetables and flowers from the restaurant's

⁸ Despite their usual fusion menus, the Soos organise banquets on an occasional basis to meet requests for traditional dinners from Toronto's Malaysian community.

“farm” to your table’ ([Team Tam Chiak 2018](#)), we would not be surprised that any chef in residence would favour seasonal, local and fresh foods on his/her menus. However, the attachment of ‘Kampong’ (as a traditional, rustic village in Malaysia and Singapore) to ‘French’ (as a signifier of stylish cuisine or dress) in the announcement seems something of an anachronism. The [website](#)’s graphics and text promoting the event in question, however, provide hints to Kampong French’s mysterious appearance in Singapore.

In green, gold and red lettering reminiscent of Peranakan batik and with borders suggestive of scatterings of wild greens, the poster announces: ‘Kampong French Popup Dining 13 Nov to 3 Dec,’ followed by the subheadings ‘From Paris with Kampong Spirit’ (together with a tiny image of the Eiffel Tower) and ‘Take Restaurant Over.’ The poster’s design includes miniature portraits of some of the popup protagonists, for example, of British chef Harry Cummins and Québécoise sommelier Laura Vidal. The accompanying text provides further details of the event:

We are welcoming award winning nomadic culinary collective Paris Popup for a three-week restaurant takeover – cheekily dubbed “Kampong French” ... Join Harry Cummins, Laura Vidal and Julia Mitton as they helm Open Farm Community’s kitchen wherein Harry will present an all-day dining menu of 12 small sharing plates with a contemporary French flair, created using 70 to 80 per cent ingredients that are sourced from farms in and around Singapore, including OFC’s very own agricultural landscape.

We might consider how this story of Kampong French serves as a motif for rethinking meanings and practices of culinary exchange and appropriation within modernity’s urban environments. How does this seemingly simple rustic restaurant represent a culinary contact zone? While Open Farm’s promotional discourse acknowledges the contradiction inherent in the popup’s cheeky title, does this venture represent a ‘stylish’ play with the unexpected, which is often the trademark of modern chefs? It is easier, perhaps, to see links between the first two stories than with this third one. At both Malacca Corner and Soos, migrating Malaysian home cooks transform themselves into restaurateurs and entrepreneurs, adapting culinary histories to new ‘homes’ in the west while attempting to preserve the integrity of traditional dishes, or, at least, to reference the palatal memories of these. How does a three-week popup, however, travelling in the reverse direction from the West to Singapore (a popup rejoicing in fashionable meanings of twenty-first century nomadism and backed up by ‘years on the road, zipping in and out of celebrated restaurants’) ([Chenye 2017](#)) insert itself into this argument? Certainly, Cummins has built a formidable reputation working in restaurants in London, New York, Kyoto, Barcelona, Montreal and Paris, for example, and not to mention the acquisition of a residency in Fez, Morocco and an internship at the Michelin-famous El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain. In fact, the breath-taking mobility and dazzling performance of this youthful popup team (35 popups in about five years), prompted a Singapore journalist to proclaim ‘How One Couple Conquered the World with its Traveling Popup Dinners’ ([Chenye 2017](#)). It seems we are now exploring a very different context from that of Mehta’s frying pan with its sensory, interstitial ‘power to melt boundaries ... between France and Guadeloupe’ ([Mehta 2005](#)) or, in this case, between France and Singapore. Or are we?

Before mulling over these possibilities, I feel that as with laksa some backstory is necessary. There are two threads I want to trace here. The first of these is the current fashionability of popups and popup economies which, in previous writing ([Duruz 2018](#)), I have linked with creative city and creative class discourse, with probably its best-known exponent, the urban sociologist [Richard Florida \(2003\)](#). In my own hometown of Adelaide, Australia, I noted that City Council reports in the last decade or so have marshalled ‘the rhetoric of “vibrancy,” “creativity” and “atmosphere” in relation to urban redevelopment, and that ‘the search for a city’s identity in an age of globalisation and in the aftermath of the global financial crisis takes a specifically spatial form’ ([Duruz 2018](#): 170). As a result, small-scale entrepreneurs with limited funds have been encouraged to occupy underused city spaces for their temporary businesses with these popups as a

