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SELF, TASTE AND PLACE

IN FICTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISHNESS

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To Sam

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Abstract

This thesis maps relationships between self, (culinary) taste and place in novels which engage with representations of Britishness after the Second World War. Whereas previous writing on food in fiction revolves mainly around eating disorders, cannibalism or table manners, here, considerations of references to foods and foodways in contemporary fiction interrogate their instrumentality in articulating cultural identities. Such interrogation is necessarily informed by insights from various disciplines: the sociology of food, cultural geography and anthropology.

An overview of the way in which cultural taxonomies rely on conceptualisations of 'authenticity' and 'tradition' in the first chapter is followed, in the second, by an analysis of the culinary coordinates of fictional (re)territorialisations of urban metropolitan space. The third chapter focuses on an underexplored category of participants in discourses on Britishness in contemporary fiction – children – and engages with the way in which understandings of spatiality from their perspective are marked by culinary experiences. An everyday concern with the culinary coexists, in contemporary fiction, with a tendency to emphasize the exotic appeal of a category of ethnic foods. This is outlined in the last chapter, which tackles consumption in a metaphorical sense and steps outside the ambit of the fictional texts it discusses to comment on the literary reception of texts which capitalise on the exotic cachet of ethnic foods.

Although concerns with the articulation of multiculture through references to food have been addressed in a range of disciplines, this thesis stands out from such studies primarily through its literary focus. Concepts such as 'community' and 'authenticity' and

attempts to trace culinary cartographies which unsettle rigid distinctions between private and public space or privilege the viewpoint of children find an artistic expression in contemporary novels which testify with particular acuity to the bearing gender, ethnicity and age have on the way people relate to space and place.

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Introduction

SELF, TASTE AND PLACE IN FICTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISHNESS

Preliminaries

> Lily did stop at the coconut shy. Both Lily and Mui had liked these as children. The pickle vendor in the town square had sold delicious white strips transfixed to a leaf and a sliver of ginger by toothpicks. Perhaps Son would enjoy some; it would certainly be healthier for him than the gruesome red and brown sweetmeat on a stick (the flesh of the ancient apple had discoloured rapidly on exposure) which Mui had so irresponsibly bought him.[1]

The above extract comes from Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, a novel which achieves a 'delicate balance between comic distance and emotional involvement' in its portrayal of the meeting of two cultures in 1960s England.[2] Lily, her husband Chen and sister Mui, Chinese migrants in London and co-owners of a takeaway south of the Thames take Lily and Chen's son, Man Kee, on a day trip to the seaside. The toffee apple that Mui buys Man Kee gains Lily's disapproval and is compared unfavourably with the culinary delights the two sisters sampled in their childhood. It is not the evocative power of food that is primarily signalled in this extract, not the role it plays in connecting lived and remembered space; the two foods are metonyms of Englishness and Chineseness respectively, two distinct entities which Mo brings together in his novel in order to explore the tensions and uncertainties which result. There is much more that might be read into this snippet of cultural commentary than I will attempt here. My aim in selecting this quotation is to preface, in as suggestive a way as possible, the discussion,

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[1] Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 157.

[2] Publicity material on the back cover of the Vintage edition of *Sour Sweet* (1992).

in this thesis, of the articulation of cultural identities in fiction about life in contemporary Britain through food.

Writing on food in literature is not scarce. An electronic search or a scan of bibliographies for articles on food in literature will prove this immediately, and one such example is Norman Kiell's *Food and Drink in Literature: A Selectively Annotated Bibliography*.[3] However, writing on food in fiction seems to revolve around eating disorders, cannibalism or table manners, and pays little attention to the use of culinary rhetoric in fictional constructions of cultural identity. If food consumption, as the social anthropologists Peter Farb and George Armelagos have succinctly put it, 'is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships [...] in all societies, both complex and simple',[4] it should not come as a surprise, then, that fiction should draw upon representations of the culinary to articulate same- or cross- gender or culture relationships within fictional communities.

Partaking of a meal, argues Peter Worsley, symbolically (re)constitutes a community, of which three different understandings are offered. 'Community as locality' designates a group of people living in close proximity to one another, in a clearly delimited location. 'Community without propinquity' is made up of a group of individuals who share an identity but not a space. Last but not least, 'community' may refer not to people but to the set of kinship and reciprocity ties which exist within a group.[5] These understandings do occasionally overlap, though this is not a hard and fast rule. Mono- and multicultural groups of characters in contemporary fiction sometimes share only a space, and not a food culture, or may partake of culturally different food items but not necessarily interact in a more complex fashion with their producers.

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[3] Norman Kiell, *Food and Drink in Literature: A Selectively Annotated Bibliography* (London: Scarecrow, 1995).

[4] Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), p. 4.

[5] Peter Worsley, quoted in David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 94.

Drawing upon the theme of commensality within a multicultural community, the novels to be discussed in my thesis are fictional accounts of post-war to present-day life in Britain, filtered through different perspectives on belonging: that of residents (of English or hyphenated cultural identity) and that of migrants.[6] The list of novels I have selected covers a wide range of experiences, from Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982), the story of a Chinese family attempting to carve for themselves an 'interstitial space of possibility' in London,[7] to Ardashir Vakil's *One Day* (2003), the tale of a bicultural household, well at home in the metropolis. This is not in any way to suggest that contemporary fiction mirrors a unilinear trajectory of cultural integration, culminating in enthusiastically multicultural environments. Rather, my aim is to offer an interdisciplinary mapping of relations between taste, place, identity and fictional representation which may provide useful guidelines for further critical inquiry into the literary imaging of mechanisms of cultural identification, and specifically into the way in which understandings of contemporary Britishness are deployed in fiction through references to foods and foodways.

Cross-cultural encounters in contemporary Britain are highly varied and complex and this thesis is inevitably selective in what it presents. At the same time, however, the aim to contain the multiplicity of such encounters within the academic narrative of a thesis would be synonymous with reducing this multiplicity to a handful of variables and not do justice to the complexity of detail that life in multicultural groups in contemporary Britain entails.

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[6] For the association of the terms *narrative* and *belonging* I acknowledge my debt to Roger Bromley who discusses diasporic cultural fictions in his *Narratives for a New Belonging* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). However, in line with Wirth-Nesher's argument that 'Because no urbanite is exempt from [...] partial exclusion [from] and imaginative reconstruction [of the space s/he inhabits] every urbanite is to some extent an outsider'. (Hanna Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9) I will extend Bromley's phrase 'narratives for a new belonging' to fiction written from the viewpoint of white English residents in Britain.

[7] John McLeod, 'Living In-Between: Interstitial Spaces of Possibility in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*', in Stephen Earnshaw (ed.), *Just Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 107-128.

At the same time, it must be highlighted that 'contemporary Britain' in this thesis, while a convenient label, is one which must be approached with caution. Periodization is often a matter of arbitrary delineation – this thesis, by virtue of its focus on culinary tropes, chooses as its year zero 1981, the publication year for *Midnight's Children.* Rushdie's novel, a Booker prize winner, brings to the forefront of the literary fiction scene the signifying power of foods in the depiction of the relationship between identity, history and memory. Rushdie sets his novel in a former colony and aligns himself with a magic realist narrative strand. The novels selected in this thesis write similar concerns back into the heart of the former Empire in a mimetic mode, and question and reconstruct particular versions of Englishness and Britishness.[8]

Lines of Inquiry

The reading of the primary texts is performed along three guiding axes. The first one corresponds to the category of taste. Focusing on culinary items as such, I start with a close look at their function in the construction of cultural identities across the texts. Keeping in mind the role of taste in producing or erasing socio-cultural boundaries, I will analyse the dynamics of same- or cross-culture interactions among characters in each novel and the culinary experience profiles (production and consumption alike). This initial reading is informed by secondary material drawn from anthropological writing on food, the sociology of food consumption and culinary-centred cultural geography and is based on the premise that commensality has a community-building and hierarchizing force. Commensality, it should perhaps be specified, is understood here both as sitting around a table to consume a meal and as individual/collective partaking of culinary items of a different cultural pedigree.

[8] Brannigan points out, however, drawing on the writing of Andrei Gasziorek, that mimeticism in the realist novel needs to be reconceptualised, in *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 57.

A second strand of reading shifts the focus from identities of people to those of places and acknowledges the latter's status as contradictory and heterodox entities open to constant resignification. Bringing together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle - restaurant names, take-away addresses, menus, home-made dishes, cornershop exchanges - it reconstructs a culinary cartography of urban Britain. This inquiry will draw on insights from various sources; among them, Hanna Wirth-Nesher's classification of aspects of a cityscape and Gail Low's focus on private spaces as a way into an understanding of the metropolis.[9]

The third guiding axis, storying, motivates its presence in the thesis by virtue of a shared topology at the level of body/self with eating – the mouth – where the two oralities, material alimentary influx and the sublimated outflux of speech, meet. Material and sublimated orality also meet at the level of society, where they again share a location – the café – whose history has been traced back to the coffee houses of the eighteenth century. These, in their role as a 'discursive arena', contributed to opening up the democratic and equalitarian public sphere, as it is argued by Jürgen Habermas.[10] Keeping the abstract dimension of orality in view, the third reading additionally touches upon the politics of metropolitan consumption of fictional constructions of multiculture in food-conscious ways.

Consuming the Nation: From Abstract Discourses to Everyday Life

In a recent paper exploring 'geographies of consumption', Philip Crang and Peter Jackson write: 'like all national cultures, "British culture" is a highly elusive concept, its

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[9] Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes. Reading the Modern Urban Novel*; Gail Low, 'Separate Spheres?: Representing London through Women in Some Recent Black British Fiction', *Kunapipi*, 2 (1999), 23-31.
[10] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Transformation of a Category of the Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 36.

boundaries increasingly porous, its content hard to define'.[11] This complexity means all interrogations are necessarily incomplete and highly context-dependent. Nevertheless, it is the very openness of contemporary British culture towards multiple positions and its willingness to accommodate contradictory points of view that enable researchers to find new points of entry for the question: 'What is Britishness?'.

At the level of political or academic discourse, contemporary national narratives in the UK, Iain Chambers observes, project two viewpoints on Britishness:

> One is Anglo-centric, frequently conservative, backward-looking, and increasingly located in a frozen and largely stereotyped idea of national culture. The other is ex-centric, open-ended, and multi-ethnic. The first is based on a homogeneous 'unity' in which history, tradition and individual biographies and roles, including ethnic and sexual ones, are fundamentally fixed and embalmed in the national epic, in the mere fact of being 'British'. The other perspective suggests an overlapping network of histories and traditions, a heterogeneous complexity in which positions and identities, including that of the 'national', cannot be taken for granted, are not interminably fixed but are in flux.

By qualifying the former as 'backward-looking', Chambers implicitly endorses multi-ethnicity as a preferred alternative, and argues for the necessity to conceptualise nation as 'an open, malleable framework in the making', thus questioning essentialist, atemporal constructions of Britishness, and laying bare the mechanisms whereby they are put together.[12]

Another viewpoint on nation is offered by Benedict Anderson, who, in a widely quoted work, which discusses the coming into being of nation-centred discourses, defines it as an imagined community. 'It is imagined,' he suggests, 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them,

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[11] Philip Crang and Peter Jackson, 'Geographies of Consumption', in David Morley and Kevin Robins (eds.), *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 327.

[12] Iain Chambers, 'Narratives of Nationalism. Being 'British'', in Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (eds.), *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), p. 160.

or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community'.[13] Anderson's definition has been taken up by Antony Easthope, who not only emphasizes the constructedness of nationhood but also draws attention to the fact that nation is 'imbricated with loaded definitions of class, region, gender, ethnicity and culture'.[14] Whereas these arguments form a necessary backdrop to my thesis, their abstract treatment of national identification does not leave scope for the everyday life level at which such process is experienced and articulated, that of small-scale communities brought together through personal knowledge and face-to-face contact.

Food speaks of nation in an unobtrusive manner, writes Catherine Palmer. It may not have the presence of prime signifiers of nationhood, such as coins, anthems or national costumes, but, as a culturally constructed object, it carries equally relevant connotations which work to re-affirm (un)belonging.[15]

The culinary and the literary, it has been argued, are necessarily linked for several reasons, not least because representations of food bind 'the literary expression with the pre-textual, historical or sociological level' to the extent that the textual representation of food becomes a 'discourse on the world', a way of making meaning (anthropological, social, cultural, and psychological) about the lived (individual and collective) experience of everyday life.[16] As John Brannigan notes, literature has 'a productive and constitutive function [...] in relation to historical experience'.[17] Novels are one of the most suitable types of texts to which the question of identity formation can be posed, as

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[13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

[14] Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[15] Catherine Palmer, 'From Theory to Practice: Experiencing the Nation in Everyday Life', *Journal of Material Culture*, 3, 2 (1998), 175-199.

[16] Gian-Paolo Biasin, *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[17] John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 54.

they 'give an individual dimension to the otherwise abstract and disembodied nature of shared norms and values'.[18]

In my reading of the way in which the national is articulated at the level of the mundane, I take as a departure point a relational and process-centred conceptualisation of identity. By doing so, I aim to go beyond a binary understanding of Britishness as either essentially and fixedly Anglo-centric or enthusiastically multicultural, and explore how gender and ethnicity/indigeneity are mobilised as resources in the performance and understanding of individual self- (and other) identities within an ethnically diverse environment. According to Anthony Giddens and others working from within the social constructivist tradition, identity in modern times becomes a matter of conscious personal choice by the individual or, as Giddens puts it, self identity is 'the self as reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography'.[19] If previously the individual was unproblematically positioned in society, right from birth, 'by way of lineage, caste or class', modernity brings with it the anxiety-inducing predicament or the providential chance of bestowing upon the individual the responsibility to construct a coherent narrative about one's self.[20] However, the individual is not entirely alone in this task, rather, what used to count as the norm in a local social context is rearticulated 'across indefinite tracts of time-space'.[21] Maureen Whitebrook, in her study on politics in contemporary fiction, departs from a similar assumption about narrative identities: they are 'neither completely given nor completely freely constructed'.[22]

'Place' is also central to accounts of identity and needs to be unpacked in the context of a semantic network built around spatiality. The cultural geographer Nigel

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[18] Stephen Connor, *The English Novel in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.
[19] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 244, quoted in Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 68.
[20] Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste*, p. 10.
[21] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 18, quoted in Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste*, p. 181.
[22] Maureen Whitebrook, *Identity, Narrative and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 41.

Thrift differentiates between place and location, by stating that the former is a compound of meanings attached by people to a concrete, physical location. Place is deemed a useful conceptual tool in that alternative narratives of place help reconfigure the differentiation between an 'us' and a 'them'.[23] Another useful distinction is made by Doreen Massey, who rejects a conceptualisation of place as necessarily entailing boundaries and proposes instead that places be imagined as bearing multiple identities. 'What gives a place its specificity,' Massey argues, 'is not some long, internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.'[24]

Multiculture on the Menu

An attempt to map the culinary imaginaries in contemporary Britain will soon meet with ambivalences, multiple layers of meanings and an impossibility to formulate an interpretation which ties together in a seamless fashion all of the loose threads. This might appear as inconvenient in the field of social theory, for example, but, in the analysis of specific literary texts, it allows the reader to move flexibly between the different meanings of culinary items a text proposes and understand them as contingent, context specific references in the fashioning of identities.

In premodern societies, as anthropological and ethnographic writing indicates, foodstuffs and foodways were a central resource for communities to define their boundaries. What one ate gave a straightforward indication of where one belonged. A globalizing modernity, however, has brought about the material and conceptual conditions necessary for the unsettling of rigid alimentary codes, and has given

[23] Nigel Thrift, "Us' and 'Them': Re-imagining Places, Re-imagining Identities', in Hugh Mackay (ed.), *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 159-212.
[24] Doreen Massey, 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place', in John Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner (eds.). *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 59-69, quotation at 66.

individuals the freedom to articulate their own identities, with an array of resources to hand. While popular social imaginaries still work with distinctly defined food cultures, adhering to a pre-established norm or being a creative and adventurous eater becomes a matter of choice.

Philip Crang and Peter Jackson argue for an attempt to define contemporary British culture through investigating its geographies of consumption.[25] These, Crang and Jackson suggest, unfold on at least three different levels. The first geography to be charted is that of local sites which determine and are defined through consumption. The second takes into account the global networks for the production and provision of culinary commodities, whereas the third, labelled 'the imaginative geography of commodity culture', refers to the knowledge and meanings consumption entails. Crang and Jackson are cultural geographers rather than literary studies practitioners, and, as such, are more interested in analyses of consumption cultures or the formulation of social theoretical arguments on the relationship between consumption and identity. Their insights, however, can usefully be transposed to the literary domain, and drawn on in the reading of the versions of Britishness constructed in contemporary literary texts, specifically through the emphasis on the contextualisation of the local and the everyday within larger networks of commodities and knowledge. 'Senses of the personal and local consumption identities,' they write, 'are interwoven with, and depend on understandings of larger geographies, such that the appeal of a neighbourhood, or something as mundane as a shopping centre, is bound up with conceptions of Britishness and Britain's place in the world.'[26]

Cultural geographers have documented extensively the way in which 'a world of cultural and culinary diversity is currently being served up to British food consumers on

[25] Crang, Philip and Peter Jackson. 'Geographies of Consumption', p. 327ff.
[26] Crang and Jackson, 'Geographies of Consumption', p. 338.

their plates, their supermarket shelves and their high streets'.[27] With some degree of justifiability, one would expect 'culinary items of alien pedigree' to find their way into identity-conscious contemporary fiction produced and marketed at the heart of the former British Empire, and such expectations are rewarded when one opens a novel to find that quintessentially British dish of fish and chips in the company of the more 'exotic' ackee and saltfish.[28]

Through my reading of the novels, I hope to show that the cultural stereotypes which connect particular foodstuffs to given localised identities are resourcefully and flexibly employed for a literary imaging of a slice of contemporary Britain, through the use of what Joel Kahn terms 'a representational grid known as multiculturalism'.[29] Multi-culture and its derivatives are terms applied not to groups made up of members of distinct cultures and coexisting within a given space but to a constant re-articulation of identities and sites, a re-articulation which defies both concrete spatial borders and a conceptualisation built upon metaphors of boundedness and enclosure.[30]

A concern with identifying trends in contemporary taste underlies Allison James's discussion of British cuisine in an edited collection on cross-cultural consumption.[31] Drawing on considerations by Ulf Hannerz on cosmopolitanism and globalization, James works with an understanding of consumption practices as a flexible resource in the fashioning of self-identity.

Yet another perspective on food consumption, this time from within a sociological framework, is offered by Alan Warde. In an empirical study of the meanings consumers

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[27] Ian Cook, Philip Crang and Mark Thorpe, 'Eating Into Britishness: Multicultural Imaginaries and the Identity Politics of Food', in Sasha Roseneil and Julie Seymour (eds.), *Practising Identities. Power and Resistance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 223-248..

[28] Alan Warde, 'Eating Globally: Cultural Flows and the Spread of Ethnic Restaurants', in Don Kalb *et al* (eds.), *The End of Globalization. Bringing Society Back In* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 299-316.

[29] Joel Kahn, *Culture, Multiculture and Postculture* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 108.

[30] Cook *et al*, 'Eating into Britishness', p. 223ff.

[31] Allison James, 'Cooking the Books: Global or Local Identities in Contemporary British Food Cultures?', in David Howes (ed.). *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 77-92; see also, by the same author, 'How British is British Food?', in Pat Caplan (ed.), *Food, Health and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 71-86.

assign to ethnic foods, Warde outlines three reasons underlying the choice of such dishes.[32] Palpable proof of globalization and basis for theoretical discussions of this much acclaimed socio-economic and cultural tendency in recent times (which Warde defines, following Arjun Appadurai, as 'farther and faster circulation of social entities'), ethnic restaurants are an excellent locus for the investigation of the reality of 'networks of interaction and social relations' across cultures.[33] Warde looks for inequalities in patterns of ethnic restaurant frequenting, inequalities that might have symbolic and cultural significance. Variables for his study are not only the socio-demographic profiles of the consumers but also the types of food outlets that purvey ethnic dishes. The general question that Warde poses is how ethnic food is perceived by the British and what meanings they attach to its consumption. The answers that Warde considers in this article are omnivorousness (people consume ethnic foods in search for novelty and variety), cosmopolitanism (ethnic foods are valorized in terms of their cultural difference) and distinction (consumption of ethnic foods is directly linked with social prestige).

Anthropological material will also be referred to, in the context of this thesis, to support readings of cultural taxonomies. Integrating studies from various disciplines has been made necessary by the focus of this thesis: embracing multiculture by means of ethnic food consumption is a nuanced matter, more so than it may appear at first sight.

Chapter Structure

The linear delimitation of the readings is not rigidly taken up in the structure of the thesis, which allows the specificity of individual texts to decide upon the weight each of the main coordinates – taste, space and storytelling – is given in each chapter.

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[32] Alan Warde, 'Eating Globally', p. 299ff.
[33] Alan Warde, 'Eating Globally', p. 299ff.

Thus, Chapter One looks at *England, England* (1998) by Julian Barnes, *Sour Sweet* (1982) by Timothy Mo and *One Day* (2003) by Ardashir Vakil.[34] Its main concern lies with issues of authenticity in relation to cuisines - both English and ethnic - and stereotypical constructions of 'other' cultures. Another primary text to be brought into the discussion is a recent short story, 'Uproar' (1997), by British-Chinese writer Paul Wong, which reads as an elaboration upon a scene in *Sour Sweet*.[35]

Chapter Two maps out culinary cartographies of London, as they are drawn by Maggie Gee in *The White Family* (2002) and Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* (2000).[36] Similarities between the two novels have already been pointed out: 'As *White Teeth*, that other multicultural Brent novel showed, today's racial landscape is coloured less in blacks and whites than myriad shades of grey'.[37] My reading of these novels aims to foreground the way in which various characters negotiate access to space in a multicultural environment by means of food-related practices.

The underlying principle of multiple viewpoints is also obeyed in Chapter Three, which brings together three novels whose main characters are children: *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996) by Andrea Levy, *Anita and Me* (1996) by Meera Syal and *The Wild* (2000) by Esther Freud.[38] The focus here is on the role of food in marking out the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction, from the perspective of a young age group.

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[34] Julian Barnes, *England, England* [1998] (London: Picador, 1999).
Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* [1982] (London: Vintage, 1992).
Ardashir Vakil, *One Day* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).
[35] Ian McEwan, *Soursweet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).
Paul Wong, 'Uproar', in *Dim Sum (Little Pieces of Heart): British Chinese Short Stories* (Manchester: Crocus Books, 1997), pp. 69-74.
[36] Maggie Gee, *The White Family* (London: Saqi, 2002).
Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* [2000] (London: Penguin, 2001).
[37] Hephzibah Anderson, 'A bit of a grey area', *The Observer*, Sunday 5 May, 2002.
[38] Andrea Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere* (London: Headline Review, 1996).
Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* [1996] (London: Flamingo, 1997).
Esther Freud, *The Wild* (London: Penguin, 2000).

Chapter Four tackles consumption both literally and metaphorically, and looks at *Admiring Silence* (1996) by Abdulrazak Gurnah, *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003) by Preethi Nair and *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali.[39]

Grouping texts in chapters has not been an easy task. Whereas *England, England*, *Sour Sweet* and *One Day* were a fairly clear-cut match due to their complementary treatment of authenticity, and this concern was not foregrounded in the remaining texts, both *Sour Sweet* and *One Day* would have made likely candidates for the 'culinary cartographies of the metropolis' chapter by virtue of their setting in London. This second chapter refers exclusively to *White Teeth* and *The White Family* because these two novels share an extended consideration of the need to rewrite the public-private divide through culinary consumption. Again, *Sour Sweet* writes an affectionately tongue-in-cheek account of a Chinese boy, Man Kee, a second-generation migrant in England, which would have justified its appearance in the third chapter, alongside Levy's, Syal's and Freud's novels. That this did not happen is mainly because in the last three texts mentioned, the perspectives of children and young adolescents are central whereas Man Kee's experience is only secondary in the text. Levy's novel may be set in London, but its narrative viewpoint makes it a more likely candidate for the third chapter.

The fourth chapter engages with an odd mix of texts at first sight. *Admiring Silence* attempts to thematize race in stories told by an unreliable narrator, an (initially) illegal migrant in London. *One Hundred Shades of White* belongs to the middlebrow fiction section, and, while set in London, it dwells on an entangled plot of love, hatred and forgiveness and the inner life of its two narrators, mother and daughter, to the extent to which the city becomes erased. *Brick Lane* is an all-embracing text: it brings together 'authentic' Bangladeshi cuisine, a vivid account of the eponymous area in London and

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[39] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence* [1996] (London: Penguin, 1997).
Preethi Nair, *One Hundred Shades of White* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).
Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Doubleday, 2003).

two fairly outspoken children characters. What justifies the inclusion of these three novels in the last chapter is their ability to contribute to a fruitful discussion on the consumption of fiction. *Admiring Silence* problematises the figure of the unreliable narrator who engages with versions of Englishness through the use of culinary references. *One Hundred Shades of White* bases its success on a canny marketing campaign carried out by the author for her first novel, *Gypsy Masala*, while banking on a pervasive concern in Indo-Anglian writing with the emotional properties of foodstuffs.[40] *Brick Lane*, as a controversial newcomer to the literary fiction scene, raises still current issues of literary reception and of the status of fictional texts.

[40] Preethi Nair, *Gypsy Masala* (Northampton: NineFish, 2000).

Chapter One

A TASTE OF BRITAIN:

'THE THING ITSELF', TAKEAWAYS AND FUSION FOOD

The Implications of Authenticity

There is an intrinsic connection between food and spatiality, the latter perceived in several shapes and guises. Nations, cities, homes and bodies are defined by and defining of the culinary. Discourses on the nation, constructed on culinary parameters, rely upon 'authenticity' as a key rhetorical element. The contrast between originals and more or less fortunate replicas lies at the foundation of such discourses and is functionalised, to a different degree and from varying angles, in contemporary literary fiction.

