

This article was downloaded by: [University of Toronto Libraries]

On: 05 January 2013, At: 23:57

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Australian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjau20>

Living in Singapore, travelling to Hong Kong, remembering Australia: Intersections of food and place

Jean Duruz^a

^a Senior lecturer in cultural studies in the School of Communication, Information and New Media, University of South Australia

Version of record first published: 18 May 2009.

To cite this article: Jean Duruz (2006): Living in Singapore, travelling to Hong Kong, remembering Australia: Intersections of food and place, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 30:87, 101-115

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14443050609388054>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Living in Singapore, Travelling to Hong Kong, Remembering Australia: Intersections of Food and Place

Jean Duruz

Amarjit Singh Tanda felt a sense of belonging when his family became citizens in 1997. But he only felt Australian when he bought his first barbecue a year later ... 'We use it to cook chicken in an Indian style but sometimes we just put chops on the grill and have them with potatoes. We are shifting. We eat all different things, cereal even, heaven forbid. That's the Australian way'.¹

Feeling nostalgic or craving the taste of traditional Chinese food? Come walk down memory lane and take in the sights and smells of good old Chinatown ... Rediscover the simple pleasure of a hearty morning meal with a special breakfast featuring popular dishes like tim sum and Yakun's Famous Kaya Toast and Egg.²

This article focuses on food that moves. This movement, however, is viewed from a less usual vantage point than one that celebrates Australia's cultural and culinary diversity, which is frequently attributed to patterns of migration and settlement, and to cross-cultural encounters ('We are shifting. We eat all different things ... That's the Australian way'). The article also follows an alternative route to declarations of Australia as a site of 'world on a plate' cosmopolitanism, with its nuances of global travel, expanding markets and sophisticated consumer choices. Such meanings are embedded in Ghassan Hage's 'cosmo-multiculturalism', which, he claims, haunts the foodscapes of Australia's middle-class urban 'Anglo'-imaginaries.³ Instead of taking this direction, I want to move meanings of 'Australian' identity, together with practices of place-making through food, to a location beyond their own cultural mainstream. This location is one that, geographically speaking, is quite literally 'outside' Australia, positioned within the everyday of Singapore's food cultures: in home kitchens, hawker centres, markets, supermarkets, restaurants and ethnic neighbourhoods. Our destination is also 'outside', figuratively speaking; it is the imaginative landscapes of other people's belonging (*their* 'memory lane', *their* nostalgia for 'good old Chinatown') that render this 'Australianness' different and require its 'otherness' to be negotiated. By unsettling the meanings of 'Australian' — shifting these, sharpening their outlines against a contrasting culinary landscape — I hope to use these as cultural resources for 'thinking through' practices of identity-making, particularly their contradictory meanings.⁴

This analysis trawls a collection of narrative fragments — remembered moments of food shopping, cooking and eating in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia — from conversations with an Anglo-Celtic Australian woman who now calls Singapore 'home'. These reflections, in turn, are complemented by the accounts of food practices and memories of her Singaporean partner for whom Singapore is 'really' home.⁵ In examining the cultural content of these fragments,

the article aims, firstly, to think about food and memories together forming a medium of exchange between cultures. Secondly, the article decentres the western 'other' in cultural analyses and recasts, for both Singapore's and Australia's culinary cultures, questions of eating across borders and (to re-work Ien Ang's concept of 'together-in-difference') of eating together differently.⁶ Such questions include: How does the table provide a performance space for multiple identities, together with their differing histories and places of attachment? How are particular meanings of identity (shaped by food, tastes and memories) mobilised, discounted or 'traded' within rituals of sharing? And, for households balancing the comforts and discomforts of 'different' tables, is there a place for a 'productive' ambivalence?⁷ With these questions offering hints of useful directions for this article's analysis, we now leave Australia for Singapore. Here, our first thought is for breakfast.

The past is another breakfast

The story so far: Fiona McNair, Australian-born daughter of British immigrants, grew up in Adelaide, South Australia, during the 1950s and 1960s. She attended university during the 1970s and 1980s, leaving Australia in the early 1990s for a teaching position in Hong Kong. After four years in Hong Kong and prior to the handover in 1997, Fiona returned to Australia, but this time to Sydney, where she again secured a university teaching post. Having shipped substantial pieces of furniture from Hong Kong,⁸ Fiona then bought a house to suit — a spacious, older terrace in the 'bohemian' suburb of Balmain on the shores of Sydney Harbour.⁹ In less than two years, however, she had accepted a similar teaching post in Singapore. Fiona has now been living and working in Singapore for almost seven years.

Officially, Fiona is an expatriate, dependent on the renewal of her work contract as a condition of residency. As such, she is part of the 'colonial' Hong Kong diaspora — British, American, Canadian, Australian and other nationals, as well as Hong Kong citizens themselves, leaving Hong Kong to return to previous points of origin, or to take up positions in 'other' places, especially other parts of Asia. The usual baggage accompanying this journey is nostalgia for Hong Kong's so-called glory days.¹⁰ On the other hand, Fiona is also one of the 'new' expatriates in Singapore who, arriving from the 1970s onwards, perform as 'invited — sometimes merely tolerated — guests' in support of Singapore's education industries and other businesses, rather than as symbols of colonial rule.¹¹

Although Singapore is renowned for its ethnically diverse food cultures (promoted, for example, through food guides, tourist literature, cookbooks and a month-long annual food festival),¹² for the western traveller-settler, this diversity is not without its contradictory moments. While the lure of the 'exotic' should not be underestimated, neither should the significance of the loss of the familiar be minimised. This is especially the case in our narrative of place-making. This is especially the case in our narrative. As Fiona begins the process of making a home in Singapore, an Australian childhood of resolutely British breakfasts emerges, carefully preserved among her belongings. This is a childhood framed by her

mother's cooking on Sunday mornings in suburban Adelaide during the 1950s, and its remembered pleasures:

My ... fond memories of food in Australia, certainly surrounding my mum, is ... seasonal as well ... 'cos we had fruit trees wherever we lived, and so summer was also fresh fruit or stewed fruit for breakfast and there was always preserves and jam-making, and ... winters were, you know, the Sunday roast ... but [winter breakfasts were] porridge ... and ... on the weekend, ... eggs and bacon, and summer was much more fruits.