first stage, perhaps, to establishing more substantial bricks-and-mortar enterprises. I also have written of the class politics associated with such innovations, especially the requirement, for this Council at least, that such popup businesses are unique, innovative and artistic in design to attract an imagined hipster clientele (171-73). Under conditions of deindustrialisation, then, popups present a leg up for developing small-scale businesses especially those centred on the hospitality industry. In fact, the Paris Popup had its origins in this philosophy. While working at Marchand's restaurant Frenchie, Cummins and Vidal discussed possibilities for setting up a hospitality business of their own. Seizing opportunities for temporary occupation of friends' restaurant premises (on days these were not officially operating) ([Chenyze 2017](#)), the couple was able to begin working towards establishing their own restaurant, first in Arles as owners of premises time-shared with other chefs and then in 2018 as sole owners of La Mercerie in Marseille.⁹

For Cummins and Vidal, these arrangements of convenience (short-term use of other people's professional kitchens to avoid the overheads of restaurant ownership) eventually were to become a lifestyle choice. At this point the second thread of global culinary nomadism becomes important. The couple's popups have enabled enviable international travel to exotic places and a form of nomadism that spells freedom from the burdens of sedentary life—freedom celebrated by the past hippies and present millennials alike (at least in a pre-COVID-19 world). Of course, not everyone needs to leave home, with technology creating forms of digital nomadism supposedly available to all. After all, says John Noyes, 'Today we all want to be nomads. We travel like nomads, we shop and surf the Internet like nomads, our technologies of communication release us from locality, and, when we use them, we defy the physical worlds that tie to territory' ([2004](#): 159).

While the Paris Popup is a fascinating story of the ways that ingenuity, depth of expertise, sheer hard work and connections with the 'right' networks of international, trendsetting chefs, shape a reputation differently from its usual manifestations within global restaurant cultures, it still leaves us cause to reflect. How does this narrative confront meanings and practices of authenticity, culinary exchange and appropriation? How does a specific example of popup which by its very nature is temporary, unexpected and rooted in elsewhere confront meanings of local ingredients and local culinary histories? Does popping into Singapore fleetingly to insert the rigorous techniques and distinctive flavours associated with French cuisine into local foodscapes seem a somewhat outrageous thing to do? Is this simply another example of neo-colonialism's appetite for cultural commodification, with a prestigious culture (in Pierre Bourdieu's 'distinction' terms) ([1984](#)) exerting its power over the 'other' and raiding tastes, aromas and memories for its own benefit? And here we also might detect the ghost of [bell hooks \(1992: 21\)](#) and her images of avaricious whites consuming black culinary culture to 'spice up' the dullness of their own. Is the popup indeed a 'takeover' as its poster suggests—a takeover that goes beyond simply borrowing someone else's kitchen? Debates of the politics of 'eating the other' as I've already indicated have a long history.¹⁰ Nevertheless, I am anxious to find a different way through the usual tenor of such debates—to see beyond hooks' much-needed political polemic and beyond the assumption that the Paris Popup is engaged in rampant opportunism to something else—a position that might still be doubtful and yet politically productive, analytically speaking.¹¹ And here, we recall the potential of Ortiz' transculturation as a way forward.

9 Note that in 2021 Mercerie continues to operate despite periods of varying COVID-19 restrictions and has expanded entrepreneurially, offering the restaurant for popups and guest spots to other chefs, organising specific theme events and participating in local festivals, especially those of the immediate neighbourhood.

10 For a recent contribution that emphasises the Asian 'other' within contexts of food pedagogies see the work of [Elaine Swan and Rick Flowers \(2012\)](#).

11 [Rachel Slocum \(2011\)](#) implies that hooks' writing is important for anti-racist social movements with its stress on the political connections between issues of food and race but also suggests that other writers subsequently, from a variety of social science and humanities disciplines, have sought to draw out these connections with a little more subtlety and nuance.