National identity, Antony Easthope has argued, is a product of modernity.[1] At the time when the nation-states were taking shape, the term 'nation' carried connotations of monocultural communities. Britain, however, can hardly be defined as such, since it has, in the words of Robert J. C. Young, 'always been multicultural'.[2] Ethnic diversity, he claims, has for at least the past four centuries been a prominent theme in representations of Britishness. The diversity-centred discourse that Young identifies coexists, however, with a view of British culture as monolithic, homogeneous and Anglo-centric, and frequently, a slippage between the use of the labels 'England' and 'Britain' occurs.

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[1] Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 3.

[2] Robert J. C. Young, 'Writing Race: Ethnicity as Otherness', in Fernando Galván and Mercedes Bengoechea (eds.), *On Writing and Race in Contemporary Britain* (Alcalá: Universidad de Alcalá, 1999), pp. 17-28.

To open a parenthesis, cultural diversity, or multiculture, as Anthony Appiah signals, has been thought of as a neutral sum total of its components or a means of pigeonholing people into readily assigned categories with their respective connotations and ideological baggage.[3] Alternatively, multiculture has also been glossed as a field of forces where power ratios change according to the viewpoint one adopts. This gloss, which Appiah endorses, is based on a definition of culture as a multicentred process and proves a most useful tool in performing a reading of contemporary literary narratives in English sensitive to the ethnic diversity of fictional characters.

This thesis is written from a position in the theoretical debates on multiculture which challenges taxonomies of cultural groups and views them as an effect of discourse rather than an essential reality to which language merely assigns labels. It places multiculture in an equation whose other member is contemporary British society (that is, in the period from the end of the Second World War to the start of the third millennium) as imagined in contemporary fiction, and aims to focus its mapping of intra- and cross-cultural relations on literary texts occupying complementary positions on the Anglo-centric *versus* multicultural identity continuum.

Returning to authenticity, a view which can be productively applied to an analysis of the multicultural (culinary) imaginaries in contemporary Britain is put forward by Ian Cook *et al.*[4] Rather than dismissing authenticity as a fallacy in the light of historical considerations of the worldwide circulation of peoples, flora, fauna and knowledge, Cook *et al.* choose to interrogate the strategies through which authenticity is conferred on particular culinary items. Whereas Cook *et al.* base their discussions on the food

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[3] Anthony Appiah, 'The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding', *The New York Review*, 9 October 1997. Although Appiah's comments are grounded in the US context and Homi Bhabha puts forward a similar argument in, for example, 'Reinventing Britain',http://www.britishcouncil.org/studies/reinventing_britain/manifesto.htm, <29 December 2003>, the choice of Appiah for this gloss of multiculturalism is warranted by the fact that Bhabha's formulation is strongly dependent on a poststructuralist vocabulary which epistemologically carries the risk of overlooking basic, lived reality.

[4] Ian Cook, Philip Crang and Mark Thorpe, 'Regions to Be Cheerful: Culinary Authenticity and Its Geographies', in Ian Cook, David Crouch, Simon Naylor and James R. Ryan (eds.), *Cultural Turns, Geographical Turns: Perspectives on Cultural Geography* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 109-139.

manufacturing and retail sectors, and in particular on the way in which 'ethnic' cuisine products are highlighted on supermarket shelves, the argument they put forward can readily be applied to an analysis of the way culinary signifiers are used as resources in constructing a particular image of multiculturalism, one in which boundaries between the cultures making up the multicultural mosaic are clearly drawn.

Authenticity thus can most helpfully be thought of in terms of specific narratives constructed around one or several key points. Culinary items might be perceived as authentic due to their being produced in their assigned region of origin, or by a person usually categorised in a particular cultural group, or by using 'original' ingredients, or following a 'traditional' recipe passed on from one generation to the other. Whatever the motivation, ultimately what counts is for what purpose the narrative of authenticity is constructed.

My aim in this chapter is to interrogate the use of culinary references in three novels engaging with cross-cultural encounters and looking at traditionalist Anglo-centredness through an ironic lens: *England, England* (1998) by Julian Barnes, *Sour Sweet* (1982) by Timothy Mo and *One Day* (2003) by Ardashir Vakil. These novels serve as distorting mirrors with the help of which readers can readjust their perception of England and Englishness in the context of an increasingly multicultural environment. Opposed versions of the experience of eating out are put forward by *England, England* and *Sour Sweet*: traditional English fare for the foreign visitors of Sir Jack Pitman's theme park, an improved and reduced-scale model of England, in the former, and sophisticated Chinese restaurant meals and inauthentic take-away dishes in metropolitan London, in the latter. *One Day*, in its turn, focuses on eating in, while further blurring boundaries between foodscapes. The sweet-and-sour chips in Mo's novel, implying a successful mingling of Englishness and Chineseness, give way to a more sophisticated

version of cultural merging as proposed by Vakil through his main character Ben Tennyson's East/West cookbook.

'The Thing Itself'?

Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998) turns the idea of nation, anchored at the Anglo-centred end of the cultural identity continuum, into a postmodern spectacle and exposes it as a palimpsest of representations. The novel has generated academic commentaries on the way Barnes incorporates tourism in his narrative with a view to critiquing postmodernism.[5] While acknowledging the particular features and themes the text owes the postmodern mode of representation, however, one can also engage with Barnes's novel through specifically a culinary prism as the starting point for a discussion of the ambiguities that would inevitably accompany an attempt to distinguish between on the one hand England as 'the thing itself' and, on the other, as a commercially attractive package which could bear the label 'a taste of England™'.

There are three Englands that Barnes playfully sketches in each of the three parts of the novel, tracing the life journey of its main character Martha Cochrane. Firstly, the rural England of Martha's childhood with its agricultural fair, which she attends at the age of five with her parents. Secondly, the 'traditional' England that a series of experts (including the Gastronomic Sub-Committee) instate, rather than revive, in Sir Jack Pitman's theme park on the Isle of Wight and, thirdly, Albion, or Anglia, the 'original' England to which Martha returns in her old age.

The England of Martha's childhood is signified by two powerful images. One is a 'counties of England' jigsaw puzzle, the other, the District Agricultural and Horticultural

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[5] Barbara Korte, 'Julian Barnes's *England, England*: Tourism as a Critique of Postmodernism', in Hartmut Berghoff, Barbara Korte, Ralph Schneider and Christopher Harvie (eds.), *The Making of Modern Tourism: The Cultural History of the British Experience, 1600-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 285-303.

Society's Schedule of Prizes which she keeps from the agricultural show she attends with her parents. The presence of the show in the novel is an opportunity for the narrator to display an organic image of Englishness based upon produce grown locally on English soil and dishes that would be identified with a rural tradition:

> Inside hot marquees were lardy cakes, drop scones, Eccles cakes and flapjacks, scotch eggs halved like ammonites; parsnips and carrots a yard long, tapering to the thinness of a candlewick; slick onions with their necks bent over and tied into submission with twine; clusters of five eggs, with a sixth broken into a judging dish beside them; beetroot cut to show rings like trees.[6]

They recall what Luce Giard labels 'terroir', or 'the tang of the soil' in an approximate translation, the sum total of the features which help produce the association of a food with a particular region.[7] Martha faithfully preserves the book of lists; however, the counties of England jigsaw puzzle with which she plays as a child she takes apart when her parents unexpectedly separate.

Later in life, after the age of twenty-five, Martha becomes involved in reconfiguring a different type of jigsaw puzzle – Sir Jack Pitman's project to capitalise on England's past. Sir Jack's 'England, England' is, to paraphrase McCannell,[8] a post-touristic resort, a ludic repositioning and combination of England's key touristic attractions, minus the inconvenience of modern transport, for the benefit of a foreign, moneyed social layer. The visitors to 'England, England' are of the category which, in John Urry's words, 'finds pleasure in the multitude of games that can be played and knows that there is no authentic tourist experience'.[9]

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[6] Julian Barnes, *England, England* [1998] (London: Picador, 1999), p. 10. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[7] Luce Giard, 'Plat du Jour', in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life. Volume 2: Living and Cooking,* translated by Timothy Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 171-198, quotation at 178.

[8] Dean McCannell, quoted in John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 140.

[9] Urry, *Consuming Places*, p. 140.

The business tycoon commissions one of his project managers to draw up, on quizzing foreigners and tourists, a list of 'quintessences of Englishness'.[10] Gastronomy-wise, the list reads 'Devonshire cream tea and marmalade', hardly a respectable gustatory canon of Englishness in Sir Jack Pitman's eyes.[11] Devonshire cream teas served in thatched cottages they shall have, he decides, but there must be more to the island's cooking that can be sold as quintessentially English. The Gastronomic Sub-Committee steps in and gives its stamp of approval to a host of culinary produce. The making of a gustatory canon of Englishness proceeds as follows:

> Roast beef of Old England was naturally approved on the nod by the Gastronomic Sub-Committee, as were Yorkshire pudding, Lancashire hotpot, Sussex pond pudding, Coventry godcakes, Aylesbury duckling, Brown Windsor Soup, Devonshire Splits, Melton Mowbray pie, Bedfordshire clangers, Liverpool Christmas loaf, Chelsea buns, Cumberland sausages and Kentish chicken pudding. A swift tick was given to fish and chips, bacon and eggs, mint sauce, steak and kidney pudding, ploughman's lunch, shepherd's pie, cottage pie, plum duff, custard with skin, bread and butter pudding, liver and bacon, pheasant, game chips and crown roast. (90)

This seemingly innocent inventory of what is perceived as traditional English fare is nevertheless exposed soon afterwards as an attempt to preserve a hollow image rather than the 'original' experience: 'Approved for their picturesque nomenclature (contents could be adjusted later if necessary) were London Particular, Queen of puddings, Poor Knights of Windsor, Hindle Wakes, stargazey pie, wow-wow sauce, maids-of-honour, muffins, collops, crumpets, fat rascals, Bosworth jumbles, moggy and parkin.' (90-91).[12]

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[10] Perceptions of England (and not only abroad) often reflect a disappointment with English cuisine; English food makes the object of many a joke. Hence the attempt of a good number of food writers and culinary experts to revive English cooking and re-affirm its value. A distinctive voice in this respect belongs to Colin Spencer, member of the Food Writers' Guild, who prefaces his popular study of food in Britain with a eulogy to the island's cuisine; *British Food: An Extraordinary 1000 Years of History* (London: Grub Street, 2003).

[11] Similar research has recently been comissioned by the BBC and its results presented in a televised series entitled 'The Nation's Favourite Food'. The foods are largely the choice of the inhabitants of the UK rather than tourists and are far from the traditionally English cuisine referred to in Barnes's novel. Recipes for the dishes listed are available in a subsequently published book: Jo Pratt, Christine Hall and James Hayes, *Recipes for The Nation's Favourite Foods* (London: BBC, 2003).

[12] Pains are taken that the culinary produce connotes Englishness alone, and potential Irish, Scottish, Welsh and subversive associations are pre-empted by a complete refusal to take into consideration dishes

The design of the Island Experience appears to be driven at once by a national heritage concern with the preservation of tradition and an entrepreneurial 'special effects' interpretation of England's past based on profit. Visitors may delight in the illusion; however, employees of Sir Jack Pitman's version of England, 'the thing itself', gradually become the parts they play, the simulation becomes reality for them, with no external referent for comparison. The game is taken seriously and turns into everyday life. A telling example of this in the novel involves the decision by Robin Hood and his band of merry men to consume a genuine thirteenth-century diet. The Robin Hood feature of the park is, the narrator intimates, 'the primal English myth [...] and on top of all this, no. 7 on Jeff's all-time list of The Fifty Quintessences of Englishness, as adjusted by Sir Jack Pitman' (146). Problems arise when Robin and his men become unhappy with the taste of the vegetarian substitute for roast ox and decide to hunt their own dinner. While the management is hesitating between employing a top French chef to enhance the mock roast's flavour and rewriting the Robin Hood script, the enterprising band takes measures which turn them into prime suspects for the disappearance of Dingle, the Woolly Steer, from the Animal Heritage Park.

Parallel to the Island Project aimed at attracting tourists and drawn up by a committee well in control of its design and outcomes, the 'original' England, now called 'Anglia', is an organically developed entity. The strong connection between the soil, seasonality and food provisioning acts as a scaffolding upon which an image of authenticity is built. Martha grows in her garden Snowball turnips, Red Drumhead cabbage, Bath cos, Saint George cauliflower, Rousham Park Hero onions and various sorts of beans. The local *Mid-Wessex Gazette*, which Martha reads out of habit rather than pleasure, records in detail the prices for the agricultural produce. Martha notes

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that would carry such meanings: 'The Sub-Committee banned porridge for its Scottish associations, faggots and fairy cakes in case they offended the pink dollar, spotted dick even when renamed spotted dog. Devils- and angels- on-horseback were in; toad-in-the-hole and cock-a-leekie out. Welsh rarebit, scotch eggs and Irish stew were not even discussed.' (90-91).

burdock has dropped in value, but she is not surprised, as 'in her opinion, most of these retro-veg were consumed not for reasons of nutrition, or even necessity, but out of fashionable affectation. Simplicity had become confused with self-mortification.' (260).

Parallelism and deviation lie at the basis of the two constructs, 'England, England' and 'Anglia'. There is an overt indication in both cases of a slippage between the inhabitants' real identity and the self they project. But whereas in the theme park employees are given externally designated parts with which they begin to identify, in Anglia they have willingly taken on a new role, not for the benefit of tourists but playing at real life. Among them is Jez Harris, formerly a legal expert with an electronics firm but currently the self-designated village yokel and folklore forger for the benefit of the odd researcher. The character of Harris acts as a counterpart for Sir Jack Pitman, but on a considerably smaller scale. He is rewarded for his services with a 'steak and kidney pudding at the Rising Sun and a pint of mild-and-bitter' (243), very much a pre-industrial version of a business lunch. Jez Harris is occasionally chided by the local schoolmaster, Mr Mullin, for his entrepreneurial pursuits, on the grounds of falsifying history, though to no avail.

Artifice is thus not only the preserve of tourism. It appears in equal measure at the level of everyday reality. Anglia may have regressed to be a pre-industrial country and therefore the reinstallment of a June fête is called for. However, to the inhabitants of the village to which Martha chooses to retire, Martha's first-hand experience of an agricultural and horticultural show, and her ceremoniously preserved book of lists appear as a 'potsherd from an immensely complicated and self-evidently decadent civilization' (247) and they decide to do without it and 'start from scratch' (247).

While making a mockery of tourism in its capacity artificially to produce a nation as a mere spectacle for the enjoyment of a leisured group, Barnes nevertheless speedily invalidates at the same time the connotations of 'tradition' and 'Englishness' which

references to 'home-grown' produce carry in the novel. Authenticity, for Julian Barnes, becomes a discursive effect rather than an independently existing reality.

Sweet and Sour Intercultural Exchanges

Tourism studies frequently takes issue with the artificial and inauthentic construction of landscapes, social spaces and accompanying practices for a much deplored itinerant category, that of tourists, ranked below the sophisticated and knowledgeable traveller, who has the ability to emerge from a cross-cultural encounter without having upset the ecology of his area of destination.

Another target of criticism with reference to the failure to provide an authentic experience are the takeaways,[13] and in this respect it could be argued that Barnes's novel constructs a takeaway version of England. Such 'takeaway Englands' also make their appearance in some fictions in which Englishness (understood as synonymous with Anglo-centredness) is problematised through the engagement of the text with multicultural themes and issues, in particular through the appearance in the text of scant and stereotypical English culinary references to represent the mainstream culture in relation to which the characters construct their identities.

From a different point of view, the takeaway can also be glossed as a 'contact zone', a site for the encounter between (individuals belonging to) different cultural groups. 'Contact zone' is a concept used by Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as:

> an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term 'contact', I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily

[13] This critique is tellingly captured in Ian McEwan's adaptation of Mo's novel; the screenplay, re-titled *Soursweet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), Chen explains: 'It won't be Chinese cuisine, Lily. It's takeaway food. It's been tried and tested. The English like it. I don't need to know anything about cooking.', p. 17.

> ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travellers and 'travelees', not in terms of separateness and apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.[14]

Pratt looks at the way in which, through travel writing, imperialist cultures have produced the rest of the world for a Western audience. She opposes the term 'contact zone' to 'colonial frontier', thus erasing the connotation of clear-cut boundaries around cultures. Following on from this, one could argue that while takeaways may offer a limited, standard choice of dishes, and thus a distorted, watered down perspective on what a culture entails, they also open up possibilities for interaction between cultures and the appearance of products with dual or multiple cultural origins. They are spaces where cultural identities are in the making, cutting across the public/private divide, always open to contestation and rearticulation.

In *England, England*, takeaways as such are not mentioned in the text. In *Sour Sweet*, however, the takeway is a central location around which the narrative is organised. In Mo's novel, conceptualising the takeaway as a contact zone rather than simply as a place which offers an inauthentic cultural experience proves extremely valuable in exploring the way in which cultural identity is packaged in the text in culinary terms.

If Barnes explodes a unique and stable referentiality of 'England' through representations of foods and foodways, for Timothy Mo's characters England is an 'existential reality' (as defined by George Hughes), in which meaning is a necessity

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[14] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

rather than an illusion, and English foods and tastes a useful point of reference in the articulation of cultural identities.[15]

Sour Sweet tells the story of a migrant Chinese couple attempting to make a living in London during the 1960s. Chen, the husband, works in the Ho-Ho, a Cantonese eating house in Soho, while his wife Lily and her sister Mui plot to move out of the Camden Town flat and open a takeaway. The planning proceeds in fits and starts until Chen, who had borrowed money from the Chinese triads for the hospitalisation of his father back in China, finds he needs to escape their influence. Two friends of the Chens appear in the novel. One is Lo, Chen's colleague at the Ho-Ho until Lo falls ill and eventually has to change his workplace. The other is Mrs Law, a well-off widow whom Lily and Mui meet in a supermarket. The two offer the Chen household the possibility to socialise outside the home. Once established, the takeaway grows to be a successful venture. Man Kee, Chen and Lily's son, reaches school age. Lily learns how to drive and a trip to the seaside ensues. Pregnant Mui takes lodgings at Mrs Law's and Chen's father arrives from China. Eventually, Mui marries Lo and the two open a fish-and-chip restaurant while Chen, found out by the triads, inevitably disappears.[16]

As Mo's text is not about England as such, but about a family of Chinese migrants who come to settle in London, comments on mainstream English culture are filtered through their viewpoint. Chineseness is signified in the text through violence and elaborate cuisine, though no relationship is drawn between the two. Authentic Chinese food is a sophisticated affair. Lily, Mui and Mrs Law share a sumptuous banquet at the restaurant in Shaftesbury Avenue where Lo finds a new job:

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[15] George Hughes, 'Authenticity in Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research. A Social Sciences Journal*, 22, 4 (1995), 781-803.

[16] The story of the Chens and their expanded family is intertwined with that of the Chinese triads in London; for the purposes of this thesis, however, it is not necessary to refer to these sections of the novel as they neither advance nor invalidate the theme of cross-cultural encounters set in culinary terms.

> The proprietor suggested some dishes: crabs were fresh and plentiful in the market at the moment, white vegetable was good, as were Holland beans. What about a baked crab with ginger and spring onion, roast pork and duck, a whole steamed sea bass, baked chicken or pigeon with potato puffs, and noodles and fried rice? Shark's fin soup to start, of course, and half-way through a sweet soup of almond or peanut. Fresh fruit and tiny sweet buns to end.[17]

Lily and Mui take great delight in the elaborate meal, while Mrs Law opts for 'the excellent cooking of the south, the unadorned barbecues in which Lo specialised and the crispest vegetables he could find for her' (51). Personal attention and decorum between restaurant staff and patrons of Chinese ethnicity are held in high esteem.

By contrast, what the English enjoy sampling is focalised through the eyes of Chen, who has an 'absolute knowledge' that the tourist fare served in the Ho-Ho was 'rubbish, total *lupsup*, fit only for foreign devils' (17), the English being included in this category. The inauthentic menu, put together by the profit-oriented proprietor of the Ho-Ho and relished by the 'foreign devils' is opposed to the special Chinese language one catering for customers with insider knowledge of the corresponding culinary culture. The English also receive an unflattering portrait a few pages later when the external third person narrator adopts the collective perspective of the waiters in the Ho-Ho and tells tales of non-paying Englishmen displaying lack of culinary sophistication and 'loud and rowdy' behaviour. The theme is one of cultural incompatibility, with an emphasis on the English inability to acquire a genuine understanding of Chineseness.

This point of emphasis is turned on its head as the novel progresses, particularly in the case of Lily. Lily is happy to make negative, sweeping statements about the 'host' culture without engaging with it in a profound way. Exploring Englishness is, for Lily, a gradual process, but not altogether an unpleasant one. The Chens may consume elaborate Chinese dishes while catering for the 'degraded English tastebuds', but eventually they get to sample English fare. References to English food are minimal (and

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[17] Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* [1982] (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 51. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

stereotypical, one might add) but highly significant. By virtue of their situation as migrants, the characters cannot take for granted the world in which they live. Fish and chips are a pleasant discovery for them.[18] On the trip they make to the seaside, the Chens and Mui, who had skimped breakfast, resort to a traditional English meal. The fish and chips shop has an 'enviably wide all-glass window' (158) and Lily the business woman admires the shop owner's acumen in choosing vandal-proof glass and painting the prices on it. She also concedes the food is 'quite good, really, not bad at all. Even Lily, depressed at spending two shillings and sixpence a head, had to concede it was good stuff as she bit a long finger of potato in half.' (159).[19]

In spite of this, not all English foods meet so easily with Lily's approval. Man Kee invariably reports he has received mince, jam tart and custard at school, making Lily wonder whether this is not a generic term for food. Mince, jam tart and custard, which prompt 'Son' to reject the Chinese dishes his mother prepares for him, definitely do not find favour with Lily at first. It may, however, be a suitable choice for the friends Grandpa brings home from the hospital where he had to go after breaking a hip. Initially, confronted with the idea of visitors, Lily suggests congee and minced salty pork, but Mui is not convinced. Ever the keen social observer, she very sensibly ponders: 'Old people may not like Chinese food, Lily. Even *real* Chinese food. Do you notice how most of our customers are young? Old people often become stuck in their ways.' (248). Lily agrees to mince, jam tart and custard: 'Now, mince would be easy: not so different from some Chinese dishes, and they had practice from preparing it for Son. Jam tarts and custard they would buy from the Co-op.' (249).

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[18] Albeit that fish and chips are not entirely an English food, as Adrian Franklin shows in 'An Unpopular Food? The Distaste for Fish and the Decline of Fish Consumption in Britain', *Food and Foodways*, 7, 4 (1997), 227-264.

[19] Ulla Rahbeck attaches the tongue-in-cheek label 'Occidentalism' to Lily's critical generalisations of English customs, in 'Representations of Englishness in Timothy Mo's Novel *Sour Sweet*', www.britishcouncil.org/studies/england/rahbek.htm, <20 December 2003>.

Initially, the takeaway is a site which sells inauthentic Chinese fare to 'pink-faced' customers for reasons of profit: [20]

> The food they sold, certainly wholesome, nutritious, colourful, even tasty in its way, had been researched by Chen. It bore no resemblance at all to Chinese cuisine. They served from a stereotyped menu similar to those outside countless other establishments in the UK. The food was, if nothing else, thought Lily, provenly successful: [...]. 'Sweet and sour pork' was their staple, naturally: batter musket balls encasing a tiny core of meat, laced with a scarlet sauce that had an interesting effect on the urine of the consumer next day [...]. 'Spare-ribs' (whatever they were) also seemed popular. So were spring rolls, basically a northerner's snack, which Lily parsimoniously filled mostly with bean-sprouts [...]. The only authentic dish they served was rice, the boiled kind; the fried rice they sold with peas and ham bore no resemblance to the *chow faan* Lily cooked for themselves, although it was popular enough with their West Indian customers. The dishes were simple to cook; well within Chen's capabilities, which was hardly surprising since they had been invented by the Chinese seamen who had jumped ship or retired in East London a generation ago. (105-106)

The counter serves as a boundary between the patrons and the customers, and Mui's sign above the stairs prohibiting entry for the customers to the rest of the house reinforces metaphorically the barrier between the two cultures. Food, however, serves to establish a channel of communication and the takeaway is gradually contextualised as a space of transit, within which (versions of) Englishness and Chineseness come into contact with and adjust perceptions of each other. Mui's brainwave - sweet-and-sour chips ('potato, not bamboo' (142)), an excellent addition to the menu ('outselling anything else they cooked' (142)), seems to have a slightly different status from the inauthentic Chinese food sold on the premises. In discussions of Timothy Mo's novel, Elaine Yee Lin Ho and John McLeod separately comment on an in-between space configured in *Sour Sweet*, a combination of elements of Englishness and Chineseness in which neither

[20] Although the novel contains references to multiple cultural configurations in the background (Greek, Indian, Chinese establishments, bus drivers from the West Indies, Asian and Indian friends Man Kee makes at school, Jewish tailors), as Ulla Rahbeck points out, Mo's narrator uses the 'narrower and more complex term English most of the time rather than the politically correct British', in 'Representations of Englishness in Timothy Mo's Novel *Sour Sweet*'.

culture is granted precedence over the other.[21] It could be argued that this in-between-ness is best symbolised in the novel by Mui's sweet-and-sour chips. This foregroundedly hyphenated concoction metaphorically points to an in-betweenness which does not appear by default in an encounter between cultures but to whose construction each culture brings its own more or less substantial contribution.