This seasonal breakfast menu, with its landscape of production, certainly appears very different from the 'familiar' of others — Singaporeans' nostalgia, for example, for the 'simple pleasure of a hearty morning ... breakfast' in Chinatown, with its opportunities to relish 'popular dishes like tim sum and Yakun's Famous Kaya Toast and Egg'.¹³ Instead, Fiona's breakfast memories are consistent with early- to mid-twentieth-century traditions of the productive backyard in Australia and a cuisine that is British-based, home-centred and 'filling'. This is a tradition that is reminiscent of kitchen gardens, allotments, farms and the countryside, and of men's manual work, and women's thrift and resourcefulness.¹⁴

On the other hand, we should remember that, for some of Singapore's residents at least, this breakfast menu is not an unfamiliar one. After all, this 'British' style of cooking and eating, intersecting with the increasing adoption of American convenience foods,¹⁵ was not the sole province of mid-century Australian kitchens. By then, it was also well established in Singapore. This was the result of advances in western mass-production, refrigeration technologies and international distribution. Cold Storage, originally a small grocery outlet in Singapore's Orchard Road, was opened in 1903 'by a group of merchants who saw the need for fresh, quality meat and dairy products'.¹⁶ By the late 1930s, however, Cold Storage had become a chain of supermarkets in Singapore and Malaya, selling tastes of 'home' and meanings of western cosmopolitanism to expatriate communities of 'European' origin:

As the only hygienic European-run store in Singapore and other major towns across Malaya, Cold Storage offered good frozen meat and a variety of products from Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the industrialised world. Never before had the European community in the tropics enjoyed such a range of familiar food products from home. For cheese alone, the customer was spoilt for choice: Dutch Edam, Italian Gorgonzola, Danish Roquefort, Swiss Gruyere, English and Australian Cheddar. Bottled sauces, pickles, jams, jellies, custards and confectionaries were of well-known English and Scottish proprietary brands. Wines came from France, tomatoes from Australia ... chocolates from Switzerland ... meat and butter from the farms of New Zealand ...¹⁷

While this dazzling array of sophisticated products might seem a long way from Fiona's homely Sunday breakfasts, the point is that such breakfasts not only travel in memories of a particular time and place of belonging but also travel literally with the movements of communities and goods. Later, in the 1970s, advice to American expatriates stationed in Singapore is underwritten with an almost forensic search for familiar foods. Despite celebrations of 'eating in Singapore' as a 'truly international experience', and despite promises of 'the new taste

experience' of 'local produce' and the sensual delights of market shopping,¹⁸ the guide book *Living in Singapore* continues:

Once a month you may discover your favorite ham and the next month it has disappeared ... air-flown dairy products — milk, cottage cheese, sour cream and yoghurt — are relatively expensive, and sometimes sour quickly. As an alternative, some families use powdered or canned whole milk for daily consumption ... [However,] Cold Storage Dairy Division produces Magnolia milk and ice-creams ... There is ... frozen lamb, beef and veal from Australia and New Zealand ... Excellent pork, chicken and eggs are produced locally.¹⁹

So it seems that, in Singapore, Fiona is not alone in her selection of nostalgic breakfast ingredients; these foods (porridge, eggs, bacon, stewed fruit, jam) touch chords of remembering for generations of 'Europeans' on the move — communities drawing on the emotional support of their culinary histories to bolster their efforts in re-located place-making. In fact, a recent cookbook, *Cooking for eXpats*, published in Singapore and compiled by a New Zealand chef now resident in Singapore, reproduces a breakfast description that, despite its American inflections, is not dissimilar to Fiona's own ritual 'fry-ups': 'Fried eggs may be served by themselves or as part of a meal', Paula Humphreys announces to the expatriate community; 'They go particularly well with grilled bacon, mushrooms, tomatoes, hash browns and sausages and hot buttered toast'.²⁰

There is, nevertheless, an irony to be noted here. While *Cooking for eXpats* might be assumed to be a manual of instruction with the aim of familiarising Singapore's international community with 'local' cuisines and cooking methods, the reverse is actually the case. As the book's subtitle, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Western-Style Cookery*, indicates, this is a book of not only cultural maintenance but also induction:

For many expats with busy professional and social lives, the opportunity to spend time in the kitchen may be limited. For these people — and I suspect it may be the majority of buyers — Paula's book will be an invaluable source of information and recipes for domestic staff, who, on a day-to-day basis provide meals for the family ... friends and guests.²¹

