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### The Spice of Life: Migrating Foods and the Sensual Experience of Diasporic Culture.

When your body moves into a different cultural environment (from Bristol to Beijing, for instance, or from Hyderabad to London) its sensual environment is altered. You are faced with new sights, smells, tastes, sounds and forms of contact. On the one hand your senses are awakened as you experience new sensations; on the other hand anxiety often accompanies new physical and cultural experiences (am I doing this correctly? what am I eating?). Over time our bodies attune themselves to new sensual worlds: habit and routine are the signs of successful accommodation to new practices and sensations (all habits and routines were at one time strange and unfamiliar). At the same time, though, when we migrate we bring with us a sensual world that is already fashioned: not just memories of sights and sounds, but also a repertoire of material practices that orchestrate sensual experiences.

Food culture is probably the arena where such conflicting experiences are most vividly and viscerally played out; where the body's ability to be *retuned* is most successfully demonstrated; and where practical adaptations (by the migrating culture and by the receiving culture) are most readily accessible. For migrating culture and the resulting diasporas, food practices are animated by countervailing forces: the necessity of adapting to different contexts; the need to retain the sensual memory of another place, another time. For the migrating culture and for the receiving culture, new cuisines signal new possibilities (sensual and economic). To study migration and diaspora through food culture will necessarily mean exploring new approaches and methods of analysis which will result in new theories on migration, diaspora and identity.

### Research Questions or Problems

The research questions that are at the centre of this project are:

- How can we attend to diasporic food cultures as sensual practices that generate both emotions (nostalgia, for instance) and affects (joy and disgust, for instance), and can't be reduced to ideational material?
- As bodies attune themselves to new tastes and smells (or fail to do so) is there anything that this process can tell us about more general forms of cultural exchange? Is there a sensual or aesthetic politics to be found in the example of food experience (an 'edible complex', for instance)?

Put more directly, the project asks how we can imaginatively explore migration and diaspora by 'thinking with the gut' (see Probyn, 2000) and how such a perspective might enliven and re-animate our political attitudes about migration and diasporas?

### Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project is theoretical and methodological; it doesn't aim to be an extensive analysis of empirical materials. As such it is conscious of the role of the 'small grant scheme' to stimulate new forms of research on diasporas, migration and identities. The objective is to lay the foundations for a theoretical method for studying migrational culture as a sensual realm that generates affects for both the migrating culture and the receiving culture.

The aim of this project is also to connect with a number of other research groups in Canada and Australia and to set up new circuits for exchange and research collaboration around the senses and diasporic culture. The objective is to arrange and take part in three workshops in Australia (two) and Canada (one), and to use these to foster future international collaborations based around comparative forms of research around migration and diaspora as sensual culture.

### Research Context

In the last ten years there has been a spate of books relating to food culture. In the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies many of these books (for example B. Ashley, J. Hollows, S. Jones and B. Taylor, *Food and Cultural Studies*, 2004) treat food practices as providing representational material that can be used to reveal social and cultural ideologies. In the process an approach that would attend to them as sensual and embodied material practices is underemphasized. Work that is concerned with food as sensual practice includes: E. Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, 2000; C. Nadia Seremetakis, ed. *The Senses Still*; and L. Giard 'Doing Cooking' in de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2*, 1998. While this work hasn't explicitly addressed migration and diaspora as a central focus, it has been concerned with food as part of an embodied experience of social and cultural change within modernity. The intention is to build on this work; directing it towards the vital and vitalising realm of migrating and diasporic food practices and developing an approach to food that treats it as part of the social aesthetic realm.

### Research Methods

The research methods for the project revolve around 'theory building', using limited empirical research (novels, films, and television programmes, as well as some secondary literature, as examples of ethnographic thick description) for material exemplification and for informing the theoretical work.

The project will initially build on Jacques Rancière's conceptualising of aesthetics as the 'distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*), that is, the order 'that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing modes of perception within which these are inscribed'. Rancière's notion of aesthetics is one that determines social, cultural and political forms because it determines what is perceivable, what can be experienced. The sensual realm then is not an alternative to the social and political but its foundation. This is crucial for thinking of forms of racism and cosmopolitanism that exist at the sensual level and that are energised by bodily affects (delight, shame, disgust, joy, etc.). This basis will allow me to

look again at the work of Probyn, Seremetakis and Giard so as to generate an approach to food practices as an aspect of social aesthetics.

Literary and media sources will also inform this 'theory building'. In fact some of the theoretical insights will come directly from these sources. For instance, in the TV comedy show *Little Britain* (BBC contemporary), the characters Judy and Maggie demonstrate (via exaggeration) the alimentary racism that can exist beneath the guise of liberal politeness ('other' cultures make them physically sick). And the comedy sketch 'going for an English' (*Goodness Gracious Me*, BBC 1998) demonstrate the non-symmetry of thinking through the taste experiences of diasporic food culture in relation to so-called indigenous British food culture. Other material that will be used to both test and fashion an approach to the sensual culture of diasporic food will include: Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, 2003, and; *Bhaji on the Beach*, dir. Gurinder Chadha, 1992.