In Elaine Yee Lin Ho's view, the tension between the two cultures, English and Chinese, and the way in which it may be resolved is, at the time of writing the novel, 'a question which *Sour Sweet* raised but did not, or could not, really address.'[22] What she identifies as a potential shortcoming is viewed by A. Robert Lee as a valuable narrative strategy. Lee writes: 'Mo very shrewdly leaves these dialectics simply in process [...] a kind of play of half balances. The upshot is neither assimilation exactly nor exclusion exactly.'[23]

Around the time of the publication of *Sour Sweet* and, takeaways would have become established icons of Chineseness in the popular British imaginary, and second-, and even possibly third-generation migrants would consequently find themselves, whether justifiably or not, associated with that image. A sensitive treatment of such stereotyping is offered by Paul Wong, a British-Chinese writer, in his short story 'Uproar'.

The Multiple Valencies of Cha Sui Pork

'Uproar' (1997), a short story by Paul Wong, while not explicitly set up as such, could be read, but for a few details, as an elaboration upon a narrative thread in *Sour Sweet*,

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[21] Elaine Yee Lin Ho, *Timothy Mo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); John McLeod, 'Living In-Between: Interstitial Spaces of Possibility in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*', in Stephen Earnshaw (ed.), *Just Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 107-128.

[22] Ho, *Timothy Mo*, p. 63.

[23] A. Robert Lee, 'Imagined Cities of China: Timothy Mo's London, Sky Lee's Vancouver, Fae Myenne Ng's San Francisco and Gish Jen's New York', *Wasafiri*, 22 (Autumn 1995), 25-30, quotation at 26.

involving Man Kee's experience within the same-age multicultural community at school. 'Uproar' is a first-person narrative of cultural identity, told from the perspective of a British-born Chinese boy, in which food is relied upon to mark cultural differences among a group of children going on a school trip.

The unnamed narrator packs a box of roast meats (cha sui pork and roast duck). On account of arriving late at the coach, he gets to sit with 'the rowdy boys at the back',[24] a position made uneasy both by his incompatibility with the group – his hair tousles the wrong way, he is too much of a swot and he has never watched a football game – and by the proximity to the heat-emanating engine. He does not seem to have much to offer that would persuade the other boys to accept him as a member of their group, that is, apart from the cha sui pork, narratively invested with the role of currency to secure him a positive image within the group. The dynamics of acceptance and rejection revolve around the cold meat dish. Both the cheese-and-onion-crisps-and-cola boy sitting on his right and Daniel, the Jewish boy on his left, whose favourite food is macaroni cheese, give a favourable verdict on tasting the cha sui pork.

> I open up the carrier bag and then the box, the sweet barbecue smell explodes in my face and I tear open the plastic and dig out a piece of cold cha sui pork for Daniel. He takes it and chews it. He thinks about it and proclaims it to be not bad. I offer a piece to the cheese and onion kid on my right, and he too approves of a small piece of cha siu pork, saying that he'd tried something similar from his local takeaway. (71).

What counts as food for one person, however, becomes a polluting category for the other - with boundaries between edible and non-edible being redrawn on a cultural rather than biological level. Jan, described as a gypsy-ish looking boy and the group bully, picks on the narrator because of the smell of the roast meat and, when they have

[24] Paul Wong, 'Uproar', in Dim Sum (Little Pieces of Heart): British Chinese Short Stories (Manchester: Crocus Books, 1997), pp. 69-74, p. 69. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

arrived at the camp, breaks open his suitcase and spreads the meat all over his clothes and comics.

Food preferences stand in place of names, which are not generously allocated. The narrator omits to specify his; his parents do not have names in the story either, nor does the boy sitting on his right in the coach, of whom we know only that he has a penchant for cheese and onion crisps and cola, and football, which he occasionally plays with a boy from the local take-away, who was born in Hong-Kong. In contrast to Daniel and Jan, the unnamed cheese-and-onion-crisps boy does not receive a specific cultural identity and we are left to infer he belongs to the unmarked white category of British population. Place names are not mentioned either. The school trip destination is left ambiguous and the narrator could live in almost any town in Britain which has a school, a common and a take-away.[25] The takeaway, in this case, becomes an integrated element in the British landscape, a sign that multiculture is a taken for granted, everyday reality, whether or not universally accepted and approved of.

England, England takes apart a 'National Heritage' image of Englishness as a mock-authentic touristic attraction, while Timothy Mo deplores its lack of sophistication, but opens up a possibility for meaningful cross-cultural interaction through following the steps of a family of Chinese migrants in London. In Wong's story acceptance and rejection of the ethnically Other are left in tension. A novel which performs a synthesis of the two approaches is *One Day*, whose author Ardashir Vakil addresses stereotypes of Englishness through the eyes of an Englishman with a penchant for fusion cuisine.

[25] Cook *et al.* remark that 'it is said that there is now an Indian and a Chinese restaurant or take-away in almost every town.' 'Regions to be cheerful', p. 109.

'Forget about the East/West Food Thing'

Timothy Mo's sweet-and-sour chips are a fine example of fusion cooking, of merging elements from two previously different cultures, though, at the level of the larger story, rapport between the cultures is less well balanced. The Chinese couple and the working-class customers at their takeaway restaurant in 1960s London are a far-cry from the bi-cultural household in roughly the same setting at the end of the century, which Vakil portrays. The English characters, cast in walk-on parts in Mo's novel, merely sample 'Chinese' fare adapted to local tastes; Vakil, however, places 'authentic' Indian cuisine in the hands of an Englishman with a passion for cross-cultural cooking, Ben, who is a gourmet and an acknowledged cook.[26] His biryani is highly praised by Mohini Patnaik, his mother in law. In Vakil's novel, culinary authenticity turns into a set of procedures with a replicable outcome; dislocated, the biryani becomes festive fare for a leisured community in which rigid, middle-class English values are oddly out of sync.

Set in London on the cusp of the third millenium, *One Day* traces the complex pattern woven by the fraught relationship between Ben Tennyson, an English schoolteacher cum cookbook writer, and his wife, Priya Patnaik, a news reader for the BBC World Service. The twenty-four hour span of the main storyline covers the preparations for celebrating the birthday of the couple's three-year-old son, Arjun (Whacka), the party and its equilibrium-restoring aftermath. Here, a concern with either traditional English dishes or elaborate ethnic cuisines has been replaced by a preoccupation with fusion cooking. This expression, as Anne Murcott signals, is a 'reminder of the fashionable use of foods whose meaning, over time, shifts from 'novelty' or 'luxury', to 'everyday' or even 'necessity'.[27]

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[26] The gender inflection is particularly relevant here: while home-made food is associated with mothering and femininity in the popular imaginary, gourmet cuisine is largely a masculine issue.

[27] Anne Murcott, 'Food Culture in Britain', http://www.open2.net/everwondered_food/culture/culture_index04.htm, <21 December 2003>.

For Ben, the genre that best explains the world is the recipe. For the past two years he has been writing an East/West cookbook (his second one), a 'blend of recipes, history, sociology and anecdote'.[28] Cookbook writing is a highly creative, occasionally only half-conscious process. While he drifts off to sleep, recipe 33 begins to take shape in his mind:

> Rice with Cinnamon and Cloves. Yes, that's what he was getting: the distinctive nutty whiff of steaming basmati. Serve it with Puy lentils and butterflied leg of lamb that's been marinated in yogurt, garlic, cumin and the sweet chilli powder that comes from Kashmir. Rice must be perfectly cooked. Each grain fluffy, standing on its own, but never al dente like we British cook it. (37)

His initial enthusiasm, however, has gradually withered. The omnipresent fusion cooking one encounters is seldom more than a superficial combination of Eastern spices with Western fare, as another character remarks to Ben:[29]

> Forget about the East/West food thing for a while [...]. Everybody seems to be doing the East/West thing nowadays. The other day I saw cardamom-flavoured chocolate icecream on the menu at some restaurant. (254)

The dual viewpoint which the third person narration takes ensures that constructions of both Englishness and Indianness are weighed and balanced against one another, rather than one-sidedly endorsed. Despite this, there is a general attempt at exoticising Priya in the novel, and of presenting her as an uncontainable mass of energy, a visceral creature, prone to mood swings and tantrums. Priya and Ben are two opposites who cannot harmoniously co-exist in the kitchen. While Ben yearns for a sense of order and tidiness, Priya takes a more emotionally-involved approach to life; the kitchen is a war zone for her:

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[28] Ardashir Vakil, *One Day* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 22. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[29] Indian food in this novel is very much a gourmet issue, a signifier of knowledgeable sophistication. A thing to be noted is that no reference is made to its emotional and spiritual properties, extensively alluded to in Indo-Anglian texts – this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four in this thesis.

> Priya wasn't cut out to be a cook. After she had finished assembling a dish there were always stacks of soiled pots and pans littering the kitchen as in some student squat. For her, making porridge required six packets of oats, three pans, four pints of milk and six ladles. It was almost as if she despised the kitchen and its utilities, and they bore her a reciprocal grudge. Like a sensitive horse tiring of an inadequate rider, the kitchen lurched and frothed and fumed at her as she flailed hopelessly at its unyielding rump. (12)

Unsurprisingly, the only joint cooking venture Ben and Priya undertake ends in disaster: Priya attempts to make a daal, which Ben, ever the perfectionist, ruins with a spoonful of salt. Successful combinations of East and West in the kitchen seem to work at the level of ingredients, but not at that of the cooks.

In *One Day*, the motivation of the cook seems to tell on the dishes. While Ben's meals are undeniably tasty concoctions, Priya's fish-shaped jellies turn out to be less presentable than might have been expected, when she cooks them for Arjun's party in an attempt to save money. Rigid worldviews and set ways must be overcome before a harmonious combination can be produced and savoured. In Priya's hands the jelly moulds, turned over as Ben's mother had advised, fail to produce recognisable shapes. Similarly unsuccessful, one might argue, are Anglo-centric narratives in containing the multifariousness of life in contemporary Britain.

Having said that, a particular version of Indianness is deployed in the novel, namely that of a cultured class which travels leisurely between continents. An Oxbridge graduate and daughter of an established Indian writer, Priya consciously assumes her freedom to choose a territorial affiliation. Dislocation does not bring with it a severing of cultural ties with her homeland and Priya attempts to live life in England according to Indian rules, with a serene disregard for the financial status of her London household. While Ben professes a decidedly English middle-class frugality and wonders whether his biryani would not suffice as a dish for his son's birthday party, Priya has ordered samosas and kebabs, absurd amounts of food:

> Money should not be talked about. It was vulgar. And yet no expense should be spared to procure what the heart desired. Financial troubles could always be sorted out at a later date by someone else. If you were having a birthday party, there *must* be champagne and beer and several sorts of fruit juice. If the weather was good, there *must* be or we *must* have a barbecue, and the meat *must* be marinated in three different ways, breasts in lemon and garlic for the children, hot sauce for those who like it hot, and not so hot for the rest. Then, should we have a biryani as well? Yes, why not? [...] Then there must be all sorts of snacks, peanuts and *chewda*, samosas and kebabs, watermelon and fruit salad. (16)

Priya justifies her largesse by recourse to a sweeping statement about her cultural heritage: people in India entertain 'properly' (17). The banquets she puts together, and which she contrasts to a derogatory enumeration of cold foods ('What do you want me to produce, curried eggs, pork pies, crusty sandwiches, Kia-Ora?' (17)), serve as props for Priya's reputation as a successful hostess in her circle of friends.

Vakil's first novel, *Beach Boy* (1997), had a similar penchant for culinary tropes, though drawing on a different setting and experience.[30] Vakil opposes it to *One Day* thus:

> I had written my voyeuristic novel, which looked back at the world that I inhabited in Seventies Bombay. Now I wanted a book that would describe the experience of living in London; what it was like to be in a couple, the struggle for self-definition, the importance of work and something about the experience of being a parent.[31]

Indeed, no better choice for translating what urban life means for double-income liberal parents than a toddler's party. The corresponding trials and tribulations are keenly described with a mixture of empathy and irony which helps, in the words of one reviewer, to 'lift the account from the commonplace to the remarkable'.[32]

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[30] Ardashir Vakil, *Beach Boy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997).

[31] Ardashir Vakil, 'Lonely at the Laptop', *The Times*, 3 March 2003.

[32] Rebecca Abrams, 'Second-Novel Syndrome: *One Day*, by Ardashir Vakil', *New Statesman*, 3 February 2003, p. 57.

Hosts and guests for Whacka's anniversary, both children and adults, turn the North London home into a site of cross-cultural culinary consumption. When the entertainer is late arriving, Priya decides to serve the children's tea straight after the pass-the-parcel game. The beginning of the party is filtered through Priya's consciousness, and, while Ben starts on the food for the adults, Priya is busy laying out the children's food. She negotiates her way through the group of adults, who arrived early, who crowd the kitchen, and switches back and forth between the tasks to be performed or delegated and memories of her own childhood parties back in Delhi. Cocktail sausages, Hula Hoops and crisps, crudités and sandwiches are laid out on Spiderman party plates and Priya takes the jellies out of the fridge.

Ben's display of culinary skill is disapprovingly watched by Robert, Ben's irredeemably conservative middle-class father, but it is Crispin, Ben's brother-in-law, who voices disgust at the sight of the fried red onion rings laid out on a kitchen towel: 'Good God,' he booms, 'what on earth is that?' 'Looks like the last cubicle in the men's bogs at work.' (219).

Eating takes place in shifts. After the children have the main part of their tea, it is the adults' turn to gather round the kitchen table for long, thin and spicy lamb kebabs, coriander, mint and garlic chutney and steaming naan. The clown entertains the children and Priya places a Batman cake with three candles on the table. The candles are blown out and the cake slices are passed round; the piece of icing in the shape of Batman's head finds its way onto Whacka's plate. Departing children collect their party bags leaving the clown ravenously helping himself to the remains of the children's food, kebabs and bread.

The biryani is almost ready when new guests, Leo and Jan, arrive. Jan engages Priya in a conversation about childbearing and religion, which is interrupted by Ben's call to dinner. The grown-ups gather round the stone table and conversation

alternatively touches upon writing and the creative process, everyday incidents and overall views on society, among participants with differing degrees of literary knowledge. When coffee, tea, fruit and chocolates have been dispensed, Jehan, a successful writer, finds himself in the limelight, with an audience eager to hear about his new book. The narrative takes a self-conscious turn and Jocelyn, Leo's mother, voices her discontent with 'novels about the trials and tribulations of middle-class north London couples. We've had enough of those to last us fifty years. Whingeing double-income liberal parents, please let us have no more of their banal utterances.' (261).

After the guests' departure,

> The kitchen is glutted with debris: food, toys, dirty glasses, plates, cutlery, balloons, wrappers of all kinds, half-eaten sweets, ripped party bags,bits of clothing, hats, shoes, pots and pans, half a tray of grilled chicken, a mound of rice, curling sandwiches, cartons of juice, empty beer bottles, a couple of brimful ashtrays, slices of cake, half-chewed biscuits, jam tarts, cold clods of samosa, bottles of wine and whisky.' (262-263)

Ben and Priya make superficial, anticlimactic conversation, summing up the highs and lows of their culinary enterprise in a 'post-mortem of the party' (267). Whereas on a superficial level the specific food items served at the party can still be placed in an 'English' or an 'Indian' category, a more detailed consideration of their production renders the categorisation invalid. A particularity of the narrative which must be remarked on and which arises out of the description of Whacka's birthday is the way in which the foods coexist within the festive space in an apparently unexceptional manner. It is not the fashionable fusion foods which take up the limelight in the novel, not the combination of ingredients within the same dish, but the amalgam of dishes served at the party and, specifically, the way in which they are brought together, without their being signalled as culturally different by the main actors in the scene or the narrator.

The 'real' 'East/West food thing' appears to be the preserve of a leisured, cosmopolitan group. Cross-cultural consumption habits in the novel are markedly

inflected by class. At the school where Ben teaches, Brenda, the cheerful tea lady, makes 'the best egg mayo sandwich this side of Tower Hamlets' (110) and professes a working class appreciation of British fare:[33]

> [...] food nowadays. Smelly foreign muck. Pah! Nice piece of boiled bacon, cabbage, boiled spuds and sprouts, thas wha' I like. What d'you call it, peppers and garlic, and them things, what are they called, chilli whatsits. You, boy,' she would say pointing at Ben, 'you stink of garlic in the morning. My Jim likes all that stuff, chillis and all sorts, 'cos he was in the war. I cook it for him sometimes, but I won't touch the stuff meself, and I need to fumi-what's-it the 'ouse after 'e's done. The smell makes me come over all giddy,' she said flapping her hand in front of her nose as she smoked. 'I 'ave ter open all the winders wide.[34] (109)

Though keen on upholding the merits of traditional British foodways, Brenda will cater for more adventurous palates, even if in the manner of the fusion cooking Ben deplores elsewhere. Her counter is packed full with pickles and condiments - Patak's jars of lime pickle and mango chutney, Branston sauce and mustard made from Colman's powder. Brenda acts as a surrogate mother for Ben; she indulgently spoils him: 'Yeah, and what's it you want - one day it's 'am, cheese and lettuce, no tomarters and lots of mustard, then tuna and mayo, no butter, then egg and crusty bread. And is it ready when you want it?' (108).

Ben cruises leisurely and knowledgeably across culinary cultures in an omnivorous and cosmopolitan fashion. Whereas in theory fusion food would be a more appropriate indicator of a genuinely plural society, Vakil's description of a party menu is one large step in that direction. Vakil may play with contradictory connotations of Indianness or of Englishness through, for example, the food preferences articulated by

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[33] Gill Valentine, for example, examines consumption practices in British households and highlights the way in which the 'tried and tested' conventional cooking of one of the participants to the research she carries out 'articulates her account of herself as 'working-class', 'conventional' and 'mildly xenophobic', in "Eating In: Home, Consumption and Identity', *The Sociological Review*, 47, 3 (1999), 491-524, quotation at 504.

[34] This is another attitude towards Indian food recorded in the British social imaginary, or, more accurately, towards a version of Indian food adapted for a particular British palate, the military personnel who fought in India: such food falls into a culinary category towards the 'suspiciously Other' end of the edible-inedible continuum.

Brenda or Crispin, but, in his novel, bounded and exclusionary attitudes are marginal in relation to a multicultural British imaginary. Cross-cultural consumption, in Vakil's novel, points towards an everyday multiculturalism which takes culinary hybridity as a normal rather than exceptional state of affairs.

Conclusion

Each of the texts discussed above explores the way in which conceptualisations of the nation are articulated at the level of everyday life through foods and foodways and does so while exposing authenticity as a relational construct. What one considers 'authentic' is highly dependent on the sociocultural coordinates of one's position. Representations of national identity are also conditioned by the particular version of multicultural imaginary one resorts to. *England, England* combines a neo-Romanticist concern with tradition and authenticity with a postmodern conviction that everything is just empty representation. *Sour Sweet* and 'Uproar' place tradition alongside a search for variety in human food consumption, albeit underlain with different motivations. In the case of the latter, a positive valuation of ethnic foods coexists with an understanding of the precariousness of the boundary between edible and inedible foodstuffs. Though appearing to promote 'authentic' Chinese cuisine, *Sour Sweet* keeps cosmopolitan tendencies well in check. This, however, is not the case with *One Day*. Vakil creates characters who profess a fine understanding of the intricacies of sophisticated transnational cookery.

My reading of the texts in this chapter has focused on cross-cultural consumption and the meanings which are attached to it. A close consideration of the food-related scenes and culinary references, as well as of the overall concern with food as a suitable marker of cultural identity, raises further issues which in this chapter have only briefly

been alluded to, but which will be considered in greater detail in subsequent parts of the thesis. For example, Mo draws up a culinary cartography of London with two opposed poles: a Cantonese eating house in Leicester Square, London's biggest tourist trap, and a modest takeaway south of the river. Vakil's Ben Tennyson, on his way to work, drives past 'sad Indian and Chinese takeaways' (99) while Priya lunches in lavish India House. The second chapter adds more coordinates to the gustatory map of the metropolis while outlining how the spatialising power of food practices operates across the public/private divide. In the third chapter, generational differences in food consumption patterns, to which Mo, Wong and Vakil draw attention, are looked at, with a particular focus on children's culinary geographies. In a review of Vakil's novel, David Horspool highlights the symbolic, emotional, cultural and social resonances of the narrative incorporation of food in Indo-Anglian writing.[35] This will be detailed in the last chapter, which works with both a literal and a metaphorical understanding of consumption.

[35] David Horspool, 'Biryani or Jelly?: Review of *One Day* by Ardashir Vakil', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 21 February 2003, p. 23.

Chapter Two

A CULINARY CARTOGRAPHY OF THE METROPOLIS

Constructions of the Urban through Foods and Foodways

> 'London is [...] a space not fully attached or detached from either British nation-space or some nationless world-space. It hovers interstitially between the two.'[1]

Writing about 'post-colonial' London, John McLeod optimistically records an attitude shift in imaginings of the metropolis: 'These differing vistas reveal a vibrant, accommodating London, where people have forged new communities and created a variety of novel, exciting representations of their city. [...] London is ever the place of multitude, of difference and diversity.'[2] Contemporary fictional re-territorialisations of the metropolis appear to endorse McLeod's statement, though exclusionary constructions of the city have continuing artistic currency, as I hope to show below, in a discussion of two recent novels, *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee and *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith.

The urban, to paraphrase Henri Lefebvre, 'exists only as it is inhabited; it is created by the very act of occupancy.'[3] Cities are as much produced by everyday practices as they are by urban planning institutions and professionals. They are not an immobile assortment of buildings but a set of meanings and relationships. Readings

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[1] John Clement Ball, 'The Semi-Detached Metropolis: Hanif Kureishi's London', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature,* 27, 4 (October 1996), 7-27, quotation at 9.

[2] John McLeod, 'Introduction. Laughing in the Storm: Representations of Post-Colonial London', *Kunapipi*, 2 (1999), vi-viii, quotation at vii.

[3] Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Ian Buchanan, 'Extraordinary Spaces in Ordinary Places', *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, 36, 1 (October 1993), 56-64, quotation at 56.

which deal exclusively with the public side of cities carry the risk of uncritically reinforcing the public-private divide. The public and the private do not exist as binary opposites. Instead, they overlap and change function depending on the way in which they are experienced.

David Sibley points out that the 'dominant message of environmental psychology is that the private domain of the home is a benign, controllable personal space standing in contrast to the exterior, public domain, which is uncontrollable, uncertain and riven with conflict'.[4] Sibley's distinction breaks down in the two fictional narratives to be discussed in this chapter.

A versatile everyday practice whose performance uses the power to install and unsettle differentiations between the public and the private is nourishment. Food consumption spatialises, not only in the sense that it is generally allocated a dedicated place but also because it helps construct a personal space within such places. My use of the terms 'nourishment' and 'food consumption' in this chapter is not strictly literal, however, as I will be referring both to the ingestion of food items as such and to the constellation of meanings built around eating, for example reminiscing and conviviality.

This chapter engages with modes of urban experience enacted and discoursed upon in *The White Family* and *White Teeth*. These novels, published two years apart and juggling with a narrative line anchored within the last two decades, allow for gender-, age- and ethnicity-inflected readings. Both authors tell stories about the dynamics of everyday life experience within ethnically diverse communities in London. The idea of multicultural London which John McLeod defines is immediately evident if one compiles a list of culinary references in the two novels. However, the dynamics of cultural inclusion and exclusion are more complex than may at first appear.

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[4] David Sibley, 'Family and Domestic Routines: Constructing the Boundaries of Childhood', in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 123-137, quotation at 129.

White London: An Elegy

In *The White Family*, Maggie Gee tells a compelling story about the misalignment of two interrelated categories, that of harmonious family ties and that of the private spatiality of the home. Nurturing is a prevailing theme in the novel. 'The family meal,' Deborah Lupton writes, 'is an important site for the construction and reproduction of the contemporary family in western societies and the emotional and power relationships within the family'.[5] In Maggie Gee's novel, the 'family meal' model of integration is taken out of its dedicated private context, the home, and rearticulated in relation to a public type of spatiality, that of the café.[6]

The White Family is a 'condition of England' novel which engages insightfully with modes of belonging in a multiracial community brought together by proximity rather than underlying feelings of acceptance and inclusion. It offers an inspired mapping of London through the prism of a type of location dedicated to culinary consumption - the café. In a book about ways of reading the modern urban novel, Hanna Wirth-Nesher writes: 'I had an immigrant grandmother who insisted that New York was not a proper city because it did not have a proper Viennese coffee house'.[7] This side of the ocean, representations of a proper Viennese coffee house may not be helpful in re-affirming the urban status of multicultural London, but Maggie Gee does see the value of the closest substitute she has to hand - cafés - to explore three days in the life of a white family in the metropolis.

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[5] Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 38. Although no longer a prevailing reality, due to increasingly differentiated lifestyles within a household, the 'proper' home-cooked meal still functions, at the level of mentalities, as a powerful signifier of the family as a socially cohesive unit. See, for example, Gill Valentine, 'Eating In: Home Consumption and Identity', *The Sociological Review*, 47 (1999), 491-524.

[6] That this is not applicable to all the characters in the novel will be detailed in this section.

[7] Hanna Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 26.

The café scenes provide a unique vantage point from which to draw a map of the city at the point of intersection between the public and the private. Cafés as such have received due theoretical attention and one line of enquiry has traced their history back to the coffee houses of the early eighteenth century, a 'self-consciously democratic institution', which, as Jürgen Habermas has argued, played a vital part in opening the bourgeois public sphere.[8] Whether set up alongside coaching stations or on their own, coffee houses were distinguished from taverns or ale-houses by their orientation towards temperance and rationality. Class divisions between frequenters of such establishments, though noticeable, were not taken into consideration. Affordable prices meant access was not limited to the affluent and the appearance of newspapers towards the end of the eighteenth century provided a wider array of topics for discussion. Coffee houses, it has been argued, were among the factors that prompted the coming into being of civil society and public opinion and of an active, participatory form of democratic life.