At this point it is useful to unravel how the Paris Popup normally operates. In conversation with Alexander Lobrano for the *New York Times* (2015), Laura Vidal [on the opening of a summer popup at the Grand Hotel Nord Pinus in Arles] comments: ‘Our sourcing is fiercely local—that’s how Harry cooks and I like to pour when possible, and Arles has one of the best markets in the south of France, with a huge section devoted to grower-producers and organic produce’ (Vidal quoted in [Lobrano 2015](#)). When talking to Meryl Koh about the team’s preparation for Kampong French in Singapore, Vidal says:

Our menus are always product-driven ... and we take inspiration from our travels. We do research on the country we’re going to. In Singapore, for instance, we went to all the wet markets, tried samples of local farms’ products and went to Edible Garden City [a network of cafes and grocery stores growing their own fruit, vegetables and herbs]. So we use a local ingredient and cook it in a different way – like the local *chye poh* flat bread. The entrance to the door of any culture is through food and language. (Vidal quoted in [Koh 2017](#))

All this emphasis on ‘fiercely local’ ingredients and ‘product-driven’ menus may cause one to imagine that a popup’s success very much depends on thorough research, engagement with on-site culinary communities and serious excavation of meanings of locality. These meanings include those of authenticity, place-histories, traditions, origins—in the sense of products being tied gastronomically to particular foodscapes, and, in practical terms, of products’ ready availability through local suppliers. This is thus not purely a matter of imposing ‘French’ on the ‘kampong’ in an anachronistic fashion. Instead, the popup becomes an attempt to negotiate, discursively, a culinary rapprochement between the two. In this case, I am imagining the kampong (with ‘Kampong spirit’ in Open Farm’s poster hinting at this) as a place in which local people grow, cook and share food in a neighbourly fashion. Elsewhere when writing about the Singapore neighbourhood of Katong, I have referred to these forms of everyday reciprocity as ‘the kampong effect’ ([Duruz & Khoo 2015](#): 142–43).¹² While Open Farm Community’s promotional discourse represents a somewhat romanticised image of rural life and work (especially in Singapore where farming and food production since the high-rise developments of the 1950s onwards has had a problematic history) ([Rut & Davies 2018](#)), the philosophy is one that is recognisable both in nostalgia for an agrarian past and in more modern concerns for food safety and sustainability ([Khoo 2019](#): 119–20; Probyn 2016: 47–8).

Meanwhile, along with traces of the ‘fiercely local’ and the ‘kampong effect,’ ‘the French effect’ is also noticeable in the shaping of this popup venture. Its presence in Singapore therefore becomes hardly surprising after all. There are two webs of French connections I will touch on briefly. Firstly, the arrival of Cummins and Vidal in Singapore is by no means accidental but facilitated by two French chefs. Cummins and Vidal first meet when both are working at Frenchie in Paris, a restaurant established by Gregory Marchand that is now part of his ‘mini-empire of restaurants on Rue de Nil in Paris’ ([Sullivan 2014](#)). Marchand’s influence on Cummins in regard to extolling the principles and practice of bistronomy (which I’ll discuss shortly) was to be profound. The other French chef (and ethical butcher) critical to this narrative is Benjamin Darnaud ([Team Tam Chiak 2018](#)), a friend of Cummins from Paris days and now the partner of Cynthia Chua, founder of the Spa Esprit Group with beauty salons and restaurants ranging from New York to Singapore. In Singapore, Open Farm Community is one of the Spa Esprit Group’s enterprises ([Wong 2016](#)). It is at Darnaud’s invitation that Cummins and Vidal found themselves there in December 2017.

