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Opinion

Everyday Militarisms in the Kitchen: Tasting History

Artist, scholar and extreme baker Lindsay Kelley explores the complex relational ontologies we ingest every day.

Southbank international food market, London. Photo by Clem Onojeghuo, via Unsplash.

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Taste and eating are far from one-dimensional subjective experiences. Food and how it tastes can convey political context, reflect culture, social politics, identity, globalisation, colonialism, sexism or violence, and even function as a mode of propaganda. Ethnographer and philosopher Annemarie Mol challenges ontological politics and questions the boundaries between foods and bodies and the assumption that "thinking and eating should be kept apart".¹ She asks, for example, what it means to eat an apple, finding that "because of the political history of Chile and its reception in the Netherlands,

...Granny Smith apples came to taste of violence". An apple that tastes of violence connects international politics, national identity, and sensory encounter, creating new knowledge through otherwise disparate connections.

Enemy Kitchen, 2003, by Michael Rakowitz. Image courtesy of the MCA Chicago.

Tasting politics and culture across the arts and philosophy

Iraqi-American artists Michael Rakowitz, for example, created *Enemy Kitchen* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/enemy-kitchen>) in 2003. The work appears to be a typical food truck, but is actually a participatory art event designed to involve American eaters in Iraqi cuisine. He started with a cooking workshop format where groups of people made the Iraqi recipes he inherited from his family. The food truck iteration extends his ongoing engagement with Iraqi cuisine by hiring sous-chefs and servers from Iraq Veterans Against the War and the Iraqi Mutual Aid Society. The paper plates were printed with replicas of Saddam Hussein's china. Rakowitz talks about welcoming tension and seeking friction, language that draws attention to the ways in which he, beside Donna Haraway, 'stays with the trouble' as an artist.

Ana Prvački performed *The Greeting Committee* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/http://anaprvaccki.com/project/greeting-committee>) to introduce audiences to the Serbian practice of offering guests a taste of a sweet fruit compote called *slatko*. The too-sweet spoonful has a complex meaning in Serbian culture: it's about having a pleasant sweet visit, but also a sweet tongue, a reminder not to gossip. *Slatko* exercises a gentle control that couples genuine hospitality with an embodied reminder of the tongue and its complex social and sensory potentials.



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Eating then illuminates dense connections and, in Joseph Dumit after Haraway's words, the 'imploded histories

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/article/view/...> of cultural difference.² These messy supply chains and "one thing after another" sequential relations animate Elspeth Probyn's writing on oysters.³ Probyn accesses what she calls 'realms of taste and history', where we might "reconceptualise taste, pushing it past its normal position as a social marker". For Probyn, thinking eating and bodies together "highlight[s] taste as a simultaneously economic, cultural, and more-than-human affair". Oysters are "athwart...cultured entities", something between animal and rock, connecting "inbetween, growing happily in brackish water".³

Mapping imperialist ingestions

James Nguyen created a two channel video installation, *Magic Pudding / Bánh Thánh* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/https://vimeo.com/319642989>), as a response to the 100-year anniversary of Norman Lindsay's children's book *The Magic Pudding*. (*Bánh thánh* translates as holy bread, or Communion host). Nguyen's mother and aunty retell the story while crafting and wearing paper costumes designed to evoke the characters in the book. By attending to Mr Curry Rice, the pudding's original owner, who is quickly stolen from, abandoned, and left to drown, Nguyen and his family make the colonial racist underpinnings of the book clear. Nguyen explains (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/https://liminalmag.com/interviews/james-nguyen>), "Unlike the various uncritical re-tellings of *The Magic Pudding* during its centenary, my mum, aunty and I felt that we could actually talk through concepts of sexism, colonisation and our own lived experiences through this quintessential Australian children's book".



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Mapping imperialist ingestions reveals how that which colonises is also perversely capable of decolonising. Nguyen plays out this perversity in the *Magic Pudding / Bánh Thính* video. Outside of Nguyen's project, this story is not critiqued — it's innocuous, everyday, all kids read it, it's as invisible as a biscuit at a morning tea. Taking seriously Devon Mihesuah's assertion that a typical Western diet tolerates or even supports systems of colonial violence, I want to link international efforts to decolonise diets and foodways with an attempt to, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith urges, better understand "the reach of imperialism 'into our heads'", and I would add, into our stomachs.^{4 5}

A relational ontology of biscuits

Biscuits are everywhere. ANZAC Day (April 25) marks the anniversary of the first campaign that led to major casualties for Australian and New Zealand forces during the First World War. The idea was to capture Constantinople, and for eight months Australia New Zealand Army Corps soldiers were engaged in a stalemate, poorly supplied, and famously poorly fed. Possibly named in opposition to hard tack (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/https://theconversation.com/before-the-anzac-biscuit-soldiers-ate-a-tile-so-hard-you-could-write-on-it-114742>) rations, also known as Anzac tiles or wafers, the ubiquity of the contemporary Anzac biscuit at this time of year reveals military legacies underpinning our diet. For example, Arnott's, manufacturer of the beloved Tim Tam, made its earliest sweet biscuits by adapting machinery designed for ship's biscuits or hard tack (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200929054000/http://www.pittwateronlinenews.com/arnotts-biscuit-tins-collectors.php>). Next time you pick up a packet, note that the parrot on the company's logo is eating a ship's biscuit.

Many of us eat biscuits every day, without thinking too much about it. Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke write about regarding food not as a substance ontology but as a relational ontology.⁶ Food shifts from a thing you ingest into a set of relations. What do we taste when we taste a biscuit? We taste histories that Katie King calls 'pastpresents', time shift or time collapse that reenactment can conjure.⁷ It's not a biscuit, it's a set of relations and responsibilities to history and contemporary politics. Understanding where and when we live and how it tastes here might assist with perverting, turning, these everyday foods into critical pastpresents. What kinds of stories do we tell about the ration cultures we participate in? What networks of responsibility are we enmeshed in when we go to war in our kitchens and at our morning teas?

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Lindsay Kelley is an artist and academic exploring how the experience of eating changes when technologies are being eaten. Her first book, *Bioart Kitchen: Art, Feminism and Technoscience*, emerges from her work at the University of California Santa Cruz (Ph.D in the History of Consciousness and MFA in Digital Art and New Media). Her published work can be found in journals including *parallax*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Angelaki*, and *Environmental Humanities*. Kelley is a

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Lindsay's new project, **Tasting History: Biscuits, Culture, and National Identity** is a three-year research project exploring the cultural, political and philosophical relations that emerge through critical ingestions of everyday staples including Anzac biscuits, hard tack, and fry bread. If you would like to participate in the project, please sign up to the mailing list [here](#).

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Tasting History was launched last month as part of [Everyday Militarisms](#)

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