My intention here is not to claim that the café organically evolved from the eighteenth century coffee-house - such a large statement needs to be backed up with detailed evidence, beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I want to argue that there is a certain similarity of purpose between the discursive arena set-up of the coffee house (as defined by Habermas and others) and the way in which characters in the novel make use of café spatiality to make sense of the (multi)culture in which they live. Where significant differences exist is in the degree of political implications of talk taking place on site. Whereas coffee-house discourse could ultimately make a difference in society, in the fictional cafés in *The White Family* (and *White Teeth*, as will be shown later in

[8] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 96. For Habermas's own views on cafés see in particular his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Transformation of a Category of the Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), especially p. 36. Habermas's is a social theory interest and, as such, must be qualified by a close analysis of the contextual specificities of interaction in the fictional cafés this chapter discusses. For an elegant summary of the critiques levelled at Habermas, see Markman Ellis, 'An Introduction to the Coffee-House: A Discursive Model', www.kahve-house.com/coffeebook.pdf, <15 September 2003>.

this chapter), 'political' is a synonym of the 'personal' in relationships of friendship between individuals or within small-scale communities.

Maggie Gee's novel revolves around the White family of the title, beginning when Alfred White, the keeper of Albion Park, is rushed to hospital after he has what is referred to as an 'event'. Wife May, daughter Shirley and sons Dirk and Darren, who have been apart for a while, are brought back together by the family misfortune, and intra-family relationships are reconfigured in the space of three days. Narrative flashbacks woven around the characters' journeys between their respective homes and the hospital reconstruct a fraught family history. Darren, in his forties, the favourite son, is a successful journalist in America but has failed to secure for himself a stable marital relationship. Shirley, pregnant at eighteen and forced to give her baby away for adoption, is now in her thirties. She is the widow of an African university lecturer called Kojo Asante and is now the partner of Elroy, a West Indian social worker. Neither relationship is approved of by the family. Dirk, the youngest child, still lives with his parents and helps in the shop of George, his father's friend, until George sells his business to a Pakistani entrepreneur. Animated by racial hatred, Dirk murders Winston, Elroy's homosexual younger brother, who will be buried on the same day and next to Alfred White, in an apotheotic ending to the book. Another character with a substantial presence in the novel is Thomas Lovell, a childhood friend of Darren's, who witnesses Alfred's 'event' and offers emotional assistance to the family, much of which is intertwined with literal nourishment.

In the Whites' household, family meals are hardly happy occasions, with May White a proverbially failed cook: 'she was never much cop at it', Dirk White says, a view underwritten by Thomas.[9] Although at twenty-five Dirk is the only child who has

[9] Maggie Gee, *The White Family* (London: Saqi, 2002), p. 24. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

not yet left home, as his mother ponders, 'home wasn't home with just her and Dirk. The boy hadn't really talked to her for years' (34).

The family reunion, brought about by Alfred's 'event', takes place in a hospital café. Shirley meets Thomas in the corridor and invites him for a cup of tea. Soon after, they are joined by Darren and his third wife Suzy, jet-lagged and hungry because the vegetarian meal on the plane did not conform to their health-conscious diet option. While clumsy attempts at casual conversation are being made, Dirk materialises and takes up his place in the shadow of his older brother.

> And then they were all there, the whole family.
>
> [...] *All of us are here. Me, my two brothers. We were never all together. We don't know how to do it.*
>
> The café was quietening down at last. [...] The Whites were left at their table in the window, lost in a desert of royal blue plastic, Darren still too wound up to sit down, Susy perched gingerly, an acid-pink flamingo on a chair she appeared to think was dirty, Shirley feeling like a giant by comparison, clumsy, creamy, too heavy to move, Thomas disappearing to fetch a pot of tea, and Dirk sidling grimly round the table to escape the women and be near his brother, his brother who was taller, richer, browner, Darren who was more of a man than him. (76)

This tableau is revealing of the strained dynamics which govern the relationships among the second generation Whites. The lack of emotional bonding needs to be acknowledged before it can be addressed, and the scene in the hospital café is essential in this respect:

> 'So that's a full house,' Shirley repeated brightly. 'All the family together at last.'
>
> Not true, of course, she realized at once. The next generation wasn't there. No one had met Darren's children.
>
> [...] Without any children they were curiously stranded, middle-aged people who were children themselves.
>
> And where were the parents? No Dad. No Mum. [...] So who was meant to look after them?
>
> Thomas put the teapot in front of her.
>
> 'I'll be mother,' said Shirley, gratefully. (76)

Darren's inability to find proper sustenance in the hospital café and Shirley's offer to be 'mother' and pour the tea stand as opposite ways of creating a relationship between self

and context, in terms of both people and places, a relationship which will be explored throughout the remainder of the novel.

Shirley moves with a certain ease between the personal, private space of the home and the impersonal, public urban one. Shirley's itinerary links home and department stores and is drawn on a larger scale. May's side of London, meanwhile, is the neighbourhood, defined by spatial proximity and face-to-face interaction. May, a fragile woman and avid reader of English Romantic poetry, mistakenly believes herself to be a pragmatist who guides her life according to facts. In reality, May has confined the world she lives in to her home, and compensates for the limited physical space by daydreaming.[10] Her penchant for evasion into literature, nostalgia for life immediately after the War and inability to provide proper, wholesome meals, undermine her ability to keep the family together. The London May moves in is a small portion of Hillesden Rise, one in which initially May and women like her had somewhere to go but whose gradual change drives her out. The character May is built upon the story of a woman forced out of a life built under the sign of stasis and false equilibrium by the unexpected illness of her husband.

Alfred's hospitalisation brings about a change in May's daily routine, and she consequently discovers a new side of Hillesden. Dazed by the novelty of the experience, she nearly walks into a chair on the pavement. The chair belongs to a Parisian-style café and May tells a gawping waiter her daughter likes French things. By odd coincidence, Shirley is at that moment in Café Claire, in a department store on Oxford Street.

'I like the café I'm going to. One of the nicest of the big store cafés.' says Shirley (114). She feels at home in the department store she frequently visits, 'a sweet-smelling heaven' (112), so far from the violence-ridden household she grew up in. The employees 'know' her: 'They look at me and think Givenchy. [...] They look at me and think 'Paris,

[10] The character May tellingly exemplifies (in a literal sense) what John Brannigan calls 'the quiet, stay-at-home England'. *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 2.

Europe,' not Shirley White as I used to be, one of the family from Hillesden Junction, who've lived in Hillesden since time began. And with that thought they set me free.' (113). The freedom is, of course, illusory but Shirley's words underwrite a conceptualisation of identity as a relational process rather than an essential product and show the way in which consumption can alter connections between identity and place. The éclair the waitress brings Shirley is no longer a specifically French foodstuff but becomes European – a qualification which, if read alongside May's discovery of the café in Hillesden, points towards the obsolescence of a static, bounded view of locality.

The character of Dirk is an attempt at a comic creation, albeit a largely unsuccessful one because of the anxiety induced in the reader by his interior monologue. As Gee herself remarks, 'nearly everything he thinks is forbidden: it mustn't be expressed.'[11] His outlook on life is based on snippets of his father's patriotic pub-talk, to which he was exposed as a child, and xenophobic views expressed in a local newspaper. In a scene central to the development of the narrative, Dirk is unexpectedly offered a lunchbreak by his boss, and a five-pound note towards it. 'They say the new Burger Bar's quite good,' George tells him. 'There's a Sushi Bar open, if you're feeling ambitious. [...] Not really your scene.' (151). Dirk walks out of the shop elated, a 'free man', though, as in Shirley's case earlier, the extent of this freedom, is questionable. If the shop and the home are oppressive places for Dirk, the public sphere is equally unwelcoming. 'I got some peanuts and half a ham sandwich,' he relates. 'I'd have got something hot, but it was frigging curry. Even down the pub. My local pub. I wanted something English [...], but all that was on offer was frigging beef curry.' (153).[12]

Interesting to note in this scene are the two dishes Dirk chooses to exemplify as constituting a hot English meal: 'spag bol or a burger' (153), since neither item would

[11] Maya Jaggi, 'In Conversation with Maggie Gee: *The White Family*', *Wasafiri*, 36 (Summer 2002), 5-10, quotation at 7.

[12] A multicultural reinterpretation of pub fare – beef, an established marker of Englishness and a non-edible item in certain sections of Indian culture, alongside the questioningly Indian curry – makes an intriguing choice in marking off the social space of the pub as no longer welcoming for Dirk.

automatically be associated with an Anglo-centric perception of Britishness, which the character Dirk appears to promote. The irony of spaghetti bolognese or a burger being seen as English swiftly brings down the scaffolding upon which uncritical and essentialist viewpoints of Englishness are built. Dirk, who lives on ruined meals, unwholesome snacks and hatred, finds that the walls of the English place he builds up as exclusive of the Other will eventually close down on him. Not only does his local pub in Hillesden not provide a suitable meal , but he loses his job when George sells his shop to a Pakistani. Later, he has to climb a literal wall to gain access to a football stadium and, eventually, he is imprisoned for murder.

Dirk's rejection of the pub's curry tellingly articulates in culinary terms a particular type of positioning within a culturally diverse environment and exposes a variant of (theoretically unmarked) white masculinity as a vulnerable construct.[13] Dirk is denied access to space because he readily embraces an ideology which defines space as contained within boundaries impermeable to culturally different influences.

Outside Dirk's conceptualisation of Hillesden, the neighbourhood exists as a felicitous assortment of multiple cultural layers. Apart from the local pub, a Burger and a Sushi Bar, and the French café May unexpectedly encounters, Hillesden also boasts an 'Italian' café. In fact, as Thomas ponders, the place 'couldn't be more English with its salty, fatty, stewed tea smell' (168). Thomas's reflection on this 'English' space stands in sharp contrast to the narrow, essentialist view taken by Dirk: 'We call it Italian, because of the owner, Mario, who comes from Milan – he fell in love with an English girl and got stuck here long ago.' (168). Arguably, though, this attitude is partly enabled by Thomas's hyphenated identity: 'I'm never quite certain where I come from (with a rugby team of genes on my father's side – Jewish, Scottish, Italian, Spanish? There was even a

[13] The character Dirk is constructed with reference to two recognisably English identities, the football hooligan and the shopkeeper, the former well-debated in the press, the latter an understated national stereotype.

rumoured great-grandma from Barbados) but walking in here I know I'm British. Stale cigarette smoke, Formica-covered tables, eggs and beans and Nescafe.' (168).

In the café, Thomas orders double eggs on toast, of which he manages two mouthfuls before he spots an emotional Darren, the prodigal White son, through the window. Darren arguably needs to confront his father and their past together in order to be able to move beyond the insecurity he associates with his roots. Discussions between the two old school friends take place over an All Day English Breakfast, of which Darren eats 'the bacon, fat and all' (so much for his elaborate diets', ponders Thomas (172), who had ordered the meal). The location also appears conspicuously English to Darren, who remarks: 'It stinks of smoke in here. That's so English.' (169). Darren returns to his roots in search of sustenance - literal and metaphorical - that will enable his future to take a different route. In an 'Italian' café, an Englishman and an Englishman turned American sit together and present the other with an honest narrative version of their lives. The interdependence of emotional and literal nourishment is an underlying theme throughout *The White Family*. Both the second-generation Whites and their friend Thomas bear with them a childhood marked by the absence of tasty and square meals and of a safe and happy environment. In the Italian/English café, Thomas and Darren share a meal and their past; their encounter is a necessary point on a trajectory towards emotional healing and progress.

My concern in the analysis of the café-related scenes in *The White Family* has been to show how everyday practices of food consumption are employed in the delimitation and definition of the space one chooses to inhabit, and one's position vis-à-vis that space. Whereas characters who embrace an essentialist and bounded view of English society (Alfred and Dirk) exit the scene, more or less peacefully, space is secured for those who can grow to relate harmoniously to the dynamics of multiculturalism.

For members of the White family, the private spatiality of their homes fails to fulfil its function as a haven and provide them with the emotional support they need. As a consequence, they depart in search of different locations where they can construct and articulate new narratives of identity. The next best choice to homes are the cafés.[14] By choosing to stage family encounters in cafés, a public type of spatiality, Maggie Gee unsettles the traditional divide between the public and the private and draws attention to the resourcefulness of individuals in redefining these two categories. The Whites attempt to open up their own private spaces within public places and succeed, provided they do not adopt a bounded, exclusionary view of cultural identity.[15]

Multicultural Coordinates of a 'Home Away from Home'

In drawing up imaginative geographies of London in *The White Family*, Maggie Gee decides to 'stay with the voice of the white characters'.[16] Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, on the other hand, boasts a multicultural cast, all of whom are granted speaking and focalizing parts. Middle-aged Englishman Archie Jones, whose aborted suicide attempt in a halal butcher's parking place opens the novel, marries Clara, one quarter English three quarters Jamaican and settles down to a life divided between his job, his home in Willesden and O'Connell's, a local café. A similar daily routine is performed by Samad Iqbal, Archie's wartime Bengali friend, now living in London. In O'Connell's, Samad debates with Archie, over an all-day English breakfast, the unsuitability of an English education for his children, hangs up a portrait of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande, attempts to construct a history of the café and subsequently witnesses the return of his

[14] Socio-economics, however, clearly marks spatial relationships in the novel.

[15] 'Private space' is not a perfect synonym of 'home'. While 'home' is both a concrete location physically and symbolically marked off, and accompanying feelings of safety and well-being, 'private space' is only a compound of meanings associated with the domestic realm. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'Mobile Transformations of 'Public' and 'Private' Life', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 20, 3 (2003), 107-125.

[16] Maya Jaggi, 'In Conversation with Maggie Gee: *The White Family*', 6.

son Magid from Bangladesh, educated to become more English than the English. Clara befriends Samad's wife, Alsana Iqbal and the two women, similarly advanced into their pregnancies, share their world views with each other and with Alsana's one year younger niece, Neena Begum, over Alsana's home-made culinary delights in Kilburn Park.

The appearance of the children, Irie Jones and twins Magid and Millat Iqbal, adds new coordinates to the setting of the novel and a dilemma in Samad's life. The Jones and Iqbal parents attend a PTA meeting at the children's school, where Samad protests against the Harvest Festival activities. Samad wins not the religion-centred argument but the support of another set of parents, the Chalfens, a strong presence later on in the novel, and the admiration of Poppy Burt-Jones, the music teacher, with whom Samad has a brief affair. The inadequacy of an English education for his offspring looms large in Samad's mind, but lack of financial means prevents him from sending the twins to Bangladesh. Only Magid makes the journey back. Teenagers Irie and Millat, by order of the school headmaster, become permanent guests at the Chalfens' home, where Irie helps Marcus, the father, with the filing.

All roads lead not to Rome but to the venue where Marcus displays his genetically-programmed FutureMouse™. Magid is there, as are the Joneses, Irie, who is pregnant by one of the Iqbal twins, the Iqbals, Millat and the KEVIN band of fundamentalists with whom he is involved, Joshua Chalfen together with a group of animal rights activists and, last but not least, Hortense Bowden, Clara's mother, singing Jehova's Witnesses hymns outside the hall. In an dramatic finale the mouse escapes, and the three generations of Joneses and Iqbals, together with relatives and friends, take up their newly-configured places in the expanded geography of their fictive world.

The image of London that Maggie Gee constructs by drawing on an elegiac version of England is rendered obsolete in *The White Family* in favour of a more

culturally inclusive conceptualisation of urbanity. Zadie Smith's fictionalised version of the city, read through a culinary prism, preserves a very tenuous link to an England viewed on preservationist or nostalgic terms. *White Teeth* takes cultural layering one step further: the place where both personal histories and official History are discursively taken apart then reconstructed comes in the shape of the misleadingly called 'O'Connell's Pool House'. This is described as follows:

> The stranger who wonders into O'Connell's Pool House at random, hoping for the soft rise and fall of his grandfather's brogue, perhaps, or seeking to rebound a red ball off the side cushion and into the corner pocket, is immediately disappointed to find the place is neither Irish nor a pool house. He will survey the carpeted walls, the reproductions of George Stubbs's racehorse paintings, the framed fragments of some foreign, Eastern script, with not a little confusion. He will look for a snooker table and find instead a tall, brown man with terrible acne standing behind a counter, frying up eggs and mushrooms. His eye will land with suspicion upon an Irish flag and a map of the Arab Emirates knotted together and hung from wall to wall, partitioning him from the rest of the customers. Then he will become aware of several pairs of eyes upon him, some condescending; some incredulous; the hapless stranger will stumble out, warily, backwards [...]. O'Connell's is no place for strangers.
>
> O'Connell's is the kind of place family men come to for a different kind of family.[17]

O'Connell's is a heterodox and contradictory location, continuously resignified by means of culinary consumption and talk. It is a second-generation hybrid space originally set up by Ali, an entrepreneurially-minded Middle-Easterner settled in Britain. Ali, having worked as a cab driver, decided he wanted to 'serve food, make people happy, have some face-to-face conversations once in a while' (246). O'Connell's positions itself decisively on the cultural map of London as an establishment with an Irish name, a traditional English menu (minus pork meat), a portrait of a Bengali rebel on the wall and a set of regular customers who are ethnically diverse but otherwise male and over thirty and who possess an in-depth knowledge of the particularities of the

[17] Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* [2000] (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 183. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

café.[18] Gradually, however, due to various circumstances, the café will allow its threshold to be crossed first by a stranger under thirty, then by bacon and at last by women.

As a café, O'Connell's occupies an intermediary position between the private and the public spheres: it is a 'home from home' for Archie and Samad and for a few other regulars including Jamaicans Clarence and Denzel. The multicultural composition of O'Connell's custom is only partially reflected in the menu – the fare being largely limited to all-day variations upon the Full English Breakfast: 'chips, egg and beans, or egg, chips and beans, or beans, chips, egg and mushrooms', occasionally accompanied by toast and cooked tomatoes (183-4) and sharing the hot plate with battered burgers and Jamaican pattie. Some anthropologists claim that consumption practices serve as clear indicators of cultural belonging; however, for the characters in *White Teeth*, the relationship between food choice and identity is dynamically constructed. Samad, originally from what is now known as Bangladesh, enjoys basic English fare in the company of his English friend but rejects the values underlying the English society and education system. Bacon is absent from the menu not because of the café owner's religious orientation but because of his father's fatal cholesterol build-up. A food rejection which could have been performed, from the beginning, as part of the observance of a religious ritual is overlooked – arguably on financial grounds – only to be enforced at a later stage with a justification derived from medical discourse. The authority of religious precepts is undermined again when Magid, just returned from Bangladesh, crosses the threshold of O'Connell's and half charms, half coerces the

[18] As such, it is a dignified descendant of the coffee houses Habermas uses as a model for his theory of the public sphere, a paradigm of urbane sociability, its paradoxical set-up notwithstanding: the coffee-houses which prompted the opening up of the 'egalitarian' public sphere were nevertheless connected with the slave-labour supported coffee trade and were not women-friendly locations. Again, see Ellis, 'An Introduction to the Coffee-House', for criticisms of this model. Intriguingly, as Ellis makes clear, the first coffee houses appeared in the Middle East.

current owner, Abdul Mickey, to make him a 'juicy, yet well-done, tomato ketchup-ed bacon sandwich. On brown.' (450).

Whereas in *The White Family* the key participants in interaction in cafés appear largely isolated from the other customers, existing in a space of their own, *White Teeth*'s O'Connell's relies on a more complex sense of community and interdiscursivity.[19] Strictly private topics of conversation remain strictly private; when Samad summons Archie to O'Connell's to confess his marital infidelity, for instance, the two withdraw to a booth behind the pinball, but to all socially acceptable matters the café owner and regulars bring their input. Thus, Samad's decision to send his offspring to Bangladesh in an attempt to counter the negative influence of England on their education is inspired by a piece of advice Archie borrows from Abdul-Mickey and presents as his own. Samad is faced with two options: he can either have his children properly brought up in Bangladesh or he has to learn to live with the situation, since, in Mickey's view, 'We are all English now, mate. Like it or lump it, as the rhubarb said to the custard.' (192).

Similarly, it is in O'Connell's that Magid puts up for public debate the issue of whether he should meet with his brother with whom he has severed communication. Magid may initially be a stranger below the minimum required age limit in O'Connell's, and, what is worse, 'all dressed in white - insultingly clean for a Friday evening in O'Connell's' (448), but in his quality as Samad's son and given his smooth manner with words he soon becomes the centre of (admiring) attention in the café. Magid first asks Clarence and Denzel whether he should indeed talk with his brother but the two refrain from venturing an opinion ('Hmm. I don' tink me can say,' replied Denzel, after a spell of thought in which he laid down a five-domino set. 'I would say you look like a young fellow oo can make up 'im own mind,' said Clarence, cautiously. (456)). Archie,

[19] See Eric Laurier *et al.* for a discussion of the status of regulars in a café, their access to shared knowledge and the way in which patterns of interaction between regular customers and staff are built; 'An Ethnography of a Neighbourhood Cafe: Informality, Table Arrangements and Background Noise', *Journal of Mundane Behaviour*, 2, 2 (June 2001), http://mundanebehavior.org.

meanwhile, bullied by Samad into making a decision, flips a coin. It is not the relevance of contributions to discussion, but the mere fact that opinions are asked for and expressed, that builds an ambience of community within the place.

Matters of immediate concern for the Iqbals reach beyond the confines of their family. Magid and his brother Millat take opposite positions in a debate over genetic engineering, to which a considerably larger audience attends. While Magid is the right hand of Marcus Chalfen, the inventor of the genetically-modified FutureMouse™, Millat is part of a religious fundamentalist group with an acronym problem, KEVIN, who ardently reject man's right to interfere in God's creation. Discussions and interior monologues in the cafés in Maggie Gee's novel have a less ambitious scope: they are generally limited to family relationships and their bearing on vulnerable white identities, irrespective of gender. In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, O'Connell's is a site where concern for intra-family relationships is linked with matters of wider debate: Magid hands Mickey an invitation to the launch of FutureMouse™ and explains to him the implications of this groundbreaking project.

Talk in O'Connell's, sparked off by Samad's question 'What kind of world do I want my children to grow up in?' (189), turns into talk about O'Connell's. In between engaging with schooling on the one hand and revolutionary genetics on the other, Samad and Archie take part in constructing the significance of a culturally hybrid space located on juridically British territory. As the external narrator dutifully points out, there are 'no better historians, no better experts in the world than Archie and Samad when it came to *The Post-War Reconstruction and Growth of O'Connell's Pool House.*' (245). 'Arch and Sam' have first-hand knowledge of the place they frequent and to whose evolution they contribute. On New Year's Eve 1989, Samad asks Abdul-Mickey's permission to hang up a portrait of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande on the wall. Pande is a bone of contention for the two friends and a source of despair for Mickey and

the café regulars. Whereas mainstream historical accounts, quoted by Archie, label Pande as a fool and mutineer, Samad insists his relative sacrificed himself for India.

The question here is as much about the truth of Mangal Pande's motivation as it is about Samad's claim to have the portrait hung on the wall. If Samad's version of Pande's story is not accepted in the public place occupied by an authoritative historical discourse, it should at least be granted right of abode in the public/private space of O'Connell's café, where Samad has been a regular customer for fifteen years, a 'very long time in any man's estimation' (249), according to him. As Samad unintentionally remarks, time, in O'Connell's, for most of the novel at least, is a masculine category: belonging and exclusion are set up along the lines of gender, compared to Maggie Gee's *The White Family*, where gender is replaced by ethnicity and economics.

Samad's assertion of territorial belonging finds a follow-up in a conversation between Mickey and Magid, several years later:

> I've got your ... wait a minute, let me get this right ... your great-*great*-grandfather up there, see?'
> 'I noticed it the moment I came in, and I can assure you, Michael, my soul is very grateful for it,' said Magid, beaming like an angel. 'It makes me feel at home, and, as this place is dear to my father and his friend Archibald Jones I feel certain it shall also be dear to me'. (449)

Samad and Archie step out of the privacy of their homes where they cannot articulate traditionally patriarchal male identities due to outspoken wives approximately half their age, and repair to O'Connell's, a public place inclusive of ethnic differences but gender- and age-biased. If cafés were labelled 'penny universities' in their early days, given that cups of coffee initially cost a penny and customers could benefit from informed talk on a wide range of subjects, Samad's nickname in O'Connell's, 'The Professor', is very suitable indeed. Samad is a makeshift historian who performs a colonisation in reverse by producing his own version of the history of O'Connell's and

by insisting that a portrait of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande be hung on the wall, thus claiming his own right to inhabit a foregroundedly hybrid place.

By inscribing a detail of Samad's personal history within a public place, initially an Irish pub whose identity was re-articulated by a subsequent Middle Eastern proprietor, Zadie Smith exemplifies the dynamic relationship between cultural identity and urban space.

London outside O'Connell's

The generous time span in *White Teeth* allows for a broader mapping of London than the one in *The White Family*, a mapping which is sensitive to the inevitable changes in the characters' style and outlook on life. Mid-1970s London sports a halal butcher's, in the parking space of which Archie Jones discovers life is still worth living; a men-only café where plans for the future are sorted out and the past is shaped into a coherent account; an Indian restaurant in Leicester Square, a Jamaican flat in Lambeth and an Anglo-Caribbean household in Willesden Green; an office which holds dinners and annual dos for its employees and their spouses, the latter admitted on condition that they be white; parks without fences, and an assortment of various other spaces, dedicated or not to the purchase, production or consumption of foods. It is worth considering some of these in greater detail below.

The list of sites related to the culinary reflects on a surface level the multicultural composition of the metropolis. It should be noted, however, as in the previous chapter, that lists like the one above are not straightforward indicators of a coherent, multicultural sense of community; rather, they are only an initial step in carrying out a mapping of the relationships which underlie such communities.