It seems, then, that cooking *for* 'expats' does not assume cooking *by* 'expats'. Instead, staff, whether 'locals' or guest workers, are educated in the preparation of food from other people's childhoods and other people's homelands, ensuring that, for these western others, a reassuring familiarity is maintained. In kitchens of these 'busy professionals', cooking for expatriates becomes, in no uncertain terms, an asymmetrical exercise in nostalgia. It references the attempts of mobile communities to put their rituals 'in place' and to direct the efforts of 'others' in service of this goal. At the same time, these place-making processes intersect with an increasing range of consumer choices and 'other' places in the global marketplace, which is itself an ever-expanding circuit of foods, memories and meanings. Instead of Ghassan Hage's binary of the nostalgic migrant versus the stylish cosmopolitan and their opposing culinary cultures,²² we find that, in the figure of the 'expat', both of these identities find a home and feed each other. In fact, nostalgia sustains this relationship: the longing for the familiar foods of 'home' from a location 'elsewhere' (in Singapore) intersects with longing for the

familiar 'exotic' tastes of a fashionable 'elsewhere' (beyond Singapore). Simultaneously, then, one can yearn for the comforts of the home-in-memory and those of home-in-imagination. And Cold Storage is always on hand for their provisioning.²³

It is important to stress, however, that the cosmopolitan eating that Cold Storage fosters is not confined to expatriates. According to the company's centenary publication, 'Over the years, [the Company of] Cold Storage Supermarkets ... [has] prided itself as an up-market specialist [in food retailing], serving the expatriate community and the more-educated, middle-income Singaporeans'.²⁴ As the expatriate table accommodates multiple meanings of identity, so does the table of Cold Storage's Singaporean customers.

Meanwhile, Fiona, an 'invited guest' in Singapore but lacking the services of a cook, has only the ghost of her mother in the kitchen to assist her as she re-creates, at home in Singapore, the ritual comforts of a winter breakfast. Certainly, histories of colonialism and globalisation ensure the ingredients are on hand. Nevertheless, for the 'practice of identity',²⁵ it is the imaginative re-location of these ingredients that provides their emotional sustenance:

I like [to do] ... fry-ups with egg and bacon and toast, you know, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms ... but it's only ever a weekend thing for me, like about ten or eleven o'clock ... In fact, you know, it's a family thing because we used to wake up late on Sundays in my family home and Mum would ... only [cook breakfast] on weekends ... So the Sunday and Saturday breakfasts were a big thing really. That still feels like comfort food to me.

Sundays with tim sum

In this kind of storytelling, it is obvious that comfort — its foods and its memories — has specific temporalities and geographies. In the late 1990s, Maureen Simpson, a Sydney food editor and cookbook writer for more than twenty-five years, compiled a list of iconic tastes of Australian childhood. When asking people to talk about their own 'comfort foods', Simpson notices that:

There is a pause, followed by a faraway look, and then everyone starts talking at once, nominating anything from crumbed lamb cutlets to peanut butter sandwiches to soft-boiled eggs and toast soldiers. Predictably ... [everyone mentions] soups, stews, home made pies and nursery puddings ... And ... [there is] a general consensus that 'you can't beat a good baked dinner'.²⁶

Nevertheless, as a late-twentieth-century nod towards Australian multiculturalism and its much-heralded diversity of culinary cultures,²⁷ Simpson quickly adds, 'for others, comfort food means rice, pasta, noodles, polenta ...'.²⁸ Here, 'others' are positioned in opposition to a culinary mainstream; the 'ethnic' traditions of European or Asian eating are to be distinguished from a dominant Anglo-Australian heritage of baking.²⁹ On the other hand, if we were to pose Simpson's question in Singapore, we would expect, obviously, reversals in comfort's political economy. Here, a 'different' remembering (prompted by that 'walk down memory lane' in Chinatown, for example) re-positions rice and noodles in the mainstream

of everyday practice and relegates Fiona's 'fond memories' to the domain of 'other'.

For this project of reversing the gaze, re-defining the 'mainstream' and remembering comfort differently, I want to place a second figure within Fiona's narrative of living and eating in Singapore. Fiona is in a lesbian relationship; her partner is Wong Li Lian. (Fiona and Li, while formally maintaining separate living spaces, spend much of the week with each other, in one or other of their respective apartments.) Born in Singapore in the early 1960s, Li remembers her childhood as a time when her maternal grandparents lived and worked in Chinatown, where her mother's father owned a tea shop. Meanwhile, Li, with both immediate and extended family, lived in a substantial bungalow with gardens in a leafy area outside the city centre. This Chinese-descended household included Li's paternal grandmother, originally from Indonesia, and Li's paternal grandfather, who was born in Malaya (now Malaysia).

Li's early memories are shaped both by the gastronomic possibilities for a middle-class Singaporean household and by the more working-class tastes of her mother's extended family in Chinatown. Assisted by maids, Li's paternal grandmother reigned as 'queen of the house', cooking a succession of meals that were 'rich in terms of taste [and] ... quality', while for Li's mother's family, 'lunch would be ... one whole fried fish and that's it'. In fact, as a child, Li was surrounded by diverse culinary traditions: her paternal grandmother, though not strictly Peranakan,³⁰ absorbed many of its influences, producing spicy dishes like *petai* ('smelly beans'); this same grandmother was also a resourceful gatherer of wild fruits like guava, rambutan and mangoes, which grew on common land behind their bungalow; one of Li's aunts was Vietnamese, and renowned for her slow-cooked soup of fresh tomatoes, beef brisket and stewed flat noodles; another aunt was from Hong Kong, and her presence added a variety of pork dishes to the family's table. At the same time, Li says, 'I used to love going to my grandmother's house [in Chinatown]', where the food was 'very, very local' and 'very, very simple'.