Perhaps even more significant than the Paris Popup’s network of French connections in the hospitality industry has been, since the early 1990s, the growth of a particular philosophy and style of restaurant cooking that reacted to the perceived preciousness, expense and exclusivity of French *haute cuisine*: bistronomy. Its proponents were heralded in 2011 as the new revolutionary chefs of Paris: ‘They call it

12 ‘Kampung’ is an alternate spelling for ‘kampong’.

bistronomy, their bible is LeFooding, and they've turned the staid world of Paris upside down' ([Tucker 2011](#)). Their mission was to produce 'gastronomy that was produce-driven and free from the straightjacket and exorbitant prices of fine dining ... that was then taking Paris by storm' ([Chenyze 2017](#)). In contrast to the 'straightjacket' Michelin-starred chef Yves Camdeborde, recognised as bistronomy's founder, presides over his modest left-bank Le Comptoir du Relais, serving 'top cuisine at unprecedentedly low prices' in a casual, 20-seat setting ([Samuel 2011](#)).

To return to Singapore, Cummins and Vidal arrived with these French connections firmly in place. Under the tutelage of Marchand, Cummins has had a thorough grounding in bistronomy and his international experience has strengthened his commitment to principles of seasonality, locality and creativity. At Open Farm Community, Cummins, Vidal and Mitton (the popup's business manager) found they were on familiar territory to some extent: existing menus already displayed concern for local ingredients (especially those actually grown in the restaurant's gardens) rather than for rarefied, hard-to-get expensive products; a concern for technique in the kitchen as a reflection both of Darnaud's classical French training and the local practices of Singaporean foodscapes; and a concern for creativity with informal dining, communal plates and fusion dishes (such as prawn pappardelle with a laksa reduction or *chai poh* [preserved radish] with crushed fingerling potatoes and arugula as listed on Open Farm's menu on October 31, 2018), very much meshing with dishes dictated by the Popup's own philosophies. Furthermore, although a week's preparation in one place seems a perilously short time to engage with its meanings of terroir, foodscape, ethnic identities and mixed culinary cultures, there was a professional team on hand to assist the popup's transition (['J'aime Le Kampong!' 2017](#)).

It appears that the Paris Popup is not imposing itself on Open Farm Community's menus or activities but rather seeking out synergies with, and creative possibilities of, these. In fact, with the assistance of networks of locals, the popup's own offerings appeared to slip seamlessly into the menus and were, perhaps, not so very different from items already listed there (which, of course, begs the question of the extent to which Open Farm Community's menus were fashionably international and fusion anyway, given the professional background of its critical players and Singapore's embrace of global gastronomies) ([Kong 2016: 217–18](#)). Nevertheless, like the Soos in Toronto, Cummins is anxious to stress he is not trying to reproduce traditional dishes but 'to let the produce drive his imagination ... *chai poh* ... pearl grouper [a fish well-known in Singapore] ... herbs from OFC's garden ... a zippy green mango salsa' ([Chenyze 2017](#)). Here, at Kampong French is the bridge that I mentioned earlier, stretching between global and local, between traditional and exotic, and, perhaps, between settled/rooted, and nomadic as well. ([Duruz 2019b: 129–31](#)).

However, in terms of intimations of authenticity, tradition and transcultural negotiations within a culinary contact zone, this last story appears more problematic than the previous two. Kut Chee Lan and the Soos, leaving home to settle elsewhere, brought their culinary cultures with them—cultures with long histories of growing, cooking, eating and remembering. These remembered tastes, smells, sights, sounds and practices inflected subsequent attempts at place-making, whether these were playful attempts to reference the new as well as the old, or thoughtful strategies to initiate present customers to the tastes of the past and of elsewhere. The frying pan (or the wok) is indeed, figuratively, an interstitial space for connecting forms of spatial referencing and sensual, gastronomic remembering. The tale of Kampong French, on the other hand, is trickier to re-work in terms of frying pan imaginaries. Where does authenticity fit into this narrative if indeed it does? Is it sufficient simply to seize the local elements of this story (ingredients, networks, tropical setting) to justify its analysis here?