The restaurant where Samad works, seemingly built on the example of the Ho-Ho in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, epitomises an illiberal understanding of multiculture.[20] Tourists and Englishmen alike mispronounce Indian names of dishes and order chips with everything. Indiscriminating omnivorousness, at home in Cousin Ardashir's restaurant, does not encourage one to think 'plural eating means a plural society', as Mark Shackleton points out.[21]

In Archie's workplace, the hope for a genuinely plural society is even more remote:

> [Archie] dashed out of the office on to the Euston Road for a box of cigars. Twenty minutes later he swaggered back into Morgan*Hero* with a huge box of Indian sweets and started making his way round the room.
>
> 'Noel, have a sticky thing. That one's good.'
>
> Noel, the office junior, looked inside the oily box with suspicion. 'What's all this in aid ...?'
>
> Archie pounded him on the back. 'Going to have a kid, ain't I? Blue eyes, would you credit it? I'm celebrating! Thing is, you can get fourteen types of dal, but you can't get a bloody cigar in the Euston Road for love nor money.' (67)

Middle-aged Archie, built on an anti-hero mould but in a manner which successfully secures for him the reader's sympathy, enthuses about his newly acquired status as a father-to-be. The box of sweets he purchases on Euston Road, however, fails to impress the other members of the staff in the Morgan*Hero* office where Archie has folded paper conscientiously since the end of the war. Moreover, the boss will kindly ask Archie not to bring his Jamaican wife, Clara, to the annual office do, an imposition compensated for with luncheon vouchers. The scene tellingly articulates in culinary terms several types of positioning within a culturally diverse space. Theoretically unmarked white

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[20] See, for example, the first definition of multiculture by Anthony Appiah, discussed in the introductory section to Chapter 1.

[21] Mark Shackleton, 'More Sour than Sweet? Food as a Cultural Marker in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*', paper presented at the conference 'Writing Europe 2001: Migrant Cartographies Cultural Travellers and New Literatures', 22-24 March 2001, University of Leiden - University of Amsterdam. I am grateful to the author for supplying me with a copy of his paper.

masculinities are subtly exposed here, as in the case of Dirk in *The White Family*, as vulnerable constructs. Kelvin Hero, although keen on specifying he is not to be perceived as a 'racialist', feels threatened by Clara's presence at the company lunch.

Not allowed to take part in her husband's office do, in Clara's case, and along with Alsana barred from frequenting O'Connell's, the two wives opt to spend time outside their homes and go in search of a public urban space to which they can be granted access. Their first choice is the cinema, and, then, when cinema seats become uncomfortable for their advanced pregnancies, they move to a bench in Kilburn Park, together with 'Niece-of-Shame' Neena, 'stuffing themselves silly' (74) with Alsana's culinary treats. The scene is revealing on several levels:

> Alsana presses a thermos of P.G. Tips into Clara's hand, without milk, with lemon. Unwraps several layers of cling-film to reveal today's peculiar delight: savoury dough-like balls, crumbly Indian sweets shot through with the colours of the kaleidoscope, thin pastry with spiced beef inside, salad with onion; saying to Clara, 'Eat up! Stuff yourself silly! It's in there, wallowing around in your belly, waiting for the menu. Woman, don't torture it! You want to starve the bump?' For, despite appearances, there are six people on that bench (three living, three coming); one girl for Clara, two boys for Alsana. (74)

Food marks off sections of the conversation. Neena rounds up her feminist lecture with a pro-abortion statement, a gesture which has Alsana choking in horror and Clara laughing her head off. If Neena wanted to rid them of their 'false consciousness', she certainly achieves her aim, as Archie and Samad are taken off their pedestals.

While Archie and Samad meet with the prejudices of mainstream white English culture in their respective workplaces, and Clara and Alsana claim whatever other public space is available for them to share food and reflect on the meaning of life, the next generation takes a participant observer approach to understanding the unmarked white majority surrounding them within the latter's homes. The English households with which the second-generation Jones and Iqbals come into contact belong to a Mr J P

Hamilton, designated recipient of the school-organised Harvest Festival offerings, and to the Chalfens, who gracefully dispense intellectual nourishment and happy family meals, though in a less disinterested manner than might at first appear. The two encounters take place about eight years apart, but are arguably symmetrical with regard to the dynamics of giving and taking upon which they are built.

Although Samad heatedly argues against the Harvest Festival, the three ten-year-olds decide to take part in helping the community and dutifully alight on the doorstep of Mr Hamilton. Neither of the two parties involved in the subsequent encounter is particularly context-sensitive - the children have overlooked an old man's inability to chew hard foods, and their host, although kindly offering them tea, tells them war stories in which non-whites are less than flatteringly represented. The children will eventually vanish with their gift (a bag of apples), in search for 'some place where free breathing was possible' (25). This event can usefully be looked at in the light of Helmuth Berking and his classification of rituals. In *The Sociology of Giving*, Berking divides ritual practices into rites of passage (which 'thematize and authenticate changes in individual status') and rites of progression (where the emphasis is upon continuity and growth rather than change from a previous status).[22] He qualifies rites of progression as follows: 'They celebrate the periodic consolidation of the collective in question, reproduce and evoke the requisite feelings, and thereby, in a kind of analogy with the annual cycle of offerings in archaic society, renew the foundation of the community, the normative expectations of its members, and the moral ties between each individual'.[23] Within this definition, there are two propositions that can be applied to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. One is that a sense of community is predicated upon a periodic reproduction of established discursive norms. The Harvest Festival, for example, is contextualised as a school task, and the authority of the educational structure endorses

[22] Helmuth Berking, *The Sociology of Giving*, translated by Patrick Camiller (London: Sage, 1996), p. 19.
[23] Berking, *The Sociology of Giving*, p. 19.

its performance. The other is the potential for a redrafting of expectations upon which experiences of community life are built. In this respect, *White Teeth* engages with an alternative Harvest Festival scenario in which emphasis is laid upon cross-ethnic encounters and the tension between a colonizer's worldview and a postcolonial questioning of its validity. The Harvest Festival scene thus turns upside down the charitable feelings underlying such an enterprise and exposes the fissures in a construction of the metropolis as a coherent community.

The Chalfens' household offers a different set-up in terms of component members and their openness towards 'strangers'. Again, this is a school-induced encounter. Irie and Millat, the Principal suggests, would benefit from having their wayward inclinations corrected with the help of the positive influence of the Chalfens, at whose home they will join the recently led astray Joshua for study afternoons. In Irie's eyes, the Chalfens are an ideal model of family, and for her their middle-class home is the epitome of English space. The guilty pleasure she experiences in crossing its threshold is equated in culinary terms to the 'illicit thrill' of a 'Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac' (328). Irie approaches the family from the perspective of a Romantic anthropologist, whereas Millat seeks only financial gratification in his irregular appearances on their doorstep. On one of these occasions, the family is about to sit down to a chicken and cauliflower cheese dinner, but the balance of the evening is upset by the tempestuous arrival of Millat, who has just argued with his father and is in need of a place to stay. While Millat's appropriation of Chalfen space operates at a surface level and is guided by pragmatic concerns, Irie attempts to absorb the Chalfen spirit packed within the place.

Clara and Alsana, who are kept at a distance from their offspring at such times begin to have their doubts about the positive influence of the Chalfens. Consequently, Neena and her girlfriend are invested with the temporary role of cultural mediators and

sent to investigate what they are like. The encounter takes place at the dinner table. Neena and Maxine, targets of Joyce Chalfen's unmodalised curiosity, sit bravely through the chicken hotpot and the trifle, then return to Alsana's house to report that the English natives are 'bouncing off the walls' (351).

The only term of comparison to the 'happy family' dinners at the Chalfens' we are offered is a picture of heated interaction between reunited members of the Iqbal and Jones families. On the 10th of November 1989, televised scenes of the Berlin wall coming down find the two generations of Joneses and Iqbals in the latter's living room, helping themselves to Clara and Alsana's cooking: rice, Jamaican fried dumplings and fish, chicken wings, bhajis, curry and ketchup. On the surface, the menu for an afternoon spent in front of the television reflects the cultural diversity of the small community. Under closer scrutiny, this particular instance of cross-cultural consumption and its outcomes, however, tells a vivid story about the way in which in a home in Willesden history with a small 'h' is being made in an encounter between people divided not by a wall or a political regime but by differences in gender and generation.[24]

White Teeth puts forward a cartography of the metropolis which complements the one drawn up in *The White Family*. Zadie Smith's portrayal of London is an altogether more dynamic and irreverential one, which engages with hybridity at an everyday level rather than as a special condition.[25]

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[24] From the point of view of consumption gestures, the Iqbal-Jones afternoon is a very involved food event. Millat and Irie jostle for prime position to get their rice, Irie snatches dumplings from her mother's bowl, Alsana waits for two awkward-shaped bhajis to go down the gullet, and holds the head of a Jamaican fried fish in protest, Irie devours a dumpling, Archie munches on chicken wings, Alsana squeals through a mouth full of curry (237-242).

[25] A detailed discussion of hybridity as an everyday phenomenon in *White Teeth* can be found in Laura Moss, 'The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*', *Wasafiri*, 39 (Summer 2003), 11-17.

Conclusion

Considering representations of London in Black British fiction by women, Gail Low asks: 'does the city always have to be represented and discoursed upon in terms of its public faces? Can the city also be defined in terms of its private and domestic spaces?'.[26] Her answer to the first question is no, the answer to the second, yes. In her reading of three different novels written by women, Low remarks that there may in fact not always be a clear-cut distinction between the public and the private, especially in what concerns women's experience of urban space. This chapter has explored several types of sites where culinary practices are enacted, homes, offices, restaurants, and cafés, the last of these in particular, sites of tension for the public-private binary. The patterns of inter- and intra-ethnic interaction and the forming of relationships between characters by means of a projected or real commensality point towards a need to consider both types of spatiality, public and private, in addressing cities in a gender-inclusive manner. A fluid boundary between the public and the private emerges in *The White Family* and *White Teeth* in both women's and men's experience of the city.

Gail Low also provides a useful point of transition to the next chapter. In the same article, she proposes Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* as an inspired choice for discussing the role that the domestic plays in women's understanding of urban space. *Never Far From Nowhere*, however, is to a large extent a text narrated by a child and then an adolescent. Consequently, the third chapter will look at Levy's novel alongside two other fictional narratives which privilege a child's perspective, in an attempt to unravel the way children relate to space through culinary consumption.

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[26] Gail Low, 'Separate Spheres?: Representing London through Women in Some Recent Black British Fiction', *Kunapipi*, 2 (1999), 23-31, quotation at 25.

Chapter Three

CHILDREN'S MAPPINGS OF TASTE AND PLACE

Preliminaries

In a seminal article on the Black British experience, Stuart Hall draws attention to the importance of conceptualising ethnicity as class- and gender-inflected.[1] Ethnicity, he argues further, is meaningfully deployed within the realm of the discursive, though Hall overlooks (arguably unintentionally) a particular category of participants to discourse, children, and implicitly the way in which age inflects understandings of ethnicity.

Consequently, my concern in this chapter is to outline the narrative treatment of culinary references in a selection of novels in which experiences of cultural belonging are filtered through the eyes of children or adolescent characters. Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) share a central concern with a gradually increasing awareness, on the part of their character-narrators, of the weight ethnicity carries in an account of cultural identity. In *Never Far From Nowhere,* Andrea Levy intertwines the surprisingly dissimilar narratives of two London-born Jamaican sisters, Vivien and Olive. Meera Syal's Meena, born in Britain of Indian parents and living in a forsaken mining village in the Midlands, negotiates her place between two cultures. The preoccupation with family life also finds its way into Esther Freud's *The Wild* (2000). Freud's novel makes use of external narration throughout while zooming in on the life of an unconventional household viewed mostly through the eyes of children. Set in 1970s Britain, like the other two texts, but

[1] Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 252-259.

displaying an Anglocentric cast of characters, *The Wild* is oblivious to the presence of racial others, conjuring up a parochial vision of a uniformly white England. [2]

The association of food and childhood triggers a plethora of meanings. Child-caregiver relationships are fundamentally marked by nourishment, with the family meal acting as a primary site of socialisation and transmission of pre-established modes of behaviour. Preoccupation with the nutritional value of foodstuffs lies primarily with the parents. Through the provision of meals for children, gifts of love and caring are displayed by parents and relatives. Parental authority may be subverted through the consumption of sweets. Childhood eating preferences have an important bearing on the shaping of consumption patterns in adulthood and on the way in which memories of home are recollected. These are but a few examples of the complex way in which food, meaning and culture are intertwined in the context of childhood.[3]

Cultural geographers have accorded considerable attention in the last decade to children's spaces and places.[4] David Sibley, for example, contextualises the relationship between childhood and spatiality within the boundaries of the home, and also those of the larger spaces of the locality and the city.[5] Whereas children (specifically in middle-class households) may acquire a certain degree of autonomy and privacy in their own rooms, culinary consumption is still the terrain of substantial parental control. Kitchens and living rooms are predilect sites for airing intergenerational conflicts. Some of the concerns Sibley discusses in his published work can assist a reading of similarities and

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[2] Both *Never Far From Nowhere* and *Anita and Me* contain experiences of being an ethnically 'Other' which are self-consciously narrated with hindsight. While cultural identity is not an evident concern in *The Wild*, the text does permit a reading of the convergence of ethnicity, taste and place.

[3] Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996), see in particular the chapter 'Food, the Family and Childhood.'

[4] For an overview, see 'Coming of Age for Children's Geographies', *Children's Geographies*, 1, 1 (2003), 3-5.

[5] David Sibley, 'Family and Domestic Routines: Constructing the Boundaries of Childhood', in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 123-137. Sibley specifies that his argument is restricted to Western and, in particular, British childhoods, though he does not expand upon what he means by 'British'.

differences in children's culinary geographies within the fictional texts to be discussed below.

'My family are from Jamaica. [...] But I am English'

Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* gives voice to two different tales of coming to terms with being ethnically 'Other' in the South of England in the late 1960s-early 1970s. Olive and Vivien Charles, born in London of Jamaican parents, alternatively narrate a few years in their lives. The first section of the novel airs a theme familiar to stories about black migrants attempting to make a living in London: 'Our parents came over on a ship in the fifties and found rooms in a house'.[6] The damp basement in which the journey begins is later swapped for a flat on an estate in Finsbury Park, an estate which, as Vivien notes with some irony, 'held the promise of decent living but didn't fulfill it' (3). Among other amenities the previous accommodation did not provide, the flat has a kitchen with a table and four chairs, 'for a proper family, like in the adverts' (4). The father, who works for London Transport, develops emphysema and dies. The mother serves meals at a school and tea in a hospital.[7]

After a brief introduction relating the parents' background, the story takes off with Vivien at fourteen, going to an all-girls grammar school, while Olive, three years older, has dropped out of school, works as a shop assistant and compensates for the lack of excitement in her life by frequenting clubs. Olive becomes pregnant and her boyfriend and later husband, Peter, seems a happy addition to the household for a while. Vivien balances her social life and her education and is offered, upon completion of her A

[6] Andrea Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere* (London: Headline Review, 1996), p. 3. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[7] A culinary-related issue which the novel raises in passing but does not further explore is the role of mealtimes in the Charles household. Whereas (or perhaps because) the mother's employment involves the provision of food, cooking at home appears to be a chore rather than an activity which supports an idealised version of motherhood.

Levels, a place at an art college in Canterbury. Neither Vivien nor Olive can easily negotiate a position for skin colour within self-identity accounts because the narratives of blackness to which they are given, or allow themselves, access fail to offer a positive model. The mother attempts to impose on her two daughters a self-understanding which completely evades the issue of colour, a choice which may at first appear to be a progressive perception of the constructedness of race. She tells Olive: 'You're not white and you're not black - you're you' (7). Nevertheless, she fails to follow up her statement successfully because she subscribes to a single-minded and uncritical valuation of a particular version of Englishness. The novel ends with the girls taking crucial decisions about how to relate to England and Englishness. Olive will return to her parents' homeland: 'I'm going to live somewhere where being black doesn't make you different. Where being black means you belong' (272-273). Vivien, on the other hand, being asked on a train between London and Canterbury where she comes from, replies she is English.

Culinary references are plentiful and have a strategic narrative purpose in *Never Far From Nowhere*. Civilisation, which the mother (called Rose, and the name is suggestive) holds in high esteem, is equated with fair skin and a middle and upper class social status. While she relishes fish paste and Sandwich Spread from jars on Mother's Pride bread believing that for her and her husband, 'every sandwich they ate with those on made them feel somehow more English' (280), she is embarassed to admit she is herself working-class and by the same token rejects pie'n'mash as 'dirty food'.[8] Rose reverts to dispensing tea and an equally stereotypical English cool, calm and reserve in crucial moments of her and her daughters' lives. 'I'll make a cup of tea' (65) she says

[8] Jamaican food is hardly mentioned in the novel. In this respect, the character of Rose Charles appears to be modelled on Levy's adolescent perception of the social invisibility of such food within her milieu: '[T]here was a whole time when I wouldn't have uttered the words: 'My parents are Jamaican.' At 15, I was ashamed of it. A girl came to our school from America. She became the talk of the class and everyone wanted to be her best friend and go home and have tea with her. No one said: 'Can I come to your house and try your mum's rice and peas?' It was: 'Urgh, you eat dumplings.' So now I'm proud.' 'Two sides to every story', interview with Raekha Prasad, *The Guardian*, Thursday 4 March, 1999.

when she finds out Olive is pregnant and Vivien recalls 'she poured the tea like we'd just told her we were going down the pub' (69).

A highly significant scene set in the Charles household is built around Vivien's being welcomed home by her mother with a hostess trolley, a fashionable accessory in the 1970s in households where social entertaining took pride of place. The irony in Rose's attempt to emulate 'civilised' Englishness is self-evident:

> Mum pushed a new trolley through into the lounge. [...] 'You'll like this, Vivien,' she told me. 'It's called a hostess trolley. You probably seen one of these with your friends in Canterbury.' She showed me all the compartments. 'Keeps food warm too.'
> Then she wheeled it back into the kitchen and filled it with plates of sandwiches and cakes. Every plate had a white doily underneath the white triangular sandwiches and gaudy pink and yellow fondant fancies. 'Your friends use these?' she said, pointing at the doilies. I shook my head. She raised her eyebrows. 'Well, anyway, I thought you'd like things to be nice now.
> [...]
> 'Now we can be civilised,' mum said. She passed round tea in her best china cups and saucers that rattled together as they moved. The noise made me instinctively sit on the edge of my chair and think about vicars and sticking out my pinky. (279)

Whereas white Englishness as an abstract projection is ever present in the household through Rose's constant affirmation of it as the valuable norm, it also materialises across the threshold, first in the form of Peter Flynn, the father of Olive's child, then in that of Eddie, Vivien's boyfriend. At the beginning, Peter's presence in the house seems to bring the 'promise of decent living' (3) closer to achievement. He proves a welcome conversation partner for Rose, helps Vivien with her English homework, plays Monopoly at Christmas with the whole family, cooks a turkey and roast potatoes and other dishes that Vivien reports they 'had never had before like spaghetti bolognese' (70).

In Olive's narrative, food makes the only the briefest appearance possible and when present, it carries negative emotional connotations.[9] It is mentioned in relation to Peter's visits to the Charleses' flat. Mrs Charles takes a liking to Peter and frequently offers him 'fried chicken, or 'did he want to try her bread pudding" (48), interrupting Olive's privacy. It appears in her description of her wedding and even there it is hardly given an elaborate description: 'There was a black fingerprint right in the middle of the white icing on the wedding cake. And there was no food or sandwiches out when we got to Peter's mum' (85). Enjoyment is to be found elsewhere than in food and conviviality, if at all. The subtheme of Olive's inability to secure for herself a nurturing environment is supported by the use of food reference throughout the text. The black fingerprint in the middle of the icing, beyond immediate connotations of rendering the wedding cake a polluted, inedible item, serves as a reminder that superficially imposing whiteness as a cultural identity is a fallible gesture.

Vivien is more successful than her sister in plotting the coordinates of her identity. The culinary references which generously punctuate her story are class- and culturally-inflected. For her, secondary school means socialising with the same-age group, all of whom come from a working class background. But A-levels and college involve changing friends since access to and a concern for education are strongly associated with class mobility. In college, class barriers are broken down:

> Our class went everywhere together like a chain-gang. We were in the canteen drinking tea and eating congealed shepherd's pie with beans.
> 'Tea's awful...'
> 'We'll have to get used to it...'
> 'I think it's quite good - I'll have it if you don't want it...'
> I sat at the end of the table listening and watching as everyone sipped and crunched and vied for space in the conversation. (247-248)

[9] Despite the connotations suggested by the choice of the name Olive, Levy describes her as being more dark skinned than her sister.

Outside college, hierarchies are still in force. Vivien meets and shares a house with upper-class Victoria and the two separate lifeworlds of the new friends are construed through a discourse imbued with culinary references, which tellingly reveal the way in which class and economics structure access to space:

> '[D]o you know Frederick's? That restaurant in ...oh, you know...you know...'
> 'Camden Passage,' I said. I knew Frederick's well. I used to look at the menu with Carol and we'd recite the dishes - smoked salmon with red peppers and limes, Parma ham with figs -and wondered what they tasted like as we ate a bag of chips walking down Upper Street. (246-247)

Victoria invites people over for a Saturday lunch but on the day she is in one of her 'moods' and Vivien has to step in and cook for the guests: 'I'll have to make the lunch,' I said. It was the last thing I wanted to do. I hadn't invited anyone round. I never did. I occasionally went round to other students' houses and ate spaghetti bolognese.' (262). Eddie, her boyfriend, who is visiting at the weekend, is not of much help, however hard he tries. As the preparations for lunch unfold, Vivien comes to the realisation that she has to make a choice between her old way of life and the new one. Previously, Eddie and Sunday dinners at his parents' house 'made up for everything', in Vivien's view. Heaped platefuls of the classic combination of roast beef, roast pork, roast potatoes, boiled potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, Brussel sprouts, gravy, followed by apple crumble and hot custard are an enticing experience.[10] Taken out of his context and placed against Vivien's new aquaintances, Eddie becomes an undesirable addition to Vivien's new mode of living, together with everything he stands for, such as cockney London and estate housing.

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[10] Interestingly, what counts as a traditional English meal differs from one fictional account to the other. In *Anita and Me*, a novel to be discussed later in this chapter, English food is glossed as fishfingers, chips and tomato ketchup, and the same image is highlighted by Gill Valentine in a study of eating habits of migrants in Britain: 'Despite giving in to the children's preferences, Rehana claims that she would never cook them a traditional 'English' meal, which she defines as fish fingers, boiled potatoes and peas.', in 'Eating In: Home, Consumption and Identity', *The Sociological Review*, 47, 3 (1999), 491-524, quotation at 518.

> 'Don't worry,' Eddie said, putting his arm round me, 'I'll do one of me fry-ups.' Eddie's fry-ups consisted of egg, bacon, sausage, mushrooms and tomato, all fried to a charred mass until the different items were indistinguishable from one another. He served it onto plates before slapping bread into the cinders in the frying pan and making it squelch up the remaining fat. Eddie would eat a mouthful then wipe the grease from his face with a towel.
> 'No, you can't,' I snapped.
> 'Why not?'
> 'They won't like it.'
> 'Everyone loves a fry-up.'
> I started to cry.
> 'Come on,' Eddie said. 'Well, what was her ladyship making?'
> 'I don't know - quiche or something.'
> 'What?' he asked.
> 'Exactly.'
> By the time the doorbell rang we'd settled on rounds of egg and salad sandwiches: 'No, the brown bread, Eddie.' (263)

Inevitably, the relationship with Eddie ends. Vivien's newly-acquired preference for brown bread is a means through which she differentiates herself from her mother. In the hostess trolley scene, Vivien swallows with difficulty the sandwiches her mother makes with Mother's Pride bread, the leading brand in the period the novel is set in. Mother's Pride, is, she protests, now too sweet for her, but her rejection further emphasizes the widening gap between her and her family background.

The mother polices unwanted connotations of 'Jamaican-ness', and implicitly 'blackness', through her choice of diets and the accompanying tableware and serving customs, a choice firmly anchored in what she (wrongly) perceives as 'civilised', middle-class Englishness. Vivien's culinary version of association and disassociation works along the lines of a dynamic internalisation and reconstruction of Englishness, rather than an uncritically reverential attempt to fit a pre-established category. At the end of the novel, Vivien suggestively declares: 'My family are from Jamaica. [...] But I am English' (282).

The passage from childhood to adolescence carries with it a loosening of parental control over culinary consumption in and especially outside the home. Whether or not the individual characters assume autonomy as it is gradually made available to them is

an important factor for positively relating to the surrounding social space, as in apparent in *Never Far From Nowhere*.

Mattar-Paneer in Tollington

Never Far From Nowhere tells the tale of an adolescent who has successfully outgrown the ties which bind her to a stifling and dysfunctional family home in London, while the parents' country of origin, Jamaica, is painted in a negative light. In *Anita and Me*, a different story unfolds.

In a book-length study of diasporic cultural fictions, Roger Bromley offers a reading of the way in which Meena, the narrator of *Anita and Me*, draws upon her culture of origin and her culture of location to construct her self-identity.[11] To neither of those, however, does Meena have unmediated access. India is only partially known to her, through her parents' censored stories or through eavesdropping on the conversation of the grown-ups. England, in the white, rural, working-class version which presents itself to Meena, is not fully accessible to Meena either because of her perceivable difference.

Anita and Me is a first-person account of coming of age in the West Midlands, in a 'no-man's land between a ten-shop town and an amorphous industrial sprawl'.[12] The main story line covers three years in the life of Meena Kumar up to her eleven plus exams when she moves out of the three-up three-down with an outside lavatory to a cosy bungalow with a landscaped garden.[13]

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[11] Roger Bromley, *Narratives of Belonging*: *Diasporic Cultural Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 143-148.

[12] Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* [1996] (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 135. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

[13] Roger Bromley accurately signals that the Kumars' experience as 'sole Asian immigrants in a rural English situation, is atypical of this particular period – the late 1960s and early 1970s – and is one of the few migrant texts not set in an urban context'; *Narratives for a New Belonging*, p. 145.