When asked to reflect on the comfort foods of a Singaporean childhood, Li narrates two stories. There is a story for each of her grandmothers, in which each of these women is positioned in her cultural milieu — the intersecting meanings of class, ethnicity, food and memory that each grandmother represents. Reflecting on these narrative fragments, I want to speculate on their nuances. Together these suggest a play of identity meanings — sometimes held in tension — that Li negotiates in her own cooking and eating, and which she brings to rituals of sharing of food at the table. The first story is embedded in the material comforts of a middle-class childhood in which Sunday mornings were spent on outings to restaurants to eat *tim sum*:

Tim sum, for me, has always been, and still is, almost comfort food ... because occasionally I have this craving for some ... my dad's side of the family aren't poor, so ... my grandmother [would take me] ... every Sunday we'd go off some place, she and I, and there always used to be this restaurant called Tropicana — used to be a nightclub at night ... with popular shows, but the daytime on Sunday mornings, it's a *tim sum* restaurant, with ... people pushing trolleys ... and there's always this remnant cigarette-stale smell ... And then there's this high, this bustle

... Every other Sunday we would go for brunch and since then ... Sunday mornings [having] *tim sum* [are] extra special.

On these Sundays with her grandmother, Li might have eaten *fung jao*, *loh mai kai* and *sui mai* (chicken feet, glutinous rice parcels and pork dumplings), examples of those ‘lightly steamed ... delicacies’ of Cantonese origin that constitute *tim sum*, and which are ‘often consumed as a snack or part of a main meal’.³¹ In fact, the act of going out for *tim sum* itself has a long history. Sidney Cheung, tracing the development and decline of Hong Kong tea houses, describes the act of breakfasting there on *tim sum* as a form of ritualised sociality for working men, especially for refugees from China during the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1990s, however, the delicate tastes of *tim sum* had moved from tea houses to restaurants, and the basis of participation transformed: ‘*Yum cha* has changed from being a venue for men to socialize in the old days, to a gathering place for the entire family today’.³² Although Cheung focuses specifically on Hong Kong, his description of *yum cha* restaurants (which, he says, often serve dual functions, and are ‘called “restaurant and night club”’) is evocative of Li’s account of Singapore Sundays at the Tropicana.³³ (And again, Cheung’s restaurants sound uncannily like those Australian suburban foodscapes that Hong Kong-Chinese migrants, through the rituals of *yum cha*, claim and transform as culinary territory.)³⁴

For the child of the 1960s Singapore bungalow, with its extended family, household staff, ‘rich food’ and ample interior and garden spaces, however, going out for *tim sum* appears to represent more than the excitement of a weekend outing with an indulgent relative. While the *tim sum* restaurant appears to have been democratised — its classed and gendered rules of patronage reworked, so that it is now available, as Cheung says, as a ‘gathering place for the entire family’ — Li registers additional *frisson* in telling this story. The daytime *tim sum* restaurant of family meals echoes with its night-time alter ego; its lingering smells contain hints of the body’s edgy pleasures and of the mythical dangers attached to places declared unsuitable for small children. As well, the restaurant, through ‘this high, this bustle’, offers tastes of another life, one that is cosmopolitan, profoundly urban and digested in the company of strangers, as well as with family and friends. Pleasure, contradictorily spiced with imagined dangers, produces nostalgia: Li casts herself as infant *flâneur*, momentarily transfixed by ‘another’ way of life. The comforts of *tim sum* are precisely that one can savour the moment, with one’s own family gathered in ritual respectability, while following the scents of the ‘others’ as well.

Turning now to Li’s other grandmother, we find that Li’s story for her is deeply rooted in the sensory landscapes of Chinatown. Li remembers that, when making family visits, she loved eating ‘this really cheap soup’ that her grandmother made from chicken bones, noodles and spinach, or eating *hokkien mee* soup, its minced prawn, chopped pork and rice noodles having been simmered in a pork-based broth. She also recalls the minutiae of daily life in Chinatown and her own absorption in this, such as watching her grandmother drop a basket from the window to purchase noodles from a hawker in the street below. Thinking about these as comforting memories, Li continues:

Funnily enough, [most of] my comfort food comes from my mother’s side of the family because it used to be an experience to go and visit my grandmother who

lives in Chinatown. We live in a house ... she lives in this walk-up ... [with] dingy stairs ..., and downstairs, early in the mornings at four, you wake up ... and hear all these people still wearing these wooden clogs ... you hear them go *click, click, click* and then you hear all these stalls ... [being] set up downstairs where I used to just look out the window and watch life come up, you know ... And it's funny, 'cos my cousin actually said to me ... 'You used to come over to my house ... when you were young ... [and] I used to be fascinated by you because you would never sleep — you would sleep holding on to the banister with your head sticking out the window 'cos you didn't want to miss [anything]'.

Initially, this story appears similar to those memoirs of childhood in which life is felt intensely — a reminder, perhaps, of Ann Game's 'meaning embodied' as a conceptual tool of analysis. These accounts share with Li's the 'experience' of particular spaces; belonging enacted through eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin, its transcendent moments practically defying language ('I used to just look out the window and watch life come up').³⁵ Certainly, others' memories of Chinatown, especially when set against a backdrop of earlier, more difficult times — times of political conflict and economic hardship — will be darker than Li's account.³⁶ Si Jing, for example, was born in 1934 to a family originally from Guangdong Province. She recalls a childhood of poverty and hunger in Singapore's Chinatown towards the end of the Japanese occupation (1942–1945). Nevertheless, Si Jing also takes pleasure in her Chinatown of the senses, especially her poignant memories of its foodscapes and streetlife:

On evenings towards the end of the war, when the sun set and dusk arrived, the busy streets of Chinatown would be filled with the aroma of grilled cuttlefish ... The cuttlefish would be placed over a charcoal stove and grilled until slightly burnt, its scent permeating every corner of the street. Customers ... ate it while it was still piping hot, savouring the taste.³⁷

Are these, then, the 'sights and smells of good old Chinatown' that the Singapore Food Festival celebrates? Is this the Chinatown that simply requires a 'walk down memory lane' for its re-discovery? If so, it seems that either Si Jing or Li would serve as 'authentic' figures for such a project. Both constitute figures of Chinatown-lived-in-memory for Singaporeans as tourists of their own collective 'past', together with tourists from elsewhere, to celebrate. In spite of obvious differences — in age, class and ethnic background, and in their childhoods' historical-political contexts — both women retain, at least in memory, significant traces of their culinary geographies, such as the taste of a simple soup, the sight of noodles being hauled in a basket up to the window, the smell of cuttlefish cooked on charcoal stoves. These 'comfort' foods, and the 'comfort' stories in which they have become embedded, in turn suggest forms of 'productive nostalgia' that allow the *practice* of belonging over time and across space.³⁸ As Ghassan Hage reminds us, these acts of remembering and meaning-making contain positive intimations of 'home' that contribute to effective identity re-settlement in the present.³⁹

Li's second story, however, to some extent refuses an analysis that focuses exclusively on the sensuous intensity of childhood remembering or one that frames Li as engaging 'other' for the tourist gaze. Li herself disturbs the figure of 'authentic' eater in Chinatown by reversing the gaze to become a tourist on her own history and family members — their everyday rituals, the domestic fabric of

their environment, the life of the street beyond the window and protective banister. As with the *tim sum* restaurant, Chinatown offers Li tastes both of the familiar and the exotic: the identities invested in the iconic comforts of 'really cheap soup', eaten within the security of the extended family, are constantly challenged by identities that thrive on the touristic opportunities to gaze on the 'others' outside.

Nevertheless, the identity of these 'others' needs clarification. Clearly the binary of the western 'self' versus the non-western 'other' is of little analytic use at this moment (other than to prompt questions in regard to its own western-centrism).⁴⁰ Likewise, the opposite, with the west positioned as 'culturally desired other'⁴¹ (a binary that Chua Beng Huat complains lies at the heart of 'a larger public discourse of contestation between so-called "Asian" and "Western" values')⁴² is inappropriate here. Instead, a range of complicated negotiations renders these oppositions of 'Asian' and 'Western' problematic. In Li's stories of her grandmothers, there are far more subtle shades of difference to negotiate: the movements between urban and suburban; the contrasts between memories of life in the bungalow, with its maids, and memories of the material constraints of the 'walk-up', with its 'dingy stairs'; the grandmother who takes her granddaughter to a restaurant for *tim sum* while the other grandmother works in the tea shop; the complex tastes of a Chinese-Malaysian/Indonesian culinary heritage versus the 'local' simplicity of 'a whole fish and that's it'. Together, these fragments suggest multiple (sometimes contradictory) calibrations of 'self' and 'others', transcending binaries that presuppose 'the west' as their *raison d'être*. Here, Fiona's memories of winter breakfasts, their culinary references shaped both by a colonial heritage and the expatriate experience, do not merit even a ghostly presence.⁴³ Instead, Li the 'insider' tourist savours moments of nostalgic familiarity, refracted with its opposite, nostalgic difference, and she returns to landscapes of her own remembering and to those 'fascinating others' closer to home. As the expatriate in Singapore mobilises different forms of nostalgia (for the 'familiar' foods of 'home' for the 'familiar-exotic' cosmopolitan lifestyle) to satisfy complex identity needs, through the vehicle of class positioning, intersecting with other ensembles of identity meaning (such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality), Li manages the complexities of this positioning. Needless to say, however, such identity management requires reckoning with its contradictory moments (such as sexuality's implicit questioning of conventional households and relationships, and times when the 'others' are, indeed, at 'home').

Exquisite flavours and rich French food

I now want to bring together these stories of moveable food and mobile identity meanings within the intimate spaces of a domestic relationship. Aligning Fiona and Li's accounts of childhood's culinary cultures, we might judge these, together, as a clear-cut assertion of cultural difference: an Anglo-Australian, as a 'tolerated' guest in a 'foreign' environment, is nostalgic for the tastes of 'home', while her partner, an 'authentic' Singaporean, has only to re-visit a *tim sum* restaurant or the narrow streets of Singapore's Chinatown to confirm her edible rights (rites) of belonging. Certainly, this seems a reasonable summary of narrative fragments to date, even if, as Li remembers landscapes that have a lingering physicality in her

everyday life, we should allow for her sense of 'lost places'.⁴⁴ Such losses might be mapped in the selective gentrification of Singapore's built environment, and the re-invention of 'Chinatown', both as a homogenised performance space for 'public' memory and as a significant tourist commodity.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, I wish to complicate this seemingly straightforward analysis by reflecting on some unexpected twists in these women's narratives. These provide ways to examine what I've chosen to call 'productive discomfort': a useful unsettling of taken-for-granted assumptions of how we live and eat, and with whom. In other words, I'm interested in the potential for culinary exchanges between 'different' people sitting at the same table, with all the ambivalence that this might entail. At the same time, I want to stress that this is a 'different' table from the one that simply parades a plethora of 'other' foods to satisfy cosmopolitan tastes. It is also, in Khoo Gaik Cheng's words, 'truly cosmopolitan' in the sense of 'transethnic interaction of a deeper level — where people of diverse backgrounds are sitting at the same table [for example, at hawker stands or restaurants] talking and sharing food rather than at different tables with their own families'.⁴⁶