Rather than attempting to recast Kampong French as a less doubtful tale of authenticity, I suggest a shift in the terms of reference. First of all, we might recall that authenticity and tradition do not necessarily belong exclusively to one local, to fixed places and peoples. Meanings of these might move and change as do food cultures themselves. Members of the popup travelled with their own accumulated memories of tastes and places—with personal, localised and internationalised culinary biographies, with meanings of local

and international tied to a sense of belonging (whether continuously or momentarily) both to particular landscapes and to global food fashions. In sum, this is to recognise that regimes of modern nomadic movement have their own places of culinary ritual and moments of memorable attachment, together with their significant zones of contact. While an Anglo-Australian's 'borrowing' laksa, for example, is unlikely to acquire the resonance of Grace Tay's 'my dead mother's tastebuds now coat my tongue and nudge my cravings,' such borrowings are not without their own taste-histories and meanings, as the first taste laksa stories continue to remind us. Furthermore, the settings of such culinary exchanges—their culinary contact zones and the transcultural imperatives of cultural gain and loss negotiated within these (Millington 2005: 219)—take on a particular poignancy in moments of remembering.

Second, the spirit with which such borrowings or culinary innovations occur is significant: the marrying of the predictable with the unpredictable need not be a random act purely for the purpose of display and novelty. Earlier, when discussing Soos' lemongrass chicken-filled taco, I referred to Charmaine Solomon's dictum that chefs employing fusion techniques need to know 'what will work and what won't,' and to show cultural respect in this regard. For the popup team, occupying multiple locations for shortish periods of time, this knowledge of 'what will work' might be difficult to acquire. However, the possibilities of transfer of accumulated culinary knowledge and diverse experience to new contexts might assist here (the likely outcome of marrying the flavour and texture of flatbread with the spicy softness of *chai poh*, for example). More importantly, an openness to the cuisine in which one is popping up is essential—to its authentic references, its iconic flavours—and to the grounded expertise of its supporting professional networks. Here, Lauren Soo's 'fusion with respect' and Solomon's 'what will work' both return as helpful ways to reflect on the balancing of nomadic and local knowledge, with respect aligning here with Ang's productive 'uneasiness' born of negotiating same-difference contradictions (2001: 200–1).

Third, as well as considering the popup members' own culinary biographies and the spirit in which they approach each new location, we should take into account more substantially than to date the composition of Singapore's culinary cultures. Given the multi-ethnic nature of these and established traditions of borrowing and exchange it is difficult, in some ways, to talk of authenticity in a pure sense in Singapore. After all, this is where mixed cuisines, such as food of the Nyonya, have long histories dating back to the seventeenth century (Duruz & Khoo, 2015: 126). And, if we chose, we could travel even further back in time to the culinary cultures of the Orang Laut, or 'people of the sea,' one of the original groups inhabiting the Melayu Kingdom (a kingdom which included what we now know as the island of Singapore) from the first millennium onwards. (Andaya 2019). However, it seems that even these cultures bear evidence of syncretism, at least in recent remembering ('The Food of Orang Laut' 2020). Returning to the stylish, class-based present of Singapore's 'foodie' landscapes, however, we find that layered on to such deep and mixed histories are continuing innovations by a group of creative chefs to produce fusion food. This has been dubbed 'New Asia Cuisine' and, according to Kong, 'not only involves a combination of different flavours, but inventive culinary techniques as well that require *'an understanding and history of the component cuisines'* (2016: 217, italics added). The somewhat difficult to define respect, together with its concomitant understandings, once again is needed to underline these chefs' efforts.

Hence, while openness to other culinary cultures is a requirement of the popup when venturing into Singapore, Singapore itself responds with its own history of diversity and openness. Kong says:

Characteristic of such a city is the existence of a large expatriate community and the presence of unceasing flows of migrants, alongside a population that is well-travelled and open to media flows and influences. While significant, the roots of this openness run deeper, drawing from a historical sense of a diverse society that takes cultural flows and exchanges as given, borne of the self-definition of a multi-ethnic society and an entrepot port. These conditions have presupposed its people to welcome a range of cuisines and to celebrate a diversity of foods. (2016: 217)