The novel opens with a remark on lies and fabrication: the alternative history that grown-up Meena tells of her childhood in job interviews and informal situations, and her positioning in a place between the uttered and the implied. Meena confesses she 'learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.' (10). She thus has to negotiate for herself a place between, on the one hand, the scattered, traditionalist Indian community within which her parents socialise and, on the other, the same-age group in the neighbourhood, who seem to bring with them a promise of freedom and non-conformism. Anita Rutter, Meena's mischosen idol, temporarily acts as her initiator and guide through the maze of early adolescence, but Meena soon learns that the boundary between admiration and pity is a fragile one, and wisely moves on. At the same time, however, she gracefully opts out of following a course set for her by the traditionalist friends of her parents, and keeps herself open to whatever life may have in store.

Attention-drawing English characters in the novel include Mr Ormerod, owner of the village shop; the various dysfunctional families with whom the Kumars share a back yard; kindly Mrs Worrall, the only English person towards whom Meena's mother, Daljit Kumar, has warm feelings; 'Uncle' Alan, who is the reverend's helper and sets up charity schemes; and Sam Lowbridge, who is a few years older than Meena, and who epitomises an inability to transcend a socially-limited condition.

Whereas Levy pays limited attention to culinary consumption within the household, in *Anita and Me* Meera Syal firmly anchors the narrative in a domestic setting. The set-up she describes is largely a happy, functional one.[14] Meena begins the culinary mapping of the place in which she spends her childhood with the image of her home as a haven:

[14] The difference may lie in the fact that the Kumars are middle-class home owners in Britain, as much as in the fact that they positively relate to their culture of origin.

> My mother would [...] be standing in a haze of spicy steam, crowded by huge bubbling saucepans where onions and tomatoes simmered and spat, molehills of chopped vegetables and fresh herbs jostling for space with bitter, bright heaps of turmeric, masala, cumin and coarse black pepper whilst a softly breathing mound of dough would be waiting in a china bowl, ready to be divided and flattened into round, grainy chapatti. And she, sweaty and absorbed, would move from one chaotic work surface to another, preparing the fresh, home-made meal that my father expected, needed like air, after a day at the office about which he never talked. (61)

In the Kumar household, wholesome Indian meals are cooked every day. As Meena aptly puts it, 'mum somehow found it quicker to make a fresh vegetable sabzi than fling something from a packet into a frying pan' (54). The preoccupation with heartwarming nourishment prepared from scratch can easily be read from the herbal display in the front garden, which includes mint, coriander and lemon verbena, much to Meena's embarrassment. While all the other gardens in the village are crammed full with flowers and decorative outdoor paraphernalia, the Kumars' is, as Meena sees it, 'a boring rectangle of lumpy grass bordered with various herbs that mama grew to garnish our Indian meals' (15). At the beginning, Meena cannot see the value of her Punjabi heritage:

> I did not want things growing in our garden that reminded me of yesterday's dinner; I wanted roses and sunflowers and manicured hedges and fountains where the blackbirds would come and sip. I wanted to see mama in a big hat doing something creative with a pair of pruners. (15-16)

Daljit attempts to recreate, in her Tollington house, a taste of her home back in India:

> From the moment mama stepped in from her teaching job, swapping saris for M & S separates, she was in the kitchen; it would never occur to her, at least not for many years, to suggest instant or take-away food, which would give her a precious few hours to sit, think, smell the roses - that would be tantamount to spouse abuse. This food was not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home. (61)

The space thus configured is positioned at a remove both from the ancestral home, which it attempts to emulate, and from the English households, with which it strongly disidentifies. Daljit's choice of location in England, as Meena intimates with hindsight, is based on the strong resemblance that the drafty house with a 'medieval' kitchen bears to her ancestral home. Daljit's account of her home in India is the product of romanticising narrative strategies, similar to the ones Meena employs when talking about the house she lives in with her parents.

Daljit's skills in the kitchen and confidently voiced critiques of the English way of life are reminiscent of Lily Chen's attitude in *Sour Sweet*. The relationship between food and the English is reduced, in Daljit's eyes, to the 'You Kids Eat Crisps Instead Of Hot Food nonsense' (59). She passes on to Meena culturally-specific culinary knowledge, through teaching her about the various herbs in the garden: 'This is mint, beti,' she would say, plucking the top of a plant and crushing the leaves under my nose, 'this one *thunia* ... coriander I mean ... this lemon verbena, you can make tea from this' (15-16)

While preserving a Punjabi heritage, Daljit understands Meena's need to have an emic experience of being a child in an English setting. On her seventh birthday, Meena is presented with a trip to Wolverhampton, the nearby town, for a film and a rum baba in Stanton's cake shop. However, eating practices within the same ethnic group bear the stamp of intergenerational differences. For Meena's parents, eating out involves a different type of public spatiality than the one to which they consider their daughter should have access:

> Whenever we went 'out', out meaning wherever English people were as opposed to Indian friends' houses which in any case was always 'in' as all we would do was sit in each others' lounges, eat each others' food and watch each others' televisions, my parents always wore their smartest clothes. (25)

In Stanton's cake shop, a silent Daljit (who, as Meena will later find out, is worried by the impact her unexpected pregnancy will have on the household) is invited by her

husband to have a cake, but Meena intervenes, speaking in the knowledge that her mother refused to eat out, 'always affronted by paying for some over-boiled, under-seasoned dish of slop when she knew she could rustle up a hot, heartwarming meal from a few leftover vegetables and a handful of spices' (26). The precociously critical Meena places a question mark on the model of femininity to which her mother subscribes: 'I bet you couldn't make this at home [...] How would you make a cake? How would you get it round and get the cream to stand up and the cherry to balance like this? You have to buy some things, you can't do everything you know' (26). That Meena's mother has indeed taken a Herculean task upon herself is evident a few chapters later, when Nanima, Meena's grandmother, comes to her rescue.[15] The presence of her grandmother also enables Meena's transfiguration from a wayward tomboy attempting to deny her Indianness to an adolescent who acknowledges and sucessfully draws upon her two different cultural heritages.

If Meena resists her mother's attempts to teach her how to cook both because she attempts to identify against the Indian cookery tradition and because of the whole baggage of meaning this carries with regard to a woman's role, kindly Mrs Worrall, a neighbour, is more successful in getting Meena to help in the kitchen. Culinary spaces in *Anita and Me* are imbued with mystery and meaning:

> I hesitated at the back door; I'd seen glimpses of her kitchen practically every day, I knew the cupboards on the wall were faded yellow, the lino was blue with black squares on it and the sink was under the window, just like in our house. But I'd never actually been inside, and as I stepped in, I had a weird feeling that I was entering Dr Who's Tardis. It was much bigger than I had imagined, or it seemed so because there was none of the clutter that took up every available inch of space in our kitchen. (60-61)

Baking is a new experience for Meena, because, as she says,

[15] In the film version of *Anita and Me*, based on a screenplay by Meera Syal, Nanima's arrival is an opportunity for the use of food references for comic emphasis. Whereas Meena's voice over confides that 'we welcomed her with a traditional offering of fresh coconut milk', which, she further stresses, 'is quite hard to find in Wolverhampton', Auntie Shaila (played by Meera Syal) is shown pouring a bottle of Deep'n'Crispy Coconut Oil over the entrance step.

> I'd never seen my mother use our oven, I thought it was a storage space for pans and her griddle on which she made chapatti. Punjabis and baking don't go together, I've since discovered. It's too easy, I suppose, not enough angst and sweat in putting a cake in the oven and taking it out half an hour later. (62)

Consequently, Meena applies to making the dough the technique she saw her mother using for the chapattis; she presses and pummels it. Mrs Worrall patiently explains to Meena what she is supposed to do and the pastry makes its way to the oven. The girl walks home with the outcome of her baking efforts, happy in her new posture as a 'cute over-achiever' (69). Again, an emic experience of practices in two different cultures allows Meena to qualify and comment on each in an insightful manner.

Food makes an appearance in children's socialising across cultures, a social practice taken very seriously by Meena. When adults intervene, cross-cultural relationships are formed less smoothly. Anita's mother comes home at teatime to find her daughter and Meena playing in the backyard. Meena assumes she is included in the summons to fishfingers and chips uttered by Deirdre Rutter:

> [O]f course I would be invited in for tea because that's what all the yard mums did, if you'd been playing with their offspring and you happened to be nearby when the call to the table came. (54)

Here, it is not the fishfingers and chips that constitute the main attraction for, as Meena explains,

> actually, the food you ate was less important than being asked, the chance to sit in someone else's house and feel grown-up and special, knowing you weren't just playing together, you were now officially socialising. (55)

In this case, however, the back gate closes in Meena's face. Furthermore, encounters between cultures bear a serious risk: incorporating food belonging to a category deemed

as polluting by one group. What enters the catalogue of edible foods is highly culture-dependent, and contradicts Meena's remark that 'the food you ate was less important':

> Of course, you didn't always strike it lucky; once I'd been at Kevin and Karl, the mad twins' house, and their mum had put what looked like an ordinary white bread sandwich in front of me. I took a huge bite and promptly threw up all over her fortunately wipe-clean vinyl tablecloth.
>
> 'What's up with yow?' asked Karl. 'Don't yow like lard sandwiches?'
>
> When I told my mother what I'd eaten, she made me drink a cup of warm milk and ordered me to sit on the toilet for fifteen minutes, all the time muttering, '*Bakwas lok!*', which roughly translated means 'Bloody weird people'. (54-55)

A less dramatic, though equally significant, unease is felt on the occasion of Anita's coming to dinner at Meena's house. Deirdre Rutter runs away from home with a butcher and Daljit Kumar decides that because 'there are children involved' (251), she needs to play a part in their feeding and looking after. Anita is invited to a meal, an offer she takes up without the least fuss, and the resulting clash between the two cultures has the quality of a sketch show. With Indian guests, eating takes place in shifts, but, for Anita, Meena sets the table herself with place mats, 'even putting Sunil's high chair next to mama's place' (252). Meena asks her parents to perform as though they were a happy English family, and tells her mother, 'Don't just run to and from the kitchen burning your fingers like you normally do. I want us to sit and talk, you know, like you're supposed to do at dinners.' (252). Things do not go as planned, however; over starters, attempts at conversation are parried by Anita, who busies herself with the television and the full contents of the crisps bowl. The main dishes provide a further cause for perceptual mismatch. Anita does not take to curries:

> 'What's that!' she demanded, as if confronted with a festering sheep's head on a platter. 'Oh that's mattar-paneer,' mama said proudly, always happy to educate the sad English palate 'a sort of Indian cheese, and these are peas with it, of course ...'
>
> 'Cheese and peas?' said Anita faintly. 'Together?'
>
> 'Well,' mama went on hurriedly. 'This is chicken curry ... You have had chicken before, haven't you?'

> 'What's that stuff round it?'
> 'Um, just gravy, you know, tomatoes, onions, garlic ...' Mama was losing confidence now, she trailed off as she picked up Anita's increasing panic.
> 'Chicken with tomatoes? What's garlic?'
> 'Don't you worry!' papa interjected heartily, fearing a culinary catfight was about to shatter his fragile peace. 'We've also got fish fingers and chips. Is tomato sauce too dangerous for you?' (253)

If Anita is not ready for the Indian banquet, she is even less so to see the Kumars casually using their fingers to dip chapatti into the curries. Anita's expression of disbelief brings the Kumars to the realisation that the girl is the first person outside their circle of Indian aquaintances and friends to have a meal with them, and places them in an uncomfortable position. A resourceful Meena makes up for loss of face by telling their guest that eating with fingers is a habit in first-class restaurants, her only lie to be well-received by her parents.

The provision of main meals and savoury snacks for children's socialising across cultures is the responsibility of the adult members of the household. Within Meena's same age group, power relations in cross-cultural interactions are marked by sweets. Anita Rutter signals the beginning of her relationship with Meena by appropriating her bag of sweets:

> 'What you got?
> I held out my crumpled bag of stolen sweets. She peered inside disdainfully, then snatched the bag off me and began walking away as she ate. I watched her go, confused. [...] Anita stopped momentarily, shouting over her shoulder, 'Yow coming then?' (38)

This gesture concisely captures the way in which the balance of power inclines in the relationship between the two girls.

Sweets, however, not only make but also break ties. When the arrival of her cousins Pinky and Baby prevents Meena from spending a desired afternoon with Anita at a friend's parents' farm, Meena finds herself following Anita towards Mr Ormerod's

shop, tagged by the two Indian girls who attract the villagers' admiring stares. The shop is a central landmark in Meena and Anita's Tollington: 'We paused, as we always did, outside Mr Ormerod's shop window and shared a reverential moment of worship, faced with the tempting array of sweets which shamelessly flaunted themselves at us from the safety of their fat glass jars.' (152). The four girls go inside and Anita, taking advantage of Mr Ormerod's temporary disappearance into the back room of the shop, generously helps herself to some of the loose confectionery. On Mr Ormerod's return, Meena distracts him by asking for some polish and nonchalantly steals a few shillings from an improvised collection tin which she hides down Baby's jumper. Unintentional parties to the misdemeanour, Pinky and Baby are reduced to silence, and subsequently punished severely by their mother when Meena, confronted with an angry father and a distressed shopkeeper, claims the two girls had stolen the tin to get money for sweets.[16]

One might conclude, from reading accounts of experiences of migration, that children switch between cultures in a flexible manner, as they do not carry the same amount of cultural baggage with them as adults do. This does not result in a blurring of cultural boundaries in *Anita and Me*. Culinary representations abound in the novel, but serve to reinforce the divisions between ethnicity-delimited communities. Apart from sweets, qualified as a universal code in the context of childhood, in the shape of either the candies from Mr Ormerod's shop, or the cake Meena has in Stanton's, or the curd tarts she bakes with Mrs Worrall, no other edible items participate successfully in cultural exchanges.

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[16] A dissimilar experience is related by Zadie Smith in an interview with Stephanie Merritt: 'When I was little, we'd go on holiday to Devon, and there, if you're black and you go into a sweetshop, for instance, everyone turns and looks at you. So my instinct as a child was always to over-compensate by trying to behave three times as well as every other child in the shop, so they knew I wasn't going to take anything or hurt anyone.', in 'She's young, black, British - and the first publishing sensation of the millennium', *The Observer*, Sunday 16 January, 2000

Wild Life

Englishness is not a theme directly addressed by Esther Freud in *The Wild.* However, in its attempt to explore the emotional entanglements of unconventional family life against the background of a return-to-nature 1970s England, it paints a vivid picture of one particular type of white British identity with which novels with a multicultural cast of characters very rarely engage.[17]

As Christina Hardyment notes in her history of the British way of eating after the Second World War, Britain has had its prominent supporters of vegetarianism.[18] On the other hand, George Orwell sternly dismisses this tendency as a selfish concern with one's own well-being and a neglect of the community. Vegetarianism is a complex issue; it has acquired manifold connotations, which are very often contradictory. There is insuficient space here to do full justice to the way in which this movement has evolved in Britain. Instead, I wish to highlight a feature which appears to function as a common denominator to attitudes towards vegetarianism, namely that, as Christina Hardyment puts it, 'what you consumed was a crucial statement about your politics'.[19]

Fish fingers and chips, sandwich spreads and roast dinners on Sunday are the main signifiers of Englishness on which novels with multicultural casts of characters rely. Such novels co-exist, however, with other works of fiction which, although not self-consciously engaging with an English cultural identity, point to a more complex version of it through the use of culinary references.

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[17] It is true that Zadie Smith does not overlook vegetarianism and communal living in her much-acclaimed *White Teeth*, albeit within the temporal framework of the 1980s. In her novel, Joshua Chalfen defies his self-assuredly middle-class parents by joining a group of anarchist militants who are against animal torture and exploitation and starts handing out leaflets entitled 'Meat is Murder: The Facts and the Fiction'. Joshua's option is penned for comic effect - as Irie herself remarks, she 'never thought she would see the day when Joshua Chalfen handed her a leaflet'; Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 403.

[18] Christina Hardyment, *Slice of Life: The British Way of Eating since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1997). Notable figures include George Bernard Shaw and two English freethinkers, Henry Salt and Edward Carpenter.

[19] Hardyment, *Slice of Life*, p. 147.

In Esther Freud's novel, the external narrator tells a story of a return-to-nature life-style, though country and city are not fundamentally opposed as no character follows up this lifestyle option with sufficient conviction. 'The Wild' of the title is the name William Strachan gives to a disused bakery on the Laurel Hill estate, part of a small hilltop hamlet within commuting distance of London. Turned into a home, the former bakery is shared by William and his three daughters with their lodgers, Francine and her children, Tess and Jake. The story of communal living is stretched over a period of one and a half years and is filtered mostly through the eyes of nine-year-old Tess, who for a large part of the novel vies for William's affection. The careful management of viewpoint and alternation of child and adult perspectives ensures a complex layering of events. Every so often, tales from Norse mythology told to Tess by Mr Paul, her teacher at the non-conventional George House school, are interwoven with the main story line. The two families share not only a home but also their meals, a site for the articulation of emotional dynamics in the household. There is a rota system in place which ensures that everyone takes an equal share in helping with the preparation of meals and the housekeeping, meaning that gender roles are not stereotypically enforced. William and Francine become romantically involved, but William fails to bond with Tess and Jake, and the relationship is fraught with tension. Francine will have a baby, but halfway through the pregnancy a new lodger moves in, seventeen-year-old Melody, and William begins to reconsider his romantic options. The story is brought to a close when a shooting incident takes place between Jake and William and the two families separate.

From the point of view of nourishment, the house appears a haven of love, harmony and parental care.[20] At the beginning, William charms his audience with

[20] This misleading image of a 'happy family life' is also repeated at the end of the novel, shortly before the shooting incident: 'The next morning William set Eve's seat out in the garden and settled her there to watch while he helped Francine dig new seeds into the ground. They were planting their summer vegetables - carrots, lettuce, kale and spinach - and as they worked Francine's face was soft with smiles. She looked more beautiful than ever in her old narrow clothes, and Tess saw how her ankles were turned and elegant again. At night William baked apples with ginger, butter and brown sugar, he made

lasagne, cheese fondue, cornmeal muffins and banana bread. The Rayburn in the kitchen dutifully helps turn out heartwarming dishes, from simple toast with butter, jam or honey, through William's ravioli (which makes such a big impression on Tess) to Francine's soups (potato, carrot, parsnip or nettle, lentil and tomato). The Strachans and their lodgers get their food supplies from a health-food shop on a farm: oats, barley, raisins, hazelnuts, dried apricots, wheatgerm, millet, rice, flour, dried apple rings and much more:

> They were visiting the family who ran the biodynamic farm. It was where the Strachans had stayed when they first came down from Scotland. 'Can't I go too?' Tess had asked, and William had shrugged and held open the back door of the van. William knew the Bremmers from another life, when they'd lived in a bungalow in Aberdeen. They'd had a television then and a freezer full of food - fishfingers, burgers, and vegetables in cubes. They'd eaten chocolate bars and sliced white bread, and hadn't even known that the skin of the potato was the most important part. But now almost everything they ate came from their land. They had six children, all large and creamy skinned, and Tess watched the oldest boy for any signs. After all, he'd been born into that other life with KitKats and baked beans, the sugar from boxed cereal pumping round his heart, but as far as Tess could see he looked just the same.
>
> Mrs Bremmer gave them parsnip soup with swirls of cream, and a slice of homemade bread. There was carrot salad with apple vinegar that got inside your nose and a sprinkling of sunflower seeds. Afterwards they ate white yoghurt with honey from the Bremmers' bees. (28-29)

Later in the novel, the set-up is dismissed by Victor, Francine's ex-husband, as obsolete: '[W]hat I don't understand,' he says, 'is why make all the effort to get out of medieval times if you're going to pretend you're still in them.' (140) Even so, he accepts a 'bowl of lumpy country soup' (95) from Francine.

Vivien, in *Never Far From Nowhere*, focuses her narrative on shared snacks at school or in her free time, and, for the most part, the preparation of meals at home is only briefly alluded to rather than staged. For Meena in *Anita and Me*, the kitchen is a space where a particular version of ethnically-referenced feminity is enacted. At 'The

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elderflower fritters and bananas roasted in their skins, and when with a flourish he presented them to her, Francine blushed and shook her head.' (*The Wild*, p. 237).

Wild', mealtimes play an important part in the production of the household as a cohesive unit. Meals are taken together:

> It was William's idea that they all eat together, Jake and Tess and his three daughters - all eat the same thing, at the same time, at every meal. Until last week they'd eaten when they felt like it, especially in the mornings, and Jake was having trouble adjusting to these rules. (3-4)

Whereas Tess tries to please the adults in an attempt to gain affection and attention,[21] Jake is ever the trouble maker and food for him is a means to challenge William's authority. On the first day of term, William cooks a breakfast of porridge, which does not appear to be a favourite with Jake. The honey jar that Francine pushes towards Jake to make the dish more appealing fails to tempt him. Jake gets up, goes to the larder and takes out a tin of golden syrup, a tin that 'had made the move with them' (12) and writes his name in syrup on the porridge.[22] This sweet concoction reminiscent of life before 'The Wild' will re-appear more than once in the story.

Initially an integral part of the menu, meat is soon left out. Francine's children adjust well to vegetarianism; Jake had effectively been a vegetarian even before William's decision to remove meat from the menu. When Tess and her brother go to London to meet their father, they are taken to lunch in a pie-and-mash shop, at Min's (Victor's girlfriend's) suggestion.[23] The shop, Tess thinks, 'looked disgusting. There

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[21] William takes great pleasure in cooking. He makes lasagna as a special treat for Francine, Tess and Jake and promises Tess she would help him arrange the layers. The scene speaks volumes about the lack of bonding between William and Tess but also about the ambivalence of emotional rejection. The girl is absent from the kitchen: 'Tess, where are you?' William calls. 'Usually she was hovering, her awkward, grubby body pressing in too close. [...] He could do the layers himself, had the perfect excuse to go ahead without her, a layer of sauce, a layer of cheese, a latticing of pasta, but instead he strode through into the wild.' (163)

[22] This instance of culinary protest can be linked with a statement made by Gill Valentine about the BBC documentary series *A Slice of Life*. Valentine remarks that the assertion that mealtimes dramatize pre-existing relationships rather than shaping or creating new relationships, 'clearly needs refining'; 'Eating in', p. 522.

[23] Victor and Min, the latter in her late teens or early twenties, are a playful couple, far from an authoritative parent or step-parent stance: they are eating wine gums at the station while waiting for the children; Min breeds eels in her bathtub, she keeps rats as pets and even buys one for Jake. Both the children and Victor are very happy with her. (Min's background is not specified, although her name is not a common English one.)

were eels and a green sauce to pour over the mash. Liquor, it was called.' (119). Tess finds it hard to believe she'd ever liked meat before.

Dietary options, however, are sometimes only temporary, and are instrumental in the expression of life attitudes. Jake, unhappy at the news of his mother's unexpected pregnancy, or, more accurately, at William being the father, rejects the vegetable pie William had cooked for supper: 'Where's the meat?' Jake asked. 'What are these? Some kind of beans? [...] in disgust, Jake pushed away his plate.' (124). Eating meat is for Jake a way of dissociating himself from the household he feels unhappy in. In the pie-and-mash shop he follows his newly-found sister Caro's example and helps himself to some more meat pie. On their second trip to London, Jake and Tess are treated to kebabs and rice. Angered by William's recent behaviour, even Tess breaks the vegetarian rule: "We don't have to tell William,' Jake whispered to Tess as she stared at a dribble of pink blood, and urged on by Min and Victor, she bit into the meat.' (227).

Meat is not the only means by which Jake and Tess play against rules set up at 'The Wild'. On one occasion when William and his daughters are away from home, Francine, Jake and Tess share a 'celebration cheese on toast'. Two slices each with vinegar and extra cheese.' (146) eaten with fingers rather than with knife and fork. Different families will have different favourite dishes, and in *The Wild* cheese on toast acts as defining of one particular family unit, that of Francine and her children. From the beginning of the novel we are told that

> For special treats Jake and Tess used to have cheese and toast for breakfast. It was their favourite food and halfway through the toasting Francine would pull out the grill and splash vinegar over the melting cheese. It gave it an extra delicious taste like the Welsh rarebit served at Miriam's cafe, and they'd sit up in bed, the three of them, and eat it. (11-12)

More treats are to come in William's absence. Toast and marmite for supper, and caramel with brown sugar and butter made in a pan on the Rayburn.[24]

When both William and Francine are away due to the new baby's arrival, Melody allows the children to have anything they would like for supper. This time food consumption is not a means of marking a separation between family units but the freedom of children from parental authority. Melody cooks pancakes much to the children's delight and sprinkles them with lemon juice and icing sugar, while allowing Jake to have golden syrup on his.

In spite of the story's one and a half year stretch, it only records one birthday, William's. Special arrangements are made for it, in line with the health-conscious food options in the household: 'Francine had arranged holly in a spiky wreath around his bowl and she'd made a special breakfast, muesli with apples finely grated in a curl over the top. There were small handfuls of oatmeal, barley, raisins and wheatgerm, sprinkled with nuts.' (65). Christmas and Easter are also celebrated, but only the latter is marked by food in the story. William's brother Alec comes to visit and brings the children sweets of a kind that clashes with the biodynamic philosophy at The Wild but which captures the children's delight, reinforcing the associations between sweets and childhood: 'Caramac bars, peanut brittle, wine gums and Pink Panther chocolate that turned to milk syrup in your mouth' (98).

In negotiating space, children use culinary props not only at the level of the home but also at the larger level of the city. London for the children is partially a fairy tale setting and the way to their father's house is marked for them by a cake shop:

> 'I know the way,' Jake said. 'We get off at Harrow Road. Walk to the cake shop and then it's the second road on the right.'

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[24] Gill Valentine claims to show that households, 'rather than being single units of food consumption, can be sites of multiple and sometimes contradictory consumption practices'. 'Eating in', p. 491 This is immediately apparent at 'The Wild', albeit that research on consumption within the home has usually been carried out with conventional familial set-ups.