The first of these narrative disruptions concerns semiotic traces of 'plain' in Fiona's culinary remembering. 'Plain' appears as the signature from a previous site of expatriate living; it is a 'borrowed' foodway that, over time, becomes normalised and claimed as one's own.⁴⁷ Specifically, this 'plain' refers to the textures and flavours of Cantonese food, to which Fiona had grown accustomed while living in Hong Kong. Although she takes pleasure in Singapore's 'hot, spicy food and the laksas ... [and] everything', Fiona states her preferences unequivocally:

In Hong Kong ... [there's] much more Cantonese food — [it's] plain, but ... [has] exquisite taste, delicate taste ... Actually, Singaporeans generally find it too plain ... [It has] subtle flavours and I love it ... When I went back to Sydney [after my years in Hong Kong] what I missed was the food. Even though in Sydney, they do have lovely Asian food, it's not quite the same ... So, I missed the food a lot.

To compensate for this missing 'taste', when in Sydney, Fiona eats pasta, because this reminds her of noodles and of the 'lightness' of Cantonese cuisine.⁴⁸

So, while living in Singapore, Fiona turns not only to childhood memories of those winter breakfasts but also to her 'other' home in Hong Kong. Memories produce a catalogue of tastes ('exquisite', 'delicate', 'plain', 'subtle', 'light'), their wistful recitation hardly surprising. This form of nostalgic remembering seems not inconsistent with current patterns of movement around the globe (through diaspora, migration, business or tourist travel) and, with this movement, the formation of transnational identities.⁴⁹ Logically, it would follow that such identities would be shaped by multiple 'homes' and the situated longings these 'homes' might engender.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the twist to Fiona's story lies in some less expected meanings of 'plain' that would benefit from brief excavation here.

During an extended visit to Singapore of my own, I found I was repeatedly asked by local people, 'Do you like spicy food?' Again and again, it was necessary to reassure my hosts (whether they were actually cooking for me or accompanying me to a hawkers' centre) that the taste of chilli, especially for an urban Australian accustomed to south-east Asian food,⁵¹ was not an unfamiliar one. With

assumptions that 'Europeans' (especially ones of British decent) need the spices and flavourings in their food 'dumbed down' to reproduce the traditional blandness of English industrial cooking,⁵² it would not be surprising if Fiona's preference for 'plain' was misrecognised as an aversion to the taste of chilli or to other typical tastes of Singaporean cooking, such as the subtle resonances of cardamom, coriander, galangal, coconut milk, kaffir lime leaf, lemon grass and palm sugar.⁵³ This withdrawal from 'spicy' to 'plain' is echoed in Paula Humphrey's advice to expatriates, as she warns readers that her curry sauce (with its modest amounts of spices) is hardly a 'traditional' one but is 'one that suits family style cooking'.⁵⁴ (For 'family style' here, we should substitute, perhaps, the mythic 'British' and 'bland' — a cuisine judged suitable for infants, invalids and the elderly — despite the reality of current culinary preferences.)⁵⁵ Fiona's 'plain', however, inscribes a different culinary imaginary entirely.

Interestingly, the discourse of 'plain' returns Fiona not only to the 'lightness' of food in Hong Kong but also to those hearty Adelaide breakfasts and, somewhat surprisingly, to an acknowledgement of her mother's health-consciousness ('I remember my mum was quite forward-thinking because she was very careful about draining everything [of fat] and grilling bacon'). Meanings of 'plain' also prompt Fiona's memories of eating pasta in Sydney, as she accesses, intuitively perhaps, the legend of the west's historic substitute for noodles.⁵⁶ These trajectories of 'plain' are obviously much more complicated than arguments of lingering traces of British colonialism, or those of 'western' culinary conservatism, might suggest. 'Plain' hints at resourceful semantic connections between 'home' and 'other' places ('other homes', even unexpected ones), creative substitutions for remembered pleasures, necessary accommodations in the face of absent tastes. 'Plain' becomes one of memory's 'ways of operating'⁵⁷ to reduce the discomfort of place-making 'elsewhere'.

Meals for Fiona are seldom solitary occasions, however. In contrast to Fiona's cherishing the 'plain' and the 'subtle' in food, Li's culinary preferences are haunted by meanings of 'richness'. As well as recalling 'richness', both in taste and quality, in the food served in her grandparents' bungalow, Li refers to 'richness' as a characteristic of cosmopolitan (particularly western) eating practices. Working with an English boss, with clients from America, South Africa, Australian and Britain, and travelling frequently to America and Tokyo, Li has developed the skills and tastes required for her position as lawyer in an international information technology organisation. Since polished performances of corporate entertaining are required for professional acculturation, Li says, she has 'learnt to drink [wine]' and has had to develop a taste for 'European' cooking and food products ('cheese, rich French food'). Furthermore, as an adventurous cook, Li claims she 'will try [to cook] anything — Italian pastas ... very rich food'; at the same time, she relishes eating out and 'trying out new restaurants'. Curiously, in Li's assessment, Fiona seems to have 'become very Asian' and is 'very game to try [local] things'; Li herself is perhaps transmogrified from the 'authentic' consumer of Chinatown and *tim sum* restaurants into one of Cold Storage's 'more-educated, middle-income Singaporeans' who trawl supermarket shelves and restaurant menus to satisfy their cosmopolitan 'tastes'.

Culinary exchanges, however, are not so simple. I have already hinted at some of the ambivalences of Fiona's position (in Sydney, Fiona misses Hong Kong; in Singapore, she misses Hong Kong; in Singapore too, as we'll see shortly, she misses Sydney). Likewise, to cast Li simply as a western-style cosmopolitan in search of 'rich' food would create some difficulties for this argument. It would not only erase the history of the child watching Chinatown from the window but would also assume that the figure of the 'westerner' and 'cosmopolitan' are one and the same. In the first place, as reassurance for those ghosts of her 'past', Li claims that her preference will always be for 'Chinese food' and the simple soup of her childhood; in the second, it should be remembered that the postmodern 'global soul' described by Iyer⁵⁸ (the nomadic, cultural, or corporate finance worker, positioned in networks of electronic interaction and having access to a *mélange* of consumer possibilities) is not necessarily from 'the west'. Ilsa Sharp, for example, points to changing membership of Singapore's mobile 'expat' community:

In the postmodernist expat world, Western expats are no longer 'king'. Japanese, Indian, Chinese or other expats may be as sought after as the Americans, British or Germans. Singaporeans now have the novel experience of interacting with fellow Asians as expats.⁵⁹

Sharp concludes, however, that increasingly, as Singaporeans and 'expats' alike aspire to global citizenship (and presumably to the cosmopolitan identities implicated in this), the danger is that both groups will become rootless, and 'non-attached ... to each other and to Singapore'.⁶⁰ In Li's storytelling, on the other hand, there is no evidence of lack of attachment; instead, there is a capacity to 'manage' her different culinary identities, and to mobilise these as required. A more obvious argument here might be that the global cosmopolitanism of many tastes (and one in which 'western' food is not necessarily hegemonic)⁶¹ should not be seen as set apart from everyday, embedded histories of cooking, tasting, smelling and eating. Rather, it is the case that these circuits of meaning intersect with each other, however ambivalent their relationship.⁶² Furthermore, as Tomlinson argues in his discussion of cosmopolitanism's potential for productive border crossings, such a conception of global and local belonging promises a useful political basis for engagement with 'other' cultures:

The transformation of our localities into 'glocalities' ... holds the promise of vital aspects of the cosmopolitan disposition: The awareness of the wider world as significant for us in our locality, the sense of connection with other cultures and even, perhaps, an increasing openness to cultural difference.⁶³

However, despite Tomlinson's optimistic predictions, the juggling of 'attachments' — of local tastes, global sensibilities and their intersections — as part of identity's project is not an easy task. In Li's story, which meanings of 'rich' and 'simple' are to be brought to the table? In Fiona's, which meanings of 'spicy' and 'plain'? And how, among the different dishes served at the same meal, are competing tastes, needs and identity meanings to be negotiated?

Eating at the table

Within relationships of empathy and reciprocity — ones shaped not only by dimensions of difference, such as ethnicity or geography, but also by dimensions of sameness, such as class, gender or sexuality — it would seem that there are ample opportunities to taste familiar foods, and unusual ones as well. Furthermore, such relations lend themselves to amiable trading of culturally specific meanings for ‘comfort’ and pleasure, embodied in the detail of connecting yet divergent histories. So, for critics of cultural cannibalism and food adventurism — or of appropriating ‘other’ cultures via a quick trawl of the supermarket shelves — the everyday culinary exchanges of two women sharing their domestic lives and eating at the same table are, perhaps, not so problematic.⁶⁴ Instead of the impossibility of intercultural interactivity (the problem, described by Hage as positioning migrant communities *in absentia*, their food products cut loose from circuits of memory, migration, travel and sensory place-making),⁶⁵ difference has an active presence at the table, its cultural relations laid bare with each mouthful. Exchanges become moments of negotiation between identity investments — a balancing act of give and take. For example, as Fiona regrets some loss of ritual in her Sunday breakfasts, the following conversation with Li takes place:

Fiona: [I also like going for] *tim sum* ... but I probably don't like to go as often as you go, as you, sort of, wake up more to go ... [laughter].

Li [with a dog-like, appealing look]: Sunday mornings! Sunday mornings! *Tim sum*? [laughter] ... Here's our compromise. Saturdays we have your fry-ups and then Sundays we have my *tim sum* [laughter].

The result of these negotiations appears an agreeable solution to the problem of Fiona and Li's competing needs for ‘comfort’ food. The significance of different cultural practices is acknowledged, and (with some reworking) both women's rituals can to be maintained. For Fiona, however, the contradiction of wanting *her* Sunday breakfasts at ‘home’ in Singapore is not so easily resolved. Despite *tim sum*'s morsels being Cantonese in origin (delicately flavoured, they would appear to support Fiona's attachment to ‘plain’), the rituals of their serving and their settings cannot replace practices and places of belonging that Fiona associates with remembered Australian Sundays. Interestingly, though, at this moment of amiable compromise, Fiona's breakfast memories are culled, not from an Adelaide childhood, but from her more recent time of living in Sydney:

I miss [having] brunch ... [being part of] café culture ... It's not as good [here] ... [There's not] the atmosphere ... newspapers ... dogs. I miss those lovely coffee places. ... [Here] we arrange to meet people at Samy's ... but I can't get used to curry in the mornings, even though I love the feeling of [the place] ... the old colonial [ambiance].

Seated on the shaded verandahs of Samy's Curry Restaurant in the Singapore Civil Servants Clubhouse on a Sunday morning, having breakfast with friends from the local lesbian community,⁶⁶ Fiona is intrigued by the novelty of ‘richness’ and romantic associations of this setting, no doubt, but not necessarily satisfied. Feelings of discomfort surface as a reminder that she is, after all, from ‘elsewhere’. The ‘exotic’ of Samy's is no replacement for the simultaneously

'stylish' and 'daggy-bohemian' suburbanness of an Australian Sunday in Balmain, with its 'good' coffee, newspapers, people and dogs. Certainly, it must be admitted that Fiona's 'lovely coffee places' in Sydney, with their fashionable offerings of home-made muesli and yoghurt, or hot ricotta cakes and honey, are distinctly bourgeois; their emphasis on 'good' coffee and pavement tables are a nostalgic reference to European café cultures.⁶⁷ At the same time, however, these 'places' display, as symptomatic of 'Australian style', a different set of nostalgic meanings: the tastes of a backyard Anglo-Australia of fifty years earlier, a culinary 'past' with Fiona's cooked breakfasts of 'egg and bacon and toast, you know, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms' at its heart.⁶⁸ Here, we are reminded that Fiona herself performs as a migrant, nostalgic from 'elsewhere' for a 'past' Australia, fixed in childhood memories (or for its café re-invention), rather than for the 'multiculinary' Australia of the 'present'.

This article began with a 'new' citizen's declaration of Australianness: 'We eat all different things ... That's the Australian way.' Having avoided discussing Australian identity as a celebrated, eat-almost-anything cosmopolitanism, the argument has moved full circle to address the challenges of finding a 'place' in Appadurai's 'shifting worlds in which we live'.⁶⁹ Like Ang's cultural project of 'togetherness-in-difference', which is grounded in meanings of hybridity that are 'not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about friction and tension',⁷⁰ 'eating together differently' for this article has become a recognition of the (here, mildly) disruptive politics of exchange — of food, of histories, of memories — at the table of global-local belonging. Although the stories told here are refracted with the pleasures of 'stylish' and classed consumerism and the satisfactions of touring difference, these pleasures alone would not amount to a comprehensive menu of culinary citizenship. Instead, embodied memories of different times, places, relationships, positionings and exigencies appear on the table as dishes to be tasted, shared, exchanged — or mourned, perhaps, in their absence.

Meanwhile, it is not only the presence of 'other' food but also of 'others' themselves at the table that has a mildly destabilising effect: an ambivalence that, assuming good-will and reciprocity, might serve productive ends.⁷¹ This ambivalence continually reminds one of where one is, and where one is not, and whom one is with and without, and the tricky business of negotiating very different and yet, in some ways, similar accounts of eating and remembering. In Li and Fiona's stories, for example, shared/similar positionings within relations of class, gender and sexuality might address, in part, the ambiguities and discomforts of their 'different' ethnicities, personal histories and geographies. Just as nostalgic remembering requires the constant effort of juggling of pleasure, pain, discomfort, denial and self-reflection, ambivalence also becomes a dynamic process, as it trades in contradictory meanings and identities. In other words, we should not simply celebrate this 'different' table; instead, we should examine its ambivalent economies of comfort and discomfort, as well as the effort, imagination and will needed to make it *work*. Of course, as Ang reminds us, such negotiations of identity differences are 'never power-free, but ... they have to be ... engaged with somehow'.⁷²

Finally, in talking of power, our viewing Australian food from Singapore has disturbed the tastes of, and meanings of, what is conventionally thought to be

'Australian'. Despite being Australian, with the heritage of a colonial-settler society, Fiona might appear 'more Asian', as she gradually accumulates expertise in 'exquisite' and 'local' tastes. This 'more Asian' identity, of course, contrasts with the mythical figure of the 'western expat', who appears almost remedial in her need to be reassured and re-taught the 'bland' recipes of her cultural roots. Li, in her turn, might reflect shifts in the outlines of the Singaporean, from the previously colonised to the 'new' cosmopolitan, as gastronomically 'at home' in the 'west' as in the 'east', and as participant in global Singapore's 'new urban order'.⁷³ However, I want to take this argument further than simply suggesting identity reversals or positions exchanged. As Fiona negotiates her identity as 'Australian-in-Asia', and Li hers as 'Asian cosmopolitan', they manage their own many-stranded, sometimes competing identity meanings, as well as negotiating with the continuities and contradictions of each other's identities.⁷⁴ Together, they not only represent the complex identity-making practices required of an 'other' relationship vested in 'different' sexualities and ethnicities but also those practices required to produce a creative 'other' relationship in gastronomic terms.

In other words, in this analysis, we are less concerned with the spectre of Hage's rapacious cosmopolitan and its appropriated 'other', or solely with the yearning associated with the exigencies of home-making 'elsewhere', and more concerned with the disruptive effects when 'different' accumulated histories, identities and place-attachments meet. This analysis engages with identities that are mobilised, comforts that are traded, and tensions and convergences of 'rich' and 'plain'. Within cultures of reciprocity, the task of balancing comforts and discomforts of 'eating together differently' becomes a politically resonant practice for the table.

Recipe: Fried Egg

2 tsp oil
1 egg

You may use butter, oil or lard to fry an egg. Heat the fat in a frying pan. Carefully break the egg into a pan. Use a controlled low heat to cook the egg. Turn the egg over and cook on the other side.

Paula Humphreys, *Cooking for eXpats: A Step-by-Step Guide to Western-Style Cookery*, Flame of the Forest Publishing, Singapore, 2003, p 68.

How to eat dim sum [tim sum]

You sit at old, chipped marble-topped tables and some places still use the push cart steamers that are brought right to your table.

Choose from *siu mai* (minced-pork dumplings); *har kow* (prawn dumplings); *fong zha* (braised chicken feet) ... ; *pai quat* (steamed pork ribs, usually with salted black beans); and a multitude of other steamed and pork delicacies.