Kampong French thus seems less of a spectacle in Singapore's foodscapes than we imagined. Instead, it is welcomed and celebrated in a fashion consistent with this city-state's food cultures and foodie reputation and with its eateries ranging from hawker stalls to stylish bars and restaurants. At the same time, traditional foods like laksa (our nearest example here, perhaps, to a historically localised food?) are not under threat. According to Joan C. Henderson, these foods are 'too deeply embedded in Singapore society and culture to disappear' (Henderson cited in [Kong 2016](#): 233). In fact, we might take the reverse position to Kampong French as a popup. Instead, we might argue that Singapore, historically a nation of accumulated popups (with its complex cultures of street food and hawkers intersecting with home cooking), easily absorbs Kampong French into its lingering *milieux de mémoire* ([Nora 1989](#): 7), even in their gentrified, mythical forms. Faced with new challenges, then, Singapore's dominant tradition of culinary mixing and its foodscapes of gastronomic expertise, aided by postcolonial forms of gentrification, casually appropriates the West's, and in particular France's, claims to culinary excellence. Meanings of cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism and histories of traditional street food are threaded together here rather than posed (as Tanaka does) as serially and historically separated (cited in [Farrer 2015](#): 8). In terms of transcultural theorising, who occupies the metropolitan centre and who is relegated to the periphery is not entirely clear here ([Millington 2005](#): 230–31).

Out of the Frying Pan ...?

This paper has set out to trouble meanings of authenticity especially in relation to food— to a community's sense of ownership of dishes, ingredients and the culinary rituals of reproducing particular tastes. Tracing a messy but complicated path through narratives of home cooks, ethnic entrepreneurs, culinary nomads and celebrity chefs, the analysis unravels intimations of nostalgia, creativity, authenticity, borrowing and re-invention in mundane food exchanges—exchanges that operate within, and between, mixed cities of a globalising world. In these narratives, the relation of authenticity and tradition to food has seemed rather precarious and puzzling and certainly troubling. On the other hand, doubts about this relationship have led the discussion along some less usual and more fruitful routes. Both the narratives of the laksa's journey to Adelaide and of Toronto's faux cuisine on Ossington muddy authenticity's mythical meanings by stressing, in differing ways, the discursive significance of entangled dishes like laksa or chicken taco and the complex threads of these entanglements.

In laksa's travels to Adelaide, for example, homogenised and static definitions of authenticity are less than useful, given the dish's mixed history, multiple re-locations, and differing meanings for consumers' identities. Yet, local contexts and meanings remain important in a globalised world. For example, we could speculate that the Australian imaginaries of 'laksa belonging' and 'laksa nation' emerge in response to Australia's ambiguous standing in the Asia-Pacific and its desire for recognition as a cosmopolitan nation ([Duruz 2019c](#)). In laksa's travels to Toronto, on the other hand, it seems that Southeast Asia, as such, is geographically and emotionally more distant, at least for non-Asian Toronto communities. Instead, Malaysia and Malaysian cuisine tend to become part of the richly flavoured, multi-ethnic gastronomic cultures that Toronto's foodie neighbourhoods represent ([Palassio & Wilcox 2009](#)). At the same time, despite their different twists and turns on the ground, threads of both narratives not only embrace meanings of the past, of tradition, but stretch forward as well to indicate productive forms of everyday cosmopolitanism in the uneasy mixed present and future of global cities ([Nava 2010](#)).

Finally, I want to reflect on the authentic resonances of the third narrative. How troubling is it, after all? While laksa's introduction to Adelaide and Toronto appears to be firmly localised in its respective contexts, the arrival of Kampong French in Singapore suggests a departure from this. In contrast to established cafés and restaurants, popups by their nature tend to be ephemeral and without roots in the local (though contradictorily, as we have seen, they still have place-connections in spite of their fluidity). Perhaps, instead

of being framed within a specific culinary contact zone, we might speculate that Kampong French is positioned within a culinary flow, with Singapore a web of local interconnections flowing through its popup food enterprises as well as a city globally connected through its transnational circulation of people, food products and culinary fashions (Kong 2016: 224–30). It would seem that such innovations as Kampong French have many advantages for the entrepreneurial, including relief from the daily grind of establishing a local culinary community on a permanent basis. Perhaps this produces a different kind of contact zone from those of Adelaide or Toronto. Or perhaps this is simply a further development in framing culinary contact zones, though this time through displacement, troubling authenticity even more than is apparent in colonial settler societies?¹³