> Tess remembered the cake shop. It was full of white and yellow sponge, pink icing and frilly looking cream. There was nothing homemade, with dark-brown flour or dates. (106)

Tess's mapping strategy reflects an innocence most usually associated with that of the childhood universe before the stage at which the surrounding world begins to be problematised. Arguably, such portrayals require an external narrator and, although 'The Wild' is placed at a remove from the central, mainstream white middle-class norm, they would be difficult to sustain in a narrative told from the more marginal position of hyphenated cultural belonging.

Conclusion

Never Far From Nowhere and *Anita and Me* share their positioning within the trajectory of the autobiographical narrative and the reference to a staple moment in stories of migration: the parents of each narrator arrive in London to meet with impoverished housing, low-paid labour and exclusion. The way each text engages with such issues, however, differs. Levy's novel adheres to what Bromley labels 'the obligatory realism of the migrant narrative', whereas Syal opts for a mocking, playful tone.[25] In a recording for the BBC Radio 4 programme *Bookworm*, Syal remarks:

> I think being able to be humorous about who you are, and that dilemma, is a sign that you're at ease in the end with who you are. And there are so many people like Meena who move very fluidly from one culture to another, and you can hardly see the join.[26]

Not surprisingly, then, the choice of culinary references in *Never Far From Nowhere* supports a satirical inclination, whereas the way the characters in *Anita and Me* enter

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[25] Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging*, p. 144.

[26] *Bookworm* Tapescript, Programme 2, 2 August 2000, quoted in Christiane Schlote, 'I'm British, But...' Explorations of Identity by Three Postcolonial British Women Artists', www.brunel.ac.uk/faculty/arts/EnterText/2_1_pdfs/schlote.pdf, p. 116.

and exit culinary cultures is portrayed in an affectionately ironical manner, which privileges the comic over the satirical.

Suresht Renjen Bald discusses the generational differences in adapting to mainstream British culture which South Asian British fiction depicts. Parents and children of South Asian origin, the latter born in Britain more often than not, and not infrequently in bicultural households, engage with Britishness from opposing points of view. While elder generations accept, unquestioningly, racist labels and categorizations conferred on them, or reconstruct themselves as close as possible to what they perceive as being legitimately British, British-born children 'want to reconstruct 'Britishness' so that their faces and their voices are recognisable and integral parts of it.'[27] While his comments can be applicable across ethnic categorisations, Bald leaves vague and unexplained the dividing line between generations and it could be argued that the variety of identification practices he highlights may be encountered in the same character across various stages in time, with attempted assimilation and recognition of specificity as two necessarily complementary phases rather than opposite identification strategies. The label 'children', in Bald's essay, should be understood as 'offspring' rather than a young-age category. Children, whose noticeable presence in contemporary fiction lies underexplored in literary studies so far, have been the focus of attention in this chapter.

As intergenerational conflicts which materialise through food practices in *The Wild* are not staged in cross-ethnic terms, it is worth noting that the mechanisms of acceptance and rejection appear to be first inflected by age differences and only in a second instance by the presence of two or more distinct ethnic backgrounds. Where class and gender are positioned in the hierarchy of factors determining children's

[27] Suresht Renjen Bald, 'Negotiating Identity in the Metropolis: Generational Differences in South Asian British Fiction', in Russell King, John Connell and Paul White (eds.), *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 70-88, quotation at 84.

mapping of space through culinary consumption is, however, more highly dependent on the contingencies of such events.

Chapter Four

CONSUMING NARRATIVES[1]

Haute Cuisine and Fast Food Fiction

The first three chapters have traced instances of culinary consumption within literary fiction set in contemporary Britain and have attempted to explain their functionalisation to articulate cultural affiliations. This chapter examines consumption in its literal and in its metaphorical sense by engaging with the various types of participants involved in the production and reception of literary fiction.

In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Samad Iqbal claims his right to a hybrid space in London, O'Connell's, through taking part in constructing the pub's history alongside his friend, Archie Jones. For Abdulrazak Gurnah's unnamed narrator in *Admiring Silence*, storying is a one-sided experience: in a pub in London he tells tales of the Empire to a story-avid Englishman, an archetypal bourgeois named Mr Willoughby, the father of his partner.

> We sat in the almost empty pub (it was just 6.30), holding on to our glasses and not speaking. When I glanced at Mr Willoughby, his eyes were dancing on me [...]. He was hungry for an Empire story.[2]

Gurnah's novel incorporates within its narrative framework the consumer of narratives for whose enjoyment the (strategically) unnamed narrator produces far-fetched and flattering fictions of Empire. Stepping outside the boundaries of the novel, we find a

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[1] Previously in this thesis, novelists with a postcolonial background have been considered alongside writers who might be included within the English novel tradition rather than the postcolonial literary strand, but in this chapter discussion focuses solely on the former.

[2] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 30.

'reality' similar to the one constructed in *Admiring Silence*, an audience eager to consume (exotic) tales of ethnic otherness. This 'reality' is criticised, by Graham Huggan among others, for nurturing a commercial interest in the 'postcolonial' and for allowing a particular type of writing about the 'margins' to gain cultural currency.[3]

Themes, images and metaphors which appear in novels promoted to the forefront of the literary fiction scene through the highly mediatised awarding of literary prizes are more often than not recycled in subsequent fiction, either to support a claim to self-conscious intellectual sophistication or to ensure a positive reception of a text by virtue of its comparability to an established text of fiction. For example, in writing which engages with Indianness, as a national or ethnic identity, there is a prevalence of gastronomic tropes as Graham Huggan points out.[4] Huggan acknowledges the presence of culinary metaphors across a range of discursive genres and critiques the metropolitan fascination with Orientalist, clichéd renderings of the Indian subcontinent. In the field of literary fiction, he takes as a classic example Salman Rushdie's 'chutnification' of history in *Midnight's Children* (1981). Rushdie's novel, awarded the Booker Prize in 1981 and the Booker of Bookers in 1993, opened the path for what has been described as a series of 'novels by numbers – part history, part local colour, part magic',[5] eager to capitalise on the culinary preoccupations of Saleem Sinai, the narrator in *Midnight's Children*. This trend has been looked at in detail by Tobias Wachinger, who reflects on the politics of metropolitan consumption of subcontinental literary products and highlights exoticised representations of the Indian subcontinent in fiction which holds an established place in the literary limelight.[6] Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, argues

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[3] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2001). See in particular the Introduction for a concise statement of this argument.

[4] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

[5] Maya Jaggi, 'Where East is West', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 29 June, 1999.

[6] Tobias Wachinger, 'Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India's Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption', paper presented at the conference 'Food Representation in Literature, Film and the Other Arts', February 17-19, 2000, The University of Texas at San Antonio. I am grateful to the author for supplying me with a copy of his paper.

Wachinger, has foregrounded the remarkable potential of food and consumption imagery in the novelistic treatment of truth, history and identity. The jars of chutney which Saleem Sinai artfully produces over the 500 pages of his narrative are filled with memories, dreams and ideas about India. Saleem preserves the history of his country alongside the raw ingredients for pickles. Such preservation, however, comes at a cost:

> In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' Rushdie touts the now familiar image of 'the infinite possibilities of the country'. One could say that in *Midnight's Children* this enabling multitudinous character of the subcontinent is translated into a vision of India as a horn of plenty producing the fresh resources that call for refining, packaging and delivery to the rest of the waiting world.[7]

This tendency is mirrored in a number of other novels. The protagonist of Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1994), another praised example of Indo-Anglian writing, Triton, is, not surprisingly, a cook.[8] The main character of Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* (1997) greedily devours every food offered him in his home city of Bombay while *The God of Small Things* (1997), by Arundhati Roy, has at its centre a pickle factory.[9] Along the same lines, in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Indian pickles re-appear in Elsa's Country, Iowa, a less likely location, while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's bestseller, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), also capitalises on Indian cuisine.[10]

As if to underwrite Wachinger's argument, Indo-Anglian writing continues to rely on the exotic appeal of Indian food. *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003), by Preethi Nair, is one such example, which does not seem to have risen beyond the status of

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[7] Tobias Wachinger, 'Spicy Pleasures…'

[8] Romesh Gunesekera, *Reef* (London: Granta Books in association with Penguin, 1994). Indo-Anglian writing is glossed here as produced by authors with an Indian background but writing in English.

[9] Ardashir Vakil, *Beach Boy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997); Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997).

[10] Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (London: Virago, 1989); Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* (London: Doubleday, 1997). It may be added here that food-related titles are another prevailing practice in Indo-Anglian fiction. Random examples include *Fasting, Feasting* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999) by Anita Desai, *Salt and Saffron* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000) by Kamila Shamsie, *Chapatti or Chips?* (London: Pocket Books, 2002) by Nisha Minhas as well as her forthcoming *Passion and Poppadoms* (London: Pocket Books, 2004), also announced as *A Spicy Seduction*.

middle-brow fiction. Preethi Nair's novel will be contrasted in this chapter with *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, another newcomer to the literary fiction scene. *Brick Lane*, a much-acclaimed fictional début, engages with the everyday life of a Bangladeshi woman in London, in a realist rather than exoticising fashion.

An Appetite for Lies

Admiring Silence was Abdulrazak Gurnah's fifth novel and was praised by Caryl Phillips on its publication as his 'best to date'.[11] In her review, Caroline Gascoigne suggestively sums up the gist of this text:

> This is a novel about being a stranger in a strange land. It is about dislocation, and not knowing one's place, both in the geographical and in the class sense. But most of all, it is about stories - telling and retelling one's personal history in order to explain it to oneself and to other people. Through a twisting, many-layered narrative it explores themes of race and betrayal with bitterly satirical insight.[12]

Admiring Silence is divided into three parts and features an unnamed, self-conscious first-person narrator. Born in Zanzibar, he escapes to England on a false passport. Whilst a student at the Institute of Education, he takes up a dishwashing job at the Costmary Grill. There he meets Emma Willoughby, a PhD student in English. The pair fall in love and decide to live together, much to Emma's parents' dismay. The birth of their daughter partially softens Mrs Willoughby's dislike, and she takes an active interest in looking after little Amelia, lavishing the young couple with frivolous gifts of food.[13] The story of the couple, for the sixteen years between Amelia's birth and the

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[11] Caryl Phillips, 'Driven by Post-Colonial Dislocation', *The Financial Times*, Saturday, 30 November, 1996.

[12] Caroline Gascoigne, 'Telling Tales: *Admiring Silence*, by Abdulrazak Gurnah', *The Sunday Times*, 29 September, 1996.

[13] Ann Blake *et al.* remark that the 'Austen and Thackeray associations of these names, with an irony intermittently deployed by both narrator and narrative, point to the failure of this story and its English female figures, and by implication of England itself, to find resolution in accord with the traditional

narrator's visit to the doctor to find out he has a 'buggered' heart is only briefly alluded to. The novel dwells upon a couple of years subsequent to the narrator's arrival in England, then makes a fifteen-year leap forward in time to the first visit the narrator pays to his parents since he left Zanzibar. Zanzibar is no longer his home, though neither is England subsequent to Emma's decision to leave the narrator and begin 'another story, one which she was choosing for herself, not a tale she had stumbled into and then could not find a way out'.[14]

Recurrent images in fiction about non-white immigrants in England crop up in the first part of *Admiring Silence*. Illegally arrived in the country, the unnamed narrator takes lodging in an acquaintance's college room. His initial contact with England ironically precludes English people: the only ones the narrator encounters are passengers on the bus or comedians on TV. He and the others with whom he shares a house

> never went anywhere: we cooked for ourselves - mostly curry and rice, watched a little television and then worked. It was a bewildering picture of England. Most of the students at the technical college I went to were *Asian*, and most of the graduate students at the house, including Ahmed, were either Indian or Pakistani. Everyone shopped at the market and bought meat at the halal butcher. And although there was strict division in the kitchen between the vegetarians and the meat-eaters, the mingled aromas that rose from there were of spices and frying vegetables. (80-81)

Communal cooking, cutting across religious divides, is occasioned by and reproduces feelings of mutual understanding and companionship among the group of 'foreigners' in England, not something to be encountered when the narrator moves from Leicester to London to study at the Institute of Education. Finding somewhere to live in London may not carry the same strong exclusionary connotations migrant stories set in the

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romantic novel'; *England through Colonial Eyes in Twentieth Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 52.

[14] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 210. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

period after the Second World War usually entail.[15] The narrator rents a bed-sit in Tooting, in a small terraced house owned by a Jamaican builder. But echoes of these experiences are still there. The enterprising owner has added a built-in shower to the room and an electric extractor fan, on a meter: 'No need to open the window now,' my landlord explained. 'This is a motherfucking cold country, boy. And when you fry your snapper, it don't have to stink up the whole house.' (55).

That he is an unwelcomed 'Other' in England is apparent to the narrator the moment he sets foot in the metropolis. At the Costmary Grill, where he takes a part-time job washing up, he is not given a meal with the rest of the staff before opening time. He gradually loses enthusiasm for the job: 'it was just dirty, greasy water, recalcitrant crockery and feeding on crumbs. (Yes, I used to pick at the leftovers if they had not been messed up too much.)' (56). The arrival of the beautiful Emma, a new waitress at the restaurant, and her taking an interest in him, wins the narrator the ill-feeling of Peter, the chef, who fires him with a burst of racist self-righteousness: 'Thousands can just walk off the plane and live off us, but you're not doing that in my kitchen.' (58).

Emma is an ideal partner for him at the beginning. They spend the evenings together, cooking 'nameless concoctions'. With Emma's help, a new London opens before his eyes. She takes him places he has never been to, second-hand bookshops and jazz clubs and vegetarian cafes. Emma deplores the bigoted, middle-class Englishness embodied by her parents, the most suggestive symbol of which is, in her eyes, roast shoulder of mutton:[16]

> To Emma, this was the archetypal bourgeois dish; somewhere between the soup, the smoked mackerel, the boiled beef, the ham and the damson pie, there sat the shoulder of mutton, as-greasy a lump of shame and reprehension

[15] Accounts of migrant experience of looking for accommodation in Britain often record encountering the following sign in windows: 'No coloureds' – for a detailed discussion of this, see James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

[16] The narrator doubts, however, if Emma has ever seen a shoulder of mutton - 'I'll have to ask her' (19), he makes a mental note, but never follows up on his decision.

> as could be found anywhere, the very emblem of smug, coercive egotism. (18)

The inter-racial affair, blissful at first, is not without its problems, however. Emma's parents do not approve of their daughter's relationship and visits to their home are customarily punctuated by the mother busying herself with cups of tea in order to avoid awkward situations. Upon their first encounter, the narrator is wary of acting in a manner which would gain him Emma's parents' disapproval and he sums up the scene with what Caryl Phillips terms 'a wonderfully sardonic eloquence':[17] 'My first view of them was coloured in this way. Their first view of me was coloured differently, and I think theirs was the biggest surprise.' (19).

The narrator is not altogether innocent, and if the Willoughbys will not take to him, he will not do his best to place himself in a favourable light: 'I did what I could to help, smiling in the wrong places, toying with the salad (instead of wolfing it hungrily down as I was supposed to), suggesting that I could cook if [Emma] wasn't feeling up to it' (31). The self-mocking tone is his strategy for survival when finding himself unjustly pigeonholed.

With a similar purpose, Gurnah has his narrator resort to exoticising strategies when describing himself. One such example occurs when the narrator pays a visit to his GP. Queried about his dietary habits by a white doctor who appears to think his patient comes from the West Indies, the narrator falls back on his tongue-in-cheek tone: 'I told him I liked green bananas and smoked monkey for breakfast.' (8).

The narrator's most avid (and uncritical) listener within the novel, however, proves to be Mr Willoughby. While Emma gradually begins to see through the stories, Mr Willoughby is an appreciative audience, who will not miss an Empire tale, and the narrator dutifully indulges him:

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[17] Phillips, 'Driven by Post-Colonial Dislocation'.

> So I began to tell [Mr Willoughby] about the free milk they used to give us at school and his eyes lit up as usual at the prospect of an Empire story. As soon as we arrived at school we lined up under the shade of the huge mango tree which stood in the middle of our assembly yard, humming devotional songs while the milk was warming in the urns. [...] The milk was flavoured with cardamon and cinnamon, and generously sugared. The first mouthful was like sipping nectar. Then we were offered a choice of the fruit in season: oranges, melons, mangoes, jackfruit, lychees and, of course, bananas. Then we strode to our well-lit classrooms to break the chains of ignorance and disease which had kept us in darkness for so long, and which the Empire had come to bring us respite from. (25-26)

I would like to draw attention here to the appearance of culinary signifiers, across the two layers in the narrative (the larger narrative level of the novel and that of the stories included within that level), which act as props in the staging of cross-cultural encounters. Stories told within *Admiring Silence* are incorporated in a literary genre which is recognisably English and European – the novel – and the locations where storytelling takes place carry equally strong connotations of Englishness. Significantly, encounters between Mr Willoughby and the narrator occur in a pub. Just as Gurnah appropriates the novel as a genre and rewrites its cultural affiliation, so he subverts our expectations about the pub as a site for the rehearsal of male bonding. Ray Oldenburg, writing in praise of the English pub, contrasts it favourably with similar establishments in other cultures. The reasons for this, he contends, 'are fairly simple and have to do with scale and warmth. Most pubs are built to the human scale. They are intimate, even cozy settings, designed more for an immediate neighbourhood than a horde of transients and visitors.'[18] In Gurnah's novel, Mr Willoughby invites the narrator to the pub; however, theirs remains an asymmetrical relationship – the nostalgic coloniser, at home in his local pub, and the obliging colonised, who gains temporary right of access through his gift for weaving imaginary tales.

On the first occasion, Mr Willoughby is urged by his wife to take some sort of action to persuade the father of Emma's unborn baby of the preposterousness, from a

[18] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 2nd edition (New York: Marlowe and Co, 1999), p. 125. Oldenburg may be referring to drinking culture, as indeed are most secondary sources on pubs and cafés, but the remarks he makes on the ambient readily apply to instances of food consumption as well.

middle-class viewpoint, of birth out of wedlock. However, Mr Willoughby is hardly the right man to be dispatched on such an errand as the issue is not even touched upon. Instead, the two men sit together, sip their beers and ponder on the menu handwritten on the blackboard: faggots, mixed grill, sausages, baked beans, or macaroni cheese. 'That's what pub food was like in those days, even in Blackheath' (25) reflects the narrator. In a Proustian fashion, faggots trigger a childhood memory in Mr Willoughby's mind, and his East-African guest volunteers a food-related story of his own, a fabricated memory of schooldays under British occupation. Mr Willoughby listens carefully and pontificates about life in the colonies after the retreat of the Empire: 'Everything's turned to shite' (26). 'Let's have some faggots' (26), he proposes, as if to compensate for the loss, but consolation is not to be found: 'They looked like shite when they arrived, too, generous lumps of dark, solid shite squatting in a shallow pool of brown gravy.' (26).

A second outing to the pub is prompted by the arrival of the baby. This time, however, Mr Willoughby does not take the same level of interest in the story told him by the narrator, who duly notes 'the artist in me felt a twinge of disappointment at this failure' (30).

It is not my intention here to take issue with the truth value of the stories told by the narrator, nor to assess the artistic merit of such fictions.[19] Questions of cultural authority and faithfulness will be pursued in relation to the reception of two writers who make strategic use of culinary references within their novels. Additionally, issues of novelistic craft will be addressed in the next two sections.

[19] The view that representations are linguistic constructs rather than accurate reflections of a pre-existing reality has frequently been put forward in contemporary cultural studies.See, for example, Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997) for a comprehensive review of discussions on this issue.

One Hundred Ways with Pickle

The odyssey surrounding Preethi Nair's first novel, *Gypsy Masala* (2000), makes for fascinating reading.[20] Published by the author herself, it was also marketed by her under the cover of an alias, PR consultant Preu Menon. Reportedly, a leaflet promoting the London Book Fair floated down in front of Preethi Nair's window, prompting her to reserve a bookstall and make her work known to people in the industry.[21] Cunning, a series of fortunate events and public admittance of the true identity of Preu Menon secured a wide audience for *Gypsy Masala* and a six-figure deal with Harper Collins for Nair's second novel.

In an interview undertaken subsequent to the publication of her second novel, *One Hundred Shades of White*, Nair makes a matter-of-fact comment on herself as a novelist: 'I've never said that I'm the most talented writer out there [...]. I didn't know much about the publishing industry when I started – it was a bit of a minefield really. But I wasn't so naïve that I didn't know that a lot of it is down to marketing.'[22] Preethi Nair draws on a discourse of entrepreneurship rather than one which emphasizes literary prowess and explains her writing, at least in the case of her second novel, in terms of inspirational meditation and autobiographical experience rather than artistic craft.[23] (Nair, originally from Kerala in the South of India, moved to England when she was two and her second novel relies on her experience of life in the metropolis.)[24] The extensive use of food imagery throughout *One Hundred Shades of White* justifies the inclusion of the novel in this thesis, as do the co-presence of two distinct culinary

[20] Preethi Nair, *Gypsy Masala* (Northampton: NineFish, 2000), published only in paperback form.

[21] From an interview with Preethi Nair, available at http://www.womenwriters.org.uk/group/newsletter/followadream.html, <5 December 2003>.

[22] Bryony Gordon, 'Ambitious? I just do whatever it takes', *The Telegraph*, 7 March, 2003.

[23] 'I went away to Sinai to reflect [...]. I came back to London with clarity and confidence, putting aside all that had gone before, I began writing again. My second novel *One Hundred Shades of White* poured out of me in six weeks.' http://www.womenwriters.org.uk/group/newsletter/followadream.html, <5 December 2003>.

[24] Incidentally, Kerala is also the initial point of departure of Arundhati Roy, an established Indian writer of fiction in English.

cultures and the themes of migration and identity construction developed in the text, which call for a close reading of the text alongside similar productions that might be regarded as more accomplished in a literary sense.

One Hundred Shades of White explores, in a food-conscious fashion, meanings of childhood and womanhood lived under the sign of relocation. Nalini, daughter of a village cook held in high esteem, elopes at sixteen with Raul Kathi, the elder son of the richest family in the village and bears him two children two years apart, Satchin and Maya. The husband's occupation prompts the removal of the family to London. Unable to feel she belongs in the new setting, Nalini withdraws to the kitchen and attempts to find comfort in preparing meals, ranked below burgers at Wimpy's by the children, who are eager to adopt the ways of their new-found friends. Socio-economic status may smooth the children's acceptance in the school to which they are sent, but for the mother it acts as a social barrier. After a while, Raul Kathi embezzles money and leaves his wife and children without any means of subsistence. Helped by Tony, the driver who used to bring consignments of food to the house, and his pretend older sister Maggie, Nalini makes a new start in life. She temporarily works in a garment factory, but it is not too long before her 'true gift' surfaces. Tom comes back from work one day to announce that one of his clients had asked for 'a certain bottle of pickle, not too spicy like the Asian stores in the area made them, but something that had a combination of zest and sweetness'.[25] Maggie suggests Nalini should make an attempt and, in no time, her bedsit, swamped in 'brightly coloured mangoes and lemons, spices and bottles' (95), becomes an ad-hoc pickle factory, 'The Abundance of Spices', supplying regular customers. Tom takes Nalini to a wholesaler where she chooses 'fruits and spices [...] of the best quality [...] you won't find anywhere better, all freshly imported from India' (99).

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[25] Preethi Nair, *One Hundred Shades of White* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 94. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

Nair's novel bears a strong similarity to another work of fiction built upon a 'spice and magic' framework, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Here, Tilo, the owner of a grocery store in Oakland, California, provides spices and mystical remedies for a host of diasporic Indians. 'I am the Mistress of Spices,' she says,

> I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth, sand and stone. [...] But the spices are my love. I know their origins and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at first, when earth split like skin and offered it to the sky. [...] Yes, they all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot. [...] But the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood. They are the ones I work with.[26]

Nair's protagonist, Nalini, carries a similar conviction:

> The art of putting together food is a magical thing and if it is done right it has the power to soften the most hardened heart. My mother always said that when you work with what you love, you work with magic. [...] Just the right amount of cumin to stimulate appetite for life, a cinnamon quill to bring spice or action into stagnant phases of life, lemon juice to diffuse an argument, chilli to relieve pain and turmeric to heal the heart. (55)

And the list goes on.[27]

Nalini celebrates her decision to turn her cooking into a full-time career option by treating the children to a meal at Wimpy's. This decision arguably indicates that she has come to terms with living in a different culture – this is endorsed by one of the additions to the pickles that The Abundance of Spices offers:

> The mango and lime pickles were doing very well and I decided it was time to introduce a new range: apple, cinnamon and chilli. Ripe, sober English cooking apples blended with a mixture of temperamental chillies, a hint of toasted fenugreek and asafoetida for vision, all grounded with lightly fried

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[26] Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* (London: Black Swan, 1997), p. 3.

[27] As the reviewer for *The Guardian* remarks, 'at times the novel threatens to turn into a recipe-cum-therapy book; Nair seems unable to mention any foodstuff without ascribing mystical properties to it.', Ranti Williams, 'Biryani battles', *The Guardian*, 17 May, 2003, p. 26. That this is not entirely the case one realises when one comes across references to hamburgers and fishfingers – even Nair cannot endow them with spiritual uplifting qualities.

> onions and mustard seeds. In those bottles were a perfect combination of stable West and fiery East. It was an acceptance on my part, an assimilation of cultures, fused together with the course sweetness of cinnamon. (108)

The sober East, however, comes in the shape of anonymous shop customers, not fully fleshed out characters, with the exception of Maggie and Tom, Nalini's best friends, who are Irish.

Cooking brings a wonderful Mr Right into Nalini's life. Ravi, one of her regular customers, proposes to Nalini and helps her set up a pickle shop. The opening day is not a business-like, matter-of-fact affair, but the expected blend of magic power and creative entrepreneurship: the first person to enter the shop is a thin old Indian man with a white beard, the priest, who blesses the shop and gives Nalini a piece of advice which she will come to understand in time: 'Now that you have mastered forgiveness, let it fly through all those who come through these doors and then serve, serve gratitude, but only when you are ready.' (124-125).

The clientele of the new shop is reminiscent of Tilo's in *The Mistress of Spices*. They are suitable recipients of a 'pedagogy of the depressed', though, in contrast to Divakaruni's novel, they do not belong only to the Indian diaspora:[28]

> The shop was like a magnet that drew many broken hearts. These fragile hearts came in with layers of armour so they appeared very strong. We had an array of customers: matriarchal Indian women who seemed to know how to hold their families together; young Jewish and Polish women who knew what they wanted out of life; middle-aged affluent English women who looked like they had everything under control; single men, married men and old men. Unbeknown to them, the sound of the chimes and the various smells disarmed them and made them feel safe, they felt secure in the store and they didn't even know it. (128)

Surprisingly, perhaps, although not all Indian cooking procedures can be replicated, this does not have a negative bearing on the outcome:

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[28] Amitava Kumar, 'Louder than Bombs: What's so hot about Indian writing?', *Transition*, 79 (1999), 80-101, quotation at 88.

> If we were back in India, the savouries would be left out in the sun, soaking in the heat and the energy; here, I left them with the light in the kitchen so they expanded with the heat and when they were ready, I fried them in hot groundnut oil so they would set hard, solidifying in time. (126)

The shop runs smoothly until Nalini gives birth to her third child and temporarily sets aside her culinary preoccupations. But her attempt to put the shop back on its track when she returns to work is placed under a cloud by the sudden appearance of Raul. The shop will be sold to raise the money with which Nalini intends to buy Raul's silence. Raul appears again later in the novel to win, by deceitful means, the sympathy of his and Nalini's daughter, Maya, at a time when she is thinking through her emotional and cultural ties. The fabrications of Raul come between mother and daughter though eventually, in the economy of the popular novel subgenre, the mischief-makers lose in favour of the kind-hearted. The reconciliation between mother and daughter is celebrated with a traditional meal: 'Amma smiled and lifted the lids off the dishes: deep-filled masala dosas with hot potato stew. I was home' (284), Maya says.[29]

An acclaimed American-Indian short story writer says of herself and her work:

> I feel hyphenated and that's rich material for me. I grew up in a place that never quite felt like home but there was no other home in my past to seek refuge in. My characters are all looking back, to a lesser or stronger degree, depending on whether they are migrants or the children of migrants.[30]

Hyphenation in *One Hundred Shades of White* is built in spatial terms, rather than on the grounds of dual cultural parentage. Nair's India is both a setting in the novel and the projected image of a motherland, metonymically figured through the recurring smell or ginger and sesame oil, which reminds Nalini of her mother. India is very much a

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[29] Mother-daughter bonds are constructed in culinary terms throughout *One Hundred Shades of White*. Nalini leaves behind her home and her mother, though the two are linked through their common gift: providing spiritual nurturing through cooking. Maya initially denies herself a meaningful connection with her past and needs to travel back to India to recapture the feeling of the place and reconstruct the severed link.

[30] Jhumpa Lahiri, interviewed by Maya Jaggi, in 'Where East is West', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 29 June, 1999.

feminine construct in Nair's novel, a texture of memories and magic. London, on the other hand, though undeniably the home of Maya and Nalini, is just an empty location to be filled with meaning. Its character and particularities are not explored in the text. The two narrators in the novel remain diasporic Indians – they do not become British Asians, as for example Meera Syal's Meena can be straightforwardly labelled.

Tobias Wachinger is eager to signal the intertextual links of much Indo-Anglian fiction with *Midnight's Children*, and arguably not unjustifiably so in the case of the preponderance of food tropes across the novels he discusses. *One Hundred Shades of White* can be read in the same vein, though some differences between Wachinger's range of texts and Nair's novel need to be signposted. Furthermore, Wachinger appears to divide the novels he discusses into two categories: the artistically accomplished and the pale copies capitalising on the exotic cachet of South-Asian food connotations. *One Hundred Shades of White* cannot be straightforwardly located in this classification.

On the one hand, Nair's second novel touches on themes characteristic of underprivileged everyday life in the British metropolis, something that the texts Wachinger discusses do not address. 'Touch', however, is the keyword here, as *One Hundred Shades of White* is not a very socially aware novel. McCracken argues that 'written popular narratives can tell us much about who we are and about the society in which we live'.[31] In *One Hundred Shades of White*, there is a brief reference to sweatshops, which is quickly glossed over. Leaving aside Nalini's brief spell in the garment factory, she has access, through marriage, to a leisured, chauffeured class helped out in times of distress by loyal domestic staff. The plot relies mainly on sensationalist elements, characteristic of a typical bestseller and the story follows a rags-to-riches-to-rags and then again to-riches pattern.

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[31] Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 1.

On the other hand, from the point of view of artistic merit, *One Hundred Shades of White* is not a technically unsophisticated text, as the control of viewpoint and the leaps backward in time show. Where it falters is in its insistent use of mystical and spiritual connotations of foods, turned throughout the novel into a standardised set of conventions. This gesture undercuts claims the novel might make to a higher literary status.[32]

Moving back from poetics on to politics, more specifically to the microsocial level of cultural self-identities, food seems to function on two distinct levels in Nair's novel. On the first level, Indian foods have strong spiritual healing properties which operate regardless of their consumer's culture or ethnicity.

On the second, particularly in the case of Maya, a rejection of her mother's cooking in favour of the fast food English children of her generation hold in high esteem, is a way of gaining a positive self-image within that particular social group. Yet neither cultural community is developed in the text. While the British are virtually absent from the novel, the text also sidesteps any reference to the existence of an Indian community.

It must be remarked that the investment of foods with emotional signification may be a genuine attempt to render a particular type of South Asian sensibility, where 'South Asian' should be broken down into its constitutive categories rather than be taken as an all-embracing label.[33] This attempt fails to achieve its purpose, however, if it is caught into the cultural mechanisms which promote a larger trend of exoticising the Indian

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[32] To illustrate this point, Scott McCracken quotes Walter Nash: 'All narratives employ conventions ... but ... in popular fiction the conventions are simplified and more or less fixed, whereas in writing of more advanced pretension the conventional game is free, diverse, endlessly modified ... popfiction is nothing if not predictable'; *Pulp*, p. 10.

[33] This issue has been touched upon, for example, in the workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London on Monday, 27 October 2003, on 'Food and Emotion in South Asian Literature'. The purpose of this workshop was to 'recover the cultural and, more specifically, emotional signification of food in South Asia. What food actually represents lies buried under manifold signifying practices such as gender, sexuality, politics, culture, and economics.', http://www.soas.ac.uk/centres/centreinfo.cfm?navid=791, <28 December 2003>.

subcontinent and packaging it ready for consumption by an undiscriminating metropolitan audience.

Just Another Chicken Tikka Masala?

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* has undoubtedly been 2003's most talked about fictional debut, writes Boyd Tonkin, the literary editor for *The Independent*. While the author made the Granta Best of Young British Novelists List of that year effortlessly, and the novel was shortlisted and deemed a favourite for the Booker prize, some reviews record a considerably less flattering attitude: 'Ironically,' one of them argues,

> *Brick Lane* has just become another 'Chicken Tikka Masala' in the modern history of British fiction writing; purely fictional and invented in Britain with concocted flavours of sweet, sour and cream but only for those who are English or Westerner. Because one must know that Bangladeshis who invented 'Chicken Tikka Masala' in Britain never try this at their home as it is too mild, sweet, and creamy for them to enjoy.[34]

The source of this remark lies at some remove from what counts as the mainstream literary press but it raises an intriguing question of cultural affiliation if read alongside the then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's confident claim that

> Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Masala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.[35]

Arguably, Geraldine Bedell, in her review of *Brick Lane* for *The Observer*, has Cook's remark in mind when she presents the novel as 'an exploration of a community that is so

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[34] Tracey Muller-King, 'Brick Lane: Monica Ali's Chicken Tikka Masala', www.refuge-magazine.com/reviews.html, <24 September 2003>.

[35] Robin Cook, 'Robin Cook's Chicken Tikka Masala Speech: Extracts from a Speech by the Foreign Secretary to the Social Market Foundation in London', *The Guardian*, Thursday April 19, 2001.

quintessentially British that it has given us our national dish, but of which most of us are entirely ignorant'.[36] Interestingly, much of the attention that *Brick Lane* has generated has tended to focus on whether or not the novel paints a true-to-life picture of the real Brick Lane, the hub of Bangladeshi life in London. In many quarters, as Sandhu remarks, the novel has been hailed in glowing terms as though it provided 'a direct portal into the minds of Bangladeshi East Londoners'.[37] Commenting in the *London Review of Books* on this tendency, he further notes that the novel 'is claimed to have mapped out a new, invisible London'.[38] That this is not the case, Sandhu proceeds to unravel, pointing out that other writers, including Farrukh Dhondy and Syed Manzurul Islam have engaged with Bangladeshi experience in the metropolis.

Brick Lane does seem to encourage readings which foreground the documentary value of the novel since it bears an acknowledgement made by Monica Ali of a sociological study from which she drew inspiration in fashioning the women characters in the novel.[39] The reference to the study clearly signals the novel's indebtedness to the realist mode of representation, a form which pays careful attention to the accuracy of the picture it paints of a specific world.

Brick Lane tells the story of Nazneen, who leaves her home village in Bangladesh for Tower Hamlets in London to be married to Chanu, a man twenty years her senior. The narrative follows the couple between 1985 and 2002. Vivid characters make their appearance at various moments in the novel: Dr Azad, the recipient of Chanu's hospitality, which he does not reciprocate; Mrs Islam, the usurer who lends money to Chanu, and to a large number of others within the same community; Razia, Nazneen's friend on the estate; Hasina, Nazneen's sister, whose experience back in Banglandesh is

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[36] Geraldine Bedell, 'Full of East End Promise', *The Observer*, Sunday June 15, 2003.
[37] Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Come Hungry, Leave Edgy: *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali', *The London Review of Books*, 9 October 2003, 10-13, quotation at 13.
[38] Sandhu, 'Come Hungry, Leave Edgy', quotation at 13.
[39] Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (London: Verso, 2002).

drawn in stark contrast to that of her sister; Karim, who brings Nazneen the piecework for sewing and subsequently becomes her lover; Shahana and Bibi, the daughters of Nazneen and Chanu, two typical second-generation British Asians.

Limited in her movements by her lack of English (which prevents her from attempting even a minimal encounter with her non-Bangladeshi neighbours) and by her husband's expectations about her role and position, Nazneen uses the resources most readily available to her - food, eating and the domestic chores related to them - to claim some form of control over her place in the household and her self-identity. At their first dinner with Dr Azad, for example, where her attempts at joining the conversation are dismissed by her husband with a laugh and a 'My wife is just settling in', Nazneen externalises her unhappiness by merely picking at her cauliflower curry.[40] Later, when the guest has departed, she clears the table and escapes to the kitchen to avoid one of her husband's long tirades to which she is a captive audience. But Chanu follows her there and eventually she leaves putting away the pans for the following morning. She will eat beside the sink, at night, when her husband is asleep. Nazneen's rebellion is minimal at first (she eats while she cooks so as to avoid sharing meal times with her husband) but gradually escalates into more radical behaviour when she decides to put chillies in the sandwiches her husband takes to work.

Although Dr Azad is a regular dinner guest in Chanu and Nazneen's home, hospitality is not returned, and an intrigued Chanu decides to pay the doctor a visit, accompanied by his wife and son. The encounter holds surprises for both men. Dr Azad's house, in a well-off area, boasts a front garden full of gnomes and an array of inside furnishings breathing opulence. Dr Azad's wife sports a very tight mini-skirt and a cigarette, while the daughter, a like-for-like image of the mother, walks in casually asking for money to go to the pub. The meal which Chanu and Nazneen are invited to

[40] Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Doubleday, 2003), p. 24.

share with the Azads completes the picture: 'They ate dinner on trays balanced on their laps. An unidentified meat in tepid gravy, with boiled potatoes. It was like eating cardboard soaked in water.' (89) So does the ensuing discussion about cultural assimilation between Mrs Azad and Chanu, who hold opposing views. The scene is largely filtered through Nazneen's consciousness, and she adopts the stance of an impartial observer who does not pass judgement on what is happening but merely registers objective facts. But a judgement is implicitly there, in Nazneen's evident unease at Mrs Azad's comments about Bengali women who 'spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English' (93), and also in Dr Azad's growing embarrassment at his wife's 'Westernized' behaviour or Mrs Azad's strongly voiced contradiction of Chanu's comments on the 'tragedy' of immigrant life.

Shared meals, and in this particular case one that does not fit a traditional pattern, generate the necessary space for airing views on the nature of cultural identities. The dinner in Dr Azad's home is not to be repeated, though Dr Azad remains a regular guest in Chanu and Nazneen's flat. Mrs Azad and her daughter will be enquired after, in a conventional manner. The hierarchy is thus reinstated.

Brick Lane distances itself from a novel like *Anita and Me*, which capitalises on the nostalgia for the homeland and a celebration of the idea of home through the consumption of specific foods. At the same time, it also stands in contrast to, for example, *One Hundred Shades of White*, where food references are anchored within a magic realist tradition prevalent in Indo-Anglian fiction.

At the time of writing, the question of how true to life Monica Ali's depiction of the East End of London can be considered to be has taken a striking turn. A piece in *The Guardian* reports that 'Community leaders from the neighbourhood in the East End of London that inspired Monica Ali's Booker-nominated first novel, *Brick Lane*, have

branded her work a despicable insult to Bangladeshis living in this area.'[41] According to Matthew Taylor, the novel, a candidate for *The Guardian*'s First Book Award, has angered a community which cannot identify with what they interpret as stereotypical and negative representations of Bangladeshis in London, and parallels have been drawn between *Brick Lane* and the outraged response to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Opinions are divided, then, on whether *Brick Lane* should be considered as a work of fiction and, therefore, on whether or not its author should be held directly responsible for the image it paints of the Bangladeshi community in the metropolis. The novelist DJ Taylor puts forward a rather weak argument in defence of Ali and her novel: 'If Monica Ali wants to write about Brick Lane, which as a Bangladeshi she presumably knows a good deal about, then she should be free to do so.'[42] That Monica Ali is only half Bangladeshi is known from interviews Ali has given to the press, and furthermore she cannot be presumed to talk about life in the Brick Lane neighbourhood from direct experience, given her own socioeconomic background. This lack of sensitivity on the part of DJ Taylor, one of the Booker Prize judges, towards the particularities of the Bangladeshi community in the British metropolis leads to his statement sounding self-contradictory.

Neither side, however, is necessarily performing a suitable reading of *Brick Lane*. The Bangladeshi community, by taking its representation in the novel at face value, and the literary judges, by their eagerness to acknowledge Monica Ali as an authoritative spokesperson for the East-End Bangladeshi group, each misplace the emphasis. At the same time, it makes one wonder why out of the eighteen pages which the Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council wrote to Monica Ali, Matthew Taylor chooses to select a particularly unflattering excerpt, both in terms of content and in terms of

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[41] Matthew Taylor, 'Brickbats fly as community brands novel 'despicable'', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 3 December 2003, p. 5. Attitudes towards the book are divided: while some argue that 'it increases the profile of the community in Brick Lane', others deem the novel 'an insulting treatment' of the Brick Lane Bangladeshi neighbourhood; 'Roots of Literary Success', *The Guardian*, Saturday 6 December, 2003.
[42] Mathew Taylor, 'Brickbats fly…', p. 5.

stylistic features: 'The book says we got here by jumping ships and it says we have lice and live like rats in their holes.'[43]. *Brick Lane* is as much a book about a woman achieving self-independence as it is a sympathetic picture of a community, modelled on but in no way identical to the Bangladeshi Brick Lane neighbourhood.

The food references in the novel help give texture to the description of everyday life for a woman in a Bangladeshi area of East London. Food is a matter-of fact concern, not an exoticising strategy within the narrative. Brick Lane, the prime curry house location in London, is not fictionally territorialised in the novel primarily on the basis of this identity. Ali chooses to inscribe it as a site of violence, xenophobia and racism and present it through the eyes of a mother braving the riots in search of one of her daughters run away from home.[44] Alongside its domestic narrative line, the novel thus performs an act of public memory.

Conclusion

Gurnah's narrator's culinary references to his culture of origin are self-consciously tongue-in-cheek and mocking. Through his use of culinary imagery, Gurnah foregrounds stereotypical renderings of life in the colonies before independence, and questions their validity. Critical distance is apparent in *Admiring Silence*, but missing, for example, from *One Hundred Shades of White*: Preethi Nair rehearses reductive, exotic associations of Indian food, reproducing a 'mystical East' in a neo-orientalist fashion. Reducing the complexity of cross-cultural interactions to a schematic presentation does have value if there is evidence of critical distance on the part of the

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[43] Mathew Taylor, 'Brickbats fly…', p. 5.

[44] Monica Ali does remark on Brick Lane, however, in an interview for *The Observer* food magazine: 'I've sampled the famous curry houses on the real Brick Lane – some of the best food is astonishingly cheap. You'll see local families eating in self-service restaurants which are nothing to look at; it just shows you can't judge a good restaurant by appearances'; Charlotte Williamson, 'My Favourite Table: Monica Ali at Tandoori Nights', *The Observer Food Monthly*, August 2003, No. 29, p. 47.

narrator; if this is lacking, the use of stereotypical images brings about the negative reception of a work of fiction by literary establishments.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* stands out from the two previously discussed texts through inserting 'ethnic' culinary references into the texture of everyday life. Taking into account the vagaries of literary consumption, however, it must be pointed out that Ali's much-debated novel capitalises on a noticeable presence in the British cultural imaginary in culinary terms. Brick Lane is, as Ian Jack reminds the readers of *The Guardian*, in what is otherwise a somewhat defensive piece, not only a tourist attraction marked for its curry houses and the taste of multicultural London it provides, but also the 'high street for the Bengali community who live in the neighbourhood'.[45]

Ian Jack, one of the judges for *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists Awards, justifies *Granta's* preference for Ali's novel thus: Monica Ali 'had created interesting and believable people, and given us insight into their predicaments.'[46] What is intriguing is Jack's justification that Ali's writing about the Brick Lane community can't be disputed because the 'right to authorship can't depend on colour, class, gender or creed.'[47] The controversy surrrounding Ali's novel is built, however, not only on this 'right to authorship' but also on the market-oriented aspect of literary reception, on which Jack remains silent. Andrea Levy remarks, in an interview with Raekha Prasad, that 'the book world didn't know what to do with her' given that '[n]o one had been really successful as a black British writer writing about everyday things'[48] and William Sutcliffe extends this view beyond the colour barrier: 'A sure-fire way to get overlooked for every single literary prize is to explore a contemporary, domestic setting.'[49]

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[45] Ian Jack, 'It's Only a Novel', *The Guardian*, Saturday 20 December, 2003.

[46] Ian Jack, 'It's Only a Novel'. It would be interesting to find out what frame of reference Jack applies for 'believable', given that he admits none of the judges had direct experience of the Bengali community in East London.

[47] Ian Jack, 'It's Only a Novel'.

[48] Raekha Prasad, 'Two sides to every story', *The Guardian*, 4 March, 1999.

[49] Quoted from 'Christmas Books: Books of the Year', *The Independent (London)*, Saturday 3 December, 2000.

Consequently, it makes one wonder whether in Ali's case, her place in the literary limelight was not secured through combining a tale of the contemporary, domestic, everyday with a high-profile setting into which, it is further claimed in the literary press, the novel sheds new and valuable insight.

Conclusions

Having invested Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* with the role of first milestone in a journey whose purpose has been to identify the meanings of food references in fiction which thematizes cultural identity, it is only suitable that the concluding pages should return to a discussion of Rushdie's text. Tobias Wachinger sums up the ending of the novel thus:

> Two pages before Saleem Sinai's narrative ends with the narrator collapsing to 630 million particles, the job of pickling India is nearly done. Only one pickle jar still needs to be filled, while thirty of them, neatly lined up on a shelf above his desk, are ready for delivery:
>
> > One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth ... that they are, despite everything, acts of love.
>
> With this passage, full of hope and sentiment, Saleem strikes the final chord of his ramified narration which is highly charged with food imagery. In the end, as is made clear, the pickles which he has been jarring over 500 pages and which correspond, as he repeatedly emphasizes, to the chapters of his narrative, are for sale.[1]

The last jar of pickle in Saleem Sinai's case calls for narrative closure. Not so the conclusion of this thesis, which will not offer closure in the form of a definitive and categorical statement about what Britishness entails, given that narratives of Britishness are forever provisional and in the making.

Nevertheless, it has proved possible to plot a few of the coordinates on which the interrelating of self, taste and place occurs within contemporary British communities, both 'real' and imagined. 'Community', the first of these coordinates, is a controversial

[1] Tobias Wachinger, 'Spicy Pleasures. Postcolonial India's Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption', paper presented at the conference 'Food Representation in Literature, Film and the Other Arts', February 17-19, 2000, The University of Texas at San Antonio.

category in contemporary urban life and not an altogether useful one for capturing the specificity of life in urban settings, unless conceptualised as a relational construct inflected by the workings of power.[2] The closest approximation to the traditional meaning of community appears in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, in the shape of the regular group of customers at O'Connell's, together with, in the case of Archie, Samad and Abdul-Mickey, their immediate and extended families. The otherwise utopian vision of a harmoniously plural society is undermined in, for example, *Brick Lane*, in which scenes of consumption which draw on two different cultural traditions (I am referring in particular, to the dinner at Dr Azad's) widen the gap between the cultures and turn the practices of mainstream culture into an object of derision. If multicultural communities are to be (re)constituted through the partaking of a meal, these texts suggest, cultural taxonomies of the edible and the inedible must be renegotiated.

Alongside community, the concept of (culinary) authenticity also brings together self, taste and place and lies at the basis of the Anglo-centred discourse of life in contemporary Britain; a discourse with which multiculturalist versions of Britishness need critically to engage in order to define themselves. Current work in cultural geography promotes an understanding of culinary authenticity as a 'negotiated ascription which is used and inhabited by food providers and consumers in particular social times and spaces'.[3] Such definitions are based on an analysis of large-scale food retail systems in the UK, and whilst applicable to a reading of the way in which Sir Jack Pitman's theme park is constructed in *England, England*, as well as to the contextualisation of the takeaway menu in *Sour Sweet*, shed little light on, say, instances of food provision and consumption in *The Wild*, which pertain to an alternative lifestyle. It follows that insights from broad-focus studies of culinary circuits and imaginaries

[2] Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 100.
[3] Ian Cook, Philip Crang and Mark Thorpe, 'Eating Into Britishness: Multicultural Imaginaries and the Identity Politics of Food', in Sasha Roseneil and Julie Seymour (eds.), *Practising Identities: Power and Resistance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 223-248, quotation at 239.

need to be compared with localised knowledge based on interviews with consumers and in-depth analyses of eating in and eating out, if meaningful readings of the way Anglo-centredness is displayed or challenged through the use of culinary signifiers are to be performed.

As well as supporting cultural taxonomies or rendering them invalid, culinary references in novels enable the fictional (re)territorialization of urban sites as lived spaces. A large selection of contemporary fiction anchors the amblings of a multicultural cast of characters in the British metropolis, but whereas novels written immediately after the Second World War highlight within their ambit established icons of public urban memory,[4] fiction on the cusp of the third millennium inclines towards a careful consideration of places where history with a small 'h' is made, homes, small local cafés and other sites not open to (wide) public scrutiny. Foods and food practices play an important part here in giving substance to the everyday. At the same time, at least in the two novels discussed in Chapter 2, representations of sites of culinary consumption help re-affirm London's status as a multicultural metropolis.

Another purpose that food references fulfil is to enable a comprehensive articulation of the relationship between self and place, from the point of view of all age groups. Novels written by grown-ups for grown-ups, Julie Myerson remarks in relation to *The Wild*, rarely manage to capture the full complexity of children's understanding of the surrounding world.[5] The novels discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis appear to aim to redress that balance. While each of the novels positions its characters at a remove from mainstream English culture (although *The Wild* does not exploit hyphenated cultural identities), it must be remarked that ethnicity is subordinated to intergenerational differences in culinary consumption in the fictional accounts discussed here. Additionally, sweets appear to be a universal part of childhood (irrespective of

[4] Examples include Colin McInnes's *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959) or Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956).
[5] Julie Myerson chooses the novel for the 'Summer Reading Special' feature in *The Observer*, 2 July 2000.

cultural differences) and highly instrumental in the way children both literally map the space around them and negotiate their positions within that space.

By virtue of their openness and their multi-voiced nature, novels testify with particular acuity to the conditions under which identities, both of people and of places, take shape. Uniquely flexible structures, narratives are able to simultaneously accommodate unitary, coherent expressions of identity, as well as fluid and indeterminate ones.

Cream teas in *England, England*, Abdul-Mickey's creative variations on the eggs, beans and chips theme in *White Teeth*, pancakes with golden syrup in *The Wild*, or the sweet-and-sour chips made by Mui in *Sour Sweet*, to take but a few suggestive examples discussed in this thesis, have a specific function within the economy of their respective narratives. They point towards the enactment of 'community' as a shared set of ideas through the partaking of a meal; they help articulate narratives of belonging which engage with tradition and authenticity; they offer a language for describing the private, everyday side of urban life; they show how children's understanding of space is orientated by their culinary experiences; and the exotic appeal of some such references parallels the increased public cachet of texts which recycle exotic imagery. All these confirm the complexity of culinary signifiers, and their ability to function as a language which can express nuanced cultural and sociohistorical meanings.

Exploring the role that representations of food have in the economy of the novels has demonstrated the diverse ways in which culinary signifiers in contemporary fiction help make legible the relations between the local, the national and the global in today's Britain, and I hope goes some way towards filling the gap created by the easy manner in which food, as a fundamental aspect of social life, has been overlooked in previous accounts of literary texts which articulate claims to entitlement and belonging along the lines of gender, ethnicity and age.

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