Nevertheless, it is impossible to displace the local from Singapore and Singapore's culinary cultures. These cultures are complex mixes of specific places and personal histories (where does one find the best kaya toast ... the best traditional hawker food?), of international influences (witness the growth of sushi-eating in Singapore) and of chefs' inventiveness (risotto with lemongrass, yam jelly with edamame foam, foie gras with star anise) (Kong 2016: 231–32). These local and global influences might exist side by side in separate establishments or entangled together as in the case of hawkerpreneurs where subsequent generations of hawkers, valuing their deeply rooted family traditions, rework hawker dishes as, simultaneously, nostalgic, modern and innovative (Tarulevicz 2018).

At Kampong French, Singapore's existing mixed culinary cultures invite further layering of mixed elements that may become, in time, traditional (that is, normalised). The food itself, with its potential for offering embedded tastes and memories within its complex geo-political, colonial and postcolonial entanglements, dictates the acceptance (even appropriation) of French traditions and techniques (even when translated by British and Canadian adherents) into Singapore's multi-ethnic cuisine rather than the other way around. And these 'new' elements, as I have been anxious to stress above, are not without their own prior histories of engagement in Singapore's foodscapes, as Open Farm Community's menus signal. In other words, the 'kampong' or 'open farm' is already a curated, yet respectful, performance of imagined (cosmopolitan) rurality, regardless of the contribution of recently arrived nomadic 'others' with their own, hopefully respectful, culinary interventions. Kampong French, as such, becomes neither the 'kampong' (or 'kampung') of traditional communities, neighbourhoods and villages in Singapore and Malaysia nor the 'French' associated with the legislation of French citizenship as undifferentiated, ethnically speaking (Berlinski 2004: 1) and a 'French' associated with a national cuisine shaped by UNESCO's designations as 'intangible cultural heritage' (Springstubb 2018). Instead, Kampong French becomes, in some ways, reminiscent of the frying pan motif—the fuzzy 'sensorial interstice'—of Mehta's imagining (2005). And yet kitchens like that at Kampong French are hardly the product of migrant/nomadic dreaming (the romance of re-creating Guadalupe as 'home' in Paris or Paris in Singapore). Instead, they represent a collective claim on the nostalgia of mixed societies and their desire to incorporate both the local and the other, rendering the latter less alien and more comforting, and the former less parochial, less racially threatening and more cosmopolitan.

Consequently, it is in the culinary contact zones and culinary flows of kitchens, food shops, markets and restaurants that the task of different people living together through food persists, with all the tensions, inequities and shared pleasures of this. And it is here too that meanings of authenticity continue to be troubled, and to be negotiated, with foods as 'the building blocks of imagined worlds' providing a social practice of possibility (Cwiertka 2002: 10–11). At the same time, Millington, drawing on both Ortiz and Pratt, strikes a note of doubt:

13 Of course, this is not to argue for equivalence of popups to first nations groups, such as Australian Indigenous communities whose position of continuing dispossession in the political landscape of settler communities is certainly very different from that of adventurous, often white, chefs (Moreton-Robinson 2003, 37–8).

[T]he emphasis on how the periphery infiltrates and shapes the worldview of the metropolis seems to me to be important, and above all it captures a sense of the tense relations and the subterranean processes that can be in play between cultures: all may not be transparent and benign exchange. (2005: 212)

While experiments like Open Farm Community and Kampong French might offer Singapore's burgeoning middle-class moments of playful, gastronomic pleasure and the satisfaction of supporting artisanal sustainability (Yoshino 2019: 1-7), they also provide 'on the ground' opportunities for exploring, through the sensory consumption, meanings of class, ethnicity and transnational border crossing. Nevertheless, while the challenge of 'eating back' into more equitable social relations remains, consumption at Kampong French contributes to an understanding of Singapore as cosmopolitan, as entangled in local-global flows of people, places, ethnic identities and food